

## INVITED ARTICLE

# Poverty as a Political Problem in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain: Smith, Burke, Malthus

James A. Harris

## Abstract

In eighteenth-century Britain, there was more than one way of thinking about poverty. For some, poverty was an essentially moral problem. Another way of conceiving of poverty was in economic terms. In this article, however, I want to consider some eighteenth-century versions of the idea that poverty might be a *political* issue. What I have in mind is the idea that a society containing a large proportion of very poor people might be, just for that reason, an unstable and disordered society. I argue, first, that this idea is central to Smith's treatment of poverty in *The Wealth of Nations*. Then, after a brief account of how Paine and Godwin imagined the end of poverty, I describe the further development and refinement of Smithian lines of thought in Burke and Malthus. My conclusion is that Smith, Burke, and Malthus constitute evidence that present-day ideas of social justice derive more from the nineteenth century and subsequent developments in moral and political thought than from the early modern period.

In eighteenth-century Britain, there was more than one way of thinking about poverty. For some, poverty was an essentially moral problem. This is not to say that such people always saw poverty as, in itself, a bad thing, morally speaking. The idea that it was a moral wrong simply for a lot of people to be very poor does not seem to have occurred to anyone until the end of the century. The concern, rather, was that poor people were likely to be immoral, and possibly criminal too, either as a cause or as an effect of their poverty, and, therefore, that measures needed to be taken to reform their manners and so restrain their tendencies to vice. Another way of conceiving of poverty was in economic terms. It was a piece of received wisdom that the poor needed to be kept poor both in order to have an incentive to work a full working week and also to keep the price of agricultural produce and manufactured goods low. Low production costs meant a higher profit on exports, and a higher profit on exports meant a healthier balance of trade. This is a train of thought that was challenged by Smith in his attack in *The Wealth of Nations* on the mercantilist obsession with the balance of trade. The very fact that Smith felt the need to discredit it is evidence of its pervasiveness. In this article, however, I want to consider some eighteenth-century versions of the idea that poverty might be a *political* issue. What I have in mind is the idea that a society containing a large proportion of very poor people might be, just for that reason, an unstable and disordered society. It might be unstable and disordered for a number of different, though related, reasons. The problem might be that the poor, being poor, feel that they have little or nothing at stake in the maintenance of law and order. It might be that the poor, being poor, are liable to manipulation at the hands of would-be usurpers who seek to use their numbers as a means of bringing down the established regime.

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It might be that the poor, being poor, are vulnerable to preachers of religious extremism and bigotry. Or it might be that the poor, being poor, resent, to the point of vandalism and riot, the bald fact that others are much richer than they are. In eighteenth-century Britain, political thinkers worried about all of these possibilities.

One way of understanding the role of Parliament at this time was as a body of representatives charged with defending the interests of the people—all of the people—against the threat permanently posed to their property (regardless of how much or little property was in question) by the powers possessed by the crown. We could call this, simplistically enough, a Lockean conception of government. My point of departure here is a different conception of government's role in the protection of property. Writing to the MP William Pulteney in 1769, in reaction to the popular disturbances occasioned by John Wilkes's treatment at the hands of the Grafton ministry, Adam Ferguson remarked that Montesquieu “and others,” in lauding the perfection of the English constitution, “only think of the dangers to Liberty that come from The Crown.” “They do not consider,” he continued, “the dangers to Liberty that come from the Populace.” Ferguson wrote a year later that “our Constitution knows of no Authority but that of King Lords & Commons, but we are now fostering a fourth Power in the State, That of the Populace of London, and at the time in which they are become most Corrupted we are inviting them to a share in the Government.”<sup>1</sup> Hume, as is well known, responded to the Wilkite riots of the late 1760s and early 1770s in the same way. In letters to William Strahan and others, he rejected out of hand the very idea of extraparliamentary opposition, and complained vociferously about the pusillanimity, as he saw it, of the ministry's treatment of the rioters.<sup>2</sup> For both Ferguson and Hume, the powers of the state were what stood between order, on the one hand, and chaos, on the other. The state was to be understood as charged with the protection of property from the threat posed by Ferguson's “fourth Power,” the power that was the populace, not just of London, but of the country as a whole.

We could, perhaps, with some important qualifications, call this a Hobbesian conception of government—insofar as it posits the achievement of internal peace and stability as the primary aim of politics.<sup>3</sup> It is a conception articulated clearly by Smith in both his lectures on jurisprudence and *The Wealth of Nations*. Property, he claims in the account of the origin of government sketched in his lectures, makes government “absolutely necessary.” He explains: “when . . . some have great wealth and others nothing, it is necessary that the arm of authority should be continually stretched forth, and permanent laws or regulations made which may ascertain [i.e., secure] the property of the rich from the inroads of the poor, who would otherwise continually made inroads upon it, and settle in what the infringement of this property consists and in what cases they will be liable to punishment.” “Laws and government,” he continues, “may be considered in this and indeed in every case as a combination of the rich to oppress the poor, and to preserve to themselves the inequality of goods which would otherwise be soon destroyed by the attacks of the poor, who if not hindered by the government would soon reduce the others to an equality with themselves by open violence.”<sup>4</sup> In Book V of *The Wealth of Nations*, during the explanation of “the expense of justice,” the same definition of government is given, but with an interesting

<sup>1</sup>I take both of these quotations from Max Skjönsberg, “Adam Ferguson on Partisanship, Party Conflict, and Popular Participation,” *Modern Intellectual History* 16 (2019): 1–28.

