

# **On the making of sociology out of the misreading of political economy: Emile Durkheim meets Adam Smith<sup>1</sup>**

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## **1. Introduction**

The relationship between economics and sociology was always bound to be tense. In founding a science of society, in attempting to lay bare (literally) the logic of the social, sociologists were claiming to do what political economists had understood themselves to be doing for the best part of a century before any self-styled sociologist appeared on the scene. Worse still (from the standpoint of the possibility of convivial relations between the two disciplines), the seminal figures in sociology – Comte, Marx, Durkheim and Weber – all knew what political economy thought of itself. Thus the very founding of a new ‘sociology’, in the face of the already-existing old sociology of the political economists, was *meant* to imply the inadequacy of the latter.

Yet the history of the relation between political economy and sociology is not quite one of unremitting negativity. On the sociological side, between the barely disguised hostility of Durkheim and the relative indifference of Habermas lies Talcott Parsons and the possibility of a more productive dialogue. To be sure, Parsons, as befits a mid-life convert from the dismal science to sociology, did not demur from the new ‘sociological’ view that economic theory, *understood as a sociology*, is ultimately a failure. But he thought that much could and should be saved from the wreckage, especially if, as he intended to do, economic theory is reconfigured as ‘part of a larger and more generalised theoretical organon’ (Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, p. ix).

Parsons wants to develop, as a key feature of his own sociology, an ‘understanding of the internalisation of cultural norms and social objects as part of personality’ – hence his interest in Marshall (Parsons, *op. cit.*, p. xi). Had he paid less attention to Durkheim’s prejudiced view of political economy and instead re-read the ‘classics’

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himself, however, he would have found such an understanding in Adam Smith. We will want to show that Smith, unlike Marshall, has a fully developed social psychology that successfully accommodates self-interested behaviour within the logic of the social. Parsons, we are sure, would have approved.

## **2. On the origins of sociology in the critique of political economy: a case study**

In order to understand Smith and his fellow political economists we need to recall that their discourse has its origins in the reaction to the rampant egoism of Hobbes and his followers. Hobbes's own illiberal version of political economy was rejected for many reasons, but for Smith at least the decisive factor was one of common sense. The “natural concords” that actually existing human beings are plainly capable of achieving are just as plainly beyond the capacity of Hobbesian actors (Smith: 1976, p.22). For Smith, the Hobbesian theory of the human actor capacitated by a rational egoism is untenable on pragmatic grounds, and in *The Theory of the Moral Sentiments* (henceforth *TMS*) he sets out to provide a more adequate account. But from the beginning Smith was badly misunderstood. As early as 1777, Georg Henrich Feder detects in *The Wealth of Nations* (henceforth *WN*) a willingness “to trust too much to the harmony of individual interests in producing naturally by their free action general good.....” (Feder: *cit.* Montes: 2003, p.68). Hildebrand's mid-nineteenth century assessment leaves even less to the imagination. In a remarkable turn of phrase he claims that Smith and his disciples want to “transform political economy into a mere natural history of egoism” (Hildebrand: *cit.* Montes: 2003, p.70). In barely more than two generations Smith's intellectual formation in the reaction to egoistic social theory has been all but forgotten and *WN* itself is being read as an exercise in enlightened Hobbesianism.

Durkheim's sociology fed off this misunderstanding. For Durkheim sociology was required as a reaction to what he took to be the starting point of political economy, Hobbes's essentially unsocial self. Like Smith, Durkheim rejects such a starting point as a possible basis for any explanation of naturalistic social phenomena. Hobbesian egoism “detaches the individual from the rest of the world ... closes off every horizon [and] leads directly to pessimism” (Durkheim in Giddens, (ed.): 1972, p.94).But,

influenced by Hildenbrand and the like, Smith, *qua* political economist, has become part of the problem rather than the basis of a solution.

