

Whigs, Statesmen, and Economists

STEPHEN DAVIES

American Institute for Economic Research

For many years there has been a discussion around what is known as the ‘Adam Smith Problem’, which has produced a sizeable literature (Otteson 2000; Teichgraber 1981). The problem or challenge it is concerned with is that of how to reconcile his two major works, the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and the *Wealth of Nations*. The argument is that they reflect and express fundamentally different ideas about things such as the best way to understand society and its workings, the nature of human motivation, and the way we should think about both individual actions and their motivations. Gregory Collins’s book is a contribution to a related question, which we may call the ‘Edmund Burke Problem’. Here the challenge is that of reconciling the arguments and approaches found in Burke’s later political writings on the one hand and his approach in his work *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* on the other (Coniff 1987). The challenge is acute not only because of the apparent difference in argument and approach but also because of the contemporaneous nature of the works in question (*Thoughts and Details on Scarcity* was written in 1795).

The two ‘Problems’ are clearly related and not only because Burke and Smith were close to each other and, on Smith’s own account, very much on the same page. The connection is firstly that the issue in the two cases is the same, that of how to reconcile the perspectives found in works of philosophy or social and political theory on the one hand with that found on works of political economy on the other. The argument in both cases is that the economic works expound an individualist and clearly free market position while the other works set out a position that can be described as classical republican or paternalistic, according to taste. In Burke’s case Collins’s argument is that *Thoughts and Details* sets out a rigorously laissez-faire position in which the economic role of government is limited and the emphasis is on the importance of an emergent spontaneous order rather than the results of deliberate policy. By contrast, the political writings starting with *Reflections on the Revolution in France* are understood as presenting a case for a traditional aristocratic and paternalistic regime (Stanlis 1991).

There are two common approaches to these ‘Problems’. The commonest is to argue that the commitment to ‘free market’ principles in the *Wealth of Nations* and *Thoughts and Details* is only apparent and that deeper reading shows that both of these works actually reflect the more cooperative and paternalistic vision of society found in *Moral Sentiments* and Burke’s later political writings (Coniff 1987). What this means in contemporary terms is that Burke and Smith are cast out of the free market canon, or at least for

many authors are recast as paternalistic conservatives, classical republicans or even moderate social democrats. The rival interpretation, advanced by Bagchi (2014), takes the mirror image approach and argues that the political works in Burke's case are actually still driven by the individualistic and free market approach of the *Thoughts and Details* and that it is the paternalism and critical view of exchange relations that is only apparent.

The second way in which the two 'Problems' are related is that they are in fact both particular instances of a wider question. This is the issue of how to understand both thinkers and many others in the context of debates that were happening in their own time. The main discussions that are relevant here are ones about the nature of civilised society, the sources of wealth and whether commercial societies were compatible in the long run with both social order in the widest sense and good government. The specific question of the best means of promoting prosperity and the responsibility of the statesman for the poor and indigent and was at the heart of much of this discussion. (Another important question was the relation of both of these to population but Burke was not as concerned with that as some of his contemporaries). Gregory Collins' work is thus a contribution to both the specific question of how to understand Burke's economic thought in the light of his political philosophy and concerns (or, to flip it, that of how to make sense of his politics in the light of his expressed political economy) and the wider question of how exactly to locate and categorise the thought of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The book is a massive work of scholarship but also leads on to or opens up other enquiries.

The great value of the book lies in two of its main features. The first is that Collins looks at the form and content of Burke's treatment of what we can broadly call economic questions in the whole of his works and public pronouncements, including many fairly obscure ones. The idea is to tease out whether he had a consistent approach to this and if so, what it was. What this leads to is not the kind of either-or allocation of his thought described above but rather a way of reconciling the two apparently contrasting and conflictual aspects of his thought and to show that they are united by both coming from a more general social and political philosophy and view of human nature (Collins 2020, §1:1-3). This means that Burke does not come out as being clearly in the category of either free market economist or paternalist conservative. Instead, he is a member of a different category, one that was recognisable to his contemporaries but obscured to current observers by the passage of time. That is the second strength of the book and its argument. It is a historical one that avoids the problems of anachronism that beset so many works by political theorists and philosophers and, a fortiori, economists. The problem with both of the approaches described earlier is that they are exercises in applying contemporary categories to thinkers from an earlier period (as opposed to looking at intellectual descents or the similarities and differences between more recent thinkers and older ones). The process is essentially one of saying "given what Burke says here where would we place him in terms of contemporary categories". This not helpful in understanding his thinking and what he is saying. Even worse it makes Burke, and other thinkers of his time, into prizes in a political tug of war and obscures the genuine insights that people from a previous era may have for our current concerns – if only we take them as they were.

