

SMITH AT 300: MEN OF BLESSED AND BEGUILING INGENUITY

BY
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Adam Smith's excellence in the art of *belles lettres* is well known and is on vivid display in his most memorable quotes, enriching his arguments and augmenting their impact. Sometimes, however, the effects of time obscure his artistry and purpose. The following passage from the *Wealth of Nations* ([1776] 1981; *WN*) is one such example. It contains an overlooked expression of Smith's liberal vision and serves to encourage further exploration of the relationship between form and substance in his writing.

While discussing clocks and watches, he states, "The first invention of such beautiful machines, indeed, and even that of some of the instruments employed in making them, must, no doubt, have been the work of deep thought and long time, and may justly be considered as among the happiest efforts of human ingenuity" (*WN* I.x.c.6).

The philosophical merit of this otherwise quaint passage is its representation of ingenuity. Traditionally, "ingenuity" meant wit, invention, and intelligence (Johnson 1755).¹ It applied most commonly in the context of literature, philosophy, and high society. In the emergent political economics, however, James Steuart and Adam Ferguson had imported ingenuity into the milieu of markets.² In doing so, they meant for the term to represent that which we would today call "technological innovation and entrepreneurship." Smith employs this new market meaning on eighteen occasions, including above. For Smith, market ingenuity adds distinct value to production beyond strain and dexterity,³ it serves as a competitive advantage,⁴ and it rightly belongs among the formal causes of the wealth of a nation.⁵

But the above passage begins to show that Smith also takes pains to bring market ingenuity into esteem. This ingenuity originates in habits of patience and reflection—habits that Smith highly values (*Theory of Moral Sentiments* [1759] 1976; *TMS* II.ii.3.7;

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¹ Alternatively, "candor." See Baker (1779) for etymology.

² Steuart (1767, pp. 34, 178, 317, 404); Ferguson (1767, pp. 257, 279, 280–281, 334).

³ *WN* I.v.4; I.vi.3; I.vi.6; IV.v.a.39.

⁴ *WN* IV.viii.48.

⁵ *WN* I.i.9.

TMS III.3.2; also *WN* I.i.9). It ends in “the happiest” of outcomes. The shifting of semantics over time, unfortunately, shrouds his intention here. “Happy” most frequently meant blessed and fortunate; “happiest,” a perfection of the blessed or virtuous life, a consummation with the divine plans.⁶ Smith adds, therefore, the tinctures of morality and religiosity to this potentially off-putting and disruptive form of ingenuity.

This aspirational treatment stands in contrast to his treatment of traditional ingenuity. He observes traditional ingenuity in French finance minister Mr. Colbert (*WN* IV.ii.38); philosophers Mr. de Quesney (*WN* IV.ix.27) and Montesquieu (*WN* V.i.f.40); the Physiocrats in general (*WN* V.ii.c.7; IV.ix.2; II.ii.1.fn); author of the *The Corn Trade* Charles Smith (*WN* IV.v.4); French demographical statistician Mr. Messence (*WN* I.viii.49); leaders of the Dissenters (*WN* IV.i.g.1); and powerful mercantilists (*WN* IV.viii.39). In every instance, however, Smith’s passing praise of their inventive minds is an empty social grace. He proceeds to condemn their ideas as the product of prejudice, poor supposition, and conceit.⁷ As Smith elevates market ingenuity, he also underhandedly depreciates traditional authority and its mode of thinking.

To summarize, Smith identifies two distinct ingenuities and he aligns these (without exception) with two distinct figures. *The Man of Blessed Ingenuity*, as I will call him, is a new figure. He is the anonymous innovator and entrepreneur. *The Man of Beguiling Ingenuity* is the traditional figure. He has name and stature, and he is similar to Smith’s dangerous “man of system” (*TMS* VI.ii.2.17). The first ingenuity is one to embrace. It is virtuous in its systematic benefits for society.⁸ The second ingenuity is to question. It has regularly proven itself authoritarian and vicious in its effects.

Smith’s figurative devices and moments of impassioned rhetoric have always drawn attention. In this case, however, his artistry is diffuse. It is the careful employment and juxtaposition of terms across the length of his work. While this artistry has been obscured by the inexorable effects of time on semantics, it reveals that Smith clearly held an appreciation for innovation and entrepreneurship that exceeds that which modern scholarship has been generally willing to grant him.⁹ Smith alighted upon market ingenuity as a positive epistemic development in the emergent socio-economic landscape, and one he felt compelled to highlight, analyze, and promote.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

⁶ See entries for “happy,” “bless,” “beatifical,” “heavenly,” “ead” (Johnson 1755). For “happiest,” see Shenstone (1780, p. 79) as an example.

⁷ Modern scholarship has missed this criticism of Montesquieu, which weighs against the common claim that Smith advocated public schooling (Drylie 2020, 2021).

⁸ See Smith’s fourth source of moral approval (*TMS* VII.iii.3.16).

⁹ See Dellisanti (2021) for literature review and expanded set of terms Smith used for “innovation” and “entrepreneurship.”

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