<sup>2</sup>See *The Letters of David Hume*, 2 vols., ed. J. Y. T. Greig (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), vol. 2, e.g., 178, 180–81, 182, 189, 191–92, 197–98. For commentary, see James A. Harris, *Hume: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 421–30.

<sup>3</sup>Compare Bernard Williams, “Realism and Moralism in Political Theory,” in *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3: “I identify the ‘first’ political question in Hobbesian terms as the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation.”

<sup>4</sup>Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. R. L. Meek, D. D. Raphael, and P. G. Stein (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 208.

additional component. “Civil government,” Smith says, “so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is in reality instituted for the defence of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all.”<sup>5</sup> In the preceding discussion it is made clear that by “the poor” here, Smith means the really very poor, “those who have none at all.” He describes how “men of inferior wealth” are willing to join together to defend the property of “men of superior wealth,” “in order that men of superior wealth may combine to defend them in the possession of theirs.”<sup>6</sup> Government originated in shepherding societies, according to Smith, but there does not seem any reason to think that he takes this part of its purpose to diminish in importance in the transition to agriculture and thence to commerce. In modern commercial societies, too, we are given to understand, government is grounded on a coalition of interest on the part of the middling classes, the small farmers, merchants, and manufacturers, with the very rich, a coalition formed on the basis of an understanding that both parts of society are permanently under threat from the violence of the poor.

Smith does not present this definition of government as if it were controversial and likely to be challenged. It seems to me likely that it was part and parcel of the disenchanted, skeptical, scientific, realist political outlook that he shared with Hume. In the *Treatise*, Hume presents government as necessary for the enforcement of justice and defines justice in terms of laws of property and contract. Hume, though, never either says or insinuates that what property needs to be protected from, first and foremost, is the poor. Hume understands the main threat to political order to be the division of society into parties or factions. He has almost nothing to say about the division of society into rich and poor. It is possible, though I cannot prove it, that Smith might have acquired his sense of the threat to political order posed by economic inequality from Rousseau's second *Discourse* and its radicalization, as Smith saw it, of Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*.<sup>7</sup> In the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, Rousseau had, in effect, denaturalized the social structure of modern society and shown it to be the result of miseducation and exploitation—of ongoing miseducation and exploitation. Smith had a very different story to tell about the origins of inequality, and, arguably, a very different moral assessment of commerce, but what he shares with Rousseau is a sense, lacking in Hume, of the tensions built into the very makeup of any and every political society, and of commercial society, in particular. Another way of putting this would be to say that, unlike Hume, Smith has an interest in *society as such*, in its component parts and structure—and its internal tensions. *The Wealth of Nations* is a study of some those tensions. It is, in particular, a study of the conflict, in modern conditions, between an enormously powerful mercantile interest, on the one hand, and “the publick,” on the other, combined with a set of suggestions as to how that conflict might best be resolved. But other internal conflicts are analyzed, too, for instance, the conflict between town and country, masters and workmen, one trade and other trades, the landed aristocracy and its tenants, the sovereign and an established religion, and the mother country and its colonies. A definition of government as a means of protecting the rich against the violent resentment of the poor issues naturally, I think, from this interest on Smith's part in structuring principles of society. But what, according to Smith, can government do to defend those who have property from those who have none?

I have suggested that Smith's view of government might be thought of as Hobbesian, but this does not mean, needless to say, that part of Smith's recipe for a peaceful polity is

<sup>5</sup>Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 715.

<sup>6</sup>Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 715.

<sup>7</sup>This is possible, I think, even given the general skepticism about the importance of Rousseau to Smith expressed in Paul Sagar, *Adam Smith Reconsidered: History, Liberty, and the Foundations of Modern Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

general acceptance of the need for the sovereign to have absolute and undivided power over his subjects. Not even Hobbes himself believed that the sovereign's absolute power would be sufficient for civil peace. In Chapter 30 of *Leviathan* he describes the “generall Providence” required of the sovereign, “contained in publique Instruction, both of Doctrine and Example; and in the making, and executing of good Lawes, to which individuals may apply their own cases.”<sup>8</sup> Smith, too, identified the management of education as a crucial responsibility of the sovereign, over and above, and in addition to, the enforcement of law. In Book V of *The Wealth of Nations*, the “expences of the sovereign” are divided into three categories. The first is defense. The second is the administration of justice. The third is public works and public institutions, divided in turn into “those for facilitating the commerce of the society” and “those for promoting the instruction of the people.” Famously, Smith recognizes the dangers posed to a modern commercial society by the very innovation, the division of labor, which makes it so much more opulent than any society that has gone before it. “The education of the common people requires, perhaps,” he says, “in a civilized and commercial society, the attention of the publick more than that of people of some rank and fortune.”<sup>9</sup> Whereas people of rank and fortune have the time and money to educate their children, the parents of common people “can scarce afford to maintain them even in infancy. As soon as they are able to work, they must apply to some trade by which they can earn their subsistence.” Moreover, “that trade . . . is generally so simple as to give little exercise to the understanding; while, at the same time, their labour is both so constant and severe, that it leaves them little leisure and less inclination to apply to, or even think of any thing else.”<sup>10</sup> He describes the result in terms of mental mutilation and deformation. It might be supposed that it would ameliorate the indignation and resentment of the poor at the poverty, and at the wealth of others, if they could be brought to understand, even in elementary terms, the kind of vindication of commercial society proposed by *The Wealth of Nations* itself. That, though, is not what Smith has in mind. “Though the interest of the labourer is strictly connected with that of society,” he says toward the end of Book I, “he is incapable either of comprehending that interest, or of comprehending its connection with his own. His condition leaves him no time to receive the necessary information, and his education and habits are commonly such as to render him unfit to judge even though he was fully informed.”<sup>11</sup> *The Wealth of Nations* seems in fact to be written for a very small proportion of the population, for those few men philosophical enough to escape from natural habits of acceptance and deference and able to organize their political thinking in terms of *utility*, that is, in terms of the long-term good of society as a whole.

