

of people who like opera or ballet on their first exposure is small relative to those who develop an interest over time.

The question of myopia is important. Certainly much of the history of philosophy and religion can be related to developing ways for people to achieve their true good rather than superficial goods in the short term. In fact, a missing element in Offer's analysis is that there is virtually no mention of religion in the book. Given all that religions, especially Christianity, have had to say about wealth and the transience of life, this is an important omission.

The book is valuable in that it provides access to a growing literature in economics that draws more heavily and directly from work by psychologists and sociologists. However, Offer is too dismissive of the rational choice model. Models are heuristic devices that do not capture all important dimensions of reality, and showing that there are behaviors that seem inconsistent with rational choice is not the same as refuting the model altogether.

Many of the chapters were previously published so there are some tiresome repetitions. There are over fifteen hundred footnotes and seventy-two pages of references; anyone who wants to pursue a particular topic discussed in the book can do so. However, among the references are news stories, and, when reading the text, it is not easy to tell whether a particular point refers to the results of research or a search of newspaper archives.

Finally, Offer shows that people often behave myopically. Occasionally, he uses this as an argument for governmental paternalism, but governments also behave myopically. A politician may often be making decisions with an eye toward the next election rather than the longer view. Human beings are flawed creatures, and this is as true of the bureaucrat as the consumer.

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## The Commercial Society: Foundations and Challenges in a Global Age

**Samuel Gregg**

Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2007 (177 pages)

The commercial society is spreading across most of the world. It is replacing the backbreaking labor and ill-health of rural life. More and more persons are entering employment in the modern economy along with the wealth and health care that it brings.

Alexis de Tocqueville encountered the early emergence of modern commercial society when he arrived at New York harbor in May 1831. As Tocqueville recognized, he was observing not merely an improvement in material orders but even more the building of new philosophical and cultural foundations.

The development of economic analysis presumed a philosophical and cultural foundation. Gregg notes that Adam Smith was totally grounded in the philosophical and cultural foundations of human economic action. It is the loss of the knowledge of such foundations

by various strains of current economic thought that has created confusions. A humane society needs to reflect the nature of human beings. Gregg notes:

Communism imploded, at least in part, because it denied certain truths about humans, most notably the fact that we possess the unique ability to make free choices. By attempting to replace market mechanisms of supply and demand with a top-down command approach, both socialist and communist economic theory ascribed abilities to humans that are possessed by no individual or group. . . . Another failure of real socialism to comprehend human nature was its inability to appreciate the observable fact that at most times, the vast majority of people prefer to place ownership of things in private hands.

Gregg explains the centrality for a commercial society of the healthy human attribute of trust. The centrality of trust is found in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. Gregg examines the contributions of Adam Smith's fellows of the Scottish Enlightenment. In the section Peace and Tolerance, Gregg expands upon the contribution of French philosophers to those principles. He quotes the letter of Archbishop Francois Fenelon of Cambrai to Louis XIV on the destructive impact of his wars. Voltaire, Montesquieu, Constant, and Tocqueville developed the theme of the contribution of commercial society to peace and toleration. Gregg quotes the French classical liberal Benjamin Constant: "It is clear that the more the commercial tendency prevails, the weaker the tendency to war must become."

Gregg shows that commercial society's aversion to the use of force is not confined to foreign policy, but it applies to the relations of persons within a society. It is a blow against civilization for a government to introduce force in peaceful relations between citizens. Legislation is often a blow against the peaceful relations of a commercial society. There is a valuable explanation of "Freedom of Association, Contract, and Contract Law" in commercial societies. The rule of law and constitutionalism are shown as extensions of these fundamentals.

Gregg explains the misleading uses of Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism*, which was a series of lectures presented during a visit to the St. Louis World's Fair. Weber took a few writers and sought to create a general type from them. The thesis was worth detailed investigation, but Weber was unable to ever engage in the research before his death as he was subjected to major health distractions. Gregg notes the important study by Kurt Samuelsson, *Religion and Economic Action: The Protestant Ethic, The Rise of Capitalism, and the Abuses of Scholarship* (University of Toronto Press, 1957, 1993); additionally, one must read Randall Collins, "The Weberian Revolution of the High Middle Ages," chapter 3 in *Weberian Sociological Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Gregg has contributed a major work to the growing literature in the field of the commercial society and its relationship to ethical and cultural foundations.

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