The manner in which Durkheim himself sets out to deal with this problem sets the tone for sociology as well as for some significant critical interventions within economics itself. For Durkheim (what he takes to be) the prevalent characterisation of the human actor as calculating ego is not so much wrong as incomplete; and consequently the answer to the *probleme social* is to somehow supplement self-interest with other, more socially-oriented concerns. It is clear, he says, that “these *two* springs of behaviour have been present from the very beginning” (Durkheim: 1984, p.145; emphasis added). Where there is only ego, where in Durkheim’s view there is only 'interest', we are back in the discredited territory of Hobbes, “for where interest alone reigns, as nothing arises to check the egoisms confronting one another, each self finds itself in relation to the other on a war footing” (Durkheim: 1984, p.152).

Durkheim thinks that his richer, more complex conception of the individual is supposed to change everything. It is not just that the needs and wants that are somehow brought into conformity through social process are richer and more complex; it is rather that these supplementary characteristics posited by Durkheim are supposed to enable the social process. For Durkheim the acquisition of character is about the *how*, rather than just the *what*, of coordination; character is the element, missing in Hobbesian theory, that enables human agents to coordinate. But Durkheim's conception of the “social fact”, of the social as *sui generis*, does not change as much as he supposes. To see this, let us consider his method. Durkheim asserts that what is required is the study of the social in its own right. For him the social is “irreducible” to “the psychic nature of the individual” (Durkheim in Giddens (ed.): 1972, p.62). Social facts, he says, must be examined as things, thus circumventing the issue as to how we get from the individual to the social. As a thing, the “social fact” can be understood *sui generis* and as such it becomes possible to work out how a social organism works without considering how it arose in the first place from individual behaviour. It turns out then that Durkheim's apparently methodological decision is a substantive one, a decision that derives from a particular kind of understanding of the relationship between individual and society. “A social

fact”, he says, “is to be recognised by the power of the external coercion which it exercises...” (Durkheim: 1982, p.56), and as such is supposed to originate and operate independently of the power of individuals. Social properties emerge just as the properties of bronze emerge from the joining of parts rather than from the parts themselves (see Durkheim: 1982, p.39). Thus what is distinctive for Durkheim about human, as opposed to other animal, societies is that human coordination, rather than being instinctive, internally driven, is supposed to be “imposed . . . from the outside”, “added on to his own nature” (Durkheim: 1982, p.248). But in positing a social psychology, a logic of the social, that is supposed to work independently of the (self-)interest driven psychology of the individual, Durkheim, far from transcending the egoism of Hobbes, has left the foundations of such a theory intact. Effectively, Durkheim's explanation of society has substituted for one 'social fact' (the Hobbesian social contract) another one of his own making.

Durkheim's (mis-)reading of political economy is fateful for the further development of sociology itself. Yet the history of the relation between political economy and sociology is not quite one of unremitting negativity. On the sociological side, between the barely disguised hostility of Durkheim and the relative indifference of Habermas lies Talcott Parsons and the possibility of a more productive dialogue. To be sure, Parsons, as befits a mid-life convert from the dismal science to sociology, did not demur from the new 'sociological' view that economic theory, *understood as a sociology*, is ultimately a failure. But he thought that much could and should be saved from the wreckage, especially if, as he intended to do, economic theory is reconfigured as 'part of a larger and more generalised theoretical organon' (Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, p. ix). Interestingly (for an economist at least) an aspect of that reconfiguration consists in a reassessment of Alfred Marshall. Parsons represents Marshall as departing from an earlier tradition of economic thought in bringing moral issues to the fore, especially in relation to the formation of character. On Parsons' reading, Marshall is supposed to have paid particular attention to the possibility that economic activity may itself generate and reinforce specific and (from a sociological perspective) positive character traits. In this paper we will not revisit what Parsons takes to be the 'implicit sociology' in Marshall's thought. Rather our overriding concern is with what Parsons measures Marshall's sociological turn against. Ultimately, Parsons' reassessment of Marshall says less about Marshall and

more about Parsons' reading of pre-Marshallian political economy. Parsons wants to develop, as a key feature of his own sociology, an 'understanding of the internalisation of cultural norms and social objects as part of personality', but thinks that to do so he must bid farewell to political economy proper. In fact, as we will argue below, such an understanding was the *raison d'être* of political economy proper, culminating in the social theory of Adam Smith.

