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Rosmini's Liberalism and the Shadow of Adam Smith

*Alberto Mingardi**
IULM University of Milan

The purpose of this article is to show the impact on Rosmini's economic thinking from one strain of classical liberal economics—that of Adam Smith. Rosmini's reflections on Smith, which are far from episodic, show a degree of affinity and a strong intellectual preference for *laissez-faire* versus economic interventionism. This article explores selected instances in Rosmini's economic and political works in which either Rosmini himself quotes Smith, or the latter's shadow seems unmistakable. It focuses in particular on Rosmini's approach to economics as a science (and his criticism of "mechanical" utilitarianism); his views of competition, monopoly, and protection; and his fiscal theory, as the places in which his reading of Smith most reverberates. Rosmini's approaches to these problems constitute sufficient evidence to place him within the classical liberal tradition.

Introduction

"If [classical] liberal economics did not exist, Rosmini, for the sake of consistency with his own ideas, would have to invent it" (Piovani 1957: 79). This statement by Pietro Piovani (1922–1980) may sound astonishing, since it does not refer to an economist but to a Catholic priest, founder of religious orders, and philosopher. Antonio Rosmini (1797–1855) was indeed a passionate advocate of competition.

Rosmini was no second-league thinker in nineteenth century Italy. He left behind an enormous body of writings: The still-incomplete critical edition of his works would amount to more than one-hundred volumes. His contributions covered a wide variety of subjects, ranging from religion and metaphysics to anthropology and politics. Although international scholarship on Rosmini's social

thought remains limited,[1] his eminence as a political and legal thinker has long been known to Italians. Scholars such as Gioele Solari (1872–1952), Giuseppe Capograssi (1886–1959), the above-mentioned Pietro Piovani, Mario D'Addio (1923–2017), and Danilo Zolo (1936–2018) have nurtured an intense discussion on the tenets of Rosmini's political thinking, which endures today. Dario Antiseri credits Rosmini for being one of the first authors to see clearly that "between our intentions and the outcomes thereof—that is, between our schemes and their actual outcomes—a gap is but unavoidable" (Antiseri 1997: 456).[2]

Initially attracted by counterrevolutionary and reactionary thinkers, Rosmini came to rely on "the right kind" of constitutionalism to avoid French-Revolution-like degenerations of political systems.[3] For his views and his sensibilities, he has been compared to Alexis de Tocqueville (Del Noce 1983: 235).

Economics was central to Rosmini's political theorizing. His interest in political economy shaped his theories from his early thought forward. In discussing Rosmini's liberal leanings, Piovani summarizes those pillars of his worldview that remain unchanged, or that he perhaps developed more fully, over his lifelong reflections on politics:

> (a) The need of safeguarding from the government's unlimited encroachments the autonomous centers characterized by their own complete social individuality … (b) The vindication of property as concrete embodiment of the moral creative efforts which characterize all human beings … (c) Proximity to several liberal tenets, to several principles of classical economics, which Rosmini appreciated and investigated as few other Italian philosophers of his age. Against the claims of the ancien regime, [classical] liberalism, by checking the political encroachment in the economic sphere, denies any further enlargement of the powers of the State. (d) Interest in the fledging issues of wealth … understood as the one obstacle, within the sphere of the modern State, to an overbearing government … (e) Hostility to the notion of entirely enclosing the juridical sphere in the legality of the State … (f) Support to the movement for the Italian national independence, particularly as it stems from natural, spontaneous forces, of which the nation is—or can be—the summary or the symbol. (Piovani 1961: 219–220)[4]

Rosmini's proximity to the ideas of *laissez-faire* and his acquaintance with "many principles of classical economics" was the outcome of a continuous interaction with Adam Smith's (1723–1790) works that, together with Jean-Baptiste Say's (1767–1832), were his true lodestar. In this article, I will try to present the most notable instances in which Rosmini's writings exhibit a critical engagement of Adam Smith.

Precisely ascertaining how other thinkers influenced an author who at the time was so well read and had a strong pretense of originality, like Rosmini, can never be easy. I have therefore privileged instances in which either Rosmini himself quotes Smith, or the latter's shadow seems to me unmistakable, in his economic and political works. While Rosmini at times emphasizes his own disagreement with Smith, his explicit invocation of Smith's ideas—together with his implicit acceptance of the latter's basic economic approach—evidences a fundamental concurrence between Rosmini and Smith. This is consistent with the Italian philosopher's own classical liberalism.

I will focus in particular on Rosmini's approach to economics as a science (and his criticism of "mechanical" Utilitarianism); his views of competition, monopoly, and protection; and his fiscal theory, as the most relevant places in which his reading of Smith reverberates.

A (Telegraphic) Biographical Sketch

Antonio Rosmini-Serbati was born March 24, 1797, the scion of one of the richest and noblest families in the city of Rovereto. Having learned to read at home, mainly from the Bible, the young Antonio began school at the age of seven, completing the normal course, and simultaneously educating himself as a polymath in his uncle's library. The young man's higher studies were completed in theology at the University of Padua, where he graduated in 1823.

His political philosophy developed and assumed precise form between the 1820s and the 1840s. It was perhaps as a consequence of the 1821 uprisings in Italy that Rosmini started working on a major book on politics in 1822. Though it consumed much of his time during 1822–1826, it was never published in his lifetime. But it served as a preparatory work for other more ambitious undertakings in the same field. In particular, by 1839 Rosmini completed his *Political Philosophy* and by 1845 his immense *Philosophy of Law and Theodicy*. These works, with the subsequent *The Constitution under Social Justice* (1848), a blueprint for a liberal constitution for the yet-divided Italy, form the consistent body of his political thought.

In 1848, as an envoy of the Kingdom of Savoy, Rosmini joined Pius IX in Rome, where the pope, initially a liberal and an advocate of Italian unification, welcomed him and (after the assassination of Pellegrino Rossi [1787–1848]) promised to make him a cardinal and prime minister of the Papal States. However, as soon as the Roman Republic was established and the pope was forced to flee to Gaeta, this relationship broke down. ("Those about the Pope had no difficulty in persuading him that his misfortunes were traceable to his encouragement of

schemes with which Rosmini's name was identified" [Liddon 1883: xv–xvi]). Rosmini's *Delle cinque piaghe della santa Chiesa*, by far his most famous work, in which he preaches a renewal of the Church, and *La Costituzione secondo la giustizia sociale* were listed in the Index of Forbidden Books.