Even so, the advantage which the state derives from the instruction of “the inferior ranks of people” is, according to Smith, considerable. What he says in this connection is worth quoting in full:

The more they are instructed, the less liable they are to the delusions of enthusiasm and superstition, which, among ignorant nations, frequently occasion the most dreadful disorders. An instructed and intelligent people besides are always more decent and orderly than an ignorant and stupid one. They feel themselves, each individually, more respectable, and more likely to obtain the respect of their

<sup>8</sup>Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Revised Student Edition, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 231.

<sup>9</sup>Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 784.

<sup>10</sup>Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 785.

<sup>11</sup>Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 266.

lawful superiors, and they are more disposed to respect those superiors. They are more disposed to examine, and more capable of seeing through, the interested complaints of faction and sedition, and they are, upon that account, less apt to be misled into any wanton or unnecessary opposition to the measures of government. In free countries, where the safety of government depends very much upon the favourable judgment which the people may form of its conduct, it must surely be of the highest importance that they should not be disposed to judge rashly or capriciously concerning it.<sup>12</sup>

Smith, like Hume, and, indeed, like Hobbes as well, was acutely aware of the precariousness of a politics grounded in nothing more substantial than opinion. The proper cultivation of opinion, therefore, was vital to the end of the maintenance of law and order and the protection of property. Donald Winch captures the spirit of Smith's account of the benefits of the education of the poor to society at large when he calls it "a political argument for strengthening the mechanisms of social control within a society of ranks in which 'opinion' plays an important part in determining the smooth functioning and stability of the polity."<sup>13</sup> Or, as Dugald Stewart put it, the role for Smith of "general instruction" is "to adapt the education of individuals to the stations they are to occupy."<sup>14</sup>

Gertrude Himmelfarb, on the other hand, goes far too far, I think, when she claims that, on Smith's account, reform of education provision for the poor would suffice to make the laborer "a free and full participant in society."<sup>15</sup> There is nothing in Smith's writings to suggest that he was any more of a proponent of the extension of the franchise than were the vast majority of his peers. Nor is there anything to suggest that he could imagine an achievable society that would be very much less unequal than the one he lived in. The victory of "the obvious and simple system of natural liberty" over "the mean rapacity, the monopolizing spirit of merchants" would ensure that wages would rise and the cost of most commodities would fall. The opulence of the nation as a whole would thereby be increased. But the rich would still be much, much richer than everyone else. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff interpret the argument of *The Wealth of Nations* as a solution to the problem of how to reconcile the rights of the rich and needs of the poor.<sup>16</sup> Smith shows, they claim, how the needs of the poor can be met without the rights of the rich being threatened. But even if the *needs* of the poor were met, there is every reason to think that they would remain painfully, and angrily, conscious of how different their lives are from the lives of their masters. Smith himself nowhere suggests that in a world of economic liberty, the poor will no longer be indignant and resentful. Nor does he appear to be able to conceive a society *not* stratified, fractured, and divided against itself. This, perhaps, is a symptom of his determination not to play the part of a "projector." Anti-utopianism—or what is now called "realism"—is a pronounced feature of Smith's moral and political writings. In *The Wealth of Nations*, he writes as if all that can reasonably be hoped for is a *mitigation* of current trade policy, *some* relaxation of the measures that the mercantile interest has so successfully promoted, and so *some* progress toward freedom of trade. In any conceivable future society, it would seem, government will have to remain the protector of the rich against the poor.

<sup>12</sup>Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 788.

<sup>13</sup>Donald Winch, *Adam Smith's Politics: An Essay in Historiographical Revision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 120.

<sup>14</sup>Dugald Stewart, "Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, LL.D.," in Adam Smith, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W. P. D. Wightman (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1982), 313.

<sup>15</sup>Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (London: Faber, 1984), 60.

<sup>16</sup>See Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff, "Needs and Justice in the *Wealth of Nations*," in *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, eds. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–44.

