Must Paris Crumble?
Commerce in Wollstonecraft's Epistolary and Historical Works[1]

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The last decade or so has seen renewed scholarly interest in theories of political economy developed in eighteenth-century Europe, a place of commercial growth, urbanization, and debt-fueled imperial expansion. Missing entirely from the literature, however, has been an assessment of Mary Wollstonecraft's contribution to this rich tradition of thought. Historians of political thought have gradually come around to the idea that Wollstonecraft – hitherto celebrated as a revolution-era pamphleteer and tireless critic of female subordination – was also a philosopher of underappreciated weight (Bergès and Coffee 2016). The possibility that she might also be read as a theorist of what she called the "commercial state," however, has been largely ignored (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.5, 37).

The few scholars who have engaged Wollstonecraft's views on political economy have adopted one of two approaches, neither satisfactory. The first has been to regard Wollstonecraft primarily as a *moral* critic who focused on the debilitating effects of commerce on the characters of those who participated in it. Scholars working in this vein usually cannot resist linking this moral critique to developments in Wollstonecraft's personal life, insinuating that her increasingly fervid denunciations of commerce tracked the deterioration of her relationship with the American businessman Gilbert Imlay, whose single-minded devotion to commercial activities appalled her.[2] Read as such, Wollstonecraft's comments on commerce can be safely dismissed as of mere biographical interest or as too theoretically insubstantial to be worth the notice of scholars of political economy. One such commentator could hardly have put matters more bluntly: "Wollstonecraft was no economist" (Taylor 2003, 172).

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[1] The author would like to thank Sandrine Bergès, Doug Thompson, David Williams, the audience at the APSA 2017 panel "The Idea of Commercial Society," and the Exeter Political Theory Reading Group for useful commentary and feedback on this chapter.

The second approach has been to assess Wollstonecraft's critique of commerce in light of her engagement with a specifically republican tradition of political theory. On this reading, Wollstonecraft not only criticized commerce as an odious activity that corrupts character, but also developed a more sweeping critique of "commercial society" itself, a critique that is "very similar to that of Rousseau" (Jones 2002, 51).[3] Other readers adopting this approach have looked less to Rousseau as Wollstonecraft's chief inspiration than to republicans closer to home, including writers in the English commonwealth tradition and members of her immediate radical circle in London such as Thomas Paine and Richard Price.[4] Whatever their views on her precise influences, however, these commentators agree that Wollstonecraft's frequent declamations against an urbanized "aristocracy of wealth," the corrupting effects of inequality, and the servility bred by luxury, formed part of a wide-ranging critique of commercial society that bears an unmistakable republican stamp (1989 vol. 6, 444).

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[2] For this reading see Todd (2000) and Taylor (2003).

[3] Jones acknowledges that Wollstonecraft's view of commerce is "divided" and that "although she can be quoted as the inveterate foe of commerce" she ultimately "upholds a commerce regulated by ideals of justice and fairness" (2002, 53).

[4] On Wollstonecraft's links to the commonwealth tradition see Barker-Benfield (1989). For her republicanism see Coffee (2013), Halldenius (2013), and Pettit (2016).

In this chapter I will argue that neither of these approaches does justice to the complexity of Wollstonecraft's theorization of commercial society, particularly as presented in her epistolary and historical writings of the mid 1790s. There can be little doubt that Wollstonecraft abhorred the morally corrupting effects of commerce. However, she also developed a historically informed appreciation of the role commerce played in advancing civilization and undermining prejudice, an appreciation that owed as much to her engagement with Scottish Enlightenment figures such as Adam Smith as it did to the republican tradition. And while she expressed doubts about the compatibility of commerce with republican freedom, she ultimately concluded that a well-regulated commerce was a necessary check on the provincialism and narrow-mindedness that would otherwise prevail in a predominantly agricultural economy. Even Wollstonecraft's most exacting criticisms of commerce, I will suggest, were directed primarily at the perverse forms of speculative trade that thrive during wartime rather than at commerce *per se*.

Reconstructing these lines of argument requires looking beyond the texts for which Wollstonecraft is most famous, namely her two *Vindications*. These early works represent Wollstonecraft at the peak of her polemical powers but constitute only the first of two distinct phases in her career as a philosopher. After abandoning the second volume of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792 Wollstonecraft departed for France to observe the revolution up close and to make her own contribution to the historical and comparative analysis of societies so prevalent in eighteenth-century Europe.[5] The end result of this new phase in her writing was a cluster of three epistolary and historical works: the *Letter on the Present Character of the French*

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[5] On Wollstonecraft's debt to the Scottish Enlightenment see O'Neill (2007).

