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## Adam Smith and Edmund Burke: Texts in Context

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## Adam Smith and Edmund Burke: Texts in Context

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*Edmund Burke and Adam Smith: Texts in Context*

*Burke, Reader of Smith*

Here is a puzzle I am far from the first to ponder. Although the Scots philosopher Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (1776) found few insightful readers in England before the 1790s, Smith himself noted that among what early readers he had the Anglo-Irish Whig Member of Parliament Edmund Burke stood out (Tribe 1984; Teichgraber, 1985). Smith informed a confidant that Burke "is the only man I ever knew who, without communication, thought on economic subjects exactly as I" (West 1969, 201; Himmelfarb, 1984, 66). They became correspondents and friends. But while Smith made it clear that government support should be extended in hard times to unemployed workers, who have a right to expect it, Burke flatly denied it. "Labor," he wrote in 1795, "is a commodity and as such an article of trade" (Burke, 1795, in Kramnick, 1999, 200). Trade, Burke declared, is none of government's business under any circumstances. "Of all things," he wrote, "an indiscreet tampering with the trade of provisions is the most dangerous and ... always worst ... in the time of scarcity" (Burke, 1795, in Kramnick, 1999, 195). If anyone deserves relief it is not those who are able to work but in hard times can't find it. It is those, and *only* those,

who are too sick, infirm, young, or old to work at all. They do indeed fall under our Christian duty to extend charity to the poor (Burke, 1795, in Kramnick 203). But the deserving poor, as they came to be called, are objects of our charity only insofar as we, and they, are private persons. Government, whose office to “regulate our tempers” by “timely coercion,” should stay out of it. “The people maintain [the government], not they the people” (Burke, 1795, in Kramnick, 195)

The puzzle is simple. How could Burke be Smith’s best reader if they differed on so important a topic?

I summarize the way scholarship has framed, if not fully answered, this problem as follows. There is, first, the possibility that Burke changed his mind without saying so. In a parliamentary debate in 1795, Samuel Whitbread, who seems to have been a pretty good reader of Smith himself, cited Smith as urging his colleagues to “regulate the wages of laborers in husbandry.” He was opposed by William Pitt, who cited Smith as an authoritative defender of *laissez-faire*. Burke did not disagree with Pitt. Perhaps he, if not Pitt, had already come to understand Smith’s *laissez-faire* principle better than Smith. Perhaps by 1795 Burke was even anticipating Malthus’s *Essay on the Principle of Population*, which appeared in 1798. In that seminal text, Malthus accused Smith of self-contradiction and argued

that public assistance always does more harm than good. More food equals more mouths to feed equals more pressure on food in an inescapable cycle.<sup>1</sup>

The idea that Burke anticipated Malthus is not unreasonable. Burke and Malthus were both responding to the same rhetorical situation--the spread of the so-called "Speenhamland system" of subsidizing families on a combined basis of the price of bread and numbers of mouths to feed. Initiated at first by local magistrates and adopted nationally as fear of French-style revolution by a starving population spread among the governing class, Malthus and Burke saw that this system would make things worse by creating both dependencies and scarcities. Still, there is no trace of Malthus's gloomy cyclical "principle" in Burke's "Thoughts and Details on Scarcity." Moreover, finding a contradiction in Smith between the new free market economy of which he had caught sight and the old 'moral economy' that, as a professional moral philosopher, kept tugging at his sleeve, seems to open up a contradiction in Burke as well.

The looming contradiction is between Burke's "organic position on political authority and his supposedly 'liberal' or individualistic conception of economic life" (Winch, 1985, 231) or, put otherwise, between his "bourgeois conception of civil society and his aristocratic conception of the state" (Freeman, 1980, 216). As Gertrude Himmelfarb correctly points out,

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<sup>1</sup> For the events summarized in this paragraph, see Rothschild, 2001, 61-64.

the essence of Burke's brand of Whiggery was his ideal of organic national solidarity (Himmelfarb, 1984, 70). It led him to reject Locke's contract theory of government and to criticize the executive usurpations of the Hanoverian monarchy nearly as strenuously as the American colonists. In fact, Burke was quite sympathetic to the Americans (Burke, 1774). But can national solidarity, on which Burke waxed most eloquently precisely when he was most vociferously expressing his categorical opposition to interfering with the free market, survive when the government allows its population to starve in the streets and die in their hovels?