It is a question whether, as Smith sees it, the resentment of the poor at their poverty might be morally justified. In the chapter on wages in Book I of *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith presents a number of different arguments for “the liberal reward of labour.” Along the way he says that “no society can surely be flourishing and happy, of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable. It is but equity, besides, that they who feed, cloath and lodge the whole body of the people, should have such a share of the produce of their own labour as to be themselves tolerably well fed, cloathed and lodged.”<sup>17</sup> That the laboring poor should not be miserably poor might be a matter of equity, or fairness, but it is not, in Smith's jurisprudence, a matter of right. It is worth pointing out also that what, as a matter of fairness, entitles the laboring poor to tolerable living conditions is according to Smith not their poverty, but rather their labor. I cannot find in Smith the materials for an argument to the conclusion that either poverty or inequality is, in itself, a wrong. Himmelfarb claims that *The Wealth of Nations* “was genuinely revolutionary in its view of poverty and its attitude toward the poor.”<sup>18</sup> It was not, though, so revolutionary as to suggest that the poor, being poor, had claims of justice that demanded to be met either by the rich or by the state.<sup>19</sup> I shall now move on to consider two writers who are often claimed to be Smith's pupils in political economy, and who explicitly consider poverty as preeminently a political problem. Both Burke and Malthus believed that it was a dangerous mistake to assert that the poor, just in so far as they were poor, had a claim to state assistance. State action to alleviate poverty, they argued, in fact made the poor worse off. It therefore exacerbated the threat posed by the poor to the stability of the social order. Winch has raised problems for the view that either Burke or Malthus was, in fact, in any straightforward sense a disciple of Smith.<sup>20</sup> My interest, however, is not in what might or might not be called Smithianism, but rather in a particular kind of late eighteenth-century Whiggism. This was a Whiggism that owed more to Hume and to Smith than it did to Locke or to Hoadly. It was a Whiggism that was just as concerned about the threat posed to social order by the poor as about misuse of prerogative powers by the crown, and that worried, above all, about the dangers posed by radicals who promised more from government than it could possibly deliver.<sup>21</sup>

Burke and Malthus engaged directly, in a way that Smith did not, with the question of what should be done about poverty. Two things serve to explain their explicitness. The first was the French Revolution, and the second was the poor harvests of middle years of the 1790s. Scarcity and hunger had become realities in Britain, and there was concern that they would motivate uprisings on the French model. Reason to think they might have this effect had been provided by books and pamphlets intent on explaining to the poor that their poverty was not an unalterable feature of the natural order of things, but rather the product of misgovernment on the part of the propertied classes. Pre-eminent among the authors of such books and pamphlets were Paine and Godwin. Both argued that absolute poverty could be abolished. In *Rights of Man Part Two*, Paine proposed a scheme whereby the money currently spent on government, and on war in particular, would be spent instead on the

<sup>17</sup>Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 96.

<sup>18</sup>Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty*, 46.

<sup>19</sup>For a more extended account of the character of Smith's Whiggism, as revealed by his treatment of poverty, see James A. Harris, “The Protection of the Rich Against the Poor: The Politics of Adam Smith's Political Economy,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 37 (2021): 138–58.

<sup>20</sup>See Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain, 1750–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>21</sup>My focus, then, is on a different kind of use of Smithian ideas from that described in Gareth Stedman Jones, *An End to Poverty? A Historical Debate* (London: Profile Books, 2004). Stedman Jones's interest is in how Smith was read by Condorcet and Paine as enabling “the realization that there need no longer be such a thing as ‘the poor’” (10). The important point here is that there was—and of course still is—more than one way to read Smith. Stedman Jones comments that “the battle to appropriate his mantle was closely intertwined with the battle over the French Revolution itself” (3).

subsistence and comfort of the poor. One part of his scheme was a system of tax relief, to the tune of four pounds a year per every child under fourteen, so that children might be sent to school instead of being sent out to work. The other part was an arrangement for the provision of support to those unable, through age, illness, or disability, to earn a living wage. Such support, Paine insisted, “is not of the nature of a charity, but of a right.”<sup>22</sup> He returned to the issue of poverty later in the 1790s, in *Agrarian Justice*, written in reply to a sermon of 1795 by Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, entitled *The Wisdom and Goodness of God, in Having Made both Rich and Poor*. God divided the human race into men and women, Paine argued, but not into the rich and the poor. On the contrary, “poverty . . . is a thing created by that which is called civilized life.”<sup>23</sup> Every human being is by right and as a matter of natural inheritance a joint proprietor of the uncultivated earth. Those, therefore, who in fact have little or nothing have by right a claim to some kind of compensation for their loss. *Agrarian Justice* proposes the creation of a “national fund” to that end.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, though, Paine at the same time defends the rights of the current owners of cultivated land. Agrarian justice is categorically different from the redistributive, equalizing agrarian law of the republican tradition. It is also, as Jonathan Clark has pointed out, different from justice as it would be conceived of by socialism.<sup>25</sup>