### **3. Smith *contra* the sociologists**

To understand Smith's political economy, and how it comes to depend in an essential way on the moral/ethical capacities of human beings, we need to know something of Smith's intellectual formation. Like all eighteenth century liberal political economy, Smith's work must be seen as a reaction, albeit several generations removed, to the decidedly illiberal political economy of the seventeenth century thinker, Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes did not set out to become the master-thinker of illiberal political economy; on the contrary he seems naturally disposed to a very different order of things. It is rather that the assumptions Hobbes makes in regard to human nature cannot help but take him to the Orwellian nightmare that is his view of an enduring social order.

Put simply, Hobbes thinks of the adequately functioning human actor as a calculating ego, as a being with certain needs and wants and with the capacity to think consequentially about how he should act in order to best satisfy them. This being the case, he argues, in a 'state of nature' I could have no respect for either yourself or your possessions, and *vice versa*. You become for me (and I for you) just another feature in a more or less recalcitrant environment, viewed in much the way that a farmer might view an awkwardly positioned tree in a field he wants to plough. And as with the farmer and his tree, I have to consider this: are you so awkwardly positioned that I should have you removed? Or are the costs of your elimination so high that I should leave you *in situ* and work around you?

Hobbes' essential point however is that the above analogy is imperfect in one very important respect. (Almost) no matter how high the cost (and *pace* the farmer and his tree) I really cannot afford to let things stand, for, unlike the tree, you are able to

anticipate my reasoning and act accordingly. You can see that there are circumstances under which I would have you eliminated, but since you do not know my 'appetites and aversions', nor how exactly I view the situation, you do not know whether or not those circumstances are met in this case; for your own safety, however, you must assume that they are. So you must act against me, whether or not I really do plan, because of the degree of your 'awkwardness', to act against you. But in any case, because I can anticipate your line of reasoning as well as you have been able to anticipate mine, you are right: I *am* about to act against you. To cut a long (but interesting) story short, Hobbes argues that social stability is only possible if we agree to appoint a 'sovereign' with the wherewithal to *impose* upon us a respect for others and their possessions. In this way we are now each of us free to go about our private business without fear of hindrance from others, secure in the knowledge that the 'fruits of our industry' are ours' alone to enjoy (see Hobbes, *Leviathan*).

As a new breed of *liberal* political economist was quick to point out, however, what Hobbes's sovereign gives with one hand she takes away with another. The supervisory state that is Hobbes's brave new world is extremely expensive to run, leaving little or no room for accumulation and economic development. Yet, as the political economists were also quick to point out, it is evident that social stability does not always need the heavy (and expensive) hand of the Hobbesian state, but rather can emerge as a natural and unintended feature of a commercially oriented human intercourse. Somehow Hobbes had got it wrong, and attention turned, in one way or another, to formulating an alternative, non-Hobbesian conception of the human act.

Smith is one of this new breed of political economist. But economists today should remember that it was the publication of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (henceforth *TMS*) in 1759, not the 1776 *Wealth of Nations*, that made Smith's name. They should also remember that these texts would not have been seen by Smith and his contemporaries as independent interventions into two separate fields. Rather the former text is supposed to be foundational for the latter, the former providing the moral fibre without which the liberal-economic doctrine of the latter would make no sense. For Smith 'commercial society', as he called it, is not a world of amoral behaviour - to be contrasted with the apparently moral world of traditional society -

but rather depends in an essential way on the irreducibly ethical basis of *all* human conduct, self-interested behaviour included.

It was the publication of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, not *The Wealth of Nations*, that made Smith's name. It is easy to forget that fact today because the celebrity of the latter text, a seminal treatise in the rising science of political economy, soon relegated the former to the status of an afterword in the apparently obsolete discourse now known as British moralism. But, by the standards of both Smith's day and ours, *TMS* is in fact a very unusual work.