I can't say for sure whether Burke saw pure *laissez-faire* in Smith from the outset or whether he read Smith correctly at first but later re-read him in a colder light or whether by the later Burke had more or less given up on Smith. Burke is silent on the subject. Whatever the answer, my point in this essay will be that differences in their economic views are not in any case the root cause of Smith's and Burke's split on the issue of public assistance. They do not disagree about how government is ideally to be related to economics. We find at the very center of the work of each man a shared and persistent desire to keep economics radically and fully out the clutches of government, and to do for the sake of good government itself. No, their differences spring from divergent conceptions of what a good government is and might be. The difference between Smith's sober, incipiently republican

view of government, I will argue, and Burke's inability to free himself from the sublime display of official violence that, as Michel Foucault has argued, characterizes the *ancien regime* explains most of what needs to be explained about their diverging views on the subject of unemployment assistance (Foucault, 1975)

This hypothesis yields, I think, an additional insight. The felt injustice of Burke's and Malthus's cold-heartedness played no small role in setting up the rhetorical situation in which politicians and economists have been immersed ever since. In the course of reducing the cognitive dissonance between the strenuous demands of the free market and the elementary claims of distributive justice, we can easily observe how Malthus's principle that population pushes against food was transformed in the first three decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century from its first expression as a dismal fact about all societies into, next, a counter-factual statement about what would happen if markets weren't left free—an interpretation in which Malthus himself took a hand—and, finally, into a very cheery claim about all the good things that are bound to happen for everyone when the market has been left alone. By the 1830s no problem of injustice remained for post-Malthusian “radical” Whig utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham (who like Malthus early on accused Smith of contradicting himself [Teichgraber, 1985]), James and John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and Harriet Martineau. Subsequently, the utilitarian

solution (which involved both an empirical prediction about economic growth and a weaker, consequentialist conception of what morality requires) became the basis of the mathematized science of economics that is still very much in play in our world. Given the scientific authority thus conferred on economics, the burden of proof has for a very long time been onerously placed on leftists like Marx, who thought of Malthus and his followers as mere ideologists, and on sentimental paternalists like Dickens, who tried to use the imaginative and emotional power of art to revive the claims of justice that utilitarian economics was trying to bury. In the course of this transformation of the rhetorical situation Smith was turned into the founder of *laissez-faire* economics, Burke into the father of libertarian conservatism, and the complexities of both men's views forgotten.

In attempting to recover this complexity, I will read Smith and Burke in the context of the different societies, 18<sup>th</sup> century Scotland and England respectively to which, in which, and on behalf of which they wrote. I will also assume a degree of consistency and coherence in their various writings that cannot be seen when their economic writings are, in the course of “disciplining” their insights, torn out of their larger bodies of work. I will, in short, read Adam Smith and Edmund Burke in the way rhetorical critics read works that are deeply engaged in concrete controversies—in context.



*Adam Smith and the Legend of Adam Smith*

If there is one thing that defines a classic text it is that the history of its reception is so persistent, powerful, and varied that it renders the original opaque and sometimes even inaccessible. Attempts to find the historical Jesus behind the Gospels or Siddh rtha Gautama behind the Buddha are so difficult for this very reason. This is not nearly *as* true in the case of Adam Smith, but it is true enough. Smith has been socially constructed since the father of *laissez-faire* capitalism and the *Wealth of Nations* (1776) as a gospel of greed. But what we learn from carefully reading Smith's complex book, from reading it alongside his several other works, and from placing his texts in their Scottish context, is enough to make us wonder whether the legend of Adam Smith is even approximately true.

Consider the famous phrase "invisible hand." Smith used it only three times. Its first use, in a text on the history of astronomy from the 1750s, makes pretty clear reference to the "invisible hand" of darkness that Shakespeare's Macbeth hopes will cover the foul deed he is about to perform (*Macbeth*, Act III, Scene II, Line 49). As Emma Rothschild points out, Smith's remaining two uses retain a reference to bad intentions while pointing to good results that come about in spite of them. Thus Smith's single mention of the invisible hand in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

(1759) refers to the trickle-down effects by which the rich, in spite of their congenital vices, give employment, and hence indirectly sustenance, to the poor by spending their money on consumption and display (on this passage, see McCloskey, 2004, 456-60). That's the beauty of a process that can properly be viewed only from a wider perspective than that of frivolous aristocrats, crooked politicians, or grasping merchants (Rothschild, 2001, 122).<sup>2</sup>

The phrase is also used only once in *Wealth of Nations*. It is used there to support the trickle-down effects of protecting domestic industries and markets, a practice that the real Smith countenanced but that the legendary Smith would not. Here the main point is to rebut the received idea, which had long been preached by the Aristotle-influenced medieval

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<sup>2</sup>Rothschild argues that Smith's wider perspective is that of a self-consciously cosmopolitan Stoic (Rothschild 2001, 131-34). For Smith, the higher perspective gives aesthetic satisfactions that nullify the emotional disturbances of what from a more mundane perspective are patent injustices. Appeal to the invisible hand thus puts one in a philosophical frame of mind as that term was meant in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is the same perspective that Kant, who prided himself on being a good reader of Scottish philosophical texts, took in his pragmatic essays.