What Collins does is to look at the whole range of Burke's writings and speeches on matters to do with anything economic or to do with political economy, a term that in his time meant the whole arena of public policy and statesmanship concerned with the physical well-being of the public. The materials includes public finance, taxation, and debt, trade and commercial policy, the legal system as it concerned things such as property and exchange, money, and specific questions such as colonial policy, poor relief and the regulation of the poor and their work, population, and public improvements as they were called. The materials also includes matters not usually thought of as economic, such as war. The materials, then, cover the greater part of what we might call statesmanship. (The main topics not included being public morals, dynastic matters, and religion.) Most of what Burke wrote or said is grist to Collins's mill. Collins pays detailed attention to many of his Parliamentary speeches, most notably those concerned with India policy and the activities of the East India Company and its chief figure Warren Hastings (Collins 2020, §9:1-6). What emerges from all of this is a picture of someone with a sophisticated and consistent political economy, which remained con-

stant in its key points throughout his career. This is also relevant to the recurring question of whether Burke underwent a change in his thought under the impact of the French Revolution, with a move from progressivism as found in his earlier writings and speeches on America, Ireland, and India to a much more conservative and traditionalist one – the clear implication is that in reality there was no change, and the views articulated in things like the *Reflections* or the *Letters on a Regicide Peace* were consistent with his earlier positions and in fact followed from them (Collins 2020, §12:1-6).

What though was Burke's political economy or statecraft, in the account given here? Reading the forensic analysis presented here shows that there are five elements. The first, which has been eagerly picked up by several reviewers and focussed on by them to the exclusion of the rest, is that this is what we might call a strongly Smithian or even Hayekian political economy (Collins 2020, §4: 1-9). The emphasis throughout is on the importance of personal choice by economic actors and the ways these are aggregated by social processes to produce an unplanned and unintended outcome, as in Smith. In specific policy terms this means opposition to the kinds of extensive and elaborate controls that were a prominent feature of the Ancien Regime throughout Europe, including Britain. There is support for freer trade and opposition to the special privileges of monopolistic corporations. Burke was clearly not a supporter of the mercantilist policy of the older court Whigs any more than Smith was (Collins 2020, §8:1-8). One very prominent feature is Burke's hostility to the contemporary form of colonialism as shown in his attack on the policy and conduct of the East India Company and his views on the way forward for relations with the American colonies (Collins 2020, §7: 1-4 and §10:1-3). That hostility to colonialism is also a prominent feature of his speeches and writings on Irish affairs, with his criticism of the dependent and exploitative relationship between the two kingdoms and his advocacy of open exchange between the two (Collins 2020, §8:1-8). He is also hostile to slavery and other forms of unfree labour on both moral and economic grounds (Collins 2017). In modern terms there is an advocacy of a spontaneous economic order and a critical view of government commands in this area.