Dismissed by the pope, Rosmini returned home to Stresa (on Lago Maggiore) where he peacefully spent the rest of his life. But the polemics against his writings did not end with his death in 1855, thanks in particular to forceful attacks by Jesuits. In 1887 the Holy Office (today known as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) promulgated a decree, *Post Obitum*, which stated that forty propositions extracted from Rosmini's works had not "conformed to the Catholic truth."

This condemnation lasted until the pontificate of John Paul II (1920–2005). He supported Rosmini's cause for beatification, and in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio* mentioned him among "significant examples of a process of philosophical enquiry that was enriched by engaging the data of faith." Finally, on July 1, 2001, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in a *Nota* signed by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and then-Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, repealed the *Post Obitum*. Ever since, Rosmini's works have attracted growing interest in Catholic circles.

Smith and Rosmini

After his father's death, Rosmini did not administer the family fortune directly but was constantly concerned about it; was informed about the minute details of his finances; and enjoyed, thanks to a capable "independent manager" of his own estate, the benefits of entrepreneurial success (Bonazza 2015). It is thus quite reasonable to speculate that the very fact that he came out of a family with business interest drew Rosmini's attention to the recently born science of political economy and its relevance.

It is safe to say that economics was part of the education Rosmini pursued for his own intellectual development. We know that he read economists Say, Sismondi (1773–1842), and Smith in the period 1824–1825 (D'Addio 2003: 18). As was not uncommon in Italy at the time (Ross 1998: xxxiii–xxxiv), Rosmini bought and read a French edition of *The Wealth of Nations* (Radice 1967: 250). He also knew Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*[5] and the "Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages," upon which he commented.[6] Explicit quotations from Smith in Rosmini are relatively rare—but they recur throughout all of his political works, up to the very last (Rosmini 1848: 120), suggesting a lifelong familiarity with Smith's works.

The first mention of Smith goes back to Rosmini's political manuscripts of 1822, which were never prepared for publication by the author himself. Rosmini was then starting to write his *Political Philosophy*, which he abandoned temporarily and resumed later. When he did, in 1826, he would be squarely in the camp of advocates of "constitutional" liberalism. Rosmini's very early political works are affected by the influence of conservative and reactionary writers, in particular Karl Ludwig von Haller (1767–1854). Rosmini was appalled by the effects of the French Revolution and, at the time, searched for intellectual nourishment among those who openly and radically opposed it. Later, Rosmini would have no problem in presenting himself as a defender of "progress" and "true liberalism," which is "a system of law and politics at the same time, which guarantees to everybody the precious treasure of their juridical freedoms" (Rosmini 1847: 87–88).

It is in his very first political manuscript that we find a first mention of Adam Smith, a critical but ultimately not unfavorable one. Rosmini takes the classical position that the end of government is "public happiness" and equates it with a condition in which a nation can take full advantage of all its goods. In this context, he remarks that "exterior goods do not fully satisfy man" (Nicola 1933: 17) and distinguishes between *pleasure* and "fulfilment [*appagamento*]," the first being a transient sensation, the latter being a state of peace. Thinkers have mistaken the true object of social happiness: "Either they only considered the amount of goods, or just the pleasures which could be obtained, or considered these pleasures in respect to their fulfilment" (Nicola 1933: 18). These three mistakes are personified in "avaricious, effete, and uncouth politicians," whose champions are in turn Adam Smith, Helvetius (1715–1771), and Rousseau (1712–1778).

The Smithian "error" is an excessive focus on "exterior" goods and production. Yet Rosmini comments:

> This is not a flaw of science, despite its only object being the wealth of the nation, as the object of any particular science is necessarily limited. It is a flaw of economists, who—being entirely preoccupied by their science—trace back to it the whole happiness of the State. (Nicola 1933: 19)[7]

For this reason, Rosmini considers that "Smith's error is certainly the less blameworthy, and it might be useful to society, were an error ever to be useful." This sentence is not without ambiguities: It looks like Rosmini is reproaching economists for not being Christian philosophers, and yet he feels attracted to their science.

This attitude comes to surface in later, more mature expression of Rosmini's thinking. In a letter to Alessandro Manzoni (1785–1873) in 1827, Rosmini, who also fears that "science, by teaching how to acquire wealth, generally and natu-

rally increases avarice in men" (Bonola 1901: 5), gives high praise to political economy as a science:

> Men committed many vile deeds for their own profit, such as the slave trade, etc. Of many of these it is possible to show that they rested on a faulty assumption, that is, that those who committed them to profit could have better provided to their own interest and profit without committing those very deeds. Thanks to the progress of the economic science, all these immoral deeds must cease. (Bonola 1901: 3)[8]

The young Rosmini celebrates the role of political economy in teaching nations how to be more productive. The relatively older one is thinking clearly of the importance of gains by trade. People will understand they can gain more by peaceful and consensual trades than by plunder: This is the civilizing hope that Rosmini places in political economy.

Luxury and Utilitarianism

To better understand how welcoming he was of Smith's teaching, let us consider Rosmini's quarrel with Italian economist Melchiorre Gioia (1767–1829). This polemic defines Rosmini's approach to economics. Gioia was an eclectic follower of Bentham (1748–1832): "Bentham is the thinker who causes Gioia's conclusive convergence with the economic science" (Barucci 1965: 138).[9] According to Faucci, he showed "great suspicion towards any kind of economic theory" (Faucci 1981:16).[10] He was one of those economists who, by the route of "pragmatism," embrace a certain latitude for government action.

Rosmini's attack on Gioia was so vehement that it has been characterized as rhetorically violent (e.g., Piovani 1957: 56; Barucci 1965: 167).[11] He considered Gioia dangerous for his "attempt to absorb ethics into economics" (Hoevel 2013: 23).

Such criticism of Gioia has been sometimes read as an indictment of the emerging economic science. In his recent, important work, for example, Hoevel considers Rosmini's rejection of Gioia's utilitarianism as tantamount to a starting point for a revision of political economy as such, picturing him as a forerunner to contemporary attempts such as Luigino Bruni's.[12] This is hardly the first time Rosmini has been considered an opponent of classical liberalism, though disguised as a reformer of it.[13]

But a very different interpretation can be argued for, too. In his *Saggio sulla definizione della ricchezza*, Rosmini attacks Gioia for the latter's approach to the issue of fashion and, in reality, consumption.[14] His general arguments are

certainly moral: Rosmini cannot abide Gioia's unapologetic materialism. Yet his arguments are *economic* too.

In his *Nuovo Galateo*, a highly successful book whose popularity perhaps roused Rosmini's polemical ambitions,[15] Gioia argued that consumption for "fashion," meaning luxury expenses, grew with an increased division of labor and civilization, thereby "trickling down" wealth to the lower classes of society. The production of such artefacts are the means by which "the wealth concentrated into the hands of some is distributed unto others and *the wealthy feeds the pauper under the rubric of work, as opposed to charity*" (Gioia 1822: I, 144). Rosmini's attack focuses exclusively on the chapter on "Apologia della moda."

The debate on luxury is a relevant one and hardly a new contribution either of Rosmini or Gioia (see Hont 2006). The gist of the argument of Gioia himself is *moral* and not merely *economic* and goes far beyond "praise of fashion—interpreted as the process of permanent changes in tastes and needs—understood as the key for a dynamic economy" (Hoevel 2014: 116). Gioia thought that the growth of luxury had a twofold beneficial effect on morality in society. On the one hand, the increased demand for luxurious goods spills over into an increased demand for labor: this means that people of modest origin need to spend more time working and therefore have less leisure to indulge in temptations. On the other hand, when it comes to the rich and affluent, "corruption is equal, or goes in proportion, to the capital available to it" (Gioia 1822: I, 162). This means that, as wealth gets consumed for buying luxurious goods, less of it is available for corrupt practices. As it was noted, there is a symmetry: "the increase of labor equals a decline of corruption [for the poor] … the capital available to corruption decreases as a consequence of the employment necessitated to follow the current fashion [for the affluent]" (Donati 1949: 59) This prefigures a view of what we may call "the economics of a ruling class," in which increased voluptuary consumption automatically decreases the amount of resources available for bribing. It is not very clear why luxury should proceed at the cost of corrupting practices, however defined, and not, for example, at the cost of investment or capital accumulation: unless the *non dictum* is that bribing is functional to investment and capital accumulation (how very Italian!). However, in arguing that the production of luxury goods does expand *per se* the productive power of society we are jumping to an unwarranted conclusion: The resources needed to produce new, fashionable goods, after all, do not come out of thin air, but are diverted from other uses and thus entail an opportunity cost.

For Rosmini, Gioia is not advocating an all-encompassing definition of luxury such as the one embraced by Mandeville (1670–1733), who points out "that many things, which were once looked upon as the invention of luxury are now

allowed even to those that are so miserably poor as to become the objects of public charity, nay counted so necessary, that we think no human creature ought to want them" (Mandeville 1714: 110). Rosmini himself agrees with this cliché of economic progress and considers "good" that "rapidly increasing production, so universally spreads affluence" (Bonola 1901: 6).

Rosmini does not read Gioia's treatment of luxury as a plea for the refinement of the arts, or for the elevation of life standards *per se*, but rather as an exhortation to *chi vuol essere lieto sia*, to favor faster, present consumption instead of savings and, presumably, investment. He criticizes such a perspective because it is at odds with his understanding of Smith's distinction between *productive* and *unproductive* labor.[16] He points out that true economists "do not recommend to amass in this fashion the things that are needed for our uses: this would amount to a foolish accumulation, an idle, wasted capital. They recommend instead to assemble the capitals not required for production, to stockpile goods in stores, not for our use, but for commerce, thus becoming the cause of new wealth"[17] (Rosmini 1827: 24n). At the same time, he knows that consumption of wealth cannot be "generally condemned without falling into the foolishness of a repulsive miserliness" (Rosmini 1823: 379).

On the contrary, Gioia's idea of fashion lies with the "keeping of a large number of idle servants, or of horses meant for leisure or pomp" (Rosmini 1827: 28). He favors this option for the affluent man *vis-à-vis* its opportunity cost, which is to "turn the crowd of servants and the stables of horses into farmers and herds" (Rosmini 1827: 28).

Rosmini here echoes Smith's vignette of the rich man entertaining an entourage ("That portion of his revenue which a rich man annually spends is in most cases consumed by idle guests and menial servants, who leave nothing behind them in return for their consumption," [*WN* II.3.18]). Smith is seen here by Rosmini as playing squarely in his own camp—as an author recommending economy in order to enable the accumulation of capital—which Rosmini equates with an application of common sense (Rosmini 1827: 26n, 37).[18] Besides any further moral consideration, Rosmini gets from Smith the understanding that "Every increase or diminution of capital, therefore, naturally tends to increase or diminish the real quantity of industry, the number of productive hands, and consequently the exchangeable value of the annual produce of the land and labor of the country, the real wealth and revenue of all its inhabitants" (*WN* II.3.13). The idea that "capitals are increased by parsimony, and diminished by prodigality and misconduct" (*WN* II.4.14) may resonate with Rosmini's own moral account, but he certainly understands the underlying economic reasoning too.

Rosmini's reply thus goes well beyond the priestly exhortation for sobriety. He maintains that the taste for luxurious goods in a given society does not necessarily mean that society has become more *industrious*. Insofar as the wealthy are concerned, for Rosmini "whether it is good that [great estates] are diminished, we refrain to establish here and now: suffice to say that, even if the curtailment of huge fortunes were a good, it would never be so that they are diminished through vices, excessive luxury, or the whimsies of fashion; but only by virtue of the liberty, the beneficence, and the charity that are the means designated by the Gospel to remove any large inequalities among men"[19] (Rosmini 1827: 43n).