Paine thus claimed to be an enemy of poverty, but not of wealth as such. Godwin, in the first (1793) edition of *Political Justice* at least, was more forthright. As things currently stood, under “the established system of property,” too much money was spent on superfluities, and too many people worked for too small a wage in order to provide the rich with those superfluities. Property should be redistributed, so that “the necessity for the greater part of the manual industry of mankind should be superseded; and the rest, being amicably shared among all the active and vigorous members of the community, would be burthensome to none.”<sup>26</sup> Central to Godwin's argument was the thought that the current condition of the mass of mankind, their unhappiness and meanness of spirit and ignorance and disposition to criminality, was a direct result of the way in which society was currently organized. Change the organization of society, first of all so that education was a possibility for everyone, and the human mind itself would change. That this should be done was, again, a matter of right. “Every man is entitled,” Godwin asserted, “so far as the general stock will suffice, not only to the means of being, but of well being.”<sup>27</sup> But like Paine, Godwin rethought his position as the 1790s passed—and, perhaps, as the dangers of mass civil unrest became more apparent.<sup>28</sup> In later editions of *Political Justice*, beginning with the second edition of 1796, Godwin's extreme individualism becomes more apparent, and his confidence in the positive effects of a change of the form of government is more muted. Enforced redistribution of property is no longer the solution to the problem of economic and social injustice. Indeed, Godwin now asserted that “property with all its inequalities . . . should be defended, if need be, by coercion.”<sup>29</sup> What mattered most was that individuals have the freedom to exercise private judgment in general, and judgment concerning the condition of the poor in particular. Freedom in the form of security, including

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man, Common Sense and Other Political Writings*, ed. Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1995), 296.

<sup>23</sup> Paine, *Rights of Man and Other Political Writings*, 416.

<sup>24</sup> Paine does not acknowledge the differences between this proposal and the one developed in *Rights of Man Part II*.

<sup>25</sup> J. C. D. Clark, *Thomas Paine: Britain, America, and France in the Age of Enlightenment and Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 353 (Paine “was a retro-Deist, not a proto-socialist”).

<sup>26</sup> William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2013), 423.

<sup>27</sup> Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, 415–16.

<sup>28</sup> Here, and in the rest of this paragraph, I follow Mark Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* (London: Duckworth, 1986), 129–41.

<sup>29</sup> William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, 2nd ed. (London, 1796), 435.

protection from forcible violation of property rights by government, was a precondition for the proper discharge of duties of benevolence to the poor and destitute.

When Burke wrote the first draft of what would be published, posthumously, as *Thoughts and Details on Scarcity*, at the front of his mind was not the details of the arguments of radicals such as Paine and Godwin, let alone how they were refining their views as events in revolutionary France took their course, but, rather, the way in which their ideas were filtering through to the population at large. Burke takes aim at “those wicked writers of the newspapers, who would inflame the poor against their friends, guardians, patrons, and protectors.”<sup>30</sup> By this time poverty had become a party-political issue. In November 1795, Charles James Fox spoke in Parliament in favor of “advancing” the price of labor.<sup>31</sup> Burke’s response was not the old mercantilist claim that productivity and national wealth depended on wages being held down as close to the level of bare subsistence as possible. Instead, and following Smith, he held that, properly understood, the interests of agricultural laborers were identical with the interests of employers, and that both would benefit from rises in wages. “The wages of labour are the encouragement of industry,” as Smith had argued in *The Wealth of Nations*, “which, like every other human quality, improves in proportion to the encouragement it receives.”<sup>32</sup> The problem was not high wages, but intervention in wage contracts made between workers and their landowners in order to keep wages higher than they would naturally be. On Burke’s view, as on Smith’s, wages were always as high as they could be. To try to raise them by government edict was like trying to push a millstone up a steep hill. Wages would fall back because of reduced demand for a more expensive commodity or would be reduced in real terms because of inflation. This explained Burke’s objection to what he saw as the lie inherent in the very idea of the “labouring poor.” Here he echoed not Smith, who used that phrase himself,<sup>33</sup> but rather Montesquieu, who had asserted that “[a] man is not poor because he has nothing, but because he does not work.”<sup>34</sup> In the normal run of things, excepting rare moments of extreme scarcity, a laborer in employment could not be called poor. The process of pay bargaining would ensure that he and his family had enough to eat. To claim, then, that a laborer needed protection from his employer, in the form of a minimum wage or a legislated price of corn, was to create an unjustified sense of grievance in the working class. That sense of grievance, moreover, was bound to be permanent, because measures such as a minimum wage or public granaries would inevitably fail to raise real wages above their natural level.

There would be times, Burke accepted, when, because of a drop in the profits of landowners, wages in the agricultural sector temporarily fell to below subsistence level. Even more certainly there would come a time in every farm laborer’s life when he was no longer able to support himself through his labor. Burke’s view was that there was nothing that government could or should do in such circumstances. They were part of the order of economic life, made necessary by “the laws of commerce, which are the laws of nature, and consequently the laws of God.”<sup>35</sup> No employer had the financial resources to pay his employees much more than he already did. And to force employers to increase wages above their natural rate for some workers was to erode their ability to pay a proper rate of wages for the rest. As Burke put it, compulsory equalizations “never raise what is below: and they depress high and low together beneath the level of what was

<sup>30</sup>*The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, Vol. 9: The Revolutionary War*, ed. R. B. McDowell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 143.

<sup>31</sup>For the context, see Richard Bourke, *Empire and Revolution: The Political Life of Edmund Burke* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 891–92.

<sup>32</sup>Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 99.