Church, that rulers, merchants, and other powerful people should explicitly *aim at* the common good. The old scholastic argument had it that they should do so because good social consequences are generally correlated with the well-informed and well-meant intentions of rulers. Smith denies it. He tells his intended audience, which includes people who make policy as well as the clerical and learned professionals who are in a position to influence them, that “by pursuing his own interest [a rich or influential person] frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it” (*Wealth of Nations*, Book IV, Chapter II, Paragraph IX).

Smith, then, is against old common-good argument. He takes a much more jaundiced view of people in power than the tradition. He thinks that cabals, combinations, and corporations of rich and leisured people, and *a fortiori* of political parties and governments, invariably obstruct the optimal flow of economic interaction among individuals, rich and poor, and are bound to do so even if the rich actually do condescend now and then out of genuine good will to support the poor in their poverty. Such hands are very visible and very heavy. They cannot help but corrupt government. So it is best to leave things alone, *laissez-faire*. Contrary to the legend, however, this is not because markets always find the best solution. The solutions they find are only said to be better than good intentions of the Speenhamland sort.

They are only “*more* effectual.” Nor does Smith say that even this is always the case. The use of the word “frequently” in his sole mention of the invisible hand in the *Wealth of Nations* shows that there are exceptions—such as the exception that is our subject.

What tells most strongly against the legend of Adam Smith, however, is the real Smith’s reason for thinking that an invisible hand is generally better. We have seen that, contrary to ancient and medieval theory, Smith thinks that the virtues of self-control, prudence, and benevolence are too scarce among hereditary rulers to support intentional pursuit of the common good. But he also thinks that these virtues are widely distributed among laboring people. On this view, the author of the *Wealth of Nations*, a former professional professor of moral philosophy, was as much a virtue theorist as Aristotle (McCloskey, 2004). But he turned classical and scholastic Aristotelian virtue theory, and its economics with it, on its head. He rejected the old assumption that ordinary people lack the moral and intellectual capacities or virtue-building experiences of their supposed betters. “Smith,” writes Samuel Fleishacker, among scholars Smith’s most careful reader, “is reluctant to acknowledge that the division of labor is based to any significant degree on differences in talents ... [A] dignified picture of the poor is ... [his] most novel contribution in the *Wealth of Nations*” (Fleishacker, 2004, 208). There is not nearly as much difference

between the populist poet Robert Burns and Professor Smith as one might think.

Accordingly, we do not find in *Wealth of Nations* anything like the defense of global free trade or of general economic equilibrium that we would expect from the Smith of legend. If an invisible hand is at work when domestic industries are politically protected we can hardly be witnessing a commendation of free trade ideology as the sole condition in which a hidden hand does its happy work. The sole reference to the invisible hand in the *Wealth of Nations* flies directly in the face of that ideology.

Even so, there *is* enough self-interest in Smith's appeal to the invisible hand to pose a problem, or at least an apparent problem, when we look at his work as a whole. As a professional moral philosopher in Scottish universities that were looking outward to the improving society of which they were a part—by teaching and publishing in English, for example (Herman, 2004)--Smith, following his teacher Francis Hutcheson, took ethics to be coeval with an acquired ability to adopt the position of a “disinterested” (which doesn't at all mean uninterested) observer of own actions. In effect, this means seeing oneself from another's point of view. When we do we are ashamed of looking bad and pleased to look good. This ability and this motivation, Smith argues, constitute a powerful stimulus to

virtuous acts and to the virtuous dispositions that grow from them. It is not odd that Smith should have written a treatise on ethics, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, as well as a treatise on economics, the *Wealth of Nations*. It still fell to moral philosophers in those days to deal not only with personal ethics, but also with politics and economics. Nonetheless, is there not a tension between the other-oriented ethics of Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and his self-interested economics of *The Wealth of Nations*? Is that because after 1762 he quit his teaching job and encountered "the real world?"