In his polemics with Gioia, Rosmini's stronger points are scored on the ground of the *extent* and *meaning* of economic theory:

> Economics cannot deal with the issue whether luxury, or fashion, is a good or an evil, at least not in these stark terms. Only Morals can decide it. Economics must limit itself to a more particular question, viz.: are luxury and fashion useful or injurious to the increase of wealth? In which sense, under which circumstances, [and] how, are they helpful or detrimental to wealth? (Rosmini 1827: 23n)[20]

Rosmini observes that "the moralist may castigate a man's avarice, or the exclusive love he places in a material good, such as wealth, [but] in the eyes of the economists he is not guilty, unless he is wont to contemplate his wealth idly lying in his coffers instead of making it yield a return and produce more wealth, by broadening commerce, expanding manufactures and improving farming"[21] (Rosmini 1827: 23n).

It seems not unreasonable thus to surmise that Rosmini's opposition to Gioia, as Piovani pointed out, is based on his perception that in Gioia's approach he was "seeing economics brought to consequences that are not implied by the premises of this science, in seeing it reduced, as it happens, to serving hedonistic morals, to seeing its very scientific truth being thus compromised" (Piovani 1957: 62). For Piovani, all Rosmini's criticism is in actual fact "a defense of classical economic theories" (Piovani 1957: 63n). He is a defender, rather than a reformer, of economics—at the time, by and large the science established by Adam Smith.

On Competition

Perhaps the point upon which classical liberal interpreters of Rosmini have most insisted (see *inter alia* Antiseri and Baldini 1998) is his strong preference for competition and his indictment of monopoly. Rosmini is adamantly opposed to any scheme that we may today label "industrial policy." Already in his *Politica prima*, he quotes Smith to make the point that higher taxes cannot be justified

for the sake of realizing entrepreneurial ventures (Rosmini 1823: 324): "No two characters seem more inconsistent than those of trader and sovereign. If the trading spirit of the English East India Company renders them very bad sovereigns, the spirit of sovereignty seems to have rendered them equally bad traders" (*WN* V.2.8). The "entrepreneurial state" (my term, not Rosmini's) takes "away branches of industry from the citizens" and makes them "less productive and sometimes even non-productive" (Rosmini 1848: 78).

Rosmini's argument is basically that government lacks the necessary information to direct economic activity, which would be much better left in private hands. He believes that "the law of liberty and commerce," and therefore the simple rule government shall follow, is "not to direct the general course of wealth, as instead to expedite it" (Rosmini 1823: 368).

> I believe *with Smith* and with many other economists, that the most profitable distribution of wealth is effected by the very nature of things and that the more perfect this distribution and direction of wealth, the amplest the place and time it is considered within…. Hence our law does not for this become invalid, if we find any instance whereby the quickness of time or the smallness of place can be helpful to wealth. But in large scale it is at the very least quite fraught with danger, as it cannot be directed without being apprised of all the laws of its movement and without taking into account the reciprocal pressure of innumerable agents…. Thus, in the belief of devising a useful institution which yields wealth, this is obstructed and prevented to increase. (Rosmini 1823: 368–369, emphasis added)[22]

The legitimate role of government lies not in "perturbing the legitimate order of wealth, as it presumes to impart a direction to it" but in "increasing the movement and enterprise of the citizens at large" (Rosmini 1823: 369). "The protection and facilitation of all the enterprises of the citizens" (Rosmini 1841–45c: § 2166) is consistent with the goal of civil society. For Rosmini, governments should allow for a proper set of incentives that make it possible and worthwhile for people to work and flourish.

"Productivist" reasons should never allow for government discretionary intervention. Government institutions can own property and businesses but only "by the same titles as an individual person, and with the same limits." Their "sole means … for preventing occupancy of unoccupied things is not an arbitrary decree" (Rosmini 1841–45c: § 2156). Government "acts contrary to its mandate when it competes with its citizens or with the societies they form to procure some particular utility, and even more when it reserves to itself the monopoly of enterprises which it forbids to individuals" (Rosmini 1841–45c: § 2167).

Rosmini seems to qualify this statement, allowing for government intervention when the market is not supplying innovative ventures itself. These are the product of widespread education and could be missing in an uneducated or intellectually lethargic society. On this point, young Rosmini criticizes Smith, assuming that the latter believes "private interest to be perfectly instructed" (Rosmini 1823: 370). On the other hand, Rosmini maintains that "removing ignorance" is a duty which government should exercise precisely to have a more thriving and enterprising society. The "stimulation of moral, intellectual, and industrial progress by means of rewards for free concurrence" is "a supremely civil duty" (Rosmini 1841–45c: § 2171). The more a society is intellectually vibrant, the more enterprising it will be. Rosmini argues for a sort of "practical Enlightenment," of which government can be an active player until society become *so* enlightened that it can take the reins of these projects itself.

"A hope that individuals or private societies undertake certain useful enterprises may be vain, not because the nature of the enterprises makes such undertaking impossible, but because individuals and private societies do not attain the level of ideas, ability, and activity necessary for these enterprises. If this is true … the government will take care to increase in the citizens the abilities they still lack" (Rosmini 1841–45c: § 2170).[23] Therefore government "can provisionally initiate some private enterprises … provided they cede them as soon as individuals should themselves be ready to undertake them" (Rosmini 1841–845c: § 2170). And yet, "We can safely assert that … great progress in civilization is made by a government that procures more public good through the spontaneous action of individuals and of the private societies it protects, and distances itself from leadership in such enterprises" (Rosmini 1841–45c: § 2168).