Nation of 1793 (intended to be the first in a series), *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* of 1794 (only the first volume of which was completed), and the *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* of 1796 (written during and after Wollstonecraft's 1795 voyages to Scandinavia). A close examination of these works, I maintain, reveals that Wollstonecraft's stance towards commerce was not straightforwardly adversarial and cannot be easily assimilated to the republican tradition. On the contrary, few thinkers better illustrate Donald Winch's claim that when it comes to maters of political economy eighteenth century writers cannot be so easily placed in the "separate cages" of republicanism, liberalism or any other ideology (1996, 163).

THE CONTEXT: FENELONIAN CRITIQUES OF COMMERCE

Most serious critics of commerce that Wollstonecraft was familiar with shared a frame of reference on the topic that ultimately derived from the work of François Fénelon, the Archbishop of Cambrai. Fénelon's *Télémaque* (1699) was one of the most widely read secular books of its age and effectively served, in Michael Sonenscher's words, as "the eighteenth-century's great blue print of moral and political reform" (2008, 38).[6] It set the terms for debating not only the dangers commerce posed to the health of a state, but also how those dangers might be averted. And while this debate is certainly not the only lens through which to read Wollstonecraft's views on commerce, it is, I hope to show, a particularly fruitful one.

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[6] For the popularity of Fénelon in the eighteenth century see Hont (2015, 104).

Louis XIV's government, Fénelon argued, had recklessly encouraged the development of a luxury economy centered on Paris in order to finance its near continuous wars. This policy had many casualties, the first of which was French morals. Commerce in luxury, Fénelon wrote, "poisons the entire nation" by encouraging the population to look upon "superfluities" as necessities and breeding ostentatious consumption at all levels of society (1994 [1699], 297). The corruption of morals, however, was by no means the worst effect of this commerce. For the French were not only destined to decline in virtue under its influence, but in *number* as well. The low prices fetched by agricultural products in comparison to luxury goods, Fénelon predicted, would deprive agricultural laborers of their livelihoods and drive them into the cities. And while some would find themselves employed there as artisans in the new industries, many more would not, resulting in population decline and a destitute urban underclass easily absorbed into standing armies constantly in need of fresh recruits.

Among Fénelon's aims in *Télémaqu*e was to present a vision of what an alternative, more balanced economy might look like. The measures he proposed were nothing if not drastic. Some specifically targeted luxury and included sumptuary laws, prohibitions on "all foreign merchandise that might introduce luxury and effeminacy," and the sale of any remaining luxuries so that livestock could be purchased with the proceeds (Fénelon 1994 [1699], 162). Others were designed to forcibly rectify the population imbalance brought about by the rise of commerce. Tax burdens on farmers should be lifted, which would both encourage productivity and enable marriage (thereby reversing rural de-population). Most drastically of all, the urban artisans that had pooled in the city could, Fénelon suggested, be "transplanted" back to the country by the state and provided with uncultivated land to farm (1994 [1699], 162). As Istvan Hont noted, what this effectively amounted to was the "destruction" of the city itself with a view to placing the economy back on an even keel (2015, 105).

Few readers approved of Fénelon's program in its entirety but a considerable number nevertheless took seriously the problem he had identified. Rousseau, a key influence on Wollstonecraft, came close to matching both Fénelon's diagnosis and his cure. In a note to his *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, Rousseau made clear that the relationship between agriculture and the urban economy was zero-sum and that city dwellers could only sustain their way of life through heavy taxation of the "scorned farmer" (1997 [1755], 202). When enough of those farmers migrated to the cities in search of the bread they had previously brought to sell there, Rousseau argued, a depopulation cycle would set in, resulting ultimately in the state's military defeat at the hands of poorer but less degenerate neighbors. It was a prediction that Rousseau would repeat in the *Discourse on Political Economy* where he argued that the titans of commerce and industry had used taxes to "draw all the money from the rural areas into the capitals" (2011 [1755], 148). The net result, Rousseau concluded, was that the "richer the city" becomes "the more miserable the rural areas" tend to be (2011 [1755], 149). In *Emile*, Rousseau even embraced Fénelon's most radical solution to the imbalance between rural and urban areas, that of dismantling the commercial city itself. "It is inconceivable," he there wrote, "that in this century of calculators, there is none who can perceive that France would be much more powerful if Paris were annihilated" (Rousseau 1979 [1762], 469).