<sup>33</sup>See, e.g., Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 782 (“the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people”).

<sup>34</sup>Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. and trans. Anne Cohler, Basia Miller, and Harold Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 455.

<sup>35</sup>Burke, *Writings and Speeches Vol. 9*, 137.



originally the lowest.”<sup>36</sup> To call these things matters of the laws of nature and the laws of God was to underline the fact that the poor had no *right* to what the economy could not provide them with. Those whose labor did not bring them what they needed for subsistence, according to Burke, could “claim nothing according to the rules of commerce and the principles of justice.” Instead, they “come within the jurisdiction of mercy”—and “without all doubt, charity to the poor is a direct and obligatory duty upon all Christians, next in order after the payment of debts, full as strong, and by nature made infinitely more delightful to us.”<sup>37</sup> On Burke’s markedly Hobbesian—and Smithian?—view of politics, government was there to prevent terrible things from happening, not to try to do good things. “To provide for us in our necessities,” Burke declared, “is not in the power of Government.”<sup>38</sup> To pretend otherwise was to be sure to make a bad situation worse. Propagandists like Paine and Godwin, and opportunists like Fox, were, as Burke saw it, guilty of precisely that. They set the poor and rich against each other, rather than instructing them as to the interests which they had in common. France had shown what the result was bound to be. No one won in a war between rich and poor. “When the poor rise to destroy the rich,” Burke warned, “they act as wisely for their own purposes as when they burn their mills, and thrown corn into the river, to make bread cheap.”<sup>39</sup>

Burke would return to the impropriety of talk of the “labouring poor” in *Letters on a Regicide Peace*. Hitherto, he claims there, the name of “the poor” has been used exclusively for “the sick and infirm; for orphan infancy; for languishing and decrepid age.”<sup>40</sup> Such people are fully entitled to pity and to charity. But a man who has to work in order to survive has nothing to complain about. For that is what it is to be a man, fashioned by God to labor for six full days out of every seven. If a man finds that six days of labor is insufficient to support him, his recourse should be to industry, frugality, and sobriety—and, ultimately, to the consolations of religion. It has been observed, by Himmelfarb and also by Winch, that in his absolute rejection of state assistance for those who are both in work and also poor, Burke adopts a more hardline tone than Smith—who, as noted above, was prepared to talk in terms of the laboring poor, and who did not positively challenge the principle of legislation in favor of poor relief.<sup>41</sup> It has been observed also that Burke’s apparent opposition to established practices of institutionalized remedies for poverty, in the form of the Poor Laws, sits uneasily with the case made in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* in favor of the customary, traditional, and prescriptive.<sup>42</sup> Burke’s reply on that score would have been that the notion of the laboring poor was for the most part an innovation that had been brought into prominence by those seeking either to foment discontent or to gain populist political advantage. To explain the uncompromising and immoderate tone of his treatment of poverty in the *Thoughts and Details* and the *Letters*, Burke would no doubt have adverted to the critical situation, as he saw it, of Britain in the mid-1790s. The country was engaged in a fight to the death. People like Paine and Godwin were the enemy within, they were doing France’s work, and were running the risk of provoking a civil war between property and labor. Use of the language of the laboring poor, Burke argued, “tends to dissatisfy [men] with their condition, and to teach them to seek resources where no resources are to be found.”<sup>43</sup>

<sup>36</sup>Burke, *Writings and Speeches* Vol. 9, 127.

<sup>37</sup>Burke, *Writings and Speeches* Vol. 9, 129.

<sup>38</sup>Burke, *Writings and Speeches* Vol. 9, 120.

<sup>39</sup>Burke, *Writings and Speeches* Vol. 9, 121.

<sup>40</sup>Burke, *Writings and Speeches* Vol. 9, 355.

<sup>41</sup>Himmelfarb, *Idea of Poverty*, 68; Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, 210.

<sup>42</sup>Himmelfarb, *Idea of Poverty*, 69–71. There is no direct reference to the Poor Laws in *Thoughts and Details*, but Winch quotes a report of a 1796 conversation in which Burke complained of “the mischief of our Poor-laws” (*Riches and Poverty*, 199).

<sup>43</sup>Burke, *Writings and Speeches* Vol. 9, 355. As Bourke says, “what concerned Burke was the ammunition that egalitarian rhetoric provided to Jacobin ideology” (*Empire and Revolution*, 891).