In so arguing, Rosmini sketches the evolution of government intervention in the economy as moving from more to less. Freer trade is part of the freedom allowed by government to the people, which "should be in the same degree of the [people's] knowledge and will to avail themselves of it"[24] (Rosmini 1823: 370). According to Rosmini's own marginalia, he developed these ideas by reading the French classical liberal Charles Dunoyer (1786–1862), who thought liberty was not a right but "a power to be obtained," "a situation in which a person can use his or her faculty without any impediment" (Beraud 2016: 164). For trade to be opened up, as was then happening in England thanks to the initiatives of William Huskisson (1770–1830), private individuals should be active and engaging and ready to take up an ever-greater number of initiatives.[25] Dunoyer maintained that minimizing government intervention was needed for humans to be really able to flourish (de Dijn 2008: 93). Rosmini actually seems to be keener to a more nuanced view, in which deregulating human affairs, on the one hand, and the

development of socially useful knowledge, on the other hand, are intertwined and dependent one on the other in a more complex way. If this interpretation is correct, he may have been closer to Scottish stadial theory than he thought.[26]

In this context, Rosmini considers the virtues of commerce in a manner not much different from Smith's. Smith pointed out that "The habits … of order, economy, and attention, to which mercantile business naturally forms a merchant, render him much fitter to execute, with profit and success, any project of improvement" (*WN* III.4.3).[27] *Vis-à-vis* the country gentleman, the merchant is far more likely to contribute improvement and a better allocation of resources.

Rosmini considers commerce to promote "the development of the mind." He thinks commerce produces "a significant recourse to the capacity of abstraction" for three reasons: First, a profit-seeking people ends up in "ceaselessly pondering all that can be advantageous in making their commerce more happy and profitable." Second, the effects of long-distance travel and communicating with strangers and very different people. Third, because of "the prudence of merchants," which develops so much that they become "the best signs of the overall political developments" (Rosmini 1839: 266–67)—something we would perhaps say today of government debt markets. This view of merchants' prudence, contrary to the earlier critique of Smith, is built on a more positive understanding of self-interest.[28]

This catalog of merchants' virtue can be found—and here we are really in Smith's shadow—in a sketch of historical development that, in Rosmini, takes the form of the movement of society through four stages: (1) the age of the founding of society, (2) the age of the development of civil society, (3) the age of its full maturity, and (4) the age of decadence. As when he embraced a somewhat corrected version of Dunoyer's view of liberty, Rosmini tries to match these traits to the underlying economic setting: The development of civil society, of institutions that are focused around abstract rules rather than on personal ties, needs "large-scale commerce" (Rosmini 1839: 268).

Rosmini being so persuaded of the benefits of unhindered competition, it is interesting to see how he does understand the obstacles coming in its way. In a footnote in the *Philosophy of Law*, Rosmini describes the British Corn Laws as the outcome of a political system in which "the landlords … passed laws exclusively for their own profit" (Rosmini 1841–45b: § 272n).

The idea that behind protection one can spot "the interested sophistry of merchants and manufacturers" (*WN* IV.3.39) is no stranger to Rosmini. He explicitly and regularly contrasts "the spirit of monopoly" and "the interest of the great body of the people." In the *Philosophy of Law*, Rosmini approves of patents ("they are simply a defense … of the inventor's right") but comes up

very strongly against "true privileges which are sometimes granted to a person who is allowed the exclusive exercise of a trade or craft … if public authority favors some person or family, or provides them with some advantage, all other individuals are injured in their rights" (Rosmini 1841–45a; § 1676). In his project of an Italian constitution, Rosmini recognizes that import and export "duties are contrary to the liberty of commerce and industry" (Rosmini 1849: 76) but allows two exceptions to this general rule. One exception relates to the development of new industries (but Rosmini knows that abuses can easily be perpetrated in this case); the other concerns transition periods from protectionism to free trade. Rosmini takes the *gradualist* approach in a way that resembles a well-known passage from the fourth book of the *The Wealth of Nations*:

> In a state where the prohibition system has prevailed and thus industry and commerce have taken an exceptional course … we cannot—without damaging many—all of a sudden destroy that status quo which is against nature by suddenly allowing a full liberty for industry and commerce. It is wise to allow time for industry and commerce to back out of their false direction.… It is therefore appropriate that custom duties be gradually decreased until the natural state of full liberty is reached.[29]

On Taxes

Rosmini "recognizes—regardless of the political regime—the powerful influence of the economic constitution over the tax system" (Graziani 1881: 219). Matters of taxes are at the heart of his political philosophy, right from the beginning of his rumination on political matters. In a way, the whole of Rosmini's thinking about the state floats around questions related to *how citizens will be charged by and for the state*. Problems of political philosophy, in his view, imply attempts to align interests and incentives that are otherwise misaligned in the muddled world of politics.

Rosmini sees taxation as intimately intertwined with the issue of the franchise: A particular tax system is the product of a particular governance structure and will not survive a change in the structure itself. He sees government officials as no less self-interested than private actors; they are both affected by a "spirit of speculation" that is "universal": "it is the same spirit which drives our publishers to ask for a much higher price whenever they can do it under the pretense of the stamp tax on their books," but "the government enjoys the power of having everyone bear this burden" (Rosmini 1823: 328–29).[30] There is virtually "no particular expense of public good" from which governments "haven't attempted

to extract the greatest gain possible, without considering whether those who bore its burden had some reason on their side" (Rosmini 1823: 329).

Rosmini frequently reminds his readers that "all taxes are an evil in their own right" as they are "a consumption and destruction of wealth."[31] As Smith explained that "all taxes on industry must diminish the natural opulence as they raise the market price of the commodities" (Smith 1763: VI.85), Rosmini understands that resources subtracted from citizens by taxation won't find an alternative use, for "every tax entails harm to particular individuals, and those unhappy consequences which bring about a decrease of prosperity in the commonwealth" (Rosmini 1823: 344). This is the background of his plea for moderate taxation. However, he sees that "we can expect economy from men who spend their own" but not quite so "when they spend somebody else's money" (Rosmini 1848: 66).

Rosmini devotes so much thinking to these problems that his reflections on them become the two pillars of his own political philosophy, which are a constant presence in all his works, even if they vary in nuance over time. One is the proportional franchise—a system of representation in which the ability to have a say in the making of public policy is proportional to the property holdings of each voter; the other is a simple system of taxation. Both these points are apparent in Rosmini's writings from the 1820s onward.

Rosmini sees these principles as the basis of an alternative to the "French-style" systems, in which the constitution proclaims the inviolability of private property but taxes are levied without the explicit consent of the taxed. These systems are "nothing more than *organized theft*" (Rosmini 1848: 54). Not that he preferred the *ancien regime* tax system. On the contrary, he comes to appreciate that "the [French] Revolution started from an act of justice, from the abolition of privileges and exemptions" (Rosmini 1848: 63). He however sees the development inconsistent with this hopeful beginning, as "absolutism mainly consists in commanding the purse of others" (Rosmini 1848: 68).