In other words, Burke is clearly on the same page as Smith, an advocate of what we would now call a free-market approach. Collins's book though shows that this is not all there is to say. The point made stands but needs to be qualified in ways that highlight the distinction between the approach to a commercial society of Burke and that of some of his contemporaries and that of later generations. The second element of his political economy, according to this account is that it is institutional. The exchange relations and spontaneous order that he supports is located within an institutional framework of legal rules and rights. The main point of policy and judgment for Burke was not to maximise economic efficiency and output. That was desirable but not if it meant undermining key institutions such as property rights (understood to include traditional entitlements) or long-standing rights and claims. This can be seen in his criticisms of Hastings' actions in India as not only simply and straightforwardly predatory but also as undermining and flouting the traditional rights and expectations of indigenous Indians (Collins 2020, §10:3. See also O'Neill 2009). This also explains something that Collins devotes some time to examining, Burke's treatment of the French Assembly's attack on the properties and endowments of the Church (Collins 2020, §11:4). In pure economic terms this could be justified as leading to a much more efficient (and private) use of resources, with the secularisation of church property a form even of forced privatisation. For Burke though this was a violation of a basic social institution that was foundational for the functioning of society and of the kind of economic relations he favoured. It was also an act of force and based on abstract principle: it has long been noted that it was this action that sparked Burke's alarm and hostility towards the Revolution, at a time when most others were still sanguine about its prospects. It was his perception of what this reform involved that made him see what was happening in France as something subversive and not the kind of improvement and reform of which he approved.

The third element of his thinking is one that makes qualification of his approach being free-market even more necessary. He favoured measures such as the Navigation Acts for example, clearly an anti-free trade measure that was intended to boost British merchant shipping and so, indirectly, naval power. In other words, for Burke economic policy was subordinated to politics (hence 'political economy'). It was the

best course of action to bring about the prosperity and power of a given political community but as such the details were subordinated to the needs of that community, which were specific and particular and influenced by things such as geography, history and geopolitics (Collins 2020, §5:1 - 7). This again meant that for him pure economic efficiency was not the ultimate criterion for the statesman. It also meant advocating a general policy of leaving people to their own devices did not mean downplaying the promotion of the 'general welfare' or the place of policy in human life – the question was what was the best way of promoting the general welfare and for Burke the answer was to leave people to their own devices but with the major caveat that the public interest of the polity as a whole could and should override individual choice where necessary.

The fourth part of Burke's political economy is, though, the one that is central to the book, along with the already mentioned support for a Smithian approach. This is the idea alluded to by the use of 'manners' in the title. Collins convincingly shows that for Burke exchange relations were not an end in themselves and were not conducted in a vacuum (Collins 2020, § 12:3-4 and also §10:1-4). They took place in a social and moral context. That context was a whole range of social norms of behaviour and conduct and a range of ethical rules, sociologically and historically rich rules, to which all kinds of human interactions were naturally and properly subject. This is exactly like Smith's anthropology and psychology of human nature, character and interaction in *Moral Sentiments* – the only real difference is Burke's greater emphasis on history and the historically evolved nature of 'manners', the term used to refer to these social conventions and institutions. This has important and far-reaching implications. It means that exchange relationships do not exist in a pure, asocial state. If people try to behave as though they do or act as though those actions can take place with no reference to the fabric of 'manners' then the results will be deeply destructive, Burke thought. In particular doing this will make exchange relations predatory and violate principles of natural justice as well as inherited social convention. His attacks on Warren Hastings show this very clearly. What this means is that Burke was not an exponent of an abstract idea of market relations or human action of the kind that is found in much modern social theory. It also means that for him exchange relations were an enormously important but still secondary kind of human interaction and, like all human interactions, subject to the rules of manners. Some kinds of exchange and action, while economically justified, were illegitimate on other grounds because of the way they violated the rules of manners.

Burke is therefore definitely not making the kind of cynical and provocative case made by people like Mandeville, according to which trade and commerce are ends in themselves, understood in the way that Machiavelli had presented politics (See Stafford 1997 for the common response). He is also different in his approach to many of his contemporaries, notably in France. There is a clear difference in this respect between his approach (and Smith's) and that of people such as Turgot or Mercier De La Riviere or Quesnay, or, later on, Say (Vardi 2014). The approach of these French authors was much more abstract and rationalistic and dealt with human beings abstracted from the demands and context of manners. We should not think that this is a case of grounded Anglo-Saxons versus ratiocinating Frenchmen – there were plenty of French authors, such as Constant or De Stael who were in Burke's camp and British ones like Bentham who most definitely were not. It is also worth noting here the way in which Burke's political economy is part of a whole model of human psychology and sentiment that he put forward as a young man in his *Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. In that work Burke argued for both the importance of feelings and emotion as compared to abstract intellect and for the importance of inherited and historical sentiments and feelings. There is a clear similarity between that aesthetic theory and his approach to public affairs and commerce (White 1993).

