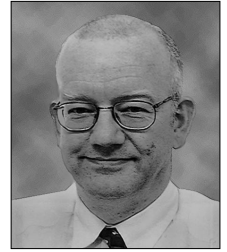


Warriors and Merchants

BY STEPHEN DAVIES



In 1915 the well-known German economic historian Werner Sombart published a book with the arresting title *Merchants and Heroes*. It argued that the war then underway between the Central Powers and the Entente was not just a traditional great-power conflict. It was rather a struggle between two different worldviews embodied by France and Britain on the one side and Imperial Germany on the other. One was that of the merchant, the world of trade, money, exchange, and bourgeois comfort and respectability. The other was that of the warrior, the world of the stern, hard, manly virtues and the desire for glory and heroism before comfort. Similar arguments were made before the war by authors such as Heinrich von Treitschke and during and after it by writers such as Ernst Jünger.

In fact such arguments have been a recurring feature of the politics of modernity, a point developed at length by Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit in *Occidentalism*. However, the history of this division goes back further than their account does, and it reveals something profound both about historic human societies and the distinctive nature of the social order that we inhabit, that of modernity. The division between the merchant and other social types is found throughout history and is reflected and articulated in literature, music, and the arts. Only in recent times, however, has the merchant, the producer, the bourgeois found many champions.

In most human societies since the advent of agriculture and complex social organization, the merchant and manufacturer have been placed on the lowest rung of the social hierarchy. Even when members of this class attained wealth, political influence, and some degree of social standing, they were the butt of social criticism and ridicule. Above all, they were seen as less worthy than other social groups because of the morally questionable nature of their activities. Trade was seen as base, lacking in the crucial quality of honor.

Honor has been associated with the warrior, along

with courage, daring, magnanimity, and generosity. The ideal aristocrat is open-handed, does not think of the future or have a cautious and prudent approach, is brave, proud, and sensitive to slights, yet generous and gracious in victory while defiant in defeat. Historically, the other figure contrasted with the bourgeois is that of the priest, or sage and holy man. The virtues ascribed to him are those of wisdom, asceticism, and respect for tradition.

By contrast, the merchant, or bourgeois, is seen as obsessed with money, comfort, and the affairs of this world; as cautious and fearful, lacking in passion or pride; and as unfeeling and introverted. Trade and production are seen as lacking in glory and romance and as being dull, domestic, and mundane. The small producer, the artisan or peasant, is also slighted in this way of thinking, but is still placed higher than the merchant. This is because he is seen typically as simple yet honest, while the merchant is seen as devious and cunning.

This kind of thinking finds expression in many ways. In pre-modern Japan the official social hierarchy was Emperor, Shogun, Daimyo, Samurai, Artisan/Peasant, Merchant. In Europe the socially ambitious bourgeois was mercilessly ridiculed, as for example in Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. In India the merchant was seen as having an especially difficult task in accumulating merit, a view also found in both China and much traditional Christian thought (including of course the Gospels).

In representative art for much of history the main subjects were either mythological or the pastimes of aristocrats, notably war and the hunt. The merchant and his lifestyle are conspicuous by their absence. There are partial exceptions to this, of course. In China the Confucians have a minority tradition that is favorable toward merchants and producers, particularly under the Song

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and the later Ming. Initially, the Islamic civilization was actively favorable to trade and commerce, not least because the Prophet himself had been a merchant before his calling. However, the underlying sociology of most Islamic lands gradually reasserted itself, while in China more conventional Confucian views, which saw the career of the merchant as a barrier to virtue, were reiterated.

In certain parts of medieval and early modern Europe, particularly England, the Low Countries, and Northern Italy, the legal status of the bourgeois was higher than the historical norm, and this was reflected in a greater than usual degree of representation in literature and the arts. Even here, however, the bourgeois virtues, in Deirdre McCloskey's expression, were seen as less worthy than those of the warrior.

The critical change takes place in the Netherlands, during the "Golden Age" of the seventeenth century. At that time we see the first appearance of a truly mercantile culture, in which the values and lifestyle of the bourgeois are held up for approbation and emulation, while the virtues of the aristocracy and clergy are slighted and attacked. This finds expression in both literature and art, with its focus on domesticity, production, and trade rather than public religion and war. This expression was a feature of the Dutch Republic that most struck contemporaries, along with the independence of Dutch women and the degree of free speech and religious toleration. Above all, trade was presented as an honorable and dignified occupation, which brings benefits and blessings to humanity in the shape of convenience, comfort, and tranquility.

The Scottish Enlightenment

This kind of argument was developed further by the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, notably Smith, Hume, and Lord Kames. They added the idea of the civilizing effect of commerce, the way it brought about a "softening" and "refining" of manners, behavior, and taste so that people acquired a greater degree of sen-

sibility or sympathy with the experience and feelings of others and became less harsh, brutal, and overbearing. Wealth was seen therefore not as corrupting but rather as morally elevating and praiseworthy. This favorable view of the bourgeois and the associated critique of the traditional virtues of the aristocracy and clergy was continued in the first part of the nineteenth century, in the works of authors such as Stendhal, Dickens, and Balzac and composers such as Verdi.

However, the later nineteenth century saw a reaction, well described by Buruma and Margalit. In the sphere of music Wagner's *Ring* was among other things a savage attack on the values of the bourgeois, not least through the figure of Alberich. One striking aspect of the literature of the time was the reappearance of arguments for the virtue-creating function of war. As found in the writings of figures such as T.E. Hulme, this was one reason for the excitement and delight with which young intellectuals such as Rupert Brooke greeted the onset of war in 1914.

Today, while the kind of self-consciously reactionary argument made by Sombart is rare in much of the world, hostility to trade as demeaning and lacking in moral grandeur is common. The kind of arguments analyzed by Buruma and Margalit have now appeared prominently in the form of Islamism. Generally speaking, in popular culture the businessman is as disreputable as ever. One important reason for this is the changing perspective of artists. Between the early seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries many artists and writers were supporters of mercantile values against those of the aristocracy and clergy. In the later nineteenth century, however, many came to associate the life of the bourgeois with stultifying conformity, hypocrisy, and philistinism. The works of authors such as Ibsen and Flaubert are classic examples. There is no essential reason, however, why this should be so, and it reflects the particular features of late-nineteenth-century society. To reconcile the bourgeois and the artist is one of the tasks of our time.



Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme