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Emma Rothschild, *Economic Sentiments, Adam Smith, Condorcet, and the Enlightenment*. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2001. ix + 353pp. Notes and index. \$45.00 US (cl). ISBN 0-674-00489-2.

Review by Liana Vardi, SUNY at Buffalo.

When we think of Adam Smith, we automatically think of the “invisible hand.” Similarly, the marquis de Condorcet remains for us the guru of social mathematics. Emma Rothschild challenges these assumptions by placing these theorists within the problematic of their times, showing them far more concerned with individual freedom and agency than we have come to suppose. In doing so, Rothschild contributes to a reassessment not only of classical economics but of the Enlightenment itself. In recent years, the Enlightenment has been denounced as authoritarian, universalizing, and eurocentric, dividing all phenomena into binary opposites with no grey areas and, in its belief in the applicability of scientific laws to society, sacrificing the individual--treated as an abstract unit--to larger forces. Rothschild's Enlightenment remains on a human scale, fascinated by the interplay between human motivations and social processes, between what can and cannot be controlled, aware that man must function within varying degrees of uncertainty.

Smith and Condorcet, as their contemporaries, did not separate political, economic, moral, or aesthetic questions. The subsequent division of these realms, Rothschild contends, has warped how we read these authors. Thus the idea that economic freedom could be achieved without political or individual freedom is a nineteenth-century distortion of Smith's thought, a response to the French Revolution that he himself would not have countenanced however prudently he advanced his views compared to Condorcet's effusions. And whereas we now see these thinkers as wedded to natural equilibrium and unintended consequences, self-interest and efficiency, the happiness of the greater number and a reliance on aggregates, in other words, to impersonal forces, Rothschild asserts that they sought primarily to liberate man from oppression and to augment his faculties, focusing on individual responses and choices. They pondered how men made decisions and what “sentiments” influenced them. Only free men could reflect and make reasoned decisions. Education was key, as were freedom from want and freedom to choose one's occupation, mode of production, and way of life. This called into question the relationship between political and economic domains.

For centralizing states in early modern Europe, national power and national wealth had become synonymous. Governments, therefore, pursued aggressive economic policies to enrich their countries at the expense of others, regulating production and supervising trade. But had such interventions brought about prosperity and bettered men's lives? For theorists such as Smith or administrators such as Turgot, the answer clearly was no. Rules and regulations, they argued, especially in economic matters, stifled trade and industry, served the special interests of monopolists (trading companies or guilds), misused public authority, and not only oppressed the poor and powerless but injured and vexed the public at large. What is more, such policies had proven counter-productive. Rather than bringing about prosperity, government meddling had created dearth and misery. The solution, therefore, was to free economic activities from government oversight. Even if not perfect, this approach would secure better

results. Bringing this about, however, demanded political action. Despite their belief in as little government as possible (but never no government), Smith and especially Condorcet and his mentor Jacques Turgot focused on what policies might be implemented, when it was appropriate to interfere, and on what basis, keeping the means as well as the ends in mind. Whatever their later reputations, they were unwilling to sacrifice mankind to long-term goals. Rothschild presents their remedies as novel yet humane. Turgot is a case in point: while espousing free trade in the midst of food shortages during his years as Intendant in Limousin, rather than enforcing provisioning regulations, he encouraged imports and provided work to the needy so that they might afford bread.

Although Rothschild refers to specific works by Smith such as *The Wealth of Nations*, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, and *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, and to Condorcet's *Réflexions sur le commerce des blés*, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, his writings on the application of mathematics or on voting patterns, and although she points out inconsistencies in their thought and, in Condorcet's case, alterations in his thinking during the Revolution, Rothschild stresses these thinkers' unwavering commitment to the individual—his thoughts, feelings, and intentions. They never forgot that their aim was the individual's liberation from oppression and the full development of the individual's capacities so that he might act and judge freely. The notion of a grand design, and one to which they had privileged access, would have affronted their belief in human agency. Refusing to position themselves somewhere in the stratosphere, observing patterns and claiming special insights, Smith, Condorcet, and Turgot maintained that all men were naturally endowed with the capacity for reason and the purpose of education was to hone this faculty. Utility and efficiency were secondary. For it was only when the mind was freed from the bonds of tradition and superstition, then and only then, might self-interest serve the common good.

Placing the ultimate responsibility for social transformation on individuals interacting in the public sphere or arguing in elected assemblies meant that the results might prove uncertain. Condorcet supposed that the outcomes could be reckoned on the basis of probabilities that differed from situation to situation. Yet he mistrusted the application of mathematics to human actions for these remained essentially imponderable. But if one could not secure ends, one could ensure equitable procedures, and this was the purpose of human institutions. These men accepted this uncertainty and lack of finality, for theirs was, as Rothschild puts it, "a fatherless world." Moreover, "If there were to be a task, or a subject of social theory, it would consist, for Smith as for Hume, in the investigation of the coexistence of intended and unintended effects, of the self-conscious and the unself-conscious activities of individuals, of the relatively reflective (the political and moral) and the relatively unreflective" (p.155).

This analysis leads to Rothschild's most striking claim—that Smith referred to the invisible hand ironically and rhetorically, seeing it as an appealing metaphor for an eventual order in politics and the economy, but not as an independent force. Our present understanding of the invisible hand would have perturbed Smith: the dismissal of the intentions of economic actors; the presumption that unintended consequences are hidden from the many but visible to the lucky few; the belief that the invisible hand "works" unaided whereas it in fact requires an ideal setting. To say that he doubted the "beneficence of the unintended order" (p.138) does not mean, however, that there was no place in his scheme for any sort of order. Smith believed in the necessity of the state and its laws. He merely questioned whether the state could legislate prosperity. Smith used the invisible hand, Rothschild concludes, as a means of convincing administrators that "doing nothing" was, in fact, doing something worthwhile. Those who actually believed in unintended consequences were the opponents of this incipient liberalism, such as the advocate-general Séguier who maintained, in his condemnation of Turgot's six edicts of 1776, that "each member, in working for his personal utility, necessarily works, even without willing it, for the true utility of the entire community" (p.126).

Does it add up? As Rothschild says, this is neither the Smith nor the Condorcet of later caricature. Gone are the determinism and the faith that societal laws had been uncovered which operate beyond men's

control. Restored is the utopian and disarming trust in man's goodness and self-restraint. But the force of Smith's, Turgot's and Condorcet's economic theories is necessarily reduced. To say that their liberalism was at times naïve or idyllic implies that there was a harsher core to extract, a more down-to-earth version. Can she then claim that modern economic thought is founded on crude misappropriations? Yet, given the sins of which all three still stand accused, this is a splendid rehabilitation. Rothschild's determination to historicize her subjects and restore their complexities sheds great light on the ways economic theories are born and transformed. Hers is a clear and lively exposition accessible to all readers.

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