Although Kant himself was much taken with Smith's *TMS*, it is not moral philosophy *a la* Kant, not concerned with *a priori* principles which, when uncovered, we might give to ourselves as the basis for what ought to be done, irrespective of time and place. It is well known that for Smith, like Hume, moral judgment is situational - what we judge to be right is always context-sensitive. Unlike Hume, however, Smith insists that what we take to be right is not consequence-oriented: moral judgments for Smith have nothing at bottom to do with utility. Such a position of course makes no sense in either Kantian or Humean terms. But then Smith refuses what the traditional Kant-Hume juxtaposition takes for granted, *viz.*, that the moral question is concerned with the extent to which an essentially private faculty (*i.e.*, reason) can impose itself on and express itself in the essentially public domain of action. For Kant and for Hume, to reason practically I need to put you in mind, as against having something else in mind. For Smith, however, I cannot help but have you in mind, for this 'I with you in mind' is the self, and it is this self that reasons.

Smith (unlike Mandeville and other authors of 'licentious systems') does not dispute the existence of virtuous conduct, nor our capacity to recognise it, and much of *TMS* is taken up with an investigation into what is, as well as what should be, considered right and wrong in regard to 'tenor of conduct'. In other words, Smith is much concerned with the question: '[w]herein does virtue consist'? But at several crucial points in his discourse, Smith's inquiry takes an unmistakably transcendental turn: given that we *do* in fact regard in terms of right and wrong, how do we come to see things in that way? 'By what power or faculty of mind...is this character, *whatever it be...*recommended to us?' Or 'how and by what means does it come to pass, that the

mind prefers one tenor of conduct to another?' (Smith, 1976, p.265; our emphasis). How, in other words, is moral judgement possible? What is its condition of possibility?

Two further points are in order here. Firstly, in distinguishing between those forms of behaviour that are recognised as moral, on the one hand, and the faculties that are supposed to make this recognition possible, on the other, Smith claims to do no more than to make a distinction which is immanent in moral discourse itself, and so one which is always and everywhere practically made. What Smith also wants to claim, however, is that 'moral-philosophical systems' do not always (or usually) recognise this natural difference, and that this is a major (perhaps the major) source of error. So, for example, benevolence (in the appropriate context) is often identified as both a form of moral conduct and the cause of moral conduct. Or, again, self-love (and again in the appropriate context) is viewed as both a form of moral conduct and its cause. One need hardly add that, ironically, Smith's project itself has subsequently been read in these conflated terms. Indeed, as we have remarked above, such a reading seems to be the source of *Das Adam Smith Problem*. For the moment, however, it suffices to add that it is all of a piece with his (explicit) recognition of the distinction between the 'what' and the 'how' of moral judgment and conduct that, whilst Smith recognises that we recognise (in the appropriate contexts) both benevolence and self-love as virtues, he should not say, and indeed does not say, that they make moral judgment (or conduct) possible. For Smith these are *forms* of human behaviour: they do not *enable* it; and, accordingly, for an explanation - as against a mere explication - of moral judgment, Smith must look elsewhere.

Smith's palpable concern with moral judgment raises a second issue, however, for to judge is not the same thing as to feel. Presumably, to judge I need to do more (or possibly do other) than to feel: for to judge I need to reflect, to consider, to decide. And if feelings are involved, then to judge means to reflect on or to consider those feelings. Now if one assumes that the title of *TMS* is deliberately chosen, and that, consequently, for Smith feelings or 'sentiments' are somehow the key here, the implication is that our capacity for moral judgment rests on our capacity for moral feeling.



The logic of Smith's position is just this: before I can judge, I must feel. My feeling or sentiment, however, is not of a deliberate kind, and only turns from moral disposition into judgment when my ongoing pre-reflective state is disturbed by a certain incongruity. In my normal pre-reflective mode, I 'expect', or I have 'hopes' (Smith, 1976, p.221), in regard to your conduct, and so long as these are confirmed, no moral judgment ensues. Indeed, it is only when I am 'surprised' by your behaviour, only when I am 'astonished and confounded' (*ibid*, p.27), 'enraged', filled with 'wonder and surprise' (*ibid*, p.31) by your conduct, when I fail to 'anticipate' your response or reaction, that a moral judgment is formed. Thus it is only when your conduct appears to be out of context, so to say, that I am forced to consider what might be the appropriate context for that conduct, if any, or in what context such conduct would be appropriate. Normally I just feel, and to feel is not to consider, let alone to judge.

