THE PROTECTION OF THE RICH AGAINST THE POOR: THE POLITICS OF ADAM SMITH'S POLITICAL ECONOMY*

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Abstract: *My point of departure in this essay is Smith's definition of government. "Civil government," he writes, "so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is in reality instituted for the defence of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all." First I unpack Smith's definition of government as the protection of the rich against the poor. I argue that, on Smith's view, this is always part of what government is for. I then turn to the question of what, according to Smith, our governors can do to protect the wealth of the rich from the resentment of the poor. I consider, and reject, the idea that Smith might conceive of education as a means of alleviating the resentment of the poor at their poverty. I then describe how, in his lectures on jurisprudence, Smith refines and develops Hume's taxonomy of the opinions upon which all government rests. The sense of allegiance to government, according to Smith, is shaped by instinctive deference to natural forms of authority as well as by rational, Whiggish considerations of utility. I argue that it is the principle of authority that provides the feelings of loyalty upon which government chiefly rests. It follows, I suggest, that to the extent that Smith looked to government to protect the property of the rich against the poor, and thereby to maintain the peace and stability of society at large, he cannot have sought to lessen the hold on ordinary people of natural sentiments of deference. In addition, I consider the implications of Smith's theory of government for the question of his general attitude toward poverty. I argue against the view that Smith has recognizably "liberal," progressive views of how the poor should be treated. Instead, I locate Smith in the political culture of the Whiggism of his day.*

KEY WORDS: Smith, Hume, Whiggism, poverty, government, allegiance, utility, authority

I. Introduction

Commentary on Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* has regularly proposed that the book has a political as well as a purely economic agenda. It is often said that Smith was making an argument for the smallest possible government, or at least for the smallest possible government involvement in economic affairs, and for the largest possible freedom of markets. After all, when he comes, in Book V, to describe the duties of the sovereign, Smith gives priority to the defense of the nation and an exact administration of justice. The sovereign's duty, when it comes to law, is, Smith says, simply that of "protecting, as far as possible, every member of society from the

* I am grateful for comments and advice to Ryan Hanley, Margaret Schabas, Max Skjönsberg, Craig Smith, and an anonymous referee. I would also like to thank the other contributors to this volume for a very helpful, and detailed, discussion of the first draft of this essay. Nick Phillipson died before I started work on this essay. It would certainly have been improved by conversation with him, and I should like to dedicate it to the memory of a supremely enlightened, humane, and sociable Smith scholar.

doi:10.1017/S0265052520000084

injustice or oppression of every other member of it."[1] And it has seemed obvious to some that what the law needs to protect members of society from is, most importantly, injustice and oppression on the part of government itself. According to Sheldon Wolin, for example, Smith proposed "a non-political model of society which, by virtue of being a closed system of interacting forces, seemed able to sustain its own existence without the aid of an 'outside' political agency."[2] Smith's principal worry, on this reading, was the fact that politicians have a tendency to try to overextend their remit, and, concomitantly, a tendency also to unnecessarily increase taxation in order to pay for their projects. Joseph Cropsey, like Wolin, situates Smith in a line of "liberal capitalist" political thought that begins with Locke, and portrays Smith as having articulated a conception of the economic and social realms as independent of, but constantly under threat from, the realm of politics.[3] Likewise, on the "civic humanist" reading of Smith proposed by, for example, John Robertson, the liberties of citizens are portrayed as endangered by a government that has, in effect, been taken over by the merchants and manufacturers. Again, the political issue is how to protect individuals from injustice at the hands of their governors. "An independent judiciary offers the first line of defence for individual freedom," Robertson observes.[4] In this essay I want to consider from another point of view Smith's conception of the sovereign's duty of protection. My point of departure is Smith's own definition of government. "Civil government," Smith writes, "so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is in reality instituted for the defence of rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all."[5] According to Smith, then, the first purpose of law, so it would seem, is the protection of individuals and their property, not from government, but from the lower ranks of society. My topic in this essay is what this definition of government tells us about the political dimension of Smith's political economy.[6]

[1] Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1981), 708.

[2] Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1960), 292.

[3] Cropsey situates Smith in a Lockean political tradition in "Adam Smith and Political Philosophy," in Andrew S. Skinner and Thomas Wilson, eds., *Essays on Adam Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 132–53. In *Polity and Economy*, by contrast, Cropsey's claim is that Smith's teaching "falls into the tradition of modern thought permeated by the spirits of Spinoza and Hobbes" (The Hague: International Scholars Forum, 1957), viii.

[4] John Robertson, "Scottish Political Economy Beyond the Civic Tradition," *History of Political Thought* 4 (1983): 451–82, at 469. For a nuanced account of Smith's relation to the republican, or civic humanist, tradition, see Leonidas Montes, "Adam Smith on the Standing Army Versus Militia Issue: Virtue over Wealth?" in Jeffrey T. Young, ed., *Elgar Companion to Adam Smith* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2009), 315–34.

[5] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 715.

[6] For a more general assessment of Smith's view of the role of government, especially in economic matters, see Steven G. Medema and Warren J. Samuels, "'Only Three Duties': Adam Smith on the Economic Role of Government," in Young, ed., *Elgar Companion to Adam Smith*, 300–314.

It might seem that no serious revision of the standard conception of Smith's politics is necessary in the light of his definition of government. If the poor present a threat to rights of property, it might be said, surely that threat is adequately met by the proper enforcement of the rule of law. No extension of government's remit is necessary. Recent Smith scholarship, however, has looked again at Smith's attitude toward the poor, and has entertained the idea that Smith did not conceive of property rights solely in commutative terms, that is, in terms of the strict enforcement of the terms of contracts. It has been claimed that there was, in addition, a distributive dimension to Smith's understanding of claims to property, and that there is in his texts at least the seed of the proposition that government has a role to play in ensuring that the distribution of property is in accord with the rights of the poor to subsistence. What paved the way for this new interpretation of Smith was the rediscovery of his jurisprudence, which set *The Wealth of Nations* in a larger moral framework, and opened up the question of what sovereign political power might need to do in order to protect the rights of human beings as such.[7] One answer to that question, influentially proposed by Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, was that, in fact, government needed to do nothing to protect the basic rights of the poor. The great achievement of *The Wealth of Nations*, on this reading, was to show that what had traditionally been regarded as claims of distributive justice could be met by, precisely, letting commerce and the mechanisms of the market proceed without political interference. The unique productivity of modern labor, structured by the division of the component parts of the tasks of manufacture, was such that what Hont and Ignatieff termed the "ancient jurisprudential antinomy between the needs of the poor and the rights of the rich" could be transcended. The *Wealth of Nations*, they argued, was "centrally concerned with the issue of justice, with finding a market mechanism capable of reconciling inequality of property with adequate provision of the excluded."[8] But some Smith scholars have gone further. According to Gertrude Himmelfarb, the *Wealth of Nations* "was genuinely revolutionary in its view of poverty and its attitude towards the poor."[9] It was revolutionary in that Smith did not believe that there was any sense in which the poor deserved to be poor. Poverty—at least, extreme poverty—was a violation of the poor's rights. The poor were poor because of misguided government policy, and would be poor no longer—at least, not in an absolute sense—if the myths of mercantilism were dispensed with. Agreeing with Himmelfarb, Samuel Fleischacker portrays Smith as an egalitarian who