Adam Smith, whose influence on Wollstonecraft is also well documented, took a different tack on this issue entirely. For Smith, a degree of imbalance between city and country was perfectly natural because ultimately they would be “mutually the servants of one another” (1999 [1776], 481). Turning the Fénelonian line of argument on its head, Smith held that the rise of commerce actually benefited the countryside rather than sucking people and resources away from it. Not only did thriving commercial centers provide markets for agricultural products, he argued, but commerce also did much to bring about liberty and the rule of law, accelerating the break up of feudal relations by converting the barons into avid consumers of luxury goods instead of local power brokers. Nor did Smith have any time for the idea that a population transfer might be needed to reverse the flow of people into the cities. Smith assumed that rich urban dwellers would naturally gravitate towards the countryside and improve the land more assiduously than any great feudal proprietor (1999 [1776], 507). The prospect of the rich willingly moving into the countryside in this manner, we shall see shortly, was important for Wollstonecraft’s own efforts to grapple with the issue of rural-urban imbalance in a commercial society.

II. THE COMMERCIAL CITY IN *A HISTORICAL AND MORAL VIEW*

Wollstonecraft was well familiar with Fénelon and the debate that he started. As a reviewer for Joseph Johnson she was singularly unimpressed with one author’s attempt to convert *Télémaque* (which she deemed a “celebrated work”) into English verse (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.7, 305). In her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* she mocked the notion that virtuous women would always end up marrying equally virtuous male companions by doubting whether luck would ever grant them an

"Emelius or a Telemachus," a reference to Rousseau's endorsement of Fénelon in *Emile* (1989 vol.5, 162). Moreover, in her unflattering portrait of Louis XIV in the *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution* Wollstonecraft attributed a transformative shift in political debate towards the end of his reign to the "writings of Fénelon" (1989 vol.6, 26).

Traces of Fénelon's case against commerce are also clearly in evidence throughout Wollstonecraft's writings. That she shared Fénelon and Rousseau's concern with the debilitating effects of luxury on character, for instance, is clear from just about everything she wrote. In her *Female Reader* Wollstonecraft compiled a string of excerpts from various authors declaiming against the tendency of luxury to "exterminate happiness" by stoking unquenchable desires and breeding vanity (1989 vol.4, 73). Similarly, in the *Vindication of the Rights of Men* she damned luxury in Rousseauian fashion for distorting natural human sentiments and rendering people indifferent to each other's fate. "Luxury and effeminacy," she noted there, had conspired to introduce "idiotism" and unfeeling into the upper classes and servility and debasement into the lower (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.5, 24).

Wollstonecraft's republican suspicions of commerce carried over into the later historical and epistolary works. In her *Letter on the Present Character of the French Nation* she worried that the "narrow principle of commerce" gaining ground all over Europe would compromise the moral and political progress the revolution had promised (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 445). She also reported dismay upon arriving in Paris at the "slovenliness" and "deceit" that commerce had bred there and feared that the benefits of the Revolution would be "last felt" in the French capital, so addicted were its inhabitants to the gratifications offered by a luxury economy (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 443 and 445).

Nevertheless, these republican reservations did not amount to a repudiation of commerce as such. What is so striking about Wollstonecraft's *Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution*, for example, is that it blended this distaste for commerce with a robust defense of free trade and enterprise. In a rare moment of praise for Louis XVI she even commended his decree allowing for the "free circulation of grain" throughout the kingdom, a radical step that essentially permitted market forces to set prices where previously the state had done so (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 202). Later in the same work she heaped praise on Turgot and Quesnay for having realized that economic growth depended on the "freedom of industry" and that only the "unshackling of commerce" could allow it to serve public needs (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 226). Wollstonecraft in this work also adopted the physiocrat line on taxes, insisting that they be leveled only on land (the "mother of every production"), and condemning their tendency to slow "the live stream of trade" (1989 vol.6, 181 and 226). Like many of her contemporaries, she took it as uncontroversial that "political economy" was a science that had recently made great strides and that the consensus among its practitioners was that *le doux commerce* should be cultivated as avidly as possible (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 132). Even her private letters from this time contain similar sentiments. To her friend Ruth Barrow she complained that the French government was "perpetually throwing impediments in the way of business" (Wollstonecraft 1979, 255).

Such enthusiasm for the freeing up of commerce may have owed something to the fact that Wollstonecraft had directly witnessed the alternative. Unlike many of her fellow radicals back in England, Wollstonecraft was uniquely positioned to see up close what happens when republicans on a Fénelonian crusade against commerce get a grip on power. Having stayed on in France after British nationals had been advised to leave (the two countries were at war from February 1793) she was in Paris when the Jacobin-dominated Convention created a new vigilante force, the Revolutionary Army, to ensure that grain supplies made it to the capital (Miller 1999, 155). Soon after the government introduced rigid price controls on grain (the so-called September Maximums) and enacted policies privileging necessities at the expense of luxuries in the hope of pushing the economy towards an austere republican autarky (Jennings 2007, 90). Wollstonecraft's letters paint a sorry picture of life in Paris at this time and she herself had to queue for bread in freezing temperatures (Todd 2002, 9).

Wollstonecraft, however, not only made an economic case for free commerce in the *Historical and Moral View*, she also defended it as a corollary of a wider process of *intellectual* improvement. On this issue she placed some distance between herself and many of her republican forebears, Rousseau especially. Though sympathetic to his attacks on the vanity of modern life, Wollstonecraft had little patience for Rousseau's pessimistic take on the development of civilization. In the *Moral and Historical View* she even accused followers of Rousseau of failing to see how the corrupting effects of commerce were a necessary byproduct of a fundamentally benign advancement of the arts and sciences. Having only noticed the "evil" arising from the luxury economy, she argued, they were unable to grasp the role the arts and sciences had played as a crucial agent of intellectual (and thus political) improvement (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 23).

Such intellectual improvement, furthermore, was inextricably linked to the rise of commercial cities. The "spirit of inquiry," she argued, first arose in "hamlets" before eventually a "favourite spot" developed into an urban hub and henceforth a "vortex for men and things" (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 223). And while these cities quickly became "hot-bed[s] of vice and immorality" they also served as the "focus of information" and thus of science (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 223). So effective were cities in radiating the benefits of intellectual improvement outwards that this almost compensated for the vices they gave rise to: "Such is the good and evil flowing from the capitals of states that during the infancy of governments, though they tend to corrupt and enervate the mind, they accelerate the introduction of science, and give the tone to the national sentiments and taste" (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 224). It was precisely by functioning as a locus for scientific progress and the exchange of ideas that Paris became the "author" of the French Revolution, an event that in Wollstonecraft's mind represented an unequivocal advance for humanity, notwithstanding the violence it precipitated (1989 vol.6, 227).

At this stage of her analysis, however, Wollstonecraft made clear that large commercial cities would eventually reach a point where they outlived their usefulness. Here she rejoined the republican mainstream. "Large capitals" would inevitably reach such a height of economic and political dominance that they "become dangerous to the freedom of the people" and "incompatible with the safety of a republican government" (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 229). Like Rousseau, she was prepared to follow this argument to its logical conclusion and envision a dramatic end to the commercial city itself: “should a republican government be consolidated,” she foresaw, “Paris must rapidly crumble into decay” (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 229). Nor could the economic dynamics that gave rise to the great commercial cities be allowed to repeat themselves. Instead continual vigilance would be called for to prevent commerce from once again forcing the “majority” to become “manufacturers rather than husbandman” (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 233).

Did this mean that Wollstonecraft also endorsed Fénelon’s view that the state itself must be the agent of the capital’s destruction? Not necessarily. Wollstonecraft predicted that the destruction of Paris would come about gradually as the luxury economy that gave rise to it in the first place withered under the new republican regime. Moreover, far from requiring the state to relocate city dwellers to the country, she was adamant that they would make the move voluntarily. Here she made two assumptions, the second of which was shared by (the decidedly non-republican) Smith. The first was that a people imbued with republican ideals would be quickly seduced by the “charms of solitary reflections and agricultural recreations” and so would abandon the city on their own initiative (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 229). The second, which as we have seen also appeared in Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* (a text Wollstonecraft referenced later in the same chapter), was that the “opulent” would also have “strong motives to induce them to live more in the country,” the decline of luxury giving them little choice but to invest in agriculture (1989 vol.6, 231).[7]

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[7] Wollstonecraft referred to Smith when indicting the “destructive influence of commerce” on the human intellect. Citing “a celebrated writer” (Smith) she lamented how the division of labour deprived workers of the time between tasks needed to prevent them “degenerating into a brute” (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 234).

It has often been said that Wollstonecraft's *Historical and Moral View* reflected a more chastened perspective on events in France as disillusionment with the Jacobin purges (and the destruction of the Girondins in particular) set in. But on this point at least she remained optimistic. Once the urban population converts *en masse* to republican virtue, she seemed to suggest, the defects of commercial society would mostly correct themselves and commercial centers like Paris, having played a crucial but temporary role in laying the groundwork for the French Revolution, would gently fall into decline (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 229). In other words, the desired Fénelonian endpoint – with balance between city and country restored – could be achieved without coercive intervention by the state. This is in keeping with Wollstonecraft's marked preference in the *Historical and Moral View* for reform to proceed in step with the "gradual improvement of manners" rather than through the pre-emptions of overly zealous politicians (1989 vol.6, 108).

III. COMMERCE AND PREJUDICE IN *A SHORT RESIDENCE*

Wollstonecraft's moral reservations about commerce would resurface in her final major work, her *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. So too, however, would her defense of commerce as a much needed catalyst of civilization. Readers have generally (and unfortunately) followed William Godwin in regarding this text as a rapturous reflection on the sublimity of nature inspired by a dramatic Scandinavian coastline. But this is to entirely overlook Wollstonecraft's stated aim in the Advertisement to the book, which was to "give a just view of the present state" of the countries she passed through on her travels, including observations on their economies, laws, and institutions (1989 vol.6, 241).

As one early reader recorded, Wollstonecraft had set herself apart from other narrators of foreign journeys by setting out as a "*political* traveller," one who saw "ample opportunities of finding fault with the laws and governments of the three countries" she had visited (Anon. 1796).

As with the *Historical and Moral View* the conclusions Wollstonecraft reached in *A Short Residence* reflected her faith in commerce as an agent of civilizational progress. Not only did she express increased frustration with Rousseau's fables about natural man's emergence from the "golden age of stupidity" and subsequent descent into commercial modernity but she also made more explicit, in true Scottish Enlightenment fashion, the association between commerce and liberty (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 288). Both England and America, she conceded, "owe their liberty to commerce" which had provided "a new species of power to undermine the feudal system," even as she warned how a "tyranny of wealth" could quickly emerge in those societies to replace monarchy and aristocracy (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 309).

A Short Residence also saw Wollstonecraft revisit the question that had vexed republican critics of commerce since Fénelon, namely whether the good that comes from large cities could possibly outweigh the dangers. Her answer again revealed a determination to set Rousseau straight. Rousseau had argued in *Emile* that because all capital cities and their inhabitants tended to resemble each other, national characteristics could only reveal themselves among the rural population. In *A Short Residence* Wollstonecraft repeated this line of argument almost verbatim, contending that because the "inhabitants of the capital are all of the same genus" she as a researcher must enter deep into the countryside where "the manners of a people are best discriminated" (1989 vol.6, 259). What she found in the countryside, however, made her less skeptical of the commercial city than Rousseau and even she herself had been in the *Historical and Moral View*. For whereas before she had regarded the commercial city as only temporarily useful as a vehicle of civilization, or a way-station *en route* to a more pastoral republic, she now saw urban life as playing an indispensible and permanent role in civilizing the inhabitants of a state.

We can see this clearly from the fact that whenever Wollstonecraft contrasted rural and urban life it was the latter that most often came off better. To live in the country, she now argued, was to live among people whose imaginations were blunted and "whose minds" had "a narrow range" (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 259). Virtue too could suffer from too much time spent in rural isolation. Wollstonecraft was adamant that an "intercourse with men of science and artists" was essential not only for intellectual growth, but for fostering moral improvement and "benevolence" as well (1989 vol.6, 302). But opportunities for "intercourse" of this sort were precisely what the countryside lacked. And determined though she remained to point out the corrupting effects of commerce and the luxury economy, Wollstonecraft was equally keen to expose the deleterious effects of "simplicity" on morals (1989 vol.6, 326). Her experience of Denmark, a country where the lust for wealth was weak but where the people were riddled with vices nonetheless, convinced her to revise her earlier position that vice was a product of the commercial city. Now she realized that distance from centers of interaction, where prejudices can be challenged through urbane sociability, was likely to have much the same effect.

Moreover, small-scale urbanization, such as in the development of country towns, would not suffice to redress these deficiencies. If anything it accentuated them. Country towns, Wollstonecraft complained, were bereft of "discussion" on politics (1989 vol.6, 250). Even the warm hospitality offered by their inhabitants was evidence, not of their virtue, but of their "want of science" and she went so far as to posit a correlation between "indiscriminate hospitality" and lack of refinement (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 251). Her stark (and startling) conclusion was that "no place is so disagreeable and unimproving as a country town" and that moral improvement was only possible either "in country solitude" (that is, safely away from the corrupting effects of country towns) or in a "metropolis" (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 296). There is little to suggest that the eventual demise of such a metropolis and its replacement with an agrarian republic was a thing any longer to be hoped for.

IV. COMMERCE, SPECULATION, AND WAR

If I am correct that Wollstonecraft in *A Short Residence* had become even more convinced that the benefits of commerce outweighed the harms, what then accounts for her blistering attacks on commerce towards the end of the text? These critiques are difficult to ignore and were piercing enough to be picked up on by early reviewers. A writer for Johnson's *Analytic Review* noted that Wollstonecraft had made some "just remarks" on the "debasing influence of commerce on the human mind," a reference to her claim that the monotony encouraged by the division of labor dulled the mental capacities of workers (Anon. 1796, 158). Indeed, Wollstonecraft conceded that her imagined reader might conclude that she had taken matters so far as to be thought "too severe on commerce" (1989 vol.6, 304).

Interpreting these passages will require adding another layer of context to our analysis. In particular, it requires understanding the circumstances that gave rise to Wollstonecraft's voyage in the first place. Events in Paris had not only forced Wollstonecraft to live under a government with an animus against commerce; they also indirectly led to her becoming a commercial agent herself. The acute grain shortage in revolutionary France opened up opportunities for any commercial adventurer well placed enough to exploit them. One such adventurer was Gilbert Imlay who sought to bypass the British naval blockade of the new republic by re-licensing a French vessel with Norwegian papers and shipping a cargo of silver to Gothenburg in exchange for grain. When the vessel went missing under mysterious circumstances, Wollstonecraft was tasked to investigate its whereabouts, negotiate compensation, and initiate legal proceedings if she were not satisfied with the amounts offered. The brief Imlay gave her was broad and allowed her to act on his behalf in all matters concerning the incident. She even wrote to the Prime Minister of Denmark, Count Bernstorff, to complain that delays in the Danish courts were threatening the "commercial plan" she was involved in and met with him in person to discuss the case (Wollstonecraft 2009 [1795], 138).

What this effectively meant was that Wollstonecraft found herself in the unusual position of being a critic of commerce while reluctantly participating in it herself.[8] This should be borne in mind when we consider that the most critical remarks in *A Short Residence* were directed not against commerce *per se* but against the mutated form of commercial activity spawned by the revolutionary wars and that she was now entangled in. Take, for instance, the passage alluded to above where she acknowledged that her reader might find her a bit too harsh on businessmen:

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[8] As Tone Brekke and Jon Mee have noted, there is little sign of Wollstonecraft's commercial dealings in the book itself other than "the intensifying attacks on the corrupting power of commerce as its nears its conclusion" (2009, xvii).

> You may think me too severe on commerce; but from the manner it is at present carried on, little can be advanced in favour of a pursuit that wears out the most sacred principles of humanity and rectitude. What is speculation, but a species of gambling, I might have said fraud, in which address generally gains the prize? (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 304).

At first glance this is an uncompromisingly negative verdict. Notice, however, that Wollstonecraft has been prompted to inveigh against commerce by the "manner it is at present carried on." To her mind there was something particularly pernicious about the sorts of commerce she was confronted with at the time she was writing. Figuring out what that was is key to understanding the scope of her critique.

What then was this novel "manner" of commerce and what made it so troublesome? Wollstonecraft's first major complaint was that the ongoing war had encouraged neglect of what we might today call the 'real economy' in favor of perverse speculative schemes that were of little benefit to society as a whole: "It moves my gall to discover some of the commercial frauds practiced during the present war" (1989 vol.6, 324). She noted with particular disdain how merchants in neutral countries could take advantage of guarantees made to them by the belligerent states. Her target here was the Scandinavian practice of exploiting the English government's promise that the cargo of any neutral nations' ships seized by the English navy would be fully compensated. This incentivized Scandinavian merchants to send out ships full of sub-par or already damaged stock deliberately into the path of English frigates and then claim compensation for the over-valued cargo that was lost. Wollstonecraft's concern was that such activities distracted, not from a life of agrarian simplicity, but from more stable forms of trade that thrive during times of peace.

