

*Political Anatomy of Ireland*\* (London, 1691); Sir Josiah Child (1630–99), *A New Discourse of Trade*\* (London, 1690); Sir Dudley North (1641–91), *Discourses upon Trade* (London, 1691); Charles Davenant (1656–1714), *An Essay upon Ways and Means*\* (London, 1695) and *An Essay on the East-India Trade*\* (London, 1696); and John Law (1671–1729), *Money and Trade Considered*\* (Edinburgh, 1705).

To a man, these writers were optimists who unreservedly endorsed the effects of increased commercial activity upon English society and who celebrated the workings of the market forces they sought to describe. Whereas earlier writers of almost all hues and persuasions had conventionally decried self-interest as the bane of political society, these authors located the foundations of the new economic order in the undirected material aspirations of the individuals who composed it. In their view, the self-interested behavior of individuals—the universal human tendency to seek one's own good—was the mainspring that kept the entire market edifice in motion and made its operation both comprehensible and rational. The individual desire for gain and the competition and instrumental behavior it engendered in a free market seemed to these writers at once a cure for idleness, an incitement to industry, a spur to achievement, and a stimulus to productivity. They recognized, moreover, that individual desires were the source of the rising demand for consumer goods that led to enhanced productivity, which in turn resulted in the augmentation of national greatness and the material enhancement of society as well as in the betterment of the individuals who composed it. In a society based upon and animated by the pursuit of profit, they discovered, egocentric behavior was both legitimate and benign. These authors were convinced that, unregulated, the natural operation of individual self-interest would render the productive powers of society virtually unlimited.

Although the Library Company owned most of these works, neither the works themselves—many of which were ephemeral—nor their authors were especially well-known to Americans of the Revolutionary generation. Their implicit plea for a free market unhampered by political interference had never won the allegiance of people in power in Britain, where governments persisted in traditional policies of mercantile regulation throughout the eighteenth century. Nevertheless, their fundamental insights into the operation of commercial society were taken up, popularized, extended, and refined in later studies of political economy such as Malachy Postlethwayt (1707?–67), *Britain's Commercial Interest Explained and Improved*\* (Lon-

don, 1757); Adam Anderson (1692–1767), *Historical and Chronological Deduction of the Origin of Commerce*\* (London, 1764); and, more especially, Sir James Steuart Denham (1712–80), *An Inquiry into the Principles of Political Economy*\* (London, 1767) and Adam Smith (1723–90), *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*\* (London, 1776), the last of which will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 7.

In such later forms, these ideas provided Revolutionary Americans with an understanding of the operation of the commercial world in which they had been so deeply enmeshed since the first settlement of the colonies and helped to legitimate the individualistic and self-interested behavior that had been so manifest a feature of American life throughout the colonial and Revolutionary eras. By fostering an appreciation of the great extent to which the socio-economic world in which they lived was the product of the unrestrained operation of self-interest in thousands of individuals, the literature of political economy also enhanced the liberal conception of political authority as a product of the consent of free individuals and helped demystify the traditional conceptions of political society as deriving from the will of a sovereign and residing in authoritative governmental institutions.

Perhaps even more important in shaping the perceptual world of Revolutionary Americans was the related literature of improvement. Primarily concerned with enhancing productivity and bettering social and economic conditions, this literature was also intimately connected with the commercial revolution that had engaged the attention of the economic writers mentioned above. Throughout the seventeenth century, an increasing number of writers offered the public a wide range of proposals for improving agricultural yields, livestock, transportation, manufacturing, marketing techniques, housing, health, urban amenities, and general conditions of life. The establishment of colonies in the New World was itself seen as a means to improve the wealth and national greatness of England. Through the systematic application of human intellect, these writers assumed, nature would be made more tractable and man more productive. Poverty and idleness would thereby be reduced, industry encouraged, standards of living enhanced, and society made ever more civil and refined as these improvements spread outward from the center to the peripheries. Improvement was thus a developmental concept that contained powerful implications for the possibility of social progress. For that reason, it held a special appeal for people in the colonies,