[7] See especially Knud Haakonssen, *The Science of a Legislator: The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

[8] Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, "Needs and Justice in the *Wealth of Nations*," in Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, eds., *Wealth and Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2.

[9] Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (London: Faber, 1984), 46.

"urged an attitude of respect for the poor, a view of them as having equal dignity with every other human being."[10] This, according to Fleischacker was an essential precondition for the idea, not only that the poor did not deserve to be poor, but that they deserved not to be poor.[11]

If Himmelfarb and Fleischacker are right in their claims about Smith's view of poverty, then it might seem that one means by which the rich stand to be protected from the poor is the meeting of the legitimate demands of the poor for an alleviation of their poverty. Fleischacker accepts that government action to reduce poverty was not something that Smith himself called for, but presents a call for such action as a logical consequence of Smith's position. Here we see Smith being turned into a kind of modern day liberal, just a step in an argument away from endorsing the view that the rights of the rich are to some degree, in some circumstances, trumped, as a matter of distributive justice, by the needs of the poor. I see this is an overreaction to the old view, on display in Wolin and Cropsey, that Smith wanted to reduce the role of government to the point where, in effect, politics was replaced by free market economics. In this essay I present Smith neither as a kind of extreme Lockean who paved the way for free market fundamentalism, nor as a proto-Rawlsian anticipator of the welfare state. Instead I portray him as what, in addition to other things, he undoubtedly was: an eighteenth-century Whig—albeit a Whig sceptical about some of Whiggism's principal component parts.[12] I take my lead from the careful contextualization of Smith proposed by Donald Winch in *Adam Smith's Politics: An Essay in Historiographical Revision*, and especially from the attention paid by Winch to, in his words, "Smith's views on the importance of, and sympathy accorded to, *established* wealth and authority."[13] Winch rejects completely the idea, prominent in Wolin and Cropsey, that Smith believed that commercial society might be stable and self-regulating in the absence of government interference.[14] Established wealth and property are part of the

[10] Samuel Fleischacker, *On Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations: A Philosophical Companion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 205.

[11] For the claim that Smith went further than Fleischacker allows, and actually argues for a right of subsistence that stood to be enforced by government action, see Amos Witztum and Jeffrey E. Young, "The Neglected Agent: Justice, Power, and Distribution in Adam Smith," *History of Political Economy* 38 (2006): 437–71. For effective criticism of Witztum and Young, and also of Fleischacker, see John Salter, "Adam Smith on Justice and the Needs of the Poor," *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 34 (2012): 559–75.

[12] I owe this formulation to conversation with Craig Smith.

[13] Donald Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics: An Essay in Historiographical Revision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 101. For an analysis that reaches similar conclusions to Winch, see Gloria Vivenza, *Adam Smith and the Classics: The Classical Heritage in Adam Smith's Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001). Vivenza argues that, according to Smith, "the aim of laws and government is to manage things so that the poor man either stays poor or, if he wishes to become rich, must do as the rich have done: work" (101).

[14] Wolin and Cropsey, Winch argues in a later paper, "fail to recognize Smith's consistent concern to demonstrate how actual practices or outcomes in modern commercial societies require the attention of the legislator" ("Adam Smith's 'Enduring Particular Result'," in Hont and Ignatieff, eds., *Wealth and Virtue*, 258–59).

ballast needed to keep society upright and orderly. I think Winch is right here. In the *Wealth of Nations*, conflict is everywhere. Smith is especially interested in the conflict between an enormously powerful mercantile interest, on the one hand, and "the publick," on the other. But other internal conflicts are analyzed too, between town and country, between masters and workmen, between the various trades, between the landed aristocracy and its tenants, between the sovereign and an established religion, and between the mother country and its colonies. My concern here is with what Smith says about the conflict between the rich and the poor. I shall argue that Smith regards such conflict as endemic to commercial society as such. His kind of Whiggism is dispassionate, disillusioned, and realistic. It is not in outrage that he describes the task of government as the protection of the rich against the poor. There is nothing that the sovereign can or should do about inequality and its social consequences. The task for the philosopher is to provide ways of understanding society's internal conflicts better, so as to show the baselessness of schemes promising quick and easy resolutions of those conflicts.

II. The Politics of Inequality

Smith introduces his definition of government in the course of Book V's reconstruction of the history of civil society. The definition is not presented as controversial or in need of defense. This is surprising, given its apparent affinity with the revolutionary analysis of modern politics on display in Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality Among Men*.[15] We know, of course, that Smith read and thought deeply about the *Discourse on Inequality*, and his definition of government would seem to be one place where his thinking converged with that of Rousseau. It is worth noting the difference between Smith's definition of government and, for example, the definition given by Locke in *Two Treatises on Government*. Government, Locke says, "being for the Preservation of every Mans Right and Property, by preserving him from the Violence or Injury of others, is for the good of the Governed."[16] But there is no suggestion in the *Two Treatises* that right and property need to be preserved, first and foremost, from the poor. Locke's preeminent concern, rather, is with the threat to life, liberty, and property posed by political power itself. Similarly, Francis Hutcheson claims that government is necessitated by the corruption of mankind generally, and especially by the fact that "many are covetous, or ambitious, and unjust and oppressive when they have power; and are more moved by present prospects of gain, than deterred by any moral principles or any distant prospects

[15] See Ryan Patrick Hanley, "On the Place of Politics in Commercial Society," in Maria Pia Paganelli, Dennis C. Rasmussen, and Craig Smith, eds., *Adam Smith and Rousseau: Ethics, Politics, Economics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 26–27.