Burke was sure that the extent and degree of poverty in Britain was being exaggerated for party-political purposes. But he was more worried about the propagation of mistaken theories of the *cause* of poverty, and especially about claims to the effect that poverty was government's fault. This was bound to sharpen the poor's resentment at their condition and add to the instability of the body politic. Malthus was of the same opinion. The unsettling message of *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) was that the cause of poverty was the poor themselves. This was a truth that political radicalism—Malthus took aim at Godwin in particular—sought to conceal when it claimed that vice and misery were the fault of human institutions. It was a basic fact, according to Malthus, that while food production increased at an arithmetic rate, population increased geometrically, or exponentially. Unless population growth was slowed, scarcity and famine were inevitable. More or less unknowingly, the rich had accepted this truth, in so far as in the wealthier part of society marriage happened later, and people had fewer children. The result was vice, in the form of prostitution, abortion, and homosexuality, but at least the birth rate was suppressed. Among the poor, though, there was no restraint on marriage and childbirth. On the contrary, through a combination of a mistaken understanding of Christian doctrine and equally mistaken public policy, the poor were encouraged to have as many children as possible. Malthus did not mention Paine in the first edition of the *Essay*, but the proposal made in *Rights of Man Part Two* of tax relief on parenthood would have been grist to his mill. The bottom line was that the poor were having more children than they could feed, and only the horrors of war, pestilence, and famine kept population growth at a level that enabled the bulk of mankind to survive. The condition of the poor in England—that they lived from hand to mouth, in conditions of squalor, often unable to feed their own families—was due to the simple fact that they married too early and had too many children. Government played its part in the ongoing disaster, not because it taxed the poor too heavily or failed to keep corn affordable, but because, through the Poor Laws especially, it offered charity that served only to make the situation worse.<sup>44</sup>

Malthus elaborated his criticism of the Poor Laws in the second (1803) edition of the *Essay*. He was explicit where Burke was—usually, at any rate—reticent.<sup>45</sup> Existing policy regarding the poor had been severely detrimental both to those who had been the direct object of poor relief and to those who, while poor, were not quite poor enough to qualify. Of course, some of the most desperate had been saved from starvation, but though legislation “may have alleviated a little the intensity of individual misfortune, it has spread the evil over a much larger surface.”<sup>46</sup> This was because, in times of scarcity, to give the means of subsistence to the very poor is inevitably to reduce the amount of food available to slightly less poor. The slightly less poor thus become dependent on direct assistance too. And so on. Also, Malthusian logic dictates that when the population increases, as it will naturally do when people are prevented from dying of starvation, then, without an increase in the food supply, the condition of the poor must grow worse.<sup>47</sup> The Poor Laws have not only increased dependency, they have eroded frugality and the disposition to save, and have positively encouraged early marriage among the very poor. Nor, Malthus added, will forcibly “advancing” wages help alleviate poverty, because poverty is a matter of how much you can buy with the money you have, and raising wages cannot by itself increase the available amount of food. All it will do is increase prices. In general, Malthus was skeptical of the Smithian principle that an increase in a nation's wealth was bound to improve the condition of every part of society. Smith, he claimed, had not noticed

<sup>44</sup>The Poor Laws were implemented locally at the village level, but the system as a whole was kept in place by parliamentary legislation.

<sup>45</sup> For Burke's private skepticism about the Poor Laws, see note 42 above.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, 2nd ed. (London, 1798), 396.

<sup>47</sup> As Winch notes, Malthus's case against the Poor Laws depends heavily on an assumption of the inelasticity of the food supply: see Donald Winch, *Malthus: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 44.

“those instances, where the wealth of a society may increase, according to his definition of wealth, without having any tendency to increase the comforts of the labouring part of it.”<sup>48</sup> An example was the case of a society where industrial output had risen at a rate unmatched by agricultural production. This was, of course, precisely what Smith himself had diagnosed to be the “unnatural and retrograde” situation of modern European states.<sup>49</sup> Malthus believed that Smith's confidence that an underdeveloped agricultural sector did not matter was misplaced. The threat posed by poverty to the body politic was more severe than Smith had recognized, and positive steps needed to be taken to boost domestic production of corn.

In the second edition of the *Essay*, Malthus sought in various ways to soften his message. Particularly relevant to my subject here is a new chapter on the benefits to civil liberty of knowledge of the true cause of poverty. Here, Malthus considers the political consequences of “[a] mob, which is generally the growth of a redundant population, goaded by resentment for real sufferings, but totally ignorant of the quarter from which they originate.”<sup>50</sup> Malthus's focus is on the danger posed, not by the mob itself, but by magistrates who use the threat of mob violence as an excuse for the seizure of emergency powers. In particular, he has in mind the normalization of a standing army in the circumstances of war with revolutionary France. In the past, the country gentlemen of England could be relied upon to stand up for their freedoms against government encroachment, but now they were so terrified by the mob and its leaders—and also, presumably, by the example of France—that they were all too willing to give up those freedoms in exchange for the protection of their lives and property. Malthus repeats the point we saw Ferguson make above: the threat to liberty now was the people, not the crown. This was a specifically European problem. In a young country like America, there was no redundant population, and so no mob. Paine was a threat, Malthus argued, because he pretended that there was no difference between Britain and America, and that there was the same possibility of feeding an expanding population in the old world as there was in the new. “The redundant population of an old state,” Malthus reminded his reader, “furnishes materials of unhappiness, unknown to such a state as America.”<sup>51</sup> Malthus wanted it to be clear that he did not reject the rights of man as such. The language of the rights of man was pernicious only in so far as mistakes were made about what, exactly, those rights were. In a notorious passage that would be dropped from later editions, Malthus made it explicit that the rights of man did not include a right to subsistence. Society owed nothing to the man whose labor did not purchase the means to survive. That man “has no business to be where he is. At nature's mighty feast there is no vacant cover for him. She tells him to be gone, and will quickly execute her own orders, if he do not work upon the compassion of some of her guests.”<sup>52</sup>

Smithian political economy proposed that there was little or no need for government to interfere with the workings of the labor market in order to improve the condition of the poor. Burke and Malthus, however, shared a fear about the social and political consequences of the claim made by radicals like Paine and Godwin that where the market failed, government was obliged to intervene. They therefore saw a need to be more precise than Smith had been about what a properly managed economy could do with respect to the poor, and what it could not do. Malthus, as we saw above, criticized Smith for claiming that the increase of a nation's wealth was always bound to reduce poverty. The poor's natural resentment at their condition, identified by Smith as one of the origins of the need for

<sup>48</sup> Malthus, *Essay*, 2nd ed., 420.

