

studies in

---

social & political thought

Volume 29 Summer 2019

Articles

**Critical Social Ontology as a Foundation for Ethics: Marx, Lukács and Critical Judgment**  
*Michael J. Thompson*

**On the Failure of Oracles: Reflections on a Digital Life**  
*David M. Berry*

**Happy Birthday Jürgen Habermas**  
*James Gordon Finlayson*

**University of Sussex Masters in Social and Political Thought  
Gillian Rose Prize Winning Essay 2018**

**The Production of Space Through Land Reclamation**  
*Niclas Kern*

Books reviewed

*Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism & New Technologies of Power*  
by Byung-Chul Han

*New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future*  
by James Bridle

*Municipal Dreams: The Rise and Fall of Council Housing*  
by John Boughton

*Adam Smith and Rousseau: ethics, politics, economics*

Edited by Maria Paganelli, Dennis C. Rasmussen, and Craig Smith

### **Adam Smith and Rousseau: ethics, politics, economics**

Edited by Maria Paganelli, Dennis C. Rasmussen, and Craig Smith

Edinburgh University Press, 2018, pbk £80.00 (ISBN 978 1 4744 2285 7), pp. 331.

by Jack Edmunds

Adam Smith and Jean-Jacques Rousseau are canonical figures in political theory, ethics, intellectual history, and economics. They have independently generated masses of commentary, just shy, perhaps, of the likes of Hobbes or Marx. Yet, despite the unfathomable breadth of the literature, much scholarship has supposedly perpetuated a strawman. Until the turn of the millennium, as the editors tell us, 'there was a popular, if crude, notion that the two were in some sense opposites or even enemies' (3). Smith was regarded as an advocate of liberalism, and as a supporter of commercial society which operated according to the self-regulating principle of selfishness. Rousseau, on the other hand, idolised the noble savage, was an advocate of republicanism, and a critic of commercial society and civilisation at large. Recent developments in both Smith and Rousseau scholarship, as well as the emergence of comparative Smith/Rousseau studies, which began in earnest in the early 2000s, has led to a broad acceptance that these eighteenth-century giants are, in fact, more aligned than had previously been understood. To date, key areas of comparative investigation have included self-interest, the role of interpersonal comparisons ('amour-propre' for Rousseau and 'sympathy' for Smith), and the problems of commercial society. In these areas, and many more, scholars have noted a surprising level of similarity. Thus, with few exceptions, the essays contained in this fine book develop what seems to be the new consensus.

What this edition offers, in fourteen essays including an editor's introduction, is a representative sample of current scholarship on the Smith/Rousseau comparative enterprise. The posthumous publication of Istvan Hont's *Politics in Commercial Society* (2015) has clearly energised those interested in the Smith-Rousseau connection, and is used as a starting point for several essays in this compilation. Indeed, Ryan Patrick Hanley's contribution (16-31) is essentially a review of that work. In short, Hont urged us to see Smith and Rousseau 'not just as authors of dead texts but also as presences in our contemporary theorising' (Hont, 2015: 24), and it is in this spirit that this collection is presented. While all of the essays are rewarding, only a sample can be addressed here.

Mark Hulliung is the only contributor to offer a sustained critique of the Smith-Rousseau connection. It is a refreshing piece, in which he goes so far as to claim that the supporting evidence to read Rousseau as an important intellectual interlocutor of Smith, and a major figure in the Scottish Enlightenment, could 'hardly be thinner' (36). His fellow contributors may disagree, but Hulliung does raise some uncomfortable observations about the state of Smith/Rousseau scholarship. It is true that Smith rarely refers to Rousseau in his major works, and his consideration of Rousseau in the 'Letter to the Edinburgh Review' is brief. On balance, however, the arguments in favour of the project prevail. After all, Smith makes plenty of textual references to Rousseau elsewhere, they both address similar questions, and, as John McHugh (109-123) recognises, Smith's critique of Mandeville's 'licentious system' is also a critique of Rousseau's (110). Nevertheless, Hulliung's suggestion that many Smith/Rousseau scholars should 'admit frankly that they have not been thinking as historians but rather as political theorists' (45-46) is legitimate. Given that Hulliung's essay

## Reviews

---

pre-emptively undermines many of the observations that follow, it at first seems strange that it made the cut. The great difficulty of comparative history, however, is selecting that which is appropriate for comparison, and it is useful to have Hulliung's scepticism in mind when one reads the subsequent contributions.