[16] John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett, revised student edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 227–28 [I §92].

of future evils to redound to them from their injuries."[17] Nor is there in Hume any hint of a connection between the need for government and the consequences of poverty and inequality. However, the source of Smith's definition of government, and what the definition tells us about Smith's engagement with Rousseau, is not my concern here. In this section I unpack Smith's definition of government as the protection of the rich against the poor. I argue that, on Smith's view, this is always part of what government is for. It is not the remit of government only in an early stage of human society. I then turn to the question of what, according to Smith, our governors can do to protect the wealth of the rich from the resentment of the poor. I consider, and reject, the idea that Smith might conceive of education as a means whereby the resentment of the poor at their poverty might be alleviated.

Book V's account of the history of civil government is necessitated by Smith's observation that an exact administration of justice, like defense, "requires . . . very different degrees of expence in the different periods of society."[18] What Smith seeks to explain in this part of the *Wealth of Nations* is why in modern societies, unlike in earlier ones, the administration of justice needs to be funded by taxation. It did not need to be funded in that way even in those societies of the past where wealth had been amassed and where, as an inevitable consequence, inequality had become endemic. Inequality first became a feature of human society, Smith says, "in the age shepherds." Wealth—for reasons we will return to below—by itself "introduces among men a degree of authority and subordination which could not possibly exist before," and thereby "introduces some degree of that civil government which is indispensably necessary for its [that is, wealth's] own protection." Smith immediately goes on to remark that wealth introduces authority and subordination "naturally," independently of any consideration of the necessity of government. The rich are perfectly well aware of their interest in "that order of things, which can alone secure them in the possession of their own advantage." What authority and subordination produce is a willingness on the part of "men of inferior wealth" to help to defend the property of the rich. As Smith puts it:

> All the inferior shepherds and herdsmen feel that the security of their own herds and flocks depends upon the security of those of the great shepherd or herdsman; that the maintenance of their lesser authority depends upon that of his greater authority, and that upon their subordination to him depends his power of keeping their inferiors in subordination to them. They constitute a sort of little nobility, who feel themselves interested to defend the property and to support the authority of their own little sovereign, in order that he may be able to defend their property and to support their authority.

[17] Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy* (London: A. Millar and T. Longman, 1755), vol. ii, pp. 214–15.
[18] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 709.

In this way the very rich and the much less rich banded together against those who had nothing at all. Both parties did so willingly, and willingly contributed to the expense of the enforcement of law and order.[19] Recourse to general taxation was only made when it was realized that there are substantial disadvantages to an arrangement where the administration of justice is made, as Smith puts it, "subservient to the purposes of revenue."[20]

Exactly why, in an unequal society, the property of the rich needs to be defended against the poor is explained by a passage earlier on in Smith's consideration of "the expence of justice," where he explains that "[f]or one very rich man, there must be at least five hundred poor, and the affluence of the few supposes the indigence of the many." He continues:

> The affluence of the rich excites the indignation of the poor, who are often both driven by want, and prompted by envy, to invade his possessions. It is only under the shelter of civil government that the owner of that valuable property, which is acquired by the labour of many years, or perhaps of many successive generations, can sleep a night in security. He is at all times surrounded by unknown enemies, whom, though he never provoked, he can never appease, and from whose injustice he can be protected only by the powerful arm of the civil magistrate continually held up to chastise it.[21]

The same train of thought is on display in the passages in the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* where Smith describes to his students the origin of government. The idea of a combination of the very rich and the less rich does not feature here. When some have great wealth and others nothing, Smith says in the 1762-63 report,

> it is necessary that the arm of authority should be continually stretched forth, and permanent laws or regulations made which may ascertain the property of the rich from the inroads of the poor, who would otherwise continually make incroachments upon it . . . Laws and government may be considered in this and indeed in every case as a combination of the rich to oppress the poor, and preserve to themselves the inequality of goods which would otherwise be soon destroyed by the attacks of the poor, who if not hindered by government would soon reduce the others to an equality by open violence.[22]

[19] All quotations in this paragraph are from Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 715.
[20] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 716.
[21] Ibid., 710.
[22] Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael, and P. G. Stein (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1982), 208.

Later in the same report, laws and government are said to "maintain the rich in the possession of their wealth against the violence and rapacity of the poor."[23]

There would appear to be no reason to think that the problem Smith purports to identify in these passages is one that besets only the age of shepherds. Smith told his students that it is "in every case" that law and government may be considered a combination of the rich to oppress the poor. What causes the indignation, envy, and violence of the poor appears to be not so much poverty itself, as poverty contrasted with wealth. The problem is inequality, and it seems to be a general truth, as Smith sees it, that the affluence of the few supposes the indigence of the many. In Book I of the *Wealth of Nations* Smith argues that national opulence is not endangered by rises in wages. "The liberal reward of labour" is both "the necessary effect" and "the natural symptom of increasing national wealth." "The scanty maintenance of the labouring poor, on the other hand, is the natural symptom that things are at a stand, and their starving condition that they are going fast backwards."[24] There is plenty of evidence, Smith says, that wages are increasing in Great Britain, at the same time as the country grows more opulent. So wage rises are nothing to fear. "No society can surely be flourishing and happy," he insists, "of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable." He adds: "It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, cloath and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, cloathed and lodged."[25] This last is a sentence to which attention has been devoted by commentators, such as Himmelfarb and Fleischacker, who see in the *Wealth of Nations* an announcement of a revolution in attitudes toward the poor. But, as I read Smith, there is little sign that his political economy leads toward a vision of anything resembling economic equality. As the nation grows more opulent, the poor will no longer be absolutely poor. Their condition will improve, as wages rise. But the rich will grow richer too, with the result that inequality will remain in place. And while inequality remains, the poor, presumably, will remain indignant, envious, and potentially violent. Even if an entire nation were to succeed in making itself wealthy, it would, as a direct consequence, be exposed to resentment on the part of its poorer neighbors.[26]

