

## COLLOQUIUM: COMMERCIAL CULTURE

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RALPH LERNER

Civilized societies promote cooperation, and few institutions do so more effectively than the law of contract. Enforceable contracts permit the New Man, the foreigner, the outsider, to overcome the barriers of a closed society that exclude him from participation in its commercial and political life. Nevertheless, antiliberals object to the institutions of free bargaining, which are said to subvert private virtue and destroy high culture.

These objections come from right, left and middle. They may be found in Wordsworth's lament about "getting and spending" and in Max Weber's portrayal of modern businessmen as "specialists without spirit" and "sensualists without heart." More recently, Daniel Bell warned of the "cultural contradictions of capitalism," arguing that free markets cannot exist without a background set of private virtues (such as prudence and frugality) which he thought free markets subvert.

After examining some of these criticisms, we will look at the eighteenth century defense of what Montesquieu called "le doux commerce." The readings will include selections from Voltaire's *Philosophical Letters* as well as from the classic writings of Adam Smith and David Hume. We will also consider the views of such antiliberals as Werner Sombart. A rich body of readings should stimulate a wide-ranging and lively discussion.

Ralph Lerner is the Benjamin Franklin Professor in the College, and professor in the Committee on Social Thought, at the University of Chicago. He is the co-editor of *The Founders' Constitution* (with Philip B. Kurland) and the author of *The Thinking Revolutionary: Principle and Practice in the New Republic*.



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