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(Review) Self-Interest Before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science

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Comments

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Pierre Force, *Self-Interest Before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. ix, 279, \$65.00. ISBN 0-52183060-5.

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There is no discussion (even to dismiss) of those passages in Book 5 that have seemed to some to prefigure alienation—nothing here even on the significance of Smith’s invocation of social, intellectual and martial virtues. The invisible hand is discussed but its philosophic reach isn’t, and this despite Fleischacker’s claim that Smith’s most famous doctrine about political economy is the doctrine of unintended consequences (p. 34). Hence, we get no discussions of the interface between the economic issue of national debt and how this bears out this doctrine or how the advantages of specialization seemingly result in mental torpor for the specialized operatives or again of Smith’s (philosophical) historical narratives in Book 3, despite history being identified as a crucial aspect of Smith’s model of social science (p. 270). The “Adam Smith problem” is given a passing nod despite it being an issue where at least a part of the intended audience would have liked some guidance, independent of its revivification in the secondary scholarship, as seen in Otteson (*Adam Smith’s Marketplace of Life*) or in Montes (*Adam Smith in Context*). The question about these, and other *lacunae*, is not that there is something necessarily additional to be said about them but that a useful companion would say something (or something more informative) about them.

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Pierre Force, *Self-Interest Before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. ix, 279, \$65.00. ISBN 0-521-83060-5.

In 1756 the young Adam Smith published an anonymous thirteen page letter (as paginated in the Glasgow Edition of Smith’s Works and Correspondence) in the *Edinburgh Review*; this was three years before the publication of Smith’s first book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The letter urged the editors of the magazine to devote more attention to Continental, and, particularly, French authors. Fully five pages of that letter was devoted to a discussion and translation of parts of Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*.

Pierre Force is a professor of French, with training as a literary scholar. He has written a learned, complex, confusing story of the relationship between Adam Smith’s thought and Rousseau’s *Discourse*, as well as their intellectual precursors on the subject of self-interest, reaching back to the ancient Stoics and the Epicureans.

According to Force, Smith erected economics not on self-interest as a first principle, but self-love; self-love is a translation of the French term *amour-propre*. Smith’s self-love is a natural, legitimate, and limited concern for our own preservation and well-being. This corresponds to Rousseau’s *amour de soi*, which is love of oneself. This is also good for Rousseau, as *amour de soi* satisfies our real needs. However, Rousseau’s *amour-propre* is an artificial passion based on our desire to be seen favorably by others. It corresponds not to Smith’s self-love, the translation of *amour-propre*; rather it corresponds to Smith’s notion of vanity. For Smith it is vanity that lies behind our concern to better our conditions, which is not really

based on either natural selfishness or self-love. Moreover, there are in Smith's work not one but two principles: self-love and sympathy; similarly, there are two principles in Rousseau's work, the second principle being pity, which Force conflates with Smith's sympathy. According to Force, both pity and sympathy are based on identification with others.

Force then claims that there is a vast neo-Epicurean/Augustinian tradition that attempts to use the concept of self-interest to explain everything. This tradition includes people such as Mandeville and tends to adhere to the doctrine of original sin. Against this tradition, Force posits a neo-Stoic point of view that does not adhere to the doctrine of original sin, and where self-interest does not explain everything; Smith and Rousseau are placed in this stream. Along the way, there are discussions of many theorists, including La Rochefoucauld, Bayle, Mandeville, Hume, Montesquieu, Malebranche, Nicole, Pascal, Shaftesbury, Butler, Calvin, Bayle, Helvetius, d'Holbach, Hutcheson, Fenelon, and Hobbes.

I would think that for readers of this journal, the most useful aspect of Force's book may be as a guide to these precursors of Smith, particularly the French theorists. Yet, I did not come away from reading Force with confidence in his abilities as an accurate, trustworthy guide. For example, Force repeatedly refers to Rousseau's *Discourse* as a satire; I would think most people would call it a diatribe (e.g., Miller 1992, p. xiii). He sees a selfish impulse such as the fear of being sent to prison or death as the source of justice for Smith; actually the source of justice for Smith is the sentiment resentment (Fleischacker 2004, pp. 145–226; Schliesser and Pack forthcoming). He views the desire to be a slave-owner as a consequence of sympathy: people want to be slave-owners so that others will look favorably upon them. I would think that for Smith people want to be slave-owners so that they can dominate their slaves. They are willing to lose some pecuniary gains so that they can have that privilege; hence, they view it to be in their self interest to be slave-owners, where self-interest is defined to include the perceived happiness to be derived from domination (Pack 1996).

On the other hand, Force's central point, that Smith was deeply influenced by Rousseau, and accepted many of Rousseau's criticisms of commercial society, is basically correct. Indeed, apparently unbeknown to Force, I have argued essentially the same point (Pack 2000). However, unless people are already inclined to this reading of Smith and Rousseau, I fear that Force's discursive argument will not be too persuasive.

By linking the Smith-Rousseau connection to a long, complicated argument about the history of self-interest, Force may have tackled a subject that is too broad and nebulous to be clearly articulated and delineated. Nonetheless, if he is going to try to trace this concept all the way back to the Epicureans and Stoics, and make this fissure the defining one, I would think he should have gone all the way back to the fountainhead of the Western philosophical tradition and dealt with the complex theories of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.

What Force ultimately discovers, and what other literary and social critics are presently discovering about Smith's social theory, is what most historians of economic thought have known about Smith's economic theory, at least since Schumpeter's *History of Economic Analysis*: that Smith was a great systematizer and synthesizer of earlier thought and traditions. Smith read widely, and he used various diverse sources to construct his own comprehensive, balanced, theoretical systems.

Meanwhile, a thorough, clear, balanced book articulating the complex and paradoxical relationships between the thought of Rousseau and Smith remains to be written—and is needed.

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Michael D. Gordin, *A Well-Ordered Thing: Dmitrii Mendeleev and the Shadow of the Periodic Table* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), pp. xx + 364, \$30, ISBN 0-465-02775-X.

The institutionalist emphasis on the importance of scientific and technological developments in determining the evolution of economic institutions has received much attention from economists like Thorstein Veblen, Clarence Ayres, Thomas De Gregori, and Warren Samuels. For example, the practical application of scientific discoveries in new technology, and how technology was used by business enterprise, was theorized by Veblen in terms of the pecuniary-motivated industrial managers against the rationally motivated engineers, or of individual self-interest versus the machine process (Veblen 1904, p. 5). However, it is sometimes the case that the economic point of view and the scientific point of view are found together in the same individual person, with some interesting consequences for the institutionalist account of the role of science in industrial development.

D. I. Mendeleev, the world-renowned chemist and inventor of the periodic table, is probably Russia's most famous scientist. He has until very recently been neglected by both historians of science and historians of economic thought for a variety of reasons, such as the Russian language barrier and a lack of awareness that Mendeleev wrote a significant amount on the economic development of Russia. However, a new biography of Mendeleev by Michael D. Gordin entitled *A Well-Ordered Thing: Dmitrii Mendeleev and the Shadow of the Periodic Table*, plus another more limited account of aspects of Mendeleev's economic writings (Barnett 2004), should go together to illuminate Mendeleev's very significant role both as a historical political economist and also as the founder of a number of scientific institutions in