[23] Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 338.
[24] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 91.
[25] Ibid., 96.
[26] For an argument that Smith envisages an end to "steep" inequality, see Deborah Boucoyannis, "The Equalising Hand: Why Adam Smith Thought the Market Should Produce Wealth Without Steep Inequality," *Perspectives on Politics* 11 (2013): 1051–70. Boucoyannis frames her argument in purely economic terms, without appeal to the principles of Smith's moral philosophy. But the argument relies on the full realization of Smith's system of natural liberty, and I think it most unlikely that Smith himself imagined that that was possible in the world as it actually is. For Smithian reasons in favor of pessimism about the real-world capacity of commerce to produce liberty for all, see Jean Dellemotte and Benoît Walraevens, "Adam

What, apart from the maximally rigorous enforcement of the law, can government do about this apparently inevitable discontent on the part of the poor? Smith's remarks in Book V of the *Wealth of Nations* about the education of the poor—one of the duties of the sovereign—might seem likely to provide some clues. "The education of the common people requires, perhaps," he says, "in a civilized and commercial society, the attention of the publick more than that of people of some rank and fortune."[27] Whereas people of rank and fortune have the time and money to educate their children, the parents of common people "can scarce afford to maintain them even in infancy. As soon as they are able to work, they must apply to some trade by which they can earn their subsistence." Moreover, "that trade . . . is generally so simple as to give little exercise to the understanding; while, at the same time, their labour is both so constant and severe, that it leaves them little leisure and less inclination to apply to, or even think of any thing else."[28] He describes the result in terms of mental mutilation and deformation. The poor, knowing nothing but poverty, and, indeed, knowing nothing but their own small part in the manufacturing process, are, inevitably, unable to think in terms of the good of society as a whole. They cannot be expected to understand that the commercial forces that produce such glaring disparities between their lives and the glittering lives of the rich are responsible, at the same time, for slow but incremental increases in their standards of living. Smith has no illusions here, and shows no sign of thinking that the doctrines of his political economy might usefully be promulgated as a means of reconciling the poor to their poverty. "[T]hough the interest of the labourer is strictly connected with that of society," he says toward the end of Book I of the *Wealth of Nations*, "he is incapable either of comprehending that interest, or of comprehending its connection with his own. His condition leaves him no time to receive the necessary information, and his education and habits are commonly such as to render him unfit to judge even though he was fully informed."[29] The goal of reformed education of the poor turns out to be nothing resembling enlightenment. The goal, rather, is to do better at keeping the poor orderly, respectful, and manageable.

Here is what Smith says about the purpose of the education of those he describes as "the common people":

> The more they are instructed, the less liable they are to the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition, which, among ignorant nations, frequently occasion the most dreadful disorders. An instructed and intelligent people besides are always more decent and orderly than an ignorant and stupid one. They feel themselves, each individually, more

Smith and the Subordination of Wage-Earners in Commercial Society," *European Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 22 (2015): 692–727.

[27] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 784.

[28] Ibid., 785.

[29] Ibid., 266.

> respectable, and more likely to obtain the respect of their lawful superiors, and they are more disposed to respect those superiors. They are more disposed to examine, and more capable of seeing through, the interested complaints of faction and sedition, and they are, upon that account, less apt to be misled into any wanton or unnecessary opposition to the measures of government. In free countries, where the safety of government depends very much upon the favourable judgment which the people may form of its conduct, it must surely be of the highest importance that they should not be disposed to judge rashly or capriciously concerning it.[30]

Smith was acutely aware of the precariousness of modern politics, where government understands its grounding to be not pure coercive power but rather the good opinion of the governed. The proper cultivation of opinion was vital to the end of the maintenance of law and order and the protection of property. Winch captures the spirit of Smith's account of the benefits of the education of the poor to society at large when he calls it "a political argument for strengthening the mechanisms of social control within a society of ranks in which 'opinion' plays an important part in determining the smooth functioning and stability of the polity."[31] Or, as Dugald Stewart put it, the role for Smith of "general instruction" is "to adapt the education of individuals to the stations they are to occupy."[32] In *The Idea of Poverty* Himmelfarb claims that Smith intended education to make the laborer "a free and full participant in society."[33] There is, however, as little evidence that Smith was a proponent of an extension of the franchise as there is that he wanted a reduction in economic inequality. The education of the poor did not stand to reduce their resentment by giving them full citizenship as a kind of compensation for their poverty. This is as much a problem for the civic humanist reading of Smith as it is for Himmelfarb. Robertson claims that Smith's vision was of a laboring class "enjoying material self-sufficiency and juridical independence." A remedy for the mental mutilation caused by the division of labor "would benefit not only the labourer himself, but society as a whole." Smith, according to Robertson, "followed Hume in supposing that the progress of commerce, bringing sufficiency and independence to all ranks, including the lowest, ought in the long run to universalize moral and political capacity."[34] Robertson's evidence for these claims is drawn, not from the *Wealth of Nations* itself, but from *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and its treatment of the social virtues of

[30] Ibid., 788.
[31] Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics*, 120.
[32] Dugald Stewart, "Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, LL.D.", in Adam Smith, *Essays on Philosophical* Subjects, ed. W. P. D. Wightman (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1982), 313.
[33] Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, 60.
[34] Robertson, "Scottish Political Economy beyond the Civic Tradition," 464–65.

benevolence and justice. It is certainly true that Smith's moral philosophy is grounded in an analysis of human nature as such, of capacities and dispositions that almost all human beings can be supposed to share. But, for reasons I shall say more about in the next section of this essay, it is going too far to claim that Smith took there to be some kind of necessary connection between "the progress of commerce" and an understanding on the part of all adult human beings of themselves as self-sufficient, independent, and equal. Smith, it seems to me, shows no sign of having wanted people to be educated into such a self-conception, nor of having wanted in any significant way to disturb traditional distinctions of rank.

