

SMITH AT 300: ADAM SMITH AND THE IDEA OF “POLICE”

BY

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“The more opulent therefore the society, labour will always be so much the dearer and work so much the cheaper, and if some opulent countries have lost several of their manufactures and some branches of their commerce by having been undersold in foreign markets by the traders and artisans of poorer countries, who were contented with less profit and smaller wages, this will rarely be found to have been merely the effect of the opulence of the one country and the poverty of the other. Some other cause, we may be assured, must have concurred. The rich country must have been guilty of some great error in its police.”

ED 2.12–2.13

As a favorite Smith quote the election of an excerpt from the *Early Draft (ED)* of the *Wealth of Nations (WN)* that was later suppressed may seem like a criticism of the author’s judgment. Nonetheless, that is not the aim. On the contrary, *WN* was probably better and less confusing without the passage and its emphasis on “police regulations.” What I want to highlight here is precisely this little-visited topic of Smith’s approach to the role of “police” in the economic order, differentiating the author’s use of the terms “police” and “policy.”¹ The excerpt’s content is principally associated with Smith’s interest in the Hume-Tucker debate on trade, as already pointed out by Istvan Hont (2005, pp. 71–72). What is of interest to me here is the reason for the suppression, which seems to be related to his intention to remove any association that might sound like praise for the idea of police (in this case, the view that a good police could be the solution for the rich country) from the *WN*. This was, however, in direct contrast to the prominence of the topic in Smith’s *Lectures on Jurisprudence (LJ)*, in which police served as a broad

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¹ While in English “policy” is a possible synonym for some of the meanings of the term “police” in its archaic sense, the two terms were not interchangeable at that time, as Smith’s uses testify. “Police” had a broader meaning of “policy, politicks, or the regulation of a government in general” (*LJ* [A] vi.i), and basically positive associations. But in the *WN* the term is reserved basically to talk critically about issues related to regulation, and is distinct from the term “policy.”

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category, associated with the internal administration of a country and the means for promoting economic order.

From the prominence and positive associations of this broad category, which titled *LJ*'s Part II, the term would pass through a restriction of its meaning, appearing in the *WN* only as a specific type of "policy" related to the regulation of the state and functioning in good measure as a target for his criticism (cf. Brown 1994 and Neocleous 1997). The few times the term appears throughout *WN*, it is either with a negative qualification, or with some specification, such as "the regulations of police." As noted by Hont and Michael Ignatieff (1983, pp. 2, 26), Smith was translating into the language of markets a jurisprudential discourse that since Hugo Grotius already allowed contrasting the laws of police and those of a natural system that should serve as a basis for the laws of all nations. In *LJ* the distinctions between Justice (Part I) and Police (Part II) were already in place, but it took a few more years for him to clearly start to argue the role of political economy in criticizing the regulation imposed by police regulations on the functioning of the economy, based on the perspective of a system of natural liberty. Several issues can be associated with this shift, and no doubt Physiocracy's attack on state regulation via police ordinances and the specific timing of Smith's contact with these issues during his sojourn in France are crucial aspects that should be considered in an extended examination.

The wide range of attributions associated in the administrative practice with so-called police matters in continental Europe made the positioning on the term unavoidable for the economic thought. The incorporation of the medieval Latin term *politia* (from Greek *politeia*) in several European languages took place roughly from the fifteenth century and was mostly via the dissemination of the uses of Middle French *police*. The first meaning was essentially "good order." The term in the nineteenth century would come to mean strictly a public security authority and its members, but in the middle of this process, "police" had its meaning greatly expanded in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to incorporate, through legal instruments such as police ordinances, the most diverse aspects of the internal administration of the state, which ended up creating many overlaps between police affairs and the objects of interest of the nascent political economy (Cunha 2021; Knemeyer 1978; Napoli 2003).

The term and glimpses of the debate associated with it are imported via France to the English-speaking context, but even though Francis Dodsworth (2008) has shown how the idea of police in eighteenth-century England included a substantive number of associations, regarding a reflection that included the theme of economic order, the type of argument developed by Smith in his lectures clearly stands out. Smith was very informed and interested in this continental debate, and his library (cf. Mizuta 1967) included the key authors of the French tradition of police, such as Duchesne or Edme de la Poix de Fréminville, as well as names such as Jakob Friedrich von Bielfeld, which, although not part of the cameralist tradition, still allowed some approximation with topics that were frequent in Germanic police science tradition (*Policeywissenschaft*).

All this contributes to highlight the relevance of the analysis of the idea of police in Smith's works as well as interesting questions about reception: for example, regarding how his ideas were combined with other traditions within the enlightened reformism in the last decades of the eighteenth century, linking through the debates about the police regulations a discourse of the promotion of economic freedom with one of the active promotion of state direction of economic activity.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

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