The answer, once we consider what we have already discovered about Smith, is no. The perspective from which he gives economic advice is not that of a worldly man or of an abstract science of economics modeled on Newtonian mechanics, which makes the invisible hand analogous to the law of gravity. It is still that of a moral philosopher who, like Aristotle, treats of economics and politics from the perspective of justice, distributive justice in the case of economics, retributive in the case of politics. What Smith broke with, and broke strongly, was Aristotle's marked non-egalitarianism.

Smith does so in part by carefully examining so pervasive and simple a phenomenon as exchange. He famously wrote in the *Wealth of Nations* that "We do not expect our dinner from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, but from their regard to the their own self-interest."

Still, agents with interacting self-interests must in the every act of voluntary exchange show enough sympathetic imagination to judge what the buyer wants and what the seller can be expected to ask for it. Thus exchange does depend after all on buyers and sellers putting themselves into each others' shoes--well enough, at least, to know what the other wants, and to know, too, how to persuade him or her that one has what is wanted at a price on which they might agree. So there is no conflict between Smith's two books.

Not only is there no contradiction between them, but in the act of exchange we also see a key source of the presumptive virtue of ordinary people that is the linchpin of Smith's argument. The results of exchange considered as an interpersonal act of communication reverberate each day through an entire interacting community in ways that are generally good for all. If Smith, unlike the Smith of legend, does not describe this reverberation as the working of an invisible hand, it is because he does not see in the scene of exchange anything like the vices of powerful people being redeemed in spite of themselves by good, but unintended consequences. On the contrary, he sees exchange itself as communicative action that constitutes a powerful school of virtue for the great mass of men and women.

This point has been stressed by McCloskey, who finds in Smith not only a full-blown, if bourgeois, virtue theorist, but, like Aristotle, an

economic theorist who takes it for granted that economic transactions are crucially interpersonal communications rather than mathematical deductions (McCloskey, 2004). This perception has political implications. Smith saw that if exchange is to ripple through a political community in a way that increasingly benefits the whole, it has to take place among people sufficiently egalitarian in their cultural assumptions to be attuned, more through their “sentiments” than their rational economic calculations, to the lived world of those with whom they share a common fate. Exchange takes place most effectively, then, in a community of relative equals. Moreover, the more pervasive and unrigged exchange is the more it helps bring into existence and sustain just such communities.

It is this observation that makes it possible for Fleischacker to have shown convincingly why, far from leaving everyone to the mercies of the free market, the real Adam Smith was willing to support some tariffs, to urge national expenditure on infrastructure, to require government to lighten the burdens of the laboring poor in circumstances when necessity presses, and at the same time categorically to oppose any policies that allow the rich and powerful to collude with one another against the poor (Fleishacker, 2004a). If Smith adopted what today is called a “preferential option for the poor,” he did so by appealing to the traditional, Aristotelian conception of distributive justice (Fleishacker, 2004b, 2004a). The point is not that the poor *qua* poor



have a basic human right to some of what the rich own. Nor is it to inflame the poor to revolt by claiming that property is theft, as Burke and Pitt feared. It is that, as for Aristotle, distributive justice means setting up and sustaining a socio-political system that shares a community's store of social goods, including honor as much as fair wages, on the basis of merit. The test of fair exchange for Smith, as for Aristotle, is that it preserves the social relationships in which it occurs (*Nicomachean Ethics* V.3.1131a-31b). The difference is that, *pace* Aristotle, ordinary working stiffs are by this measure as presumptively meritorious as anyone else, if not more so. That is decidedly not an Aristotelian conclusion. Although Smith himself did not see this, it is also potentially republican and democratic, as the rapid co-expansion of economic liberty and political equality in post-revolutionary America shows.

### *Edmund Burke's Sublime Politics*

Edmund Burke will seem an unlikely fan of Adam Smith unless we recall that he was an intensely Whiggish opponent of a monarchy that he viewed as unconstrained by, and hence eager to corrupt, an independent aristocracy and a representative Parliament. Such a monarch, whether Stuart or Hanoverian, Burke regarded from first to last as aiming to usurp the

traditional freedoms of British peoples. Accordingly, the Anglo-Irish Burke positioned himself outside the existing political system even while he was actually well inside it.<sup>3</sup> Burke's famous speeches were, like those of the