For Rosmini, the cornerstones of good taxation are what we now call the contribution and the benefit principles of taxation. Governmental activity is such that it benefits citizens in greater degree the wealthier they are: Those who own substantial property need more police services, etc.[32] *Legitimate* taxation is basically seen on par with a service fee:[33] "only he in whose regard the expense is made should pay the tax" (Rosmini 1823: 326). An equitable "distribution of common good" consists in equalizing "the share-quota of utility which members can serve from the institution and management of society" (Rosmini 1841–45c: § 1653).

Rosmini builds here on Adam Smith's sketch of the contribution and benefit principles of taxation:

> The subjects of every state ought to contribute towards the support of the government, as nearly as possible, in proportion to their respective abilities; that is, in proportion to the revenue which they respectively enjoy under the protection of the state. The expense of government to the individuals of a great nation is like the expense of management to the joint tenants of a great estate, who are all obliged to contribute in proportion to their respective interests in the estate. In the observation or neglect of this maxim consists what is called the equality or inequality of taxation. (*WN* V.2.25)

The contribution and the benefit principles are so important for Rosmini that he makes them the pillars of his political system. Rosmini interprets the contribution and benefit principles as radically opposed to any sort of progressive taxation,[34] and he endorses the equivalent of a modern *flat tax*, a proportional tax. Tax progressivity "breaks, openly and directly, the evident principle of social right that all properties of citizens share the burden of the state in proportion to their income, and therefore it is a masked theft perpetrated by the legislative power on behalf of the law" (Rosmini 1848: 70).

Rosmini's franchise is proportional over *properties* (not income), but taxes should be levied on "the income of each property rather than … the properties themselves as, since taxes are collected each year, they have to be considered as a passive annuity that weighs on properties almost as an equalizing fee to be subtracted from the profits of those properties" (Rosmini 1848: 57). Here Rosmini disagrees with Smith's preference for ground-rent taxes that do not hinder improvements.[35] Likewise, if Smith considers "the interest of money a much less proper subject of direct taxation than the rent of land" (*WN* V.2.89), Rosmini thinks "it is appropriate that taxation hits both fixed and liquid assets equally" (Rosmini 1848: 82). They share a certain degree of skepticism over taxing wages (which, in the case of Rosmini, would jeopardize its own political construction) and consumption. We have seen that Rosmini, in his debate with Gioia, considered inordinate luxury as a threat to the capital stock of society. When it comes to taxes on consumption, he, like Smith, opposes taxes on "the necessaries of life" (*WN* V.2.150) as "unjust … barbarian and inhuman" (Rosmini 1848: 74). His skepticism over consumption taxes is rooted in the fact that they fall "indifferently on what is necessary for living and what is superfluous." But then he comments that "if we are talking about an innocent luxury in a country where luxury is held within certain limits, it would be unjust to impose taxes on luxury items." Father Rosmini, who recognized a government's power in moralizing the consumption of its citizens by taxing unhealthy and immoral ones, thought that luxury taxes ought to be "municipal or provincial" (Rosmini 1848: 74).

Rosmini welcomes the Smithian principles concerning the certainty, convenience, and economy of taxation. He quotes Smith in supporting his own idea of submitting taxation to the rule of law. ("The tax which each individual is bound to pay ought to be certain, and not arbitrary. The time of payment, the manner of payment, the quantity to be paid, ought all to be clear and plain to the contributor, and to every other person" [*WN* V.2.26].) Rosmini wants taxes to be easily computable by citizens; due on sure and well-defined deadlines; and levied in such a way to minimize bureaucratic and accounting costs both for government and taxpayers (Rosmini 1823: 340–341).

Conclusion

Antonio Rosmini had a deep knowledge of contemporary economics and shared a classical liberal persuasion. Here I have focused on his critical reading of Adam Smith's works. In dealing with such an ambitious system builder, it is probable that something has been missed. Mastering Rosmini's works, even while circumscribing one's attention to his politics, is a challenge.

However, a certain degree of consistency throughout his entire life suggests that Rosmini cared deeply about certain issues and proposals. His tax theory and his franchise theory are cases in point. They have been influenced, and indeed made possible, by his understanding of political economy. In this realm, Adam Smith was certainly one of the thinkers he regarded most highly, and one he used constantly to strengthen his own reflections.

Rosmini was not an economist himself. Economics was a strong and yet ancillary interest in his own studies, for he was first and foremost a Catholic priest. This clearly shaped his own language. It seems to me, however, that attempts to reduce the importance of political economy in his thinking, or to consider him as a more "traditional" figure in Catholic social thinking by watering down his commitment to the truths he found in political economy, are destined to fail.

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Notes

* I am grateful to Luigi Marco Bassani, Dan Klein, David Perazzoni, Kevin Schmiesing, Jane Shaw, and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on a previous version of this essay. All remaining mistakes are exclusively my fault.

1. Hoevel (2013) is a noteworthy exception and has excited critical responses. See Krienke (2014).

2. Antiseri is referring to Rosmini's rejection of "perfettismo," that is "a system which believes perfection to be achievable in human affairs and which sacrifices the present good for the sake of a vision of future perfection … a bold prejudice, which causes human nature to be too-favourably judged … there are goods whose existence would be utterly impossibile without the presence of some evils [*quel sistema che crede possibile il perfetto nelle cose umane, e che sacrifica i beni presenti alla immaginata perfezione futura … un baldanzoso pregiudizio, per qual si giudica della natura umana troppo favorevolmente … vi sono de' beni la cui esistenza sarebbe al tutto impossibile senza l'esistenza di alcuni mali*]" (Rosmini 1839: 111–112). On Rosmini's antiperfectionism, see Perlini (2004).

3. Rosmini distinguished between organically grown constitutions ("formed passage by passage, without a premeditated scheme, incessantly patched and mended accordingly to countervailing social forces and the urgency of instincts and popular needs") and constitutions imposed top-down by a legislator ("created altogether, emerging complete as theory from the mind, like Minerva from the head of Jupiter"). He favors the first kind and opposes the latter (Rosmini 1848: 5ff).