The enlightened, philosophical perspective on inequality, and on commerce more generally, offered by Smith in the *Wealth of Nations* was, then, not a perspective that he imagined would, or could, be taken up by the nation at large as a means of giving ideological support to the government in its attempt to enforce the rule of law. That perspective is a perspective on utility considered in the most expansive sense—on the utility of maximally free markets, considered as a means of securing the *salus populi*, the safety and happiness of the people. In the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* Smith describes this as the perspective of Whigs, who see "that magistrates give security to property and strength to laws, and that without them all must fall into confusion," and who accept the authority of government for that reason and for that reason alone.[35] Smith surely has in mind here Whigs of his own kind, uninterested in talk of an ancient constitution and an original contract, and focused on the future rather than the past. These were the Whigs that Duncan Forbes calls skeptical and scientific.[36] They were, as Smith puts it, men "of a bold, daring, and bustling turn," as contrasted with those, who, being of "a peaceable, easy turn of mind" were "pleased with a tame submission to superiority."[37] As the skeptical, scientific Whig saw things, a government deserved allegiance to the extent that it pursued policies conducive to peace, international and domestic, and also opulence. Smith, though, did not imagine that the good opinion of the governed was conferred solely by judgments made in terms of utility. On the contrary, the utilitarian perspective of the Whig turns out to be, for Smith, an *unnatural* perspective on government. It is unnatural in the sense of being unusual, and it is unusual because it cuts against the grain of Smith's understanding of the moral sentiments. This, at any rate, is what is suggested when we look more deeply into Smith's account of the foundations of government in opinion. What mitigates the societal tensions caused by inequality of wealth turns out be, not opinion as to utility, but rather what Smith describes as a natural disposition to respect established authority.

[35] Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 319, 322.
[36] Duncan Forbes, "'Scientific' Whiggism: Adam Smith and John Millar," *Cambridge Journal* 7 (1954): 643–70; "Sceptical Whiggism, Commerce, and Liberty," in Skinner and Forbes, ed., *Essays on Adam Smith*, 179–201.
[37] Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 402.

III. The Principle of Authority

In the *Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume treats opinion about a regime's legitimacy as shaped exclusively by considerations of utility. "All men . . . ," he claims, "owe obedience to government merely on account of the public interest."[38] In the essay "Of the First Principles of Government," on the other hand, the picture is more complicated. There are two kinds of opinion, opinion of interest and opinion of right, and right is then subdivided into two further kinds, "right to power and right to property."[39] "Upon these three opinions, therefore," Hume concludes, " . . . are all governments founded, and all authority of the few over the many."[40] But having laid out this analysis, Hume does little with it. In his treatment of the foundations of government, as elsewhere in his writings, Hume is more interested in the destruction of false theories than in fully elaborating a viable alternative. In this section I describe how, in his lectures on jurisprudence, Smith refines and develops Hume's taxonomy of the opinions upon which all government rests. The sense of allegiance to government, according to Smith, is shaped by instinctive deference to natural forms of authority as well as by rational, Whiggish considerations of utility. Following Smith's own lead, I connect this twofold analysis of allegiance with some key passages in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and show that Smith regards the principle of utility as *unnatural*—where "unnatural" means contrary to the normal economy of the moral sentiments. It is the principle of authority that provides the feelings of loyalty upon which government chiefly rests. It follows, I suggest, that to the extent that Smith looked to government to protect the property of the rich against the poor, and thereby to maintain the peace and stability of society at large, he cannot have sought to lessen the hold on ordinary people of natural sentiments of deference.

"[E]very one," Smith told his students in the lecture course he gave in 1762-63, "naturally has a disposition to respect an established authority and superiority in others, whatever they be. The young respect the old, children respect their parents, and in generall the weak respect those who excell in power and strength." This disposition extends to those in positions of political power:

> One is born and bred up under the authority of the magistrates; he finds them demanding the obedience of all about him and he finds that they always submit to their authority; he finds that they are far above him in the power they possess in the state; he sees they expect his obedience and sees also the propriety of obeying and the unreasonableness of

[38] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 553.
[39] David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Millar, rev. ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1987), 33.
[40] Hume, *Essays*, 34.

> <dis>obeying. They have a naturall superiority over him; they have more followers who are ready to support their authority over the disobedient. There is the same propriety in submitting to them as to a father, as all of those in authority are either naturally or by the will of the state who lend[s] them their power placed far above you.[41]

Smith should not be taken to be endorsing the idea of natural superiority as such. Rather, he is identifying a general *belief* in such superiority, deriving from a sense of the propriety of obedience. "Propriety" is a technical term for Smith. It is analyzed in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in terms of the social dynamics of the principle of sympathy. The implication of that analysis is that we obey those whom we take to be our superiors because we know that the disposition to do so will be approved of by those around us.

"The principle of authority," Smith goes on, "is that which chiefly prevails in a monarchy." In the British context, it is what underlies the attitude of Tories. "Respect and deference to the monarchy, the idea they have that there is a sort of sinfullness or impiety in dissobedience, and the duty they owe to [the monarch], are what chiefly influence them."[42] Smith adds that "The calm, contented folks of no great spirit and abundant fortunes which they want to enjoy at their own ease, and dont want to be disturbd nor to disturb others, as naturally join with the Tories and found their obedience on the . . . principle of [authority]."[43] There is reason, in fact, to think that the principle of authority has a wider ambit even than this. A sense of the propriety of obedience is not limited to Tories and "calm, contented folks." As we have just noted, it is, as Smith sees it, a feature of ordinary human nature. In the history of civil government with which he begins his account of the "expence of justice" in the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith provides a taxonomy of "the causes or circumstances which naturally introduce subordination, or which naturally, and antecedent to any civil institution, give some men superiority over the greater part of their brethren."[44] They are physical, intellectual, and moral superiority; superiority of age; superiority of wealth; and superiority of birth (meaning, having been born to an "ancient" family). Smith goes on to argue that of these four circumstances, birth and fortune are those that "principally set one man above another." "Among nations of shepherds," he observes, "both these causes operate with their full force."[45] But there is no reason to suppose that they operate with any less force among commercial nations. The description of the four circumstances of superiority is conducted in the present tense, and is naturally read as having as much relevance to modern Europe as to nations of shepherds. "The authority of fortune," Smith says, ". . . is very great even in an opulent

[41] Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 318.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., 320.
[44] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 710.
[45] Ibid., 714.

and civilized society. That it is much greater than that, either of age, or of personal qualities, has been the constant complaint of every period of society which admitted of any considerable inequality of fortune."[46] In his lectures, Smith noted that one of the effects of the influence upon our sentiments of "superior antiquity" is that "a hereditary monarch has much greater power [and] authority than an elective one."[47]