The process of interpersonal comparison - of utmost importance in the moral philosophies of both thinkers, and in their conjectures concerning the origins of society - is the chief focus of Christel Fricke's essay. She provides a useful and accessible summary of the mechanisms of Rousseau's amour-propre and Smith's 'sympathy'. Fricke concludes that while Smith was inspired by Rousseau's account of social interaction in the Second Discourse, he did not follow Rousseau, 'either in the details of his analysis or in the conclusions he drew' (58). To illustrate this point, she uses Frederick Neuhouser's (2008, 2014) account of amour-propre in Rousseau to great effect. By distinguishing between inflamed and non-inflamed amour-propre, Neuhouser argues that amour-propre is not an entirely negative passion, but, in fact, provides the remedy to the evils it causes. Fricke's implication is that Smith's process of 'sympathy' was influenced by the idea of non-inflamed amour-propre as per Rousseau. It is a plausible and interesting thesis, though the textual evidence is slight. Neuhouser's account, it should be said, is itself controversial.

Mark Hill's essay on Rousseau's contribution to the eighteenth-century debate on self-interest is the most difficult of the collection. Perhaps too much is made of the question of categorisation, and the thrust of Hill's argument is blunted by discussions of Rousseau's relation to 'moral realism' and 'moral rationalism'. Irrespective of this, Hill's essay performs the task of one side of the scholarly pincer movement that has come to characterise Smith/Rousseau scholarship. Instead of viewing Rousseau as a republican moralist, Hill asserts that he is, in fact, a philosopher of the political and social good of self-interest. This shift is facilitated by an interesting discussion on voluntarism. Theological voluntarism holds that to act morally one must accept the will of God as one's own will. Hill argues that Rousseau reformulated voluntarism so that the people, rather than God, constitute the source of the sovereign will. The internalism of voluntarism allowed Rousseau to conclude that people could be forced to be free. In this context, self-interest takes on a different meaning.

Tabitha Baker's essay is the boldest of the collection. She argues that the striking similarity between certain aspects of Rousseau and Smith's thought can be most abundantly sourced in Rousseau's fictional works (144). Baker creatively anchors her comparison of their thought to the motif of the landscape garden. She does, however, make a number of claims that intellectual historians have been trained to suspect. For example, she states that Rousseau's novel *La Nouvelle Heloise* 'can be seen as inherently Smithian in nature due to the way in which most moral and economic themes are treated' (144). However, while Baker certainly strays into mythologies of coherence and prolepsis (Skinner, 2002: 67-79), she eloquently links Smith's concept of the impartial spectator to pleasure gardens in England which encourage 'a culture of seeing and being seen' (147). The private garden in Rousseau's *Heloise*, on the other hand, seeks to redirect desires of admiration and vanity (150). Nonetheless, there is an impressive attempt to use gardens to flesh out notions of proximity in Smith and Rousseau's understanding of 'sympathy' and 'pity' (156). Thus, even if Baker takes some methodological liberties, her essay is both courageous and sensitive to the philosophical nuances of Rousseau in particular.

