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How the Scots Invented the Modern World: The True Story of How Western Europe's Poorest Nation Created Our World and Everything in It: The True Story of ... Created Our World and Everything in It

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The Scots are the true inventors of what we today call the social sciences: anthropology, ethnography, sociology, psychology, history, and, as mention of the name Adam Smith makes us realize, economics.

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At each stage of civil society, Kames, Smith, and Robertson said, the way people earn their living shapes the character of their laws, their government, and their culture. Who we are depends on whether we are hunters and gatherers, or shepherds and nomads, or farmers and peasants, or merchants and manufacturers—the latter being the makers of “commercial society,” or, to use a more familiar term, capitalism. Almost one hundred years before Karl Marx, Kames and the Scots had discovered the underlying cause of historical change: changes in the “means of production.”

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Kames had done two other remarkable things. First he had developed a flexible, sliding scale by which to characterize and compare different societies, in the past or the present, based on their position in the four-stage process. Modern England and France clearly fit the modern commercial stage, as did ancient Athens and Renaissance Italy. Medieval England, on the other hand, belonged to the agrarian stage, as did

eighteenth-century Russia. The ancient Hebrews and the Indians of the American Plains fit the pastoral-nomadic—along with the Highland clans of Kames's own Scotland. But none could be said to be forever fixed or static. This was the point: Human communities are in a state of constant evolution, as they slowly, sometimes imperceptibly, make their way from one stage to the next, higher stage. Kames's followers borrowed a French term for this process of social evolution. They called it "civilization," meaning a transformation of society from primitive barbarism to a civilized "polite" state.

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The four-stage theory of civilization defined human history as a continuous vista of secular progress. Understanding the character of those different stages, and identifying the crucial moving parts in each, would become the task of the...

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But Kames had also solved the question Francis Hutcheson had by implication posed, but never quite answered: Why, if everyone has the same desire to be free and happy, as Hutcheson had claimed, are there so many societies in which people are neither? Now Lord Kames gives us the answer. Because, under certain primitive material conditions, when resources are scarce or in uncertain supply, the rights of the individual have to give way to the imperatives of the group. The Bushman hunter divides his kill with the rest of his little clan, whether he wishes to or not, because otherwise the group might starve. During the Dark Ages, peasants were bound...

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Under these harsh conditions, society cannot afford to trust individual choice or inclination. Men are guided instead by custom, and the personal authority of those they do trust—"the elders of the tribe" or a...

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Then, as material conditions improve, as they inevitably will when human beings devise new ways to increase their stock of property, the institutions governing the community also improve. In short, material progress—from the relative scarcity of the hunter-gatherer Bushmen to the relative prosperity of mercantile London and Edinburgh—brings other kinds of progress in its wake. The affluence and mutually beneficial union of commercial society “softens and polishes the manners of men,” as Robertson put it. Individual conscience is prepared to do the work that laws, and fearful punishments and taboos, used to do. As a modern social scientist would say, the rules of socialization are internalized. We no longer need awe-inspiring authority figures—kings and nobles, popes and priests—to tell us what to do, or what is right and wrong. “The moral sense,” Kames...

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This “fellow feeling” and identification with others leads to our first moral judgments. We use it first to judge others’ actions toward us (what makes me feel happy is good, and what makes me sad is bad), and then our own actions toward others, as we watch their reactions. Then, finally, we use it to judge the motivating passions behind those actions (here Smith accepted Hume’s basic point, that human beings were largely governed by their passions, not reason). Society acts as a mirror to our inner self, by reflecting back to us the reactions of others, and becomes our guide to what is good and evil in the world. “Were it possible,” Smith wrote, “that a human creature could grow up to manhood in a solitary place, without any communication with his own species, he could no more think of his own character . . . than of the beauty or deformity of his own face.”

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Smith had finally defined the link between commerce and cultural progress, which the rest of the Scottish Enlightenment had written about and celebrated, but not really proved. But he also opened up a broader point, and gestured toward another, often overlooked advantage to living in a modern commercial society. As the fourth stage of human progress, it produces more, in greater quantities, than any of its predecessors. It is so productive, in fact, that it can supply the wants and needs not only of those who work, but of those who don’t. In the early drafts of *Wealth of Nations*, Smith strongly emphasized this

(unfortunately, most of it did not make it to the final published version). He conceded that capitalism generates a great inequality of wealth, with a very few commanding the great bulk of commodities and a great part of the rest sharing what is left. But even so, Smith wanted to know, "in what manner shall we account for the superior affluence and abundance commonly possessed by even the lowest and most despised member of Civilized Society, compared with what the most respected and active savage can attain to."