How then does the individual come by these moral sentiments that constitute her ongoing, pre-reflective state, and that, when disturbed, provoke a moral judgment? According to Smith, to have moral sentiment or feeling is to sympathise. Now, as he reminds us, today we are said to sympathise only when we feel 'pity and compassion', when we have 'fellow-feeling with the sorrow of others'. Smith's own usage, however, recalls the origins of the term sympathy in the Greek *sympatheia*, meaning sense of organic connection, and is thus taken to 'denote our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever' (Smith, 1976, p.10). We sympathise, according to Smith, when we 'bring home' to ourselves the case of another (*ibid*, p.11); sympathy is the capacity for somehow 'entering into' another's situation (*ibid*, p.10). It is well-known of course that Hume also makes what he chooses to call sympathy the basis of moral judgment, that 'sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions' (Hume, 1973, p.618). But Hume's 'sympathy' is quite different to Smith's. For Hume I 'sympathise' by regarding the benefit (or otherwise), the 'pain or pleasure', the 'prospect of ...loss or advantage' of another's action (*ibid*, 295-296). It is in regard to this ensuing benefit, then, that I am able to pass moral judgment on the conduct of another.

Of course, I can *recognise* the benefit or utility given to another (though this does not mean that the recipient recognises these things), but it is not clear how I can *sympathise* with another's benefit or utility, at least not in Smith's sense of the term. For to sympathise in Smith's sense I must have a 'fellow-feeling', literally, a feeling

that is a fellow of your feeling. But I cannot have a fellow-feeling of your benefit, utility or advantage because these things are not feelings to begin with. In the sense then that the object of my Humean sympathy is not a feeling, this (Humean) sympathy cannot be a fellow-feeling, and thus it turns out that what Hume calls 'sympathy' is not sympathy (in Smith's sense of organic connection) at all.

It is not then, according to Smith's lights, that I do not sympathise with your benefit, but rather that I cannot sympathise with your benefit: I can recognise your benefit, but I cannot sympathise with it. For Smith, however, I can and do sympathise with your gratitude, with how you feel about the benefit. Otherwise expressed: for Smith there is an organic connection between myself and how you feel (about a certain form of conduct that affects you). But your feeling (or rather how I suppose that you feel) and myself can only be organically connected if your feeling is somehow inside of myself. And 'your feeling, inside of myself' constitutes what Smith calls the 'impartial spectator', the 'man within the breast' (see, for example, Smith, 1976, pp.129-132). Now 'your feeling, inside of myself' is not the same as your feeling, which, as such, cannot be inside of myself. On the other hand, it is not a feeling that *I* have, which is always and everywhere partial. In the sense that this form of spectating generates a kind of feeling or sentiment which is neither of the 'I' nor of the 'you', but, more like, of the 'us', Smith's talk of an impartial spectator is exactly apposite.

Smith's impartial spectator is neither of the 'I' nor of the 'you'. It is however of the self. Smith's talk of an impartial spectator is his way of expressing the norms that we live by, and we come to live by these norms because, as he says, they are re-presented as the man within the breast. It is a moot point as to whether Smith thinks of these standards as absolute or relative. Either way, though, our point is that Smith does not think of these as external standards that we are forced to adhere to, nor as standards of the kind to which, upon reflection, we agree to conform. These are not the norms that enable Habermas's normatively regulative action. These standards that are not external at all but, according to Smith's lights, inhere in me: they are my norms; norms that are somehow taken into myself. Better, this 'man within' is the 'me'.

For Smith, the 'man within' enables the moral judgement. More significant from a social-theoretic standpoint, however, is that the 'man within' enables the human act.