4. *(a) Necessità di salvare dall'invadenza illimitata dello Stato i centri autonomi forniti di una loro compiuta individualità sociale … (b) Apologia della proprietà in quanto … realizzazione concreta di una morale attività creatrice propria della persona umana … (c) Vicinanza a molte tesi del liberismo, a molti principi dell'economia classica, da Rosmini conosciuti e studiati come da pochi altri filosofi italiani suoi contemporanei. Contro le pretese dell'antico regime, il liberismo, limitando l'azione della politica nell'economia, nega un ulteriore, deciso ampliamento del potere dello Stato. (d) Interesse ai nuovi problemi della ricchezza … intesa come unico ostacolo esistente, nell'ambito dello Stato moderno, alla onnipotenza statale … (e) Avversione all'esaurimento del fenomeno giuridico nella legalità statale … (f) Consenso ai*

movimento di indipendenza nazionale soprattutto come riconoscimento di forze naturali e spontanee, di cui la Nazione è, o può essere, il compendio o l'emblema.

5. Rosmini opposed "establishing virtue upon sympathy" (1828: 197) instead of reason. Muscolino (2010: 56–57) argued that Smith's and Rosmini's moral philosophy are actually closer than Rosmini thought.

6. Rosmini argues against the idea that proper names are conventionally used by "two savages, who had never been taught to speak" to indicate to each other those particular objects. Consistent with his innatism, Rosmini thinks that "names were in antiquity imposed over things not because of an arbitrary decision, but with reason" (Rosmini 1836: § 151).

7. *Ciò non è difetto della scienza ancorché ella abbia a solo scopo la ricchezza della nazione, essendo lo scopo di qualunque scienza particolare di necessità limitata. E' difetto degli economisti, i quali occupati tutti in questa scienza, tutta la felicità dello stato riconducono a Lei.*

8. *Gli uomini facevano molte azioni turpi per tirarne guadagno, come il commercio degli schiavi, ecc. Di molte di queste si può dimostrare che le appoggiavano sopra un falso supposto, cioè che quelli che le facevano per guadagno avrebbero potuto senza essere procedere meglio ai loro interessi e al loro guadagno. Coi progressi della scienza economica tutte queste azioni immorali debbono venire a cessare.* This is not the only instance in which Rosmini seems to endorse a theory of *doux commerce*. In his essay on statistics, he alludes to a convergence between "exterior civilization [incivilimento esterno]" and "interior morality [interna moralità]" (Rosmini 1844: 72).

9. Barucci suggests that Gioia never approached Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, and he knew Smith's positions because of Jean-Baptiste Say. The most frequently cited author by Gioia, as far as economics is concerned, is Jean-Antoine Chaptal (1756–1832).

10. On the other hand, Piovani (1957: 54) reads Gioia as writing upon the intuition "of the importance of the new science (i.e., economics) of which he is an enthusiastic advocate." Hoevel considers Gioia, in his wide-ranging attempts to apply the economic reasoning to society, akin to a forerunner of Gary Becker's (1930–2014) economics of the family (Hoevel 2013: 40).

11. For a matter of temper, in intellectual disputes Rosmini often appears keener in emphasizing dissent over consent with other thinkers—as it is clear in a number of examples throughout his political works.

12. See, *inter alia,* Bruni and Zamagni (2017). In direct reference to Hoevel (2013), Krienke alludes to the possible sources of this misunderstanding by pointing out that "the social institutions, in a liberal and Rosminian sense, are institutions of liberty

as social realization of morality that is not the same as the morality of individual actions. *We cannot reduce, in a liberal sense, the first one to the latter one*" (Krienke 2014: 5, emphasis supplied).

13. Bulferetti (1951) proposed, contra Piovani, to read Rosmini as a Saint-Simonian.

14. Rosmini even claimed that Gioia countered Say by adulterating his (Gioia's) translation of Say's work (Rosmini 1827: 21–22n).

15. According to Romagnosi, "all the classes of the Italian people honored with their suffrage this work" (quoted in Donati 1949: 61).

16. It is also at odds with Rosmini's own classification of goods, in terms of the ability to fulfill immediate needs versus the ability to produce other goods that may satisfy needs. Graziani (1881: 218) already pointed out that "Rosmini categorizes goods into goods of immediate attitude, or of mediated attitude of the first degree, or mediated in the second degree, etc. This categorization is quite similar to Menger's … depending on their immediate, or more or less mediate, attitude to the satisfaction of our needs."

17. *non raccomandano di accumular in questo modo le cose che servono al nostro uso: sarebbe un'accumulazione stolta, un capitale giacente, perduto. Raccomandano di accumulare i capitali inservienti alla riproduzione, d'accumulare gli oggetti ne' fondachi non a nostro uso, ma pel commercio, ond'essi si fanno cagione di nuove ricchezze*

18. A theorist of unintended consequences such as Smith had of course a multifaceted vision of luxury. See Berry (1994: 152–73).

19. *s'egli sia un bene o no che vengano diminuiti [i grandi patrimoni], noi non vogliamo ora decidere: questo ci basta, di dire che se anche fossero bene che venissero diminuite le fortune colossali, non sarebbe però mai un bene che venissero diminuite mediante i vizi, mediante un eccessivo lusso, e delle mode capricciose; ma solo mediante la libertà, la beneficenza, e la carità che è il modo indicato dal Vangelo per togliere le notevoli diseguaglianze fra gli uomini.*

20. *l'Economia non può trattare la questione: è un bene o un male il lusso? è un bene o male la moda? proposta in modo così assoluto. E'solo la Morale che può deciderla. L'economia deve ristringessi a quest'altra più particolare: il lusso e la oda sono utili o dannosi l'aumento della ricchezza? in che senso, in quali circostanze, come, sono utili o dannosi alla ricchezza?*

