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23. *On Luxury*

To Benjamin Vaughn

*Passy, July 26, 1784*

. . . You ask, "what Remedy I have for the growing Luxury of my Country, which gives so much *Offence* to all *English travellers* without exception." I answer, that I think it exaggerated, and that Travellers are no good Judges whether our Luxury is growing or diminishing. Our People are hospitable, and have indeed too much Pride in displaying upon their Tables before Strangers the Plenty and Variety that our Country affords.

They have the Vanity, too, of sometimes borrowing one another's Plate to entertain more splendidly. Strangers being invited from House to House, and meeting every Day with a Feast, imagine what they see is the ordinary Way of living of all the Families where they dine; when perhaps each Family lives a Week after upon the Remains of the Dinner given. It is, I own, a Folly in our People to give *such Offence to English Travellers*. The first part of the Proverb is thereby verified, that *Fools make Feasts*. I wish in this Case the other were as true, *and wise Men eat them*. These Travellers might, one would think, find some Fault they could more decently reproach us with, than that of our excessive Civility to them as Strangers.

I have not, indeed yet thought of a Remedy for Luxury. I am not sure, that in a great State it is capable of a Remedy. Nor that the Evil is in itself always so great as it is represented. Suppose we include in the Definition of Luxury all unnecessary Expence, and then let us consider whether Laws to prevent such Expence are possible to be executed in a great Country, and whether, if they could be executed, our People generally would be happier, or even richer. Is not the Hope of one day being able to purchase and enjoy Luxuries a great Spur to Labour and Industry? May not Luxury, therefore, produce more than it consumes, if without such a Spur People would be, as they are naturally enough inclined to be, lazy and indolent? To this purpose I remember a Circumstance. The Skipper of a Shallop, employed between Cape May and Philadelphia, had done us some small Service, for which he refused Pay. My Wife, understanding that he had a Daughter, sent her as a Present a new-fashioned Cap. Three Years After, this Skipper being at my House with an old Farmer of Cape May, his Passenger, he mentioned the Cap, and how much his Daughter had been pleased with it. "But," says he, "it proved a dear Cap to our Congregation." "How so?" "When my Daughter appeared in it at Meeting, it was so much admired, that all the Girls resolved to get such Caps from Philadelphia; and my Wife and I computed, that the whole could not have cost less than a hundred Pound." "True," says the Farmer, "but you do not tell all the Story. I think the Cap was nevertheless an Advantage to us, for it was the first thing that put our Girls upon Knitting worsted Mittens for Sale at Philadelphia, that they might have wherewithal to buy Caps and Ribbands there; and you know that that Industry has continued, and is likely to continue and increase to a much greater Value, and answer better Purposes." Upon the whole, I was more reconciled to this little Piece of Luxury, since not only the Girls were made happier by having fine Caps, but the Philadelphians by the Supply of warm Mittens.

In our Commercial Towns upon the Seacoast, Fortunes will occasionally be made. Some of those who grow rich will be prudent, live within Bounds, and preserve what they have gained for their Posterity; others, fond of showing their Wealth, will be extravagant and ruin themselves.

Laws cannot prevent this; and perhaps it is not always an evil to the Publick. A Shilling spent idly by a Fool, may be picked up by a Wiser Person, who knows better what to do with it. It is therefore not lost. A vain, silly Fellow builds a fine House, furnishes it richly, lives in it expensively, and in few years ruins himself; but the Masons, Carpenters, Smiths, and other honest Tradesmen have been by his Employ assisted in maintaining and raising their Families; the Farmer has been paid for his labour, and encouraged, and the Estate is now in better Hands. In some Cases, indeed, certain Modes of Luxury may be a publick Evil, in the same Manner as it is a Private one. If there be a Nation, for Instance, that exports its Beef and Linnen, to pay for its Importation of Claret and Porter, while a great Part of its People live upon Potatoes, and wear no Shirts, wherein does it differ from the Sot, who lets his Family starve, and sells his Clothes to buy Drink? Our American Commerce is, I confess, a little in this way. We sell our Victuals to your Islands for Rum and Sugar; the substantial Necessaries of Life for Superfluities. But we have Plenty, and live well nevertheless, tho' by being soberer, we might be richer.

