



Economic Rights of Individuals in Mercy Otis Warren (1727–1814)

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Mercy Otis Warren identified economics as intricately linking the political and the moral. Having experienced the aftermath of the Revolutionary War and seen that “After freedom was attained” the “acquisition of wealth, and the new advantages” upset equality and “threatened” freedom and republican values, Warren warned that “a superfluity of wealth and a train of domestic slaves, naturally banish a sense of general liberty.” In her *Observations on the Constitution* and her *History* she noted that the economic right of an individual to pursue wealth to the extent that others suffer, will affect freedom, for “zeal for the defense of liberty” will be lost.

The right of the military to be paid does not entail extravagant pay for those with military power. Too much wealth for the few tends to lower the virtue of individuals and thus the state. Chance for human improvement and gratitude for liberty is greater when virtues are “uncontaminated by luxury.” A “sudden acquisition of wealth” is not “favorable to the virtue or manners of the possessors, for wealth has a tendency to contract the mind,” and lead it “to shrink into selfish views and indulgences, totally inconsistent with genuine republicanism.”

As “the sudden rotations in human affairs are wisely permitted by Providence to remind mankind of their natural equality, to check the pride of wealth,” the state, too, must permit the change in fortune, but at the same time see that no great harm comes to the freedom and equality of its citizens. A wealthy nation, however, does have benefits: “in proportion to the increase of wealth, the improvements in the arts, and the refinements of society.” That depends, however, if that wealth has not been “actuated by the principle of immediate self-interest” and if the dispersing of wealth is promoting equality and freedom.

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