Wollstonecraft's second area of concern was inflation. She assumed with good reason that sudden spurts of war-driven economic activity would drive up the prices of local provisions. Sweden provided a good example of this. Gothenburg, she noted, had experienced a swell in "commission business with France since the war," another reference to the lucrative grain trade this neutral state conducted with the new republic (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 250). The result was that the merchant class in the city had grown rich quickly "at the expense of the other inhabitants" who suffered the effects of inflation (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.5, 250). The situation was so bad that speculation on wartime "exportation of corn to France," she estimated, had doubled local prices, an inflation that would only be reduced if "peace" could "put a stop" to speculators (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 254).

Her third worry was that speculation had effects on character that went beyond those experienced by regular traders or merchants. Wollstonecraft's final destination on her voyage was Hamburg, a city that had experienced a rapid up-tick in trade as a result of war profiteering. Her disgust for this city (where "profit is the only stimulus" of the inhabitants) is palpable but again her attacks were directed mainly at the war economy and the character deforming effects on those who participated in it (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 342). The explosion of economic activity there had created what

Wollstonecraft elsewhere called “mushroom fortunes,” or wealth gained from speculating on price fluctuations (1989 vol.5, 340). This “sudden influx of wealth,” she maintained, would corrupt moral character in ways a more balanced form of economic growth would not, in that speculation encourages “vulgarity” and the craving of profit for profit’s sake (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 340).

It is in this light that we should read Wollstonecraft’s acerbic remarks against Imlay, whose character had been “altered” (very much for the worse) as a result of his engagement in commerce (1989 vol.6, 340). In the *Letters to Imlay* (published posthumously by Godwin) she complained that he had been “embruted by trade” and grew contemptuous of the moneymaking plans he was constantly “dragged” into by his associates (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 398 and 401). This appears to be an indictment of all commercial activity before we recall that Imlay was no ordinary entrepreneur and that the schemes he pursued were of a uniquely dubious sort. The trade Imlay was attempting in the 1790s, for example, was entirely dependent on the British naval blockade of France and the wartime rationing of grain. And while his published writings earned him a reputation as an agrarian primitivist, Imlay’s activities in the American frontier revolved almost exclusively around land speculation, precisely the kind of activity that Wollstonecraft singled out in her critique in *A Short Residence*.

Just how much Wollstonecraft knew of Imlay’s past commercial enterprises is unclear but there is one venture that he almost certainly kept from her. With the windfall from a speculative coup in Kentucky Imlay ventured into the slave business, purchasing a 50 percent stake in the slave ship, the *Industry*, thus becoming one of the barterers in human flesh that Wollstonecraft so heartily condemned from her earliest writings (Verhoeven 2006, 836). By a cruel irony, the passage in *A Short Residence* in which Wollstonecraft attacks the "owners of negro ships" explains how her recent experiences had made her wise to the "mean machinery" at work behind supposedly innocuous commercial dealings (1989 vol.6, 344). That she had just been deputizing for a former slave trade investor suggests that she was not yet fully awakened to the full extent of Imlay's duplicitousness, though in this she was far from alone.[9] In any case, Wollstonecraft's criticisms of Imlay made clear that if he had been corrupted by commerce, it was commerce of an exceptional and odious sort.

The final element of Wollstonecraft's critique of war commerce concerned the influence of profiteers in prolonging conflicts that might otherwise have ended. Speculators like Imlay, Wollstonecraft complained, had incentivizes to perpetuate the war conditions under which their business could prosper. Other of Wollstonecraft's contemporaries, such as Paine and Condorcet, had considered commerce anathema to war and lauded the pacifying effects it would have on relations between states. Wollstonecraft excoriated those whose interests pointed in the opposite direction. Unlike those who participate in *le doux commerce* "speculating merchants" had an interest in stoking animosities between states and obstructing paths to peace (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 344).