The account of these "two principles which induce men to enter into a civil society" given by Smith in his 1766 lecture course was presented, not as a historical thesis about the first beginnings of civil society, but as a description of how all individuals, regardless of time and place, make the transition from the private domestic sphere into the public realm of civil society. The note-taker reports Smith as saying this time that superior wealth more than any other quality "contributes to conferr authority." He immediately went on to make it clear that this was not because those who submitted to the authority of the rich expected to benefit in material terms: "This proceeds not from any dependance that the poor have upon the rich, for in general the poor are independent, and support themselves by their labour, yet tho' they expect no benefit from they have a strong propensity to pay them respect." He then directed his students to the part of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* where it is shown that this propensity "arises from our sympathy with our superiours being greater than that with our equals or inferiors."[48] The part in question is Chapter 2 of Section 3 of Book 1, "Of the origin of Ambition, and of the distinction of Ranks."[49] There Smith says that

> When we consider the condition of the great, in those delusive colours in which the imagination is apt to paint it, it seems to be almost the abstract idea of a perfect and happy state. It is the very state which, in all our waking dreams and idle reveries, we had sketched out to ourselves as the final object of all our desires. We feel, therefore, a peculiar sympathy with the satisfaction of those who are in it. We favour all their inclinations, and forward all their wishes. What pity, we think, that any thing should spoil and corrupt so agreeable a situation![50]

"Upon this disposition of mankind," Smith goes on, "to go along with all the passions of the rich and powerful, is founded the distinction of ranks, and the order of society."[51] It breeds "[o]ur obsequiousness to our superiors," a "natural disposition to respect them," a "habitual state of deference."[52]

[46] Ibid., 712.
[47] Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 322.
[48] Ibid., 401.
[49] Here Smith draws heavily on Hume: see *A Treatise of Human Nature*, II.II.v ("Of Our Esteem for the Rich and Powerful").
[50] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1984), 51–52.
[51] Ibid., 52.
[52] Ibid., 52, 53.

Again, there is no suggestion that this is a description of another kind of political culture, or of the distant past. It is our world—his own world—that Smith is describing. The claim is that this is just how we are.

In the course of the description, Smith remarks on the unnaturalness of the Whiggism that, so we have every reason to think, was his own political outlook, and the outlook certainly of the *Wealth of Nations* taken as a whole. In Book II's chapter on the accumulation of capital, Smith distinguishes between productive and unproductive labor, and places "the sovereign, . . . with all the officers of justice and war who serve under him, the whole army and navy" on the unproductive side of the divide: "They are the servants of the publick, and are maintained by a part of the annual produce of the industry of other people."[53] It is hard to imagine a more disenchanted, skeptical, philosophical perspective on the monarchy. In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, however, Smith writes: "That kings are the servants of the people, to be obeyed, resisted, deposed, or punished, as the public conveniency may require, is the doctrine of reason and philosophy; but it is not the doctrine of Nature."[54] In other words, one of the two sources of allegiance, the principle of utility, is not the doctrine of nature. It was according to the doctrine of nature, on the other hand, that the "provocations" of Charles I were forgotten, and his son restored to the throne. It was according to the doctrine of nature that "[c]ompassion for James II, when he was seized by the populace in making his escape on ship-board, had almost prevented the Revolution, and made it go on more heavily than before."[55] The *Lectures on Jurisprudence* make it clear that Smith himself had a soberly pragmatic understanding of the Revolution—and that he regarded its justification as much less problematic than did, say, Hume.[56] In the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, however, he observes that, while everyone, "even the most stupid and unthinking," condemns injustice and wants to see it punished, "few men have reflected upon the necessity of justice to the existence of society, how obvious soever that necessity may appear to be."[57] In an undeveloped aside in his lectures on jurisprudence, he even claimed that judgments in terms of utility are often made on the basis of some general assumptions as to authority. "[I]t will but seldom happen," he told his students, "that one will be very sensible of the constitution he has been born and bred under; everything by custom appears to be right or at least one is but very little shocked by it."[58] The thought here seems to be that assessments of the utility of a policy or a regime are not made in a fully comparative way, taking into account all possible alternatives. What is

[53] Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 330–31.
[54] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 53.
[55] Ibid.
[56] See Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 325, 327–30, 436—where Smith draws on Gilbert Burnet's *History of His Own Time*, not Hume's *History of England*.
[57] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 89.
[58] Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, 322.

judged to be useful is usually what perpetuates the mode of government under which one has grown up.

In his lectures, Smith can be understood as trying to foster a Whiggish, utility-orientated frame of mind in his students. But he knew that this was not how most people thought, and there is no evidence to suggest that he regarded it as how most people *ought* to think. Hont claims that for Smith the compassion felt by ordinary people for James II was a "political problem," and that "overcoming the deference of the poor to the rich and powerful" was for Smith an important objective.[59] I know of no evidence for this claim. One might object that a reason to think of Smith as interested in universal moral reform is provided by the new third chapter written for Book I, section 3 of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in the sixth edition of 1790—the chapter entitled "Of the corruption of our moral sentiments, which is occasioned by this disposition to admire the rich and the great, and to despise or neglect persons of poor and mean condition." There Smith observes that "wealth and greatness are often regarded with the respect and admiration which are due only to wisdom and virtue; and that the contempt, of which vice and folly are the only proper objects, is often most unjustly bestowed upon poverty and weakness, has been the complaint of moralists in all ages."[60] "They are the wise and virtuous chiefly," Smith adds, "a select, though, I am afraid, but a small party who are the real and steady admirers of wisdom and virtue. The great mob of mankind are the admirers and worshippers, and, what may seem more extraordinary, most frequently the disinterested admirers and worshippers, of wealth and greatness."[61] In the first five editions of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* the chapter on the origin of ambition and the distinction of ranks was followed by a chapter "Of the stoical philosophy," where it is explained that, as the Stoics saw things, "all the different conditions of life were equal." The "happiness and glory of human nature" lay not in being rich rather than in being poor, but rather in an "order, propriety, and grace" in the living of life, regardless of one's rank.[62] It is from this perspective that it is apparent that there is no reason to prefer wealth and greatness to poverty and obscurity. The Stoic philosophy, Smith says, "affords the noblest lessons of magnanimity" and "is the best school of heroes and patriots." There is no objection to it—other than that it "teach[es] us to aim at a perfection altogether beyond the reach of human nature."[63] The *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is not best understood as a work in the Stoic tradition.[64] On the contrary, and like Hume's *Treatise of*

