Of Luxury

David Hume

In this essay, written in 1742, Hume captures the general Enlightenment celebration of commercial civilization, which he labels "refinement in the arts."

Another advantage of industry and of refinements in the mechanical arts is that they commonly produce some refinements in the liberal [arts]; nor can one be carried to perfection without being accompanied, in some degree, with the other. The same age which produces great philosophers and politicians, renowned generals and poets, usually abounds with skillful weavers and ship carpenters. We cannot reasonably expect that a piece of woolen cloth will be wrought to perfection in a nation which is ignorant of astronomy or where ethics are neglected. The spirit of the age affects all the arts, and the minds of men being once roused from their lethargy and put into a fermentation turn themselves on all sides and carry improvements into every art and science. Profound ignorance is totally banished, and men enjoy the privilege of rational creatures to think as well as to act, to cultivate the pleasures of the mind as well as those of the body.

The more these refined arts advance, the more sociable men become; nor is it possible that, when enriched with science and possessed of a fund of conversation, they should be contented to remain in solitude or live with their fellow citizens in that distant manner which is peculiar to ignorant and barbarous nations. They flock into cities; love to receive and communicate knowledge, to show their wit or their breeding, their taste in conversation or living, in clothes or furniture. Curiosity allures the wise, vanity the foolish, and pleasure both. Particular clubs and societies are everywhere formed; both sexes meet in an easy and sociable manner; and the tempers of men, as well as their behavior, refine apace. So that, beside the improvements which they receive from knowledge and the liberal arts, it is impossible but they must feel an increase of humanity from the very habit of conversing together and contributing to each other's pleasure and entertainment. Thus industry, knowledge, and humanity are linked together by an indissoluble chain, and are found, from experience as well as reason, to be peculiar to the more polished and what are commonly denominated the more luxurious ages.

Nor are these advantages attended with disadvantages that bear any proportion to them. The more men refine upon pleasure, the less will they indulge in excesses of any kind, because nothing is more destructive to true pleasure than such excesses. One may safely affirm that the Tartars are oftener guilty of beastly gluttony when they feast on their dead horses than European courtiers with

all their refinement of cookery. And if libertine love, or even infidelity to the marriage bed, be more frequent in polite ages, when it is often regarded only as a piece of gallantry, drunkenness, on the other hand, is much less common—a vice more odious and more pernicious, both to mind and body. And in this matter I would appeal, not only to an Ovid or a Petronius, but to a Seneca or a Cato. We know that Caesar, during Catiline's conspiracy, being necessitated to put into Cato's hands a *billet-doux* which discovered an intrigue with Servilla, Cato's own sister, that stem philosopher threw it back to him with indignation and, in the bitterness of his wrath, gave him the appellation of drunkard, as a term more opprobrious than that with which he could more justly have reproached him.

But industry, knowledge, and humanity are not advantageous in private life alone; they diffuse their beneficial influence on the public, and render the government as great and flourishing as they make individuals happy and prosperous. The increase and consumption of all the commodities which serve to the ornament and pleasure of life are advantages to society, because at the same time that they multiply those innocent gratifications to individuals they are a kind of storehouse of labor, which, in the exigencies of state, may be turned to the public service. In a nation where there is no demand for such superfluities men sink into indolence, lose all enjoyment of life, and are useless to the public, which cannot maintain or support its fleets and armies from the industry of such slothful members.

The bounds of all the European kingdoms are at present nearly the same they were two hundred years ago. But what a difference is there in the power and grandeur of those kingdoms which can be ascribed to nothing but the increase of art and industry? When Charles VIII of France invaded Italy, he carried with him about 20,000 men; yet this armament so exhausted the nation, as we learn from Guicciardin, that for some years it was not able to make so great an effort. The late King of France, in time of war, kept in pay above 400,000 men, though from Mazarin's death to his own he was engaged in a course of wars that lasted near thirty years.

This industry is much promoted by the knowledge inseparable from ages of art and refinement; as, on the other hand, this knowledge enables the public to make the best advantage of the industry of its subjects. Laws, order, police, discipline—these can never be carried to any degree of perfection before human reason has refined itself by exercise and by an application to the more vulgar arts, at least of commerce and manufacture. Can we expect that a government will be well modeled by a people who know not how to make a spinning wheel or to employ a loom to advantage? Not to mention that all ignorant ages are infested with superstition, which throws the government off its bias and disturbs men in the pursuit of their interest and happiness. Knowledge in the arts of government begets mildness and moderation by instructing men in the advantages of human maxims above rigor and severity, which drive subjects into rebellion and make the return to submission impracticable, by cutting off all hopes of pardon. When the tempers of men are softened, as well as their knowledge improved, this

humanity appears still more conspicuous and is the chief characteristic which distinguishes a civilized age from times of barbarity and ignorance. Factions are then less inveterate, revolutions less tragical, authority less severe, and seditions less frequent. Even foreign wars abate of their cruelty; and after the field of battle, where honor and interest steel men against compassion as well as fear, the combatants divest themselves of the brute and resume the man.