The final element of his thought as set out in the book follows from this. Not all exchange relations are of the same sort or have the same moral content because the nature of the human interactions that embody them are different. That means different kinds of exchange relations have different moral standing and that it is not the case that any and all consensual exchange relations are good. One particular feature of Burke's economic thought, which features prominently in the *Reflections* and his other later works, is his attitude towards purely financial exchange relations and his view of the 'money interest' as he called it. This was at least sceptical but often hostile (Collins 2020, §11:5-6). In the post-1790 works Burke clearly sees the work-

ings of pure finance and the social and political interests associated with it (the money interest) as being responsible in part for the disaster he saw taking place in France. This fitted in with an important part of his political economy, which was his thinking about public debt and the financing of government. For Burke as his speeches on these matters make clear, debt was much to be preferred to the system of liquid loans from financiers that the French monarchy depended on, not least because this was a central factor in the undermining of the entire political and social order there. (For an argument as to why his judgment was completely correct on this, see Root 2018).

For Burke the problem with purely monetary and speculative exchange relations is that they are detached from history and associated with novelty. More fundamentally, they are removed from the context of manners and human relations. He contrasted money relations and transactions, and the kinds of property they gave rise to (essentially tradable fiduciary claims) with other kinds of transactions and property claims, above all the ownership of long-lasting or permanent goods of which land was the preeminent case. A state financed by debt and monetary speculation is inherently unstable as compared to one that is not. A certain amount of secure and reliable debt is actually desirable for him but the massive indebtedness of both France and Britain in his time was not. That is why he favoured economical reform as it was called, meaning the reduction of government spending through such measures as the abolition of sinecures. This all meant that speculative transactions of various kinds, made possible by easy access to money and credit, were not just ill-advised but morally disreputable. All of this is a huge qualification to the first point about his being in general a supporter of markets and voluntary exchange. He was, but in a very qualified way, and in a way that is different in kind to that believed in by many who would like to claim his mantle today.

This all leads to the questions that Collins's work poses and which need further exploration. How should we locate Burke's thought historically and in relation to his contemporaries? As far as the label we should apply to it goes, the conclusion should be that terms like 'liberal' or 'conservative' and even more 'free-market' are anachronistic, and should be avoided. For contemporaries for the greater part of his career there was no problem in the label to assign him, because he clearly expounded the recognised views of a well-known political position, which was a Whig one. Specifically, it was a certain kind of Whig political economy that had moved on from the more classically mercantilist position of Walpole and the Court Whigs to one that incorporated a different set of ideas about the best course of economic policy. This form of Whig thinking and policy had emerged from the circle around the Marquess of Rockingham, of which Burke was a prominent member (O'Gorman 1967). One of the persistent mistakes made by contemporary writers in trying to explain this kind of Whig politics, which Burke exemplified, is that of trying to fit it into the categories of either 'liberal' or 'conservative'. The problem is that those two identities did not really become formed until the 1820s (when both terms were first used as political labels). Emily Jones has persuasively argued that Burke was still seen as a Whig for most of the nineteenth century and was only defined as a conservative in the 1880s (Jones 2015). Both of these later political identities grew out of and derived from Whig thinking which is why trying to apply them retrospectively leads to problems in categorising and understanding not only Burke's thinking but also that of many of his contemporaries, such as both Portland and also Fox and Sheridan.

