

**PHILOSOPHY,
HISTORY, AND
METHODOLOGY OF
ECONOMICS**

**Saving Adam Smith: A Tale of Wealth,
Transformation, and Virtue**

Jonathan B. Wight

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Pedagogical novels are seldom successful, either as doctrine or as fiction. When they do work, it is usually the genius for language and characterization of the author that sustains an otherwise tenuous combination. One thinks of the socially conscious novels of Charles Dickens, or the great allegorical construction of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Jonathan Wight is by no means attempting to replicate such high and serious labor in his debut novel, *Saving Adam Smith*. In fact, the charm of the work is its tongue-in-cheek use of the novelistic form. Wight makes this clear in his "Preface," where he quotes Adam Smith's unknown (and perhaps unexpected) *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*: "It is only the teller of Ridiculous Stories that can be at all tolerable in conversation, as we know his design is harmless so we are readily inclined to grant him some license." Far from apologizing in advance, though, Wight is actually guiding the reader away from form, which is merely his vehicle to accomplish a fresh and intriguing end.

The goal of the novel is to reintroduce the ideas of Adam Smith to a contemporary society that, at best, uses the great thinker as a sound bite for the defense of capitalism. That goal, it seems to me, is accomplished both thoroughly and engagingly. It is Adam Smith, the moral philosopher, who emerges from the shadows of *laissez faire* and "the invisible hand" to assert his place. It is the Smith of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (the 1759 treatise that he considered his magnum opus and the groundwork for all the

theorizing in his now more famous work, *The Wealth of Nations*) that takes center stage. Wight's creation of Smith as a character in his novel seems an inspired way of exhibiting the humanness that was at the center of Smith's vision for the free society and free market.

At first glance, the premise of Adam Smith channeling through the mind of an elderly Romanian immigrant auto mechanic, who ends up on a cross-country road trip with a disaffected Ph.D. candidate in economics, seems more than a bit unwieldy. Enter a domineering, corporately connected dissertation director with the demeanor of a drill-sergeant, and a stalker (who is himself a disillusioned former economics Ph.D. student) from the left-wing advocacy group POP (People Over Profits), and the plot begins to stretch thin. But all this indictment and caricature of economists within the academy is Wight's master-stroke; it becomes apparent that the average reader is at no greater disadvantage in a true understanding of Adam Smith than many contemporary professionals within the discipline. In fact, Smith's appearance has been prompted by his outrage at the way his name has been used to justify reckless capitalism, both as taught in the academy and as practiced in the marketplace.

When Rich Burns, the central character who is battling in the slough of dissertation despond, tries to confirm his doubt that the voice he has encountered is the real Smith, he struggles to come up with any first-hand knowledge of the thinker: "Where had I put it? There, used as a bookend for my research folders, was Adam Smith's, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776. I had found it at a yard sale, and strange as it sounds, I never cracked it in school. Why should I have? History of economic thought was a dying field during my graduate school days, populated by those who could not stomach calculus and matrix algebra" (36).

Things are worse when he goes into the library stacks to look for *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, which the voice of Smith had insisted was his true masterpiece: "I moved to a library carrel and sat down. Cautiously, I lifted the cover. The lending card showed it had been checked out only once. But the spine was stiff, the pages uncut. This book had never been read by anyone.... I turned to the first chapter and soon was reading, blinking, and murmuring. My expectation had been of a dull, irrelevant treatise on moral philosophy. I was having trouble reconciling that view with the effervescent insights and sparkling writing that jumped from the pages" (39).

Much of the plot is taken up with this difficulty of reconciling a quantitative, skeptical, economics education with the startlingly moral concerns of Smith. Over the course of their circuitous drive from Virginia to California, with its numerous roadside stopovers, Smith offers extended explanations of his principles to the struggling Burns. The banter is full of insights such as this: "Smith seemed unperturbed. I decided to gently provoke him. 'Do you have the gall to presume you're wiser than the masses? Isn't that pure snobbery?' Smith stretched. 'Rocking your boat, am I? Moral philosophy, at least as I practice it, examines motives,' he said. 'That's the key to this riddle. You, however, focus on the external behavior and ignore motives. But to what purpose is all the toil and bustle of this world? What is the reason for avarice and ambition? It

is the vanity, not the ease, or the pleasure, which interests men in acquiring things” (112).

Indeed, it is in repudiating selfishness that Smith offers his central insights: the function of conscience, the necessity of a moral imagination, and the importance of ‘fellow-feeling’ in making economic exchange viable. When Burns finally has the insight that will anchor his long-overdue dissertation, he reflects back on the new world that Smith has revealed to him: “While modern economic theories exhibited logical elegance, did they address the interconnectedness of one to another, in social and moral ways? Could there be true understanding without that? Moreover, mainstream economics seemed to require nothing of the individual by way of personal change and transformation, nor did it acknowledge, encourage, or inspire anyone to care a whit for anyone else’s well-being” (233).

These sorts of revelations are certainly meant as a goad to the discipline of economics, as carried forth in the American academy (Wight himself teaches in the Robins School of Business at the University of Richmond). As it turns out, the real antagonist of Smith’s ideas is not Burns, nor even the left-wing radical Max Hess (who seems actually to understand the threat of Smith’s ideas to his own agenda) but, rather, the much-lauded Professor Lattimer, the hectoring dissertation director. It is Lattimer who offers consultation on global economy from his ironic Adam Smith Chair of Economics at a prestigious East-coast university, consultations that lead to rash privatizations and untold suffering for masses of people in transitioning nations. It is Lattimer who is pushing Burns to finish his dissertation in time to present the findings to the mega-corporation WorldChem, who need the information in their takeover of a huge Russian industry. It is Lattimer who represents all that is wrong, in Wight’s view, with the practice of economics in the world today. By the end of the story, with its twists and surprises, I was ready to throw in my hat with Burns, as revivalist of Smith’s more human philosophies.

Wight seems to intend his novel for use in the undergraduate classroom; he includes several appendices, with a timeline of Smith’s life, a copious section of explanatory notes for most of the statements that the character Smith makes in the story, and a guide to literature not only on Smith and economics theory but also global development. There is even a brief guide for instructors. The book thus serves as an engaging, if quirky, presentation of important economic ideas, with enough apparatus to make it a mini-course unto itself. Wight’s novel—or perhaps it would be better to say that Adam Smith himself—will not fail to engage any reader who wonders why we are where we are as a civilization, and how things might improve.

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