Nor need we fear that men, by losing their ferocity, will lose their martial spirit or become less undaunted and vigorous in defense of their country or their liberty. The arts have no such effect in enervating either the mind or body. On the contrary, industry, their inseparable attendant, adds new force to both. And if anger, which is said to be the whetstone of courage, loses somewhat of its asperity by politeness and refinement, a sense of honor, which is a stronger, more constant, and more govern-able principle, acquires fresh vigor by that elevation of genius which arises from knowledge and a good education. Add to this that courage can neither have any duration nor be of any use when not accompanied with discipline and martial skill, which are seldom found among a barbarous people. The ancients remarked that Datames was the only barbarian that ever knew the art of war. And Pyrrhus, seeing the Romans marshal their army with some art and skill, said with surprise, "These barbarians have nothing barbarous in their discipline!" It is observable that as the old Romans, by applying themselves solely to war, were almost the only uncivilized people that ever possessed military discipline, so the modern Italians are the only civilized people, among Europeans, that ever wanted courage and a martial spirit. Those who would ascribe this effeminacy of the Italians to their luxury or politeness or application to the arts need but consider the French and English, whose bravery is as incontestable as their love for the arts and their assiduity in commerce. The Italian historians give us a more satisfactory reason for the degeneracy of their countrymen. They show us how the sword was dropped at once by all the Italian sovereigns; while the Venetian aristocracy was jealous of its subjects, the Florentine democracy applied itself entirely to commerce; Rome was governed by priests, and Naples by women. War then became the business of soldiers of fortune, who spared one another and, to the astonishment of the world, could engage a whole day in what they called a battle and return at night to their camp without the least bloodshed.

What has chiefly induced severe moralists to declaim against refinement in the arts is the example of ancient Rome, which, joining to its poverty and rusticity virtue and public spirit, rose to such a surprising height of grandeur and liberty; but having learned from its conquered provinces the Asiatic luxury fell into every kind of corruption, whence arose sedition and civil wars, attended at last with the total loss of liberty. All the Latin classics, whom we peruse in our infancy, are full of these sentiments and universally ascribe the ruin of their state to the arts and riches imported from the East, insomuch that Sallust represents a taste for painting as a vice no less than lewdness and drinking. And so popular were these sentiments during the latter ages of the republic that this author abounds in praises of the old rigid Roman virtue, though himself the most

egregious instance of modern luxury and corruption; speaks contemptuously of the Grecian eloquence, though the most elegant writer in the world; nay, employs preposterous digressions and declamations to this purpose, though a model of taste and correctness.

But it would be easy to prove that these writers mistook the cause of the disorders in the Roman state and ascribed to luxury and the arts what really proceeded from an ill-modeled government and the unlimited extent of conquests. Refinement on the pleasures and conveniences of life has no natural tendency to beget venality and corruption. The value which all men put upon any particular pleasure depends on comparison and experience; nor is a porter less greedy of money which he spends on bacon and brandy than a courtier who purchases champagne and ortolans. Riches are valuable at all times and to all men because they always purchase pleasures such as men are accustomed to and desire; nor can anything restrain or regulate the love of money but a sense of honor and virtue, which, if it be not nearly equal at all times, will naturally abound most in ages of knowledge and refinement.

Of all European kingdoms Poland seems the most defective in the arts of war as well as peace, mechanical as well as liberal; yet it is there that venality and corruption do most prevail. The nobles seem to have preserved their crown elective for no other purpose than regularly to sell it to the highest bidder. This is almost the only species of commerce with which that people are acquainted.

The liberties of England, so far from decaying since the improvements in the arts, have never flourished so much as during that period. And though corruption may seem to increase of late years, this is chiefly to be ascribed to our established liberty, when our princes have found the impossibility of governing without parliaments or of terrifying parliaments by the phantom of prerogative. Not to mention that this corruption or venality prevails much more among the electors than the elected, and therefore cannot justly be ascribed to any refinements in luxury.

If we consider the matter in a proper light, we shall find that a progress in the arts is rather favorable to liberty and has a natural tendency to preserve, if not produce, a free government. In rude, unpolished nations, where the arts are neglected, all labor is bestowed on the cultivation of the ground, and the whole society is divided into two classes, proprietors of land and their vassals or tenants. The latter are necessarily dependent and fitted for slavery and subjection, especially where they possess no riches and are not valued for their knowledge in agriculture, as must always be the case where the arts are neglected. The former naturally erect themselves into petty tyrants and must either submit to an absolute master for the sake of peace and order; or, if they will preserve their independence like the ancient barons, they must fall into feuds and contests among themselves and throw the whole society into such confusion as is perhaps worse than the most despotic government. But where luxury nourishes commerce and industry, the peasants, by a proper cultivation of the land, become rich and independent; while the tradesmen and merchants acquire a share of the

property and draw authority and consideration to that middling rank of men who are the best and firmest basis of public liberty. These submit not to slavery, like the peasants, from poverty and meanness of spirit; and having no hopes of tyrannizing over others, like the barons, they are not tempted for the sake of that gratification to submit to the tyranny of their sovereign. They covet equal laws, which may secure their property and preserve them from monarchical as well as aristocratical tyranny.

The lower house is the support of our popular government, and all the world acknowledges that it owed its chief influence and consideration to the increase of commerce, which threw such a balance of property into the hands of the Commons. How inconsistent, then, is it to blame so violently a refinement in the arts, and to represent it as the bane of liberty and public spirit!