So, what is the Whig politics that Burke followed and expounded? As well as the economic thinking or political economy that has already been described, it had four other elements. The first was the idea of a balanced constitution or form of government (as supposedly embodied in the British settlement of 1688) in which the practice of government was carried on by a governing class inspired by ideals of public service. Good government rather than small or efficient government was the aim but good government did not mean service to or being guided by an abstract notion of progress or perfection. The second part was the notion of reform or improvement. This meant measures and changes that corrected abuses and removed bads or aided the appearance of good things by removing barriers. Improvement was not the same as progress, because it lacked the teleological quality of the latter. It was also an anti-revolutionary concept because the central feature of improvement is that the thing improved or reformed survives rather than being replaced or transformed (Collins 2017; Slack 2014). The third is the idea of statesmanship, a notion of how

governance should be carried on and the ends at which it should aim that combined the ideals of keeping the ship of state afloat and of improving and repairing it. This is where Burke's political economy comes into play, because an obvious question was what concrete policies the statesman should follow. For Burke (and other Whigs of his time) improvement, signified by things such as greater prosperity and well-being and greater humanity and lenity of manners was brought about mainly by social action and the playing out of free exchange (Collins 2017; Boyd 1999). The fourth aspect was the notion of culture and refinement or civilisation, which is where manners come in (O'Neill 2004). This was a central concept in eighteenth century thought, having been introduced into European thinking towards the very end of the previous century by the Jesuits. What united all of this was the notion of providence and a providential natural order in which things should normally and naturally work out for the best. For believers such as Burke this was still the providential dispensation of the Christian God, while for others (such as Smith, almost certainly) it was derived from the idea of a detached deity or Nature.

Thinking about this and Burke's more explicitly commercial or economic thought should help us to locate him in the debates of his own time and to understand also the legacy he left for later generations. His political economy as set out by Collins, and his wider political and intellectual position give him a definite place in several major debates of his time. One was over the question of commercial society and its desirability. Throughout the eighteenth century there was a continuing debate between advocates of a commercial society and those who held that such a society and the wealth it created would undermine true civilisation and the higher human qualities. These people, who included figures as different in other ways as Montesquieu and Rousseau, argued that the wealth of commercial society created luxury. This meant not just affluence (as we would call it) but a way of living that led to a focus on physical pleasure and gratification and an emphasis on the present at the expense of both the future and the past (Hont 2006; Berg & Eger 2003). Their conclusion was that a lasting and stable society and one in which virtue would flourish would be one that was simple and austere in its lifestyle and tastes and dominated by farming carried on by a class of yeoman freeholders, rather than commerce and trade. Burke clearly belongs to the other side (along with figures such as Hume and Smith), who argued that a commercial society would create greater comfort and prosperity and also lead to a softening of manners and conduct that would make life more peaceful and cultured ('Refined' in the language of the time – there is an irresistible temptation to pronounce the word with a Morningside accent).

However, although Burke clearly favoured a relatively more urbanised and commercial society and thought that part of wise statesmanship was to encourage and allow the growth of commerce, he did not share the view of Mandeville that the morally corruptive effects of commerce were part of the process by which wealth and power were created. For him, because of the emphasis on manners and the way exchange relations and transactions were embedded in a wider set of social relations and codes of conduct, commerce was not an end in itself. It was rather a part of a certain kind of social order, an important but ultimately subordinate part. This is why it is anachronistic to see him as a classic *laissez faire* liberal but also the reason why he does not fit the idea of a paternalistic conservative who believed in a governing class with a responsibility to act directly and powerfully to relieve poverty or promote public welfare by measures such as creating infrastructure. There were many people of that kind in Burke's own time, in the shape of the cameralists, a school of public administration and political economy that was very influential in many Germanic principalities, particularly Prussia and Austria (Tribe 1984; Seppel & Tribe 2017).