[59] Istvan Hont, "Adam Smith's History of Law and Government," in *Political Judgement: Essays for John Dunn*, ed. Richard Bourke and Raymond Geuss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 151.
[60] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 61–62.
[61] Ibid., 62.
[62] Ibid., 58.
[63] Ibid., 60.
[64] Which is not, say, *pace* Hont, that it is a work in the Epicurean tradition. See Istvan Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith*, ed. Béla Kapossy and

Human Nature, it does away with the justification for any possible claim as to any singular, exclusive definition of the highest good for human beings. Lisa Hill captures the spirit of Smith's writings when she says that "Smith was interested in the proper management of people and mass societies as they really were, and he did not care much about classical virtues or national greatness."[65]

At the beginning of the new chapter written for the sixth edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith writes that the disposition to admire the rich and the great, and to despise or neglect persons of poor and mean condition, while being "the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments," is "necessary both to establish and to maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society."[66] This is written from a perspective that corrects the splenetic philosophy of the Stoics, and considers what is necessary to, in Hill's phrase, the proper management of people and mass societies as they really are. Smith never put things this way himself, but the natural disposition to admire the rich and the great can be seen as a counterbalance to the equally natural disposition on the part of the poor, "the great mob of mankind," to regard the rich with indignation and resentment. Seen in this way, there was every reason not to try to reduce its hold upon people at large. On the contrary, it was a corruption of the moral sentiments that was absolutely essential to the preservation of social order. This corruption of the sentiments was essential also to the economics of growth that the *Wealth of Nations* was intended to enable and accelerate. "What Smith worked out [in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*]," according to Hont, "was a definition of commercial society in terms of moral psychology."[67] Hont argues that the device of the impartial spectator is meant as a means of protecting individuals from various forms of self-deception endemic to social life in general, and endemic to life in commercial societies in particular. But there is an important sense in which modern commerce itself is powered by a form of self-deception that Smith cannot regard as, generally speaking, pernicious. In his discussion of "the effect of utility upon the sentiment of approbation" in Part IV of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith argues that what appeals to us in the utility of an object is not the end to which it is fitted, but rather how, precisely, it is fitted to an end.

Michael Sonenscher (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), chap. 2 (see e.g. 32: "*The Theory of Moral Sentiments* . . . was a treatise in enhanced Hobbism and Epicureanism"). For criticism of Hont, see Hanley, "On the Place of Politics in Commercial Society"; and also James A. Harris, "Review of Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society*," *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 14 (2016): 151–63.

[65] Lisa Hill, "Adam Smith and Political Theory," in Ryan Patrick Hanley, ed., *Adam Smith: His Life, Thought, and Legacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 324. For a very different view, see Ryan Patrick Hanley, *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). I offer some reasons to be skeptical of Hanley's reading of Smith in a review of his book in *The Adam Smith Review* 7 (2014): 293–98.

[66] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 61.

[67] Hont, *Politics in Commercial Society*, 39.

"Fitness," the "happy contrivance of any production of art," is often valued more than the end for which it is intended.[68] He goes on to claim that this principle "is often the secret motive of the most serious and important pursuits of both private and public life." There follows a famous description of the state of mind of the poor man's son, "whom heaven in its anger has visited with ambition, when he begins to look around him, admires the condition of the rich."[69] On this description it is not so much imagination of the ease or pleasure of the wealthy that exerts influence, as it is imagination of the *means* of happiness which they possess, "the beauty of that accommodation which reigns in the palaces and oeconomy of the great," "how every thing is adapted to promote their ease, to prevent their wants, to gratify their wishes, and amuse and entertain their most frivolous desires."[70] The Stoic knows that all this is trivial and trifling, and that the happiness of the rich and great is no more real or substantial than that of the poor. But this point of view is no match for the hold upon us of our ideas of the satisfactions afforded by wealth—ideas which, in turn, explain why we sympathize with the condition of the rich so much more intensely than with the condition of the poor. The really important point here, for my purposes, is that Smith judges that it is a good thing, all things considered, that we deceive ourselves in this way.[71] "It is this deception," he says, "which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind."[72] It prompts the cultivation of the earth, the building of cities, the founding of commonwealths, and the invention of all the arts and sciences that ennoble and embellish human life. It seems right to conclude that Smith thinks it would not, on the whole, be genuinely beneficial for there to be less admiration of the rich on the part of the poor, nor on the part of their sons.

IV. Smith's Whiggism

In this essay I have sought to portray Smith in terms appropriate to his time and place. He was of course a forward-thinking advocate of commerce, but he was at the same time acutely conscious of, and worried about, the tensions generated by an increasing divide between rich and poor. I have suggested that it was in the spirit of realism, and not out of moral indignation, that Smith defined government in terms of the protection of the rich from the poor. I have looked to Smith's twofold account of allegiance, as filled out by the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, for an explanation of how he supposed the resentment of the poor at their poverty could be countered and neutralized. Their resentment, as we have seen, is set against an equally

[68] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 179.
[69] Ibid., 181.
[70] Ibid., 183.
[71] Though it may well have costs for individuals who do not, in the end, find happiness in the pursuit of wealth and greatness.
[72] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 183.

natural deference to the authority of the wealthy and the powerful. Faced by the internal societal conflicts that commerce served only to exacerbate, Smith advocated neither complete government inaction, nor direct government action to ameliorate the poverty that was the prime cause of those tensions. Instead, he advocated a policy of public education sufficient to inoculate the poor from religious enthusiasm and political extremism. The preeminent value in Smith's political economy—though not, of course, in his moral philosophy—was utility, where utility was understood sufficiently broadly to include everything of benefit to society at large. And what was most beneficial to society at large was the preservation of peace and the protection of property. Smith's kind of Whiggism was authoritarian. This can be seen, for example, in some Whig responses to the disturbances caused by the Grafton ministry's treatment of John Wilkes in the late 1760s. Smith himself does not mention the riots of 1768 in his letters.[73] But Hume and Adam Ferguson, Whigs of the same kind as Smith, made it amply clear that they were entirely unsympathetic to the demands of the Wilkite mob. In letters to William Strahan and others Hume rejected out of hand the very idea of extra-parliamentary opposition, and complained vociferously about the pusillanimity, as he saw it, of the ministry's treatment of the rioters.[74] Writing to Member of Parliament William Pulteney in 1769, Adam Ferguson remarked that Montesquieu "and others," in lauding the perfection of the English constitution, "only think of the dangers to Liberty that come from The Crown." "They do not consider," he continued, "the dangers to Liberty that come from the Populace."[75] It is hard to believe that Smith's attitude would have been very different.[76]