By the by, here is just issued an *arrêt* of Council taking off all the Duties upon the exportation of Brandies, which, it is said, will render them cheaper in America than your Rum; in which case there is no doubt but they will be preferr'd, and we shall be better able to bear your Restrictions on our Commerce. There are Views here, by augmenting their Settlements, of being able to supply the growing People of America with the Sugar that may be wanted there. On the whole, I guess England will get as little by the Commercial War she has begun with us, as she did by the Military. But to return to Luxury.

The vast Quantity of Forest Lands we have yet to clear, and put in order for Cultivation, will for a long time keep the Body of our Nation laborious and frugal. Forming an Opinion of our People and their Manners by what is seen among the Inhabitants of the Seaports, is judging from an improper Sample. The People of the Trading Towns may be rich and luxurious, while the Country possesses all the Virtues, that tend to private Happiness and publick Prosperity. Those Towns are not much regarded by the Country; they are hardly considered as an essential Part of the States; and the Experience of the last War has shown, that their being in the Possession of the Enemy did not necessarily draw on the Subjection of the Country, which bravely continued to maintain its Freedom and Independence notwithstanding.

It has been computed by some Political Arithmetician, that, if every Man and Woman would work for four Hours each Day on something useful, that Labour would produce sufficient to procure all the Necessaries and Comforts of Life, Want and Misery would be banished out of the World, and the rest of the 24 hours might be Leisure and Pleasure.

What occasions then so much Want and Misery? It is the Employment of Men and Women in Works, that produce neither the Necessaries nor

Conveniences of Life, who, with those who do nothing, consume the Necessaries raised by the Laborious. To explain this.

The first Elements of Wealth are obtained by Labour, from the Earth and Waters. I have Land, and raise Corn. With this, if I feed a Family that does nothing, my Corn will be consum'd, and at the end of the Year I shall be no richer than I was at the beginning. But if, while I feed them, I employ them, some in Spinning, others in hewing Timber and sawing Boards, others in making Bricks, &c. for Building, the Value of my Corn will be arrested and remain with me, and at the end of the Year we may all be better clothed and better lodged. And if, instead of employing a Man I feed in making Bricks, I employ him in fiddling for me, the Corn he eats is gone, and no Part of his Manufacture remains to augment the Wealth and Convenience of the family; I shall therefore be the poorer for this fiddling Man, unless the rest of my Family work more, or eat less, to make up the Deficiency he occasions.

Look round the World and see the Millions employ'd in doing nothing, or in something that amounts to nothing, when the Necessaries and Conveniences of Life are in question. What is the Bulk of Commerce, for which we fight and destroy each other, but the Toil of Millions for Superfluities, to the great Hazard and Loss of many Lives by the constant Dangers of the Sea? How much labour is spent in Building and fitting great Ships, to go to China and Arabia for Tea and Coffee, to the West Indies for Sugar, to America for Tobacco! These things cannot be called the Necessaries of Life, for our Ancestors lived very comfortably without them.

A Question may be asked; Could all these People, now employed in raising, making, or carrying Superfluities, be subsisted by raising Necessaries? I think they might. The World is large, and a great Part of it still uncultivated. Many hundred Millions of Acres in Asia, Africa, and America are still Forest, and a great Deal even in Europe. On 100 Acres of this Forest a Man might become a substantial Farmer, and 100,000 Men, employed in clearing each his 100 Acres, would hardly brighten a Spot big enough to be Visible from the Moon, unless with Herschell's Telescope; so vast are the Regions still in Wood unimproved.

'Tis however, some Comfort to reflect, that, upon the whole, the Quantity of Industry and Prudence among Mankind exceeds the Quantity of Idleness and Folly. Hence the Increase of good Buildings, Farms cultivated, and populous Cities filled with Wealth, all over Europe, which a few Ages since were only to be found on the Coasts of the Mediterranean; and this, notwithstanding the mad Wars continually raging, by which are often destroyed in one year the Works of many Years' Peace. So that we may hope the Luxury of a few Merchants on the Seacoast will not be the Ruin of America.