According to Smith, and *pace* many of his interpreters down the years, sympathising is not something the human actor does with some of the people, some of the time. Nor is it confined to some special class of 'moral' behaviour. Rather sympathy for Smith is in the nature of the human act as such, the capacity that makes a specifically *human* form of acting possible. The 'passionate', partial side of being, and its 'impartial' counterpart, the man within the breast, together constitute the self. And it is this self that acts. One might say that the 'I' is the active principle here, somehow constrained by the normative 'me'. But this in a very crucial respect misses the logic of Smith's position, suggesting as it does the possibility of an active, 'impulsive' 'I' without its normative accompaniment. For Smith the man within the breast is always present, accompanying the 'I' everywhere. In that sense Smith's otherwise admirable terminology is misleading; for the 'man within the breast' is no man (but rather a constituent part of a man), no more than the man whose breast he inhabits would be a man without him. The human being can no more act according to the passions alone (egoistic theory) than according to the impartial spectator, or rather according to his representative, the 'man within' (traditional moral theory). Rather action emerges as a result of a pre-reflective interplay between the two. Smith puts it thus: the actor 'lower[s] his passion to that pitch, in which the spectators are capable of going along with him. He must flatten, if I may be allowed to say so, the sharpness of his natural tone, in order to reduce it to harmony and concord with the emotions of those who are about him...[And]...[i]n order to produce this concord, as nature teaches the spectators to assume the circumstances of the person principally concerned, so she teaches this last in some measure to assume those of the spectators' (Smith, 1976, p.22). Note well: this is not a strategic 'lowering of tone'; I do not have an act in mind which I then modify, having first reflected on your initial response, though of course this can happen too. Rather I have already, via the 'man within', your anticipated response in mind, an anticipation that thus constitutes the act: my 'lowering of tone' comes 'naturally'. 'Nature teaches' me to act with your view of the act in mind, just as 'she teaches' you to have my circumstances in mind when you respond, and all of this is instinctive: '[w]e are *immediately put in mind* of the light in which he will view our situation, and we begin to view it ourselves in the same light; for *the effect of sympathy is instantaneous*' (Smith, 1976, p.22-3; our emphases).

#### **4. Concluding remarks**

Just as we suspect that Parsons would have been pleased with Smith's sociological efforts, had he ever bothered to read him properly, so also we suspect that Smith would have commended Durkheim, for his recognition of the sociological inadequacy of the Hobbesian view of the human actor, and Parsons, for his attempt to set matters aright. But none of this should detract from the plain fact that the self-styled discipline of sociology is founded on a mistake. Smith's work constitutes a theoretical solution to the logic of the social, not a problem or barrier to its understanding that therefore needs to be overcome.

Worse still for the new discipline, the Hobbesian (not Smithian) conceptions of the human act that really do need to be overcome, if sociological theory is to move into productive waters, are not overcome by the likes of Durkheim. Durkheim knows that Hobbesian actors of themselves are not capable of a spontaneous order, but then so does Hobbes. Where Durkheim and the new sociology depart from Hobbes is that (unlike Hobbes) they recognise the possibility of spontaneous social order. But they have little to say on the human capacities that would turn that possibility into reality. Talk of 'social facts' and the like hardly takes sociological theory beyond blind faith. No wonder another new sociologist – the first new sociologist, in fact - August Comte, wants to commend the social to us as a religion.

Parsons goes beyond the founding fathers of the new discipline in recognising that one really should do more than merely assert the immanent sociability in human affairs – that an adequate theory would need to show how that sociability arises from the ordinary capacities of ordinary human individuals – but he carries forward uncritically Durkheim's assessment of political economy. He cannot see, therefore, that his call for a social theory that understands cultural norms and other social objects as part and parcel of human personality, rather than as added on to or imposed on that already existing personality from the outside, had been answered long ago within pre-Marshallian political economy, and in particular by Adam Smith. For Smith we are not forced to socialise; nor do we socialise out of some ulterior motive. Rather our behaviour, economic or otherwise, is irreducibly social, irreducibly ethical. By this he does not mean that we cannot help but care about what happens to other people and so take this into account when we act. Rather Smith's idea is that we are naturally

sympathetic creatures, meaning that we naturally build into our acts other people's expectations of those acts. We do not think of these expectations as belonging to other people, however, because, as it turns out, these are naturally represented as the expectations that we have of ourselves. For Smith, then, we are naturally sociable creatures but, *pace* Durkheim and the like, we need not look outside of our own self-interest for this nature.

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