<sup>49</sup> Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 380.

<sup>50</sup> Malthus, *Essay*, 2nd ed., 526.

<sup>51</sup> Malthus, *Essay*, 2nd ed., 530.

<sup>52</sup> Malthus, *Essay*, 2nd ed., 531.

government, would be heightened by misconceptions of government's capacity to alleviate misery and destitution. In the long term, the remedy was education. There was, Malthus insisted, no reason to think that education would create “a spirit of tumult and discontent” among the poor, because it would enable them to read works like Paine's *Rights of Man*. On the contrary—and here Malthus says he agrees with Smith—“an instructed and well-informed people, would be much less likely to be led away by inflammatory writings, and would be much better able to detect the false declamation of interested or ambitious demagogues, than an ignorant people.”<sup>53</sup> For Malthus, public education had a distinctly utilitarian, not to say conservative, rationale. Malthus noted that Smith had proposed that elementary geometry and mechanics should be taught in the parish schools. “I cannot help thinking,” he confessed, “that the common principles by which markets are regulated might be made to sufficiently clear, to be of considerable use.”<sup>54</sup> This was a scheme of education intended not so much to realize the inner potential of the individual, as to protect property from ignorance about the facts of economic life. What people needed to be taught was “what is really true, that, without an increase of their own industry and prudence, no change of government could essentially better their condition,” and that “a revolution would not alter in their favour the proportion of the supply of labour to the demand, or the quantity of food to the number of consumers.”<sup>55</sup>

What I have tried to do in this article is to use Smith, Burke, and Malthus as a means of getting into focus the idea that, in late eighteenth-century Britain at least, it was unusual for poverty to be regarded as, in itself, unjust and as a reason for demanding ameliorative action on the part of the state. Paine and Godwin (though only in the first edition of *Political Justice*) did make such a claim, but what might be termed mainstream Whig political thought treated poverty as a *political* not a *moral* problem. What I mean by that is that Whigs like Smith, Burke, and Malthus treated poverty as, first and foremost, a threat to social order. They lived in an unequal society where the poor were very poor and where the poor significantly outnumbered everyone else. They worried, therefore, about both the inclination and the ability of the poor to resort to violence as an expression of their resentment at their condition. They worried also about the possibility that the writings of people like Paine and Godwin, as they percolated down to the mass of the population by way of newspapers, pamphlets, and rabble-rousing public meetings, might make such violence more likely. As we have seen, this did not mean that they did not look with compassion on the plight of the poor. But they thought, for a variety of reasons, that the idea that the poor had claims to relief as a matter of justice was a mistake. As Smith was reported as having said in his lectures on jurisprudence, “A beggar is an object of charity and may be said to have a right to demand it; but when we use the word right in this way it is not in the proper but a metaphoricall sense.”<sup>56</sup> The rights of the poor were, as Pufendorf had expressed it, imperfect, and stood to be distinguished from the rights “which we have a title to demand and if refused to compel an other to perform.”<sup>57</sup> The beggar's claim was not a claim of justice, and, for that reason, it was not a claim that government was bound to recognize and meet. To claim otherwise was dangerous, because government action could only be counterproductive, and because it was all too likely to generate expectations which, by being frustrated, would dangerously exacerbate social tensions. I have made here only a very localized and limited study of one particular facet of “early modern social justice,” but it

<sup>53</sup> Malthus, *Essay*, 2nd ed., 555–56.

<sup>54</sup> Malthus, *Essay*, 2nd ed., 553.

<sup>55</sup> Malthus, *Essay*, 2nd ed., 556.

<sup>56</sup> Smith, *Lectures*, 9.

<sup>57</sup> Smith, *Lectures*, 9.

confirms a suspicion I have that present day ideas of social justice derive substantially from nineteenth-century liberalism and socialism.<sup>58</sup>

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

**James A. Harris** is Professor of Philosophy at the University of St Andrews. His books include *Of Liberty and Necessity: The Free Will Problem in Eighteenth-Century British Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2005), *Hume: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), and *Hume: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2021). He has written and published widely on eighteenth-century British philosophy and has edited texts by Reid (with Knud Haakonssen), Beattie, Kames, and Abraham Tucker. He was a Member of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton in 2012–13, and in 2018 he gave the Benedict Lectures in the History of Political Philosophy at Boston University. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

<sup>58</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous referee for several useful suggestions and to Remy Debes for his encouragement and advice. It was a great disappointment to me that I was unable to present this paper at the *Southern Journal of Philosophy*'s 2022 conference on early modern social justice. I am certain that it would have been improved by the comments and questions of the other contributors to this special issue.