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<sup>3</sup>This self-positioning, as well as his defense of the traditional rights of British people against a usurping crown, throws light on Burke's support for the American colonies (Burke, 1774, 1777). Burke thought of himself as an outsider to the extent that he thought of the current monarchy much as the American colonists did. He thought of the crown and court as turning a just kingship tempered by a strong aristocracy into a tyranny that was abolishing all the social differentiations of rank and role on which political freedom actually depends. But at the same time Burke was urging the Americans not to depart on the ground that reform of this sort was still politically possible and by arguing that the mother country and its colonies are tied by bonds of tender affection in an almost feminized way (Burke, 1777). In doing so, Burke helped put into circulation important commonplaces of the Whig tradition that eventually found their way into the speeches of the American Whig Henry Clay, who used them to fight against sectionalism. Through Clay's speeches, these *topoi* went into Lincoln's "mystic chords of memory" that bind us together as a people. Lincoln was a Whig before he was a Republican.

ancient Athenian Isocrates, intended to circulate among a literate public as much as among his constituents and parliamentary colleagues. Small wonder, then, that these discourses were intensely responsive to aesthetic norms--so responsive, in fact, that many of Burke's parliamentary colleagues, some of whom were not well educated, regarded them as useless. In view of the fact that some of Burke's speeches are models of public address to this day it is hard for us to appreciate that when news spread that he was about to rise the benches suddenly emptied.

As a member of Parliament, Burke made it his business to learn as much as he could about economic policy. "If I had not deemed it of some value," he later said, "I should not have made political economy an object of my humble studies from my very early youth to near the end of my service in parliament." Thus in reading the newly published *Wealth of Nations* Burke understood Smith's claim that economic activity is not isolated calculation, but an interpersonal relationship that depends on communication, trust, sagacity, and civility. When successfully accomplished, economic transactions bind people together in ways that collectively taken cement larger bonds while at the same time preserving, indeed enhancing, individual autonomy. It is small wonder that Smith saw in Burke a good reader. It is highly unlikely that Burke meant to include Smith among the "sophisters,

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economists, and calculators” that he denounced in his 1790 *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.

Still, there is an interesting difference. Burke’s consciously aesthetic rhetoric cultivated a markedly elevated style rather than the plain style favored by Scottish writers and rhetorical theorists, Smith included. (Smith wrote a rhetorical treatise in 1762-63 in which he favored the plain style. [Smith, 1985]. By contrast, even when he was talking about subjects as mundane as taxes and trade, Burke’s was a rhetoric of sublimity rather than of the clear and straightforward speech commended by the Scots. What political work, we may well ask, could such a high-flying style possibly be doing? And whatever that work might be could it have inclined Burke to draw a different conclusion from Smith about government support for the laborers in hard times?

To discover why Burke cultivated his high style we must go back to his younger days as a literary critic. Having done so, we can then fast-forward to the scene of revolution and war in the 1790, when Burke opposed public subsidies for the poor.

Burke began his public life in the 1750s as a literary critic and theorist. He was, like James Boswell, a familiar of the famous circle around Samuel Johnson. He was just as eager as others in that circle to respond to David Hume’s skepticism, which attacked the possibility of knowledge in order to

place ethical and political life on imaginative and emotional, not intellectual, foundations. I say “respond to” rather than “refute” because the problem is that to one degree or another Hume’s most intelligent critics agreed with him that reason does not ground what Hume called “common life” (Livingston, 1984). It is our moral sentiments that do that. Their force is self-evident. It is they that exercise the gravitational pull--Hume professed a desire to be Newton of social life--that binds us together into community. Hume’s friend Smith shared this view. So did Thomas Reid. So did Burke. But whereas Smith and Reid (and even more Kant, who was a careful reader of all three authors) resisted Hume’s skepticism, Burke seems to have concluded even more strongly than Hume that the emotional and imaginative mechanics of common life cannot be correctly described, let alone explained and justified, if we imagine that they are in any way rationally motivated or rationally grounded.<sup>4</sup>

In his 1757, *Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful and the Sublime*, which develops thoughts acquired during his time with Johnson’s circle, Burke argued against the rationalism of the Aristotelian