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Smith carried Mandeville one step further, however, revealing an even deeper paradox and a greater irony: the pursuit of our own self-interest actually causes us to reach out to others. This is true of all societies, as Hume and Kames had realized; the Bushman soon realizes that the hunt goes easier when he has help, instead of having to do it all himself. But Smith's bold insight was to realize that it was the genius of capitalism to carry both of these characteristics, the pursuit of self-interest and the need for cooperation, to their highest pitch. On the one hand, it multiplies the opportunities, and lessens the amount of direct physical labor, necessary to pursue that interest. On the other, the relentless search for customers to buy, and for suppliers to sell, results in a vast network of interdependence, binding people together in far more complex ways than is possible in more primitive conditions. "In civilized society [a person] stands at all times in need of the cooperation and assistance of great multitudes," Smith wrote, "while his whole life is scarce sufficient to gain the friendship of a few persons." Then still another paradox, and a further irony: the interdependence of the market begets independence of the mind, meaning the freedom to see one's own self-interest and the opportunity to pursue it. We recall that for Hutcheson, human happiness had been about personal liberty, the capacity to live one's life as one saw fit without harming others. For Kames, it had been about owning property, which gave us our sense of "propriety" and identity as human beings. Now Smith put the two together. By entering and competing in the great interactive dynamic network of modern society, at once impersonal but also indispensable to happiness, we become fully free and human. Independence in this sense becomes the hallmark of modern society, just as dependence on others or "servility" becomes the hallmark of primitive societies and institutions. "Nobody but a beggar," Smith admonished, "chuses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow-citizens." Yet this has been the essential fate of the vast majority of humankind through

most of history, as slaves toiling for their masters, as peasants handing over the harvest to their feudal lords, or as members of the tribe or clan dependent on their chieftains' command for life or death—hapless creatures whose quality of life rests entirely on whether their chief is “gentle Lochiel” or a brute like Coll MacDonnell. Capitalism breaks that cycle, and offers the conditions under which we forge our own happiness: independence, material affluence, and cooperation with others.

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In fact, while Wealth of Nations speaks highly of free markets, it treats businessmen themselves in a very different light. To begin with, Smith saw the important beneficiaries of the free market not as businessmen but as consumers. “Consumption is the

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This was precisely what the existing British system failed to do. It put the interest of the producers and merchants ahead of that of consumers, who only want low prices and a ready supply of goods. Merchants often prefer the opposite. In fact, Smith understood that much of the British government's disastrous trade policies came at the instigation of the London merchants themselves, who wanted to protect their livelihood. “It is the interest of every man to live as much at his ease as he can,” Smith notes in Book Five, and that rule applies as much to the businessman as it does to the landed aristocrat or university professor.

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But Smith saw another, more systematic corruption flowing from commercial society, one that was more pernicious and worried him deeply. Even as capitalism increases specialization, and more sophistication in the overall output of goods and services, the individuals caught up in the process become narrower in their interests and less concerned with what happens outside their shop, office, or showroom. They come to weigh everything in terms of their job, of profit and loss, and lose sight of the larger picture. This worry appeared years before in one of Smith's lectures, and is worth quoting in full:

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The English character? If the eighteenth-century Scot had subordinated himself to a larger whole as a “North Briton,” Smiles was now willing to carry things a step further. Scottish scientists and inventors such as Watt and Telford and Nasmyth, he was suggesting, were displaying a creative national character that turned out not to be Scottish at all, but English! It was an extraordinary piece of national selfeffacement, especially since Britain was becoming more reliant on its Scots than ever. If England’s claim to greatness in the second half of the nineteenth century rested on its laurels of empire, it was an empire largely built and organized by Scots.

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Mill’s attack on India’s culture and civilization makes hard reading in today’s multiculturalist age. But his anger sprang from his liberal, even radical, sympathies (he was the friend and disciple of the founder of English radicalism, Jeremy Bentham). He wanted European-style progress to raise up the lives of the Indian peasant and urban artisan, who found themselves overtaxed and powerless, as well as denied a basic human dignity by Hinduism’s relentlessly rigid rules of caste. If India’s rulers were incapable of changing this, Mill declared, then the British had to. “A simple form of arbitrary government,” Mill wrote, “tempered by European honour and European intelligence, is the only form which is now fit for Hindustan.” He wanted the British to take command—not in order to enhance their own power and profits (the East India Company already had plenty of both), but to make India into a modern, “civilized” society.

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was the issue of bringing progress to the Highlands all over again, but in a tropical climate. Mill had given birth to the idea of what Rudyard Kipling would call “the white man’s burden,” and the impact on British policy was swift. Mill was appointed to a post at East India House, and the book itself went into four editions. The president of the Board of Control took Mill’s arguments to heart, as did a future president, Thomas Babington Macaulay. Macaulay detested Mill’s left-wing politics and wrote a famous essay ridiculing them in the *Edinburgh Review*. But

Mill's radical ideas on legal reform, which Macaulay thought unsuitable for England, he saw as perfect for India. Macaulay called *The History of British India* "the greatest historical work which has appeared in our language since Gibbon." He pressed hard to implement its proposed reforms, along with a national English-language school system for India—shades of Scotland's own common parish schools.

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