Reactionary Politics and the Remaking of the Economic Subject: Bentham and Godwin in the Shadow of Revolution

In 1828, at the age of twenty-two, John Stuart Mill discovered the poetry of William Wordsworth. Mired in the depths of a prolonged depression sparked by his disillusionment with the utilitarian philosophy inculcated in him by his father, Mill found in Wordsworth’s writings “a source of inward joy, of sympathetic and imaginative pleasure, which could be shared in by all human beings; which had no connexion with struggle or imperfection, but would be made richer by every improvement in the physical or social condition of mankind.”¹ This discovery marked the turning point in his intellectual and moral development, the moment when he abandoned the (to his mind) crude hedonism of Benthamite psychology to instead place the cultivation of the imagination at the center of his conception of happiness and human flourishing.

This story, as famously recounted in Mill’s Autobiography, has long served as a neat encapsulation of the competing intellectual currents in 19th century British society; Gradgrind with his “rule and a pair of scales… ready to weigh and measure any parcel of human nature” versus Blake’s visionary evocation of the “dark satanic mills.”² At the core of this cleavage rests a critique of classical political economy, and in particular the popular image of its human subject as narrowly self-interested, utility-maximizing, concerned only with profit and loss. Much effort has been spent in searching for the origins of this charmless character. Above all, it has been associated with an intellectual lineage stretching from Adam Smith to Jeremy Bentham and the philosophic radicals, whose reductive conception of human psychology led them “with the dryest naiveté” to believe, in Marx’s sarcastic summation, that “the modern petty bourgeois, especially the English petty

bourgeois, is the normal man. Whatever is useful to this peculiar kind of normal man, and to his world, is useful in and of itself.” If not always so cutting, this linkage of Smith to the Benthamites in constituting the canon of classical political economy has defined much subsequent scholarship on the subject, from Élie Halévy’s argument that the doctrines of the philosophic radicals were simply “their economic psychology put into the imperative” or A. V. Dicey’s invocation of the “firm of Smith and Bentham” to Michel Foucault’s excavation of the mid-18th century origins of liberal governmentality.

Recent research, however, suggest that the connection between Smith and the utilitarians is far from obvious. A wave of studies on Enlightenment political economy have recovered the fundamental ethical concerns at the heart of Smith’s thought, moving beyond the so-called “Adam Smith problem” to reveal a philosopher concerned above all with questions of sympathy, social harmony, and economic justice. Far from a champion of the ruthless pursuit of self-interest, Smith has instead been revealed as one of capitalism’s earliest critics. Yet if this interpretation is correct, we are left with the question of why his sentimental economics became the “dismal science” of Victorian lore. How did the utility-maximizing agent associated with Bentham and his disciples come to replace the Smithian subject, a subject enmeshed in a web of human relations marked not by profit-minded rationality but by capacities of imagination, affective empathy, and moral sophistication far removed from the caricature of *homo economicus*?


Here the scholarship is less clear. Following Emma Rothschild, answers to this problem have focused on the ways in which Revolutionary-era politics transformed political economy into the “conservative” discipline which emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century, fingerling Thomas Malthus, Dugald Stewart, and David Ricardo as the primary culprits in distorting Smith’s original views. As such, they contribute to a broader portrait of Britain during the Napoleonic Wars as fundamentally reactionary, driven by fear of the Jacobins and the looming threat of an emerging working class into a jingoistic, King and country conservatism which would only begin to fade in the 1820s. Aristocratic and authoritarian, the British state reasserted its power over the people, strengthened traditional social hierarchies, and tightened its administrative grip both at home and abroad. The severing of the connection between economic thought and political emancipation between Smith and Ricardo thus appears of a piece with a broader story of political reaction, in which an obsessive fear of radical republicanism and the looming threat of persecution for sedition closed off avenues for social reform. Only after Britain