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<sup>4</sup>I would argue on another occasion that Burke’s suspicion of reason is connected with the fact that he addresses us as a rhetorician rather than as a philosopher. See Depew & Peters, 2001

account of our pleasure in dramatic representations of unpleasant things. The Aristotelian and French neo-classical answer to this old puzzle is that the pleasures of tragedy depend on the fact that rationally following their narrative logic transmutes the emotions of pity for one who is represented as suffering and of fear that it might happen to oneself into an emotionally purifying and hence pleasurable form of reflective learning (Nussbaum, 1986). Given the moral and political importance Burke assigned to imagination, and so to art, as well as his Humean distrust of reason as a guide to life, Burke judged this answer unsatisfactory. It is far better to stay at the level of the passions, and to do so by recognizing as a plain fact that the fascinated pleasure we take in actually seeing suffering has little to do with rationally following the logic of a well-wrought plot. Burke's proof is the greater delight he thinks we take in actually witnessing suffering rather in seeing mere representations of it. It is well known that people flock to the scene of a gruesome accident.<sup>5</sup> When its scale is large and powerful

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<sup>5</sup>*The New Yorker* reports on the basis of audience interviews that the large rise in ticket sales for the accident-prone, because actually life-threatening, Broadway production of *Spiderman* is directly related to the prospect of seeing someone injured or killed, an event that can be contemplated with

enough, the actually terrible gives us the distinctive pleasure we call the sublime--as long as we are momentarily safe from danger and so rid for the moment of the fear that blocks the sublime pleasure. This pleasure, Burke argues, is a physiological reaction that binds us in fascination to an object of terror. It is not a reasoned reflection in which we tell ourselves, well, yes, that might happen to me so I'd better be careful. Catharsis, learning, and reason have *nothing to do with it*. So Aristotle and the French neo-classicists are dead wrong.

Moreover, Burke argues that God actually designed us this way so that we may more surely reach our end than if our conduct were held hostage to such a frail and unequally distributed reed as reasoning power. Burke says that every judgment of the beautiful functionally exists in order to serve the propagation of the species through the cultivation of our sociality--even Kant, who was horrified by Burke's reduction of beauty to what he called the pathology of sexuality, acknowledged that the beauty of women as they appear in public is paradigmatic of all beauty.<sup>6</sup> By the same token, Burke's

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relish precisely because it occurs in the experience of an artwork. "Look Out," *The New Yorker*, January 17, 2011, 20

<sup>6</sup>Kant, I. 1764. *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Section III, Paragraph 1.

slightly demented twist on natural theology led him to postulate that God had implanted in us a fascination with violent death in order that in the pleasurable experience of having momentarily evaded of it we would be reinforced to preserve our life in ways that reason seems quite incapable of ensuring. No stronger approbation could be found, I think, of Hume's maxim that "Reason is and ought to be the slave of the passions," or of the view that the political functions of art are to intensify and so systematically reinforce the passions that bind us to our own life and our "common life" with others.

One cannot imagine Smith saying these things. Perhaps the reason is that Burke lived and worked at the cockpit of hegemonic political power, not the middling Scotland where his theory was formed. If so, we are free to note that Burke's bodily-based, passion-and imagination-centered view of morality also has a rather menacing implication. It suggests that if consent to and compliance with the "imagined communities" in which we live with others were ever broken, as they might easily be in a society riddled with injustice and pretense, skepticism would have not the mild, benign, corrective effects that Hume postulated, but would vividly show that political power is all power and no politics and that "unaccommodated man is no more than a bare-forked naked animal," as King Lear puts it.



Anxiety about this problem gnawed at Burke. It gnawed at him, for instance, in his Whiggish effort to insist that the legitimacy of a state ostensibly based on the continuity of its monarchy had not been undermined by the rather severe constitutional break of 1688, in which Parliament intervened to make William of Orange what amounted to a constitutional monarch. Burke was as eager as other Whigs to suture that fissure before anyone could look too hard at it (Burke, 1790, in Kramnick, 421-423).

Much of the mystification that went into Burke's elevated style betrayed his concern that without making politics sublime the stitching might show. The problem was of special concern to Burke because, in contrast to block-head conservatives, there was great tension between his own desire for reform and his perception that even the most legitimated political order is in fact nothing but a set of conventions and artifices that works only if it *appears* natural. How much reform can the system actually tolerate? The hyperbolic style of Burke's rhetorical performances can ultimately be traced to the fact that in his view only sublime invocations reaffirming what another Burke, the rhetorical theorist and critic Kenneth Burke, was to call consubstantial identification, could possibly sustain the work of making the conventional seem natural by making innovation look like tradition (Burke, 1969).