Consider Burke's position on another of the contemporary debates, that of how to deal with the challenge of poverty and the impact on the poor of both natural phenomena such as harvest failures and of the rapid changes of the agrarian and artisanal economy well underway in many parts of Europe (but particularly Britain) by the 1770s and later. This was in fact the subject matter of *Thoughts and Details*. The 'scarcity' of the title referred to the dearth of necessities occasioned by harvest problems at the time it was written in 1795. Burke's argument that the government was under no obligation to provide the necessities of life because this was not a public good in the strict sense of the term and that it was something that should be left to private charity, was aimed at the arguments of his one-time colleague Samuel Whitbread (Collins

2020, §2:1-6). The general argument was that ultimately the best way to improve the condition of the poor was through the operation of trade and commerce, with the role of government limited to providing the legal and institutional framework but also, crucially, upholding public morals and manners through an established religion. To return to the point made earlier this is a call for a market-based economy but one where market exchanges take place within a robust social and cultural framework, one that constrains and limits the extent and importance of certain kinds of exchange. At the time there were voices calling for an expanded or reformed role for public poor relief as a part of the institutional landscape, and it was this that Burke was rejecting. Like the Physiocrats across the Channel, he also rejected the idea of controls on prices and market relations where necessities were concerned (Turgot for example had been a major opponent of the long-standing French policy of preventing the movement of grain in times of famine).

This tells us something about the part Burke played in the events of his own lifetime and its immediate aftermath. This was the bifurcation of the historic Whig tradition into two successors, liberal and conservative. This happened in the arena of actual politics, with the split between Burke and his sometime friends and colleagues such as Charles James Fox and the way that he and others like him such as Portland became allies and supporters of Pitt, once their nemesis. At the level of ideas, we can see a process in which the parts of Burke's ideas were taken by contemporary and subsequent writers and developed in different directions, with the two sides each emphasising a different aspect of his united thinking, given it was an expression of the general view of the later eighteenth century Whigs. It is this intellectual bifurcation that led to the belief that there was a contradiction in his thinking or that he had undergone a *bouleversement* in 1790. The event that led to this bifurcation was of course the Revolution in France. Fox, and those who followed him such as Holland, chose to emphasise the part of Whig thought as expressed earlier by Burke that focussed on improvement and the limitations of government and hostility to monarchical power. This meant that while rejecting the politics of English Jacobins such as Thelwall they supported the idea of the need for radical change in the institutions and governance of Britain and resisted the defensive reactions of Pitt's government to the threat from across the Channel. This way of thinking was taken up and developed by later writers and 'philosophic Whigs', such as Mackintosh and Brougham, and the circle associated with the *Edinburgh Review* such as Jeffrey and Sydney Smith (Jacyna 2014). Others like Portland or Canning accepted the need for a robust response to the revolutionary challenge and chose to emphasise the part of Burke's thought that stressed the importance of maintaining historically evolved institutions and social norms. Both sides agreed on scepticism about abstract reason and hostility to 'enthusiasm' (meaning fanaticism).

Finally, how should we view Burke's political economy and approach to this area of public policy from the standpoint of today? Some of the points of his arguments and analysis, as set out by Gregory Collins, remain as relevant as ever, notably the need to recognise both the need for a state and for that state to be effective, while assigning it a precise but limited role and relying on unplanned exchange and other kinds of social interaction to address and resolve most challenges. On the other side, considering his arguments as presented should lead us to reconsider the way such matters are mostly approached today, in the academy at least. The kind of thinking about public and political economy that we find in Burke's writings and speeches has been replaced by the modern academic discipline of economics. There has certainly been a gain in rigour but something has also been lost. The very idea of 'the economy' as a distinct sphere of human life and experience, that can be studied in isolation, has benefits inasmuch as it can bring greater intellectual clarity but it also leads to a simplified and reified approach that can miss a lot of what is actually going on. Contemporary economists should try to recover the kind of insights that Burke had about the importance of 'manners' and the primacy of politics and other social relations. More specifically, contemporary defenders of limited and constitutional government would do well to rediscover these other parts of Burke's thought or indeed of Whig thinking in general. The idea here would be not to replace or amend economic thinking but to integrate social, cultural, political, and economic thinking in the way that was common in the later eighteenth century and, indeed, for some time thereafter.

We may ask has Burke and the Whig tradition he defended and elaborated, got any representatives today? Are there contemporary figures who can be seen as carrying on that particular flame? One might

point to people such as George Will as an example of this and there are perhaps people in politics or letters who do (Dueck 2020). What is lacking, and needed, is intellectuals who will take up that mantle.

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