In The Wealth of Nations, Adam Smith famously argued that commercial societies produce freedom and widespread prosperity. In The Theory of Moral Sentiments, Smith held that such societies would unleash and cohere around the moral sentiment of sympathy along with the pursuit of material self-interest. In the commercial city, all may be strangers, even competitors, but none are foreigners. At the same time, Smith was acutely aware of the tendencies toward collusion, monopoly, and factionalism that could undermine individual freedom, equality, prosperity, and sympathetic association.

Our speakers from a range of disciplines will explore these tensions within commercial society. For Smith, does material inequality undermine freedom and the moral imagination's capacity for sympathy? Today, have the benefits of a market-oriented society been undercut by socioeconomic segregation and stratification? Has the ideal of the cosmopolitan commercial city been exposed by the realities of the slum and the gated-community? Or does the commercial republic itself provide the best solutions to these ailments?