More productive forms of commerce that leave a lasting imprint on the local economy Wollstonecraft not only tolerated but welcomed. Indeed, far from condemning the commercial spirit in its entirety, Wollstonecraft in some cases thought it too weak among those engaged in economic activities other than speculation. In the opening of *A Short Residence* she unfavorably contrasted the laziness of Swedish pilots guaranteed an income from the crown (and so willing only to perform the bare minimum of work) with their industrious English counterparts who, lured by "expectation of extraordinary profit," actively hail approaching ships even in stormy weather (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 244). Later she predicted that the "manners" of the Norwegians would improve with the deforestation of the country, as the industriousness this would call for would also foster "ingenuity" (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 288). She found the Danes too to be sorely lacking in the "enterprising spirit of commerce" and consequently "averse to innovation" (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 330-1). In the same letter in which she compared speculation to gambling and condemned its effect on morality, she praised the industry of the traders at Moss and lauded the owner of the local iron works as a man of "fortune and enterprise" (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 302). What this suggests is that Wollstonecraft found the sterile, unproductive nature of speculative commerce just as objectionable as its moral effects.

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[9] Imlay's professed opposition to slavery earned him an audience with Brissot and his circle.

A Short Residence also saw Wollstonecraft renew her defense of free trade. She particularly lamented the mercantilist impulses driving Danish trade policy towards its sister kingdom, Norway, noting with bitterness the law requiring Norwegian trading vessels bound for the West Indies be first routed through Copenhagen where they could be taxed. Echoing her one time opponent Edmund Burke, who had long complained against similar policies imposed by Britain, Wollstonecraft even compared the effects of this policy to the "painful subordination of Ireland," a country whose trade had been strangled by the 1670 Navigation Act requiring all Irish goods to pass through English ports to be taxed before heading to the colonies (1989 vol.6, 274).

If Wollstonecraft generally chaffed against state interventions in foreign commerce, however, she was perfectly willing to countenance domestic measures to combat social inequality. Wollstonecraft idealized the small farmer as a model of independence in precisely the way we might expect from someone steeped in the English commonwealth tradition. In Norway she admired the "distribution of landed property into small farms" and how the absence of great proprietors helped ensure the "balance of liberty" (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 273). Unique to Norway, however, was that a similar system also operated with regard to merchant wealth. Wollstonecraft approvingly noted how Norwegian merchants were legally obligated to divide their fortunes equally among their offspring without reference to seniority (though Wollstonecraft noted with considerable irritation that the boys receive twice as much as the girls). It is precisely such a property regime that allowed the Norwegians to achieve the status of a "free community" despite being ruled by an absolute monarch (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 273).

Other Norwegian inheritance laws that Wollstonecraft admired achieved a similar effect. Of particular interest to her was the system of *odelsrett*, a set of allodial rights that allowed descendants to repurchase land sold out of the family for the original sale price. This system effectively prevented family farms from being sold on the open market and then absorbed into the estates of rich landowners. At the time Wollstonecraft was writing the *odelsrett* system had become a matter of some controversy in Norway and even Thomas Malthus would later identify it as a major obstacle to the improvement of Norwegian agriculture in the second edition of his *Essay on Population*. Wollstonecraft admitted that "most rational men" she had discussed the topic with favored their eventual abolition as they considered them an "impediment to commerce" (1989 vol.6, 309). She, however, defended the system for the very reason that Malthus opposed it, namely that it helped to keep the "farms in the farmers' own hands" (Wollstonecraft 1989 vol.6, 309).

CONCLUSION

Too often Wollstonecraft has been applauded merely as a passionate denunciator of the injustices she saw around her in eighteenth-century Britain, not least the abject condition to which women had been reduced. But this is to take an overly narrow view of what she thought she was about, particularly in the later phase of her career when she devoted herself to comprehending and comparing the progress of civilization across different European societies. Although Wollstonecraft wrote no systematic treatise on the subject it should be clear by now that she offered *analysis* of commercial society rather than mere condemnation. It should also be evident that labeling that analysis 'republican' will only get us so far if we are sincerely interested in understanding what she was doing. And sincerely interested is precisely what we ought to be, if for no other reason than that Wollstonecraft's case illustrates how criticism of the corrupting effects of commerce can sit alongside an acknowledgement of the historical role it played in transforming society in ways both good and bad. If commercial society was to be reformed (and she clearly thought it should be) it must be reformed in such a manner that preserved the considerable intellectual and moral-psychological benefits it had brought about.