The challenge of reconciling the political thought of Rousseau and Smith is undoubtedly a tall order. Dennis Rasmussen, the author of one of only three monographs that compare Rousseau and Smith, makes some headway in a nuanced discussion rooted in political philosophy. His essay turns on the interpretation of a specific phrase in Smith's 'Letter to the Edinburgh Review'. In this text, Smith describes Rousseau as carrying 'the

true spirit of republicanism a little too far'. The standard interpretation of this statement is that Rousseau went too far in his understanding of 'positive' liberty. In other words, in contrast to Smith's moderate republicanism, which rested on a principle of 'negative' liberty and freedom as non-interference, Rousseau thought that freedom would be best realised through collective self-government. Rasmussen agrees that in the strictly political sense the demarcation of Rousseau and Smith in terms of positive and negative liberty stands. However, on the level of the individual, Rasmussen argues that 'Smith advocates something akin to positive liberty as a central feature of his moral theory' and that 'Rousseau advocates negative liberty for all of those who are healthy enough to avoid abusing it' (246). The argument for Rousseau is clearly evidenced. After all, people in the state of nature, and in nascent society, enjoy freedom from psychological and legal interference and are happy and free. Rasmussen's claim concerning Smith is, however, complicated by the fact that Smith does not use the language of liberty in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Nevertheless, the notion of restraining or commanding one's passions is central to Smith's moral philosophy, and Rasmussen's argument is perceptive.

Jason Neidlemen's essay explores the role of the state in the formation of public opinion. Models of political legitimacy tend to presuppose that the relationship between public opinion and governance moves from the former to the latter. Neidlemen notes that Smith, and particularly Rousseau, acknowledged the necessity of the inverse (261). For Smith, the government should act to smooth out the rough edges of public opinion. For Rousseau, of course, government needs to undertake a transformation of human nature. Their difference in emphasis is explained by the fact that Smith's project is a liberal one, whereas Rousseau's is republican. But a more interesting point is that, in Smith, there is symmetry between the virtues of the good person and the virtues required for commerce to flourish, whereas, for Rousseau, amour-propre 'had no such tethering mechanism and tended to attach itself to the corrupt vagaries of popular taste' (267). Neidlemen aptly concludes that the difference between Smith and Rousseau lies in the difference between self-command and self-government (274).

Newcomers to the Smith/Rousseau comparative project will find this book immensely helpful, especially the introduction, which provides a survey of the relevant literature. Those familiar with the field will also find a number of the contributions compelling. They may, however, like the author of this review, fear that the quest for innovative scholarship might push the similarity thesis too far. Ultimately, Smith believed in a commercial society that horrified Rousseau, and their political projects were incompatible.

**Jack Edmunds** (jack.edmunds@kcl.ac.uk) is a PhD Candidate in the History Department at King's College London. His research, supported by an AHRC Doctoral Training Partnership, focuses on Bernard Mandeville and the benevolence debate in the early eighteenth-century.

## References

Force, P. (2003) *Self-interest before Adam Smith: a Genealogy of Economic Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Griswold, C. (2017) *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith: A Philosophical Encounter*. London: Routledge.

Hanley, R. P. (2009) *Adam Smith and the Character of Virtue*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

## Reviews

---

- Hont, I. (2015) *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.
- Hullung, M. (2018) *Enlightenment in Scotland and France: Studies in Political Thought*. London: Routledge.
- Neuhouser, F. (2008) *Rousseau's Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Neuhouser, F. (2014) *Rousseau's Critique of Inequality: Reconstructing the Second Discourse*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pack, S. J. (2000) 'The Rousseau–Smith Connection: Towards an Understanding of Professor West's "Splenetic Smith"', *History of Economic Ideas*, 8, pp.35–62.
- Phillipson, N. (2010) *Adam Smith: An Enlightened Life*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Potkay, A. (2017) 'Pity, Gratitude, and the Poor in Rousseau and Adam Smith', *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 46, 162–82.
- Rasmussen, D. C. (2006) 'Rousseau's "Philosophical Chemistry" and the Foundations of Adam Smith's Thought', *History of Political Thought*, 27, pp.620–41.
- Rasmussen, D. C. (2008) *The Problems and Promise of Commercial Society*, University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Skinner, Q. (2002) *Visions of Politics, Volume 1: Regarding Method*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.