

Salim Rashid. *The Myth of Adam Smith*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1998. x-227 pp. ISBN 1-85898-532-3.

Rashid's self-appointed task is to place the *Wealth of Nations* in context and (therefore) to demolish the undeserved hagiographic image of Adam Smith. Rashid's attempt is inspired by mistrust towards the "hero view of history", a view that, once applied to economics, leads to such a platitudinous moral as: that "economics is a very difficult subject which can only make sense after we have been initiated into its mysteries" (p. 210), and requires a Secular Saint to mark the beginning of the subject. The hagiographic literature stemming from such a view is not only morally disgusting, as when in Ronald Reagan's age Adam Smith was invoked on TV to justify merciless social policies, but also productive of intellectual blindness and prejudice (pp. 210-211). These are: first, the unjustified (and now overcome) assumption that the "pragmatic economic thinking" of the pre-Smith era was worthless and noxious in terms of economic policies, and second, the no less unjustified assumption of a relevant influence of Smithian doctrines in the making of the industrial revolution.

Rashid's strategy is: (a) to show how and why Smith was raised to superior fame for contingent reasons, with an amount of cross-purpose talk among Tories, Whigs, philosophic radicals, Anglican liberal divines, and even the founders of Marxism, who all found something to praise in Smith's work; (b) how nothing was particularly new in the analytic contributions of *The Wealth of Nations*, and his presentation of the previous history of economic knowledge was tendentious, denying due acknowledgment to his predecessors' achievements; (c) how Smith's use of historical facts was tendentious, making facts bend to preconceived doctrines. The alleged implications are that (a<sub>1</sub>) since Smith's myth was built on sand, his work deserves much less praise than usual; (b<sub>2</sub>) since no new element of his overall economic theory was endowed with particular novelty, the theory as a whole adds nothing to existing knowledge; (c<sub>3</sub>) since Smith as historian was tendentious, his contribution to economic theory is worthless.

Rashid's general thesis flies in the face of received wisdom, but one must admit that the proof of the first set of claims is carried out in accurate historical terms, with competent use of generally ignored historical sources, and with enjoyable results. What strikes the reader, yet, is that the implications of these claims are left without a self-standing proof, as if they were matter of course, once the main claims are accepted.

Besides, as in several famous previous cases, Rashid's option for a 'soft' model of economic knowledge (a "meadow" more than a "pyramid") falls prey of unresolved dichotomies inherited from the view he chooses to oppose. Let us mention the alternative between an objective and a tendentious kind of history, or the requirement of novelty in individual analytic elements as *the*

condition for theoretical worth are posited in a rather dogmatic way.

The first point worth discussing in more detail is whether the achievement of *The Wealth of Nations* has been that of creating a new and more encompassing conceptual framework where already existing theoretical elements could be integrated (See Vaggi 1996; see also Cremaschi 1984, ch. 3), and whether growth of knowledge could have originated from a growth in the consistency of a theoretical framework which synthesized already existing individual elements.

A second point is whether a "tendentious" presentation of the positions of both predecessors and opponents might be some kind of unavoidable sin from which no son of Adam has been exempted in the history of economic thought, a side-effect of those controversies out of which every theoretical innovation in the science arose (see Cremaschi and Dascal 1998). And whether Adam Smith himself might have been guilty of that sin because this was a price to be paid to his rhetorical strategy (see Pack 1991). A third point is whether the fact that a text has been canonized at a certain moment in history for quite contingent reasons is no decisive proof of the intrinsic worth (or lack of worth) of the text in itself. For example, ask any historian of Christianity how and why the gospels and Paul's letters were included into the Canon, while several first-century orthodox texts were left out. So I suppose that, even if the rise of *The Wealth of Nations* to superior fame was the conclusion of that comedy which is masterly told by Rashid in ch. 7, the cognitive progress carried by the work was real, and it bequeathed an indispensable legacy to Malthus, Ricardo, Marx, and their followers. Two corollaries are in order: first, the "popular" Smith (see Vaggi 1996, pp. 115-117) is not the economist's Smith; second, cases of multiple discovery are the historian's of science staple, and every innovative idea, after its success, has always been traced back to various contemporaries or predecessors of all innovators in any discipline.

A marginal point that deserves discussion is Smith's alleged "special fascination for Christians" (p. 219). Rashid's claims are that Smith was, quite like his friend Hume, a secular opponent of Christianity; and that Smith's "social theodicy" centred on the invisible hand was later equivocated by Anglican liberal divines becoming popular with nineteenth century "Christians".

I think that Rashid's claims needs some rectification. First, Smith's 'secularism' is one more die-hard historiographic myth, resulting from nineteenth-century misunderstanding. Second, the story of the withdrawal of passages on theological subjects in the third edition of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is no proof of Smith's conversion to atheism (p. 219) but only a mark of inner tensions in Smith's thinking on morality, religion, and theodicy (See Dickey 1986; see also Pack 1995). Third, the invisible hand (pp. 218-219) is much less a theological than a physical-social metaphor or simile, carrying out the function of making coexistence of efficient and final causes possible (see Cremaschi 1981) and accordingly its later misinterpretations in terms of dogmatic social theodicies should not reflect on Adam Smith. Fourth, the "Christians" in nineteenth century Europe included virtually everybody, excepted a minority of Jews and another of Christian-born atheists, and that the

fascination with Adam Smith was restricted to liberal Anglican divines, while Adam Smith met for a long time with undeserved opprobrium among Catholic theologians and social thinkers for the same reasons as Locke, Bentham, and virtually every modern social thinker: alleged individualism, ethical subjectivism, an hedonistic view of human nature, a restricted view of the ends of human society.

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