In reflecting on the fact that Burke's theory of tragedy invites artists to raise emotions about violence that usually exist at the boundary of our

experience we seem already to have arrived at the theory of politics implicit in his rhetorical performances. Burke's political rhetoric was focused above all on making the state a sublime fantasy, and therefore on making it a dangerous and revered object of consciousness. That, I submit, is why his style is so elevated and mystified. (In his *Essay on the Sublime and the Beautiful* Burke claims that poetic words should not be clear, but evocative.) This is a decidedly non-Smithean perspective. Before passing on to the economic consequences of this view of government, however, we might pause to acquaint ourselves a bit more with how that theory of government works.

In explicating that theory, I would like to refer Stephen Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations*, in which what to the modern liberal mind appears puzzling in Shakespeare's plays, especially in his very dark and almost sadistic comedy *Measure for Measure*, affords a key to the very meaning of politics in the *ancien regime* (Greenblatt, 1989). Greenblatt's "new historicist" method of reading leads him to see that until very recently the very nature of governing was thought to be intimately and inextricably bound up with something very much like what we call "the Stockholm syndrome," in which hostages -- Patty Hearst, for example -- bond with their captors. The whole point of statecraft in the *ancien regime* was to display the royal body as a sublime, awe-ful object in spectacles of staged terror,

such as the dismemberment of Damien the Regicide that Foucault memorably reports in the opening chapter of *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1975). Such staged and stagy events were often followed by seemingly random, unpredictable acts of mercy and forgiveness. The phenomenon, as well as a lifetime's reflection on it, can be seen in Dostoyevsky's personal experience of just such a mock execution. My point is this. Because we habitually retrodict onto earlier writers the calculatively rational, moderately self-interested bourgeois liberalism into which 18th century Whiggism morphed, which intentionally desublimated politics, we are insufficiently alive to the fact that for his part Burke was still so pre-modern that he could not imagine the disappearance of a spectacular conception of statecraft *even when he clearly wanted to*. Consider in evidence the following passage:

Let us take review of the dungeons, whips, chains, racks, gibbets, with which every society is abundantly stored, by which hundreds of victims are annually offered up to support a dozen or two in pride and madness, and millions in abject servitude or dependence. There was a time when I looked with reverential awe on these mysteries of policy: but age, experience, and philosophy have rent a veil; and I view this *sanctum sanctorum*, at least, without any enthusiastic admiration. *I acknowledge,*

*indeed, the necessity of such a proceeding in such institutions;* but I must have a very mean opinion of the institutions in which it arises.

Given sentiments this complex, how can there be any doubt that the Burke who presciently condemned the French Revolution in 1790 was fundamentally the same Burke who wrote his essay on the sublime and beautiful some thirty-five years earlier? Listen to snatches from the most famous passage in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France* with his theory of tragic pleasure in mind:

It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the queen of France ... at Versailles. I saw her just above the horizon, decorating and cheering the elevated sphere she had just began to move in – glittering like the morning star. ... Little did I dream that ... that she should ever be obliged to carry the sharp antidote against disgrace [a dagger] concealed in that bosom. Little did I dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her ... The age of chivalry is gone.

*That of sophisters, economists, and calculators has succeeded; and the glory of Europe is extinguished forever.* Never, never more shall we behold that generous loyalty to rank and sex, that proud submission, that dignified obedience, that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 446)

Here we have an epitome of the aesthetic politics that I have placed at the center of the political theory performed in Burke's speeches — all the more heightened by the mixture of sexualized beauty in a social setting and, through the image of the dagger, the sublime terror of seeing Marie Antoinette's fate as that of a sort of Damien the Regicide in reverse. The image is sublime insofar as it exceeds the bounds of sense by turning the natural — well, seemingly natural — order upside down in ways that, once they are upended, preclude any possibility of bringing the world back into order. Never, never, never, Burke exclaims in passage just quoted, echoing *King Lear*. The cake of custom has been irreversibly cut and eaten. The passage thus re-inscribes the very principles of legitimacy that were Burke's constant preoccupation from the start. We must keep from going down this path, he argues. Our enemies are “sophisters, economists, and calculators”—he had French reformers in mind mostly—who naively assume that government will still be possible once politics has been shown up as resting on what Marx, in an allusion to Burke, called the naked “cash nexus” that has “drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, and of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation” (Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*).