Another exponent of Smith's kind of Whiggism was John Millar.[77] In *An Historical View of the English Government* Millar identifies principles of

[73] Smith's only surviving comment on Wilkes dates from early on in the saga, just after the publication of number 45 of *The North Briton* and its burning by the public hangman. "The ridiculous affair of Wilkes," he wrote to Hume in December 1763, "seems at present to be the principal object that occupies the attention of the King, the Parliament, and the People": *The Correspondence of Adam Smith*, ed. E. C. Mossner and I. S. Ross (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1987), 414.

[74] See James A. Harris, *Hume: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 426–28.

[75] Quoted in Max Skjönsberg, "Adam Ferguson on Partisanship, Party Conflict, and Popular Participation," *Modern Intellectual History* 16 (2019): 1–28, at 20. For the larger case for seeing Ferguson not as a nostalgic republican but rather as an essentially Smithian political philosopher, see Craig Smith, *Adam Ferguson and the Idea of Civil Society: Moral Science in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

[76] According to Winch (*Adam Smith's Politics*, 102), Smith shared Hume's highly critical attitude toward extra-parliamentary pressure on the legislature. It needs to be acknowledged, however, that after his death in 1790, and in the wake of the French Revolution, Smith acquired the reputation of a dangerous radical: see Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments: Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 52–64. I think this tells us more about the political atmosphere of the early 1790s than about Smith himself.

[77] See Forbes, "Scientific Whiggism."

"utility" and "authority" as the two bases of government, the former being "the consideration of advantages to be derived from any political establishment," the latter being "the immediate effect of the peculiar qualities or circumstances, by which any member of society may be exalted above another."[78] Like Smith, he describes utility as the principle of Whigs, and authority as the principle of Tories. Unlike Smith, Millar is willing to affirm that, "from the progress of arts and commerce," the principle of authority has been "continually diminishing" while the principle of utility has been "gaining ground in the same proportion." He describes this as "a gradual progress of opinions," caused by the advance of "philosophy" into politics; as the mysteries of government have been unveiled, the degrees of power committed to individuals have been placed on their proper basis, the monarch (or, "chief magistrate") has been stripped of artificial trappings so that he "appears naked, and without disguise, the real servant of the people," and the blind respect and reverence that used to be paid to ancient institutions has given place to rational criticism. The result is that "[t]he fashion of scrutinizing public measures, according to the standard of their utility, has now become very universal; it pervades the literary circles, together with a great part of the middling ranks, and is visibly descending to the lower orders of the people."[79] Millar's tone suggests that he thought that this was all to the good. However, there was a limit to how far he thought the influence of the principle of utility should extend. The right conclusion was not that the principle of authority, "operating without reflection," is useless:

> From the dispositions of mankind to pay respect and submission to superior personal qualities, and still more to the superiority of rank and station, together with that propensity which every one feels to continue in those modes of action to which he has long been accustomed, the great body of the people, who have commonly neither leisure nor capacity to weigh the advantages of public regulations, are prevented from indulging their unruly passions, and retained in subjection to the magistrate.[80]

Millar was less cautious in his politics than Smith, but we see here nonetheless the same pragmatism, or perhaps pessimism, and the same unwillingness to contemplate a complete puncturing of the illusions upon which social and political life depended. To a scientific Whig, these illusions were both the driver of economic growth and what provided the lower orders with necessary distraction from natural resentment at their own poverty.

[78] John Millar, *An Historical View of the English Government*, ed. Mark Salber Phillips and Dale R. Smith (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2006), 796.
[79] Ibid., 804–5.
[80] Ibid., 807.

It is my contention here that Stewart was right when, in his work on the life of Smith, he concluded that the speculations of the political economist "have no tendency to unhinge established institutions, or to inflame the passions of the multitude. The improvements they recommend are to be effected by means too gradual and slow in their operation, to warm the imaginations of any but of the speculative few; and in proportion as they are adopted, they consolidate the political fabric, and enlarge the basis upon which it rests."[81] This was not Stewart playing down the radical implications of his own Smithian commitments in the fraught circumstances of the 1790s. So much is made clear enough by what Smith himself says in Part VI of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, added in 1790, about the dangers of being seduced by "a certain spirit of system" into believing that what is needed is "to new-model the constitution, and to alter, in some of its essential parts, that system of government under which the subjects of a great empire have enjoyed, perhaps, peace, security, and even glory, during the course of several centuries together."[82] I agree with Winch that it would be unhelpful, in fact positively misleading, to infer that Smith should be labeled a "conservative." His political economy had many radical implications. It was nothing less than, as Smith put it in a letter, a "very violent attack . . . upon the whole commercial system of Great Britain."[83] Even so, Smith did not envisage, let alone argue for, a transformation in how ordinary people understood themselves and their place in society. Perhaps this was Marx's point when he complained about the fact that political economy hitherto had sought only to understand the world, not to change it. At the time of its origin, political economy was aimed at an elite audience of policy makers—and also at those whom Hume called "philosophical politicians," which was to say, armchair politicians, men and women interested in political speculation for its own sake. The laws required for the proper functioning of the economy, and the protection of wealth that it generated, needed simply to be imposed on most people, with the help, as I have indicated, of natural habits of deference and respect.[84]

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[81] Stewart, "Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith," 311.
[82] Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 232.
[83] Adam Smith, *Correspondence*, ed. E. C. Mossner and I. S. Ross (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1987), 251.
[84] As Nicholas Phillipson puts it, Smith's message was that "[i]n a country whose politics and governance was in the hands of the landed and mercantile classes, it was the job of philosophers, who understood the principles of political economy, to safeguard the public interest by educating their masters": Phillipson, *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), 220–21.