21. *il moralista potrà condannare l'avidità d'un uomo od il suo esclusivo amore posto in un bene materiale, come la ricchezza [ma] davanti all'economista egli non è colpevole se non quando contempla la ricchezza giacente nei forzieri in luogo di*

farla fratture e produrre altra ricchezza, coll'ampliare i commerci, estendere le fabbriche e migliorare la coltura dei terreni

22. *Io credo collo Smith e con tanti alti economisti, che la più utile distribuzione della ricchezza si faccia dalla stessa natura delle cose, e tanto è più perfetta questa distribuzione e direzione di ricchezza quanto è più vasto il luogo ed il tempo in cui essa si considera … Per cui la nostra legge non viene per questo meno, se si trova qualche caso, in cui per la istantaneità del tempo o piccolezza del luogo sia trovata utile anche la direzione della ricchezza. Ma in grande è per lo meno pericolosissima, perché non si può dirigerla senza conoscere tutte le leggi del suo andamento, e senza calcolare la pressione mutua dell'infiniti agenti … Credendo aduque di fare alcuna buona istituzione che apporti ricchezza, se la inceppa e se la rattiene dall'aumentarsi*

23. "Enlightenment" of citizens eventually means for Rosmini developing among people a better appreciation of *their own* interests, which is altogether a different thing than fostering "needs," including unnecessary ones, for the sake of multiplying expenditure. See Piovani (1957: 71–72).

24. *debbe essere tanta quanta è la scienza e la volontà che possiede [the people] di usarla*

25. The interaction between freedom of initiative and progress is an important insight upon which Rosmini builds in his passionate defense of competition in education: "A civil government, in forcing all teachers and tutors to follow a sole approach it established in all branches of education, is not just inimical to the natural right to free teaching inherent to all scholars, but in addition is injurious to progress [*Un governo civile obbligando tutti i maestri ed istitutori a seguire un unico metodo da lui stabilito per ogni ramo d'istruzione, non è solo violatore del natural diritto al libero insegnamento che hanno i dotti, ma di più è nemico del progresso*]." Such a government would be "illiberal and static. It is illiberal, as it oppresses the legal freedom of teaching; it is static as it fixes the natural development of [teaching] methods, which cannot possibly progress, since the government wishes that no other method than the one it prescribed be used [*illiberale e stazionario. E' illiberale, perché opprima la libertà giuridica dell'insegnamento: è stazionario perché inchioda il naturale svolgimento dei metodi, intorno ai quali non si dà più alcun progresso possibile, dal momento che il governo non vuole che si usi altro che il suo*]" (Rosmini 1854: 197).

26. Rosmini always maintained that the emergence of trade was intertwined with the development of civil society as "Man-made wealth … is the indispensable means for the formation of civil society. Trade, as the means of enriching families amongst the people, brought in its wake the bond necessary for their union" (Rosmini 1841–45c: § 2003)

27. Smith's understanding of the virtues and the shortcomings of the commercial spirit is certainly an intensely debated matter. See Paganelli (2013).

28. In *The Constitution under Social Justice*, Rosmini states that "the private sector … exercises vigilance … because of its own interests" (Rosmini 1848: 78). Moreover, in criticizing the assumption that the sovereign was able to be caretaker of the subjects' better interest, in the *Five Wounds* Rosmini remarks that the proposition "Generally speaking, every person or corporation is the sole true judge of its own necessity" is true and confirmed by experience (Rosmini 1846; § LXIV).

29. "The case in which it may sometimes be a matter of deliberation, how far, or in what manner it is proper to restore the free importation of foreign goods, after it has been for some time interrupted, is, when particular manufacturers, by means of high duties or prohibitions upon all foreign goods which can come into competition with them, have been so far extended as to employ a great multitude of hands. Humanity may in this case, require that the freedom of trade should be restored only by slow gradations, and with a great deal of reserve and circumspection. Were those high duties and prohibitions taken away all at once, cheaper foreign goods of the same kind might be poured so fast into the home market, as to deprive all at once many thousands of our people of their ordinary employment and means of subsistence. The disorder which this would occasion might no doubt be very considerable" (*WN*, IV.ii.40: 468–69).

30. *[spirito di speculazione] … è lo stesso spirito, per cui i nostri librai quando possono col titolo di farsi pagare il bollo de' libri innalzano molto più il loro prezzo: colla differenza che questo non può fare che qualche libraio e solo con alcuni idioti comperatori, mentre il governo ha il potere di farlo sostenere tutti.*

31. Such a consumption and destruction of wealth "is not seen by those who cannot tell apart value and the form under which value presents itself … So that when money—which is the form of a value given to the prince for taxes—goes back to the state for public expenses, it only remains the labor paid for with this same money, which is but the same value under a different guise, and thus vanishes and is lost. [*il che non veggono quelli che non distinguono il valore della forma sotto cui sta il valore … Così quando il danaro, che è la forma di un valore dato al Principe per le imposte torni allo stato per le pubbliche spese non resta che il lavoro pagato con questo danaro, e che è il valor stesso sotto altra forma, non si sia dileguato e perduto*]" (Rosmini 1823: 320).

32. Indeed, "Civil government, so far as it is instituted for the security of property, is in reality instituted for the defense of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all" (*WN* V.1.55).

33. The idea that taxation was to be considered as a fee paid in exchange of public services was to become a tenet of Italian economics. Those who, like Antonio De Viti

De Marco (1858–1943), would explore it, all likewise maintained that individual consumption of public services increases with the affluence of citizens (see De Viti De Marco 1888).

34. A different interpretation of these principles is often used to support progressive taxation: "As a country that values fairness, wealthier individuals have traditionally borne a greater share of this burden than the middle class or those less fortunate. Everybody pays, but the wealthier have borne a little more. This is not because we begrudge those who've done well —we rightly celebrate their success. Instead, it's a basic reflection of our belief that those who've benefited most from our way of life can afford to give back a little bit more" (Obama 2011).

35. "Ground-rents and the ordinary rent of land are a species of revenue which the owner, in many cases, enjoys without any care or attention of his own. Though a part of this revenue should be taken from him in order to defray the expenses of the state, no discouragement will thereby be given to any sort of industry. The annual produce of the land and labour of the society, the real wealth and revenue of the great body of the people, might be the same after such a tax as before" (*WN* V.2.75).