We may now return to our original problem. Burke does not say that even in the worse of times subsidies should be withheld from the poor

because he believes that a policy of benign neglect will ultimately good for the poor, as market ideologists have convinced themselves from the mid Victorian to our own times. Rather, his fear, like that of Adam Smith, was about the consequences of turning the state into an economic agent, thereby removing the imaginative and emotional conditions under which governance is possible at all. As can be seen in the case of France, this will have the effect of demystifying and hence delegitimizing not only the monarchy, but the state itself. If the cake of custom on which politics depends is irreversibly cut the problem will no longer be the potential starvation of a relative few but the reduction of an entire society—a society, let us recall, that for Burke will have no rational resources with which to pull it back from an entirely bestial existence—to the condition of animals. Accordingly,

It is not in breaking the laws of commerce, which are the laws of nature and consequently the laws of God, that we are to place our hope of softening the Divine displeasure to remove any calamity under which we suffer or which hangs over us (Burke, 1795, in Kramnick, 210)

Behind a sublime state, Burke says, lies a sublime God who can look with on death by starvation with the same equanimity that we, having been made in his image, look on tragic events reenacted for the sake of a fascinated pleasure whose secret spring is self-preservation. In sum, sublime art, sublime politics, and sublime economics are of a piece.

*Into the Modern Age*

In this essay I have argued that Smith's difference from Burke on government-sponsored support for the poor rests not on differing views of economics, but on differing views of government. Once we see this we will also see how pre-modern both of them actually were. We will also see how insightful they were about matters toward which we have a certain blindness, even a "trained incapacity," as Kenneth Burke calls it.

Edmund Burke's pre-modernism is more obvious. It is obvious not only in his theory of the connection between political legitimacy, display, and violence, but in his theocentric imagination. It is impossible for us to read "Thoughts and Details on Scarcity" with any equanimity. Burke was clearly deceiving himself about how the laws of God and the laws of the market are connected. Best to leave God out of it by connecting economics as a legitimating discourse with secular, humanistic science, even if the underlying "meta-narrative" of modern and modernist science still comes trailing at least a few clouds of theological glory.

This was the program of the middle class post-Malthus reformers of Victorian England. The utilitarians who founded the University of London and who wrote for *The Westminster Review* managed to square the circle by

persuading the Victorian public sphere that the market, if left to its own devices, will make the problem of distributive justice disappear as well as it possibly can. This belief removed the need for a theodicy and thus left room for doing precisely what Burke feared, desublimating the state. Sober men in black suits rather than the motley display of the court took over. Their aim was not to make the state into a corporation, as Burke and Smith feared. That is a deviation from free-market principles which, as in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia-- and perhaps even present-day Russia--is always accompanied by some degree of re-sublimation. Rather, their aim was to make the state into a protector and guarantor of the principle that private persons, groups of persons, and even fictitious persons can own firms and operate them pretty much as they please so long as the same right is extended to all others. Families are now treated by states as firms. This is the imaginary, and to some extent real, dispensation under which we have lived for almost two centuries. It is small wonder that its actual working philosophy is utilitarianism, most recently seen in risk analysis.

I cannot say that this program has been a failure. Under the banner of globalization the entire planet is now committed to it. Governments that tried to evade it have collapsed. Countries that still have a long road to hoe can at least look with confidence on a growing number of examples in which the prediction of Herbert Spencer that social harmony and individual



freedom will be simultaneously maximized by a free market has been borne out.

In this respect we might think that Adam Smith has been vindicated. If so, however, it is only the Adam Smith of libertarian legend. The real Adam Smith, if he were to walk among us, would certainly note with pleasure the rise in the standard of living. But he would also note, as would Burke, that in spite of our mythical belief to the contrary government has not in the least stayed out of it. Instead it has, with ever accelerating intensity, taken a strong hand in actively producing the kind of people who can, as disciplined producers and consumers, live in and profit from modern market societies. If Foucault paints a vivid picture of pre-modern states and subjects in his *Discipline and Punish* it was not to offer a contrast with the wonderful world of Adam Smith, but with the pervasive entanglements that make us all mere nodes through which biopower—actually, Foucault generally used the term *biopolitique*—flows. Jeremy Bentham, the father of utilitarianism, was also the father of the panoptical prison.

None of this would be a surprise to Edmund Burke. This defender of the body politics of the pre-modern looked at modernity through eyes uncannily like those of today's post-moderns. If, meanwhile, libertarians invoke Smith's iconic name in the course of urging that the power of the modern state be curbed, the fact that this power is always increasing shows

the power of the imagination to portray what has, except for a few transient moments, never actually existed as a state of affairs that has been lost and needs to be recovered. State and society as imagined and intertwined by the real Adam Smith are worth working for. They are a modern *polis*. But the state Smith's self-proclaimed disciples long for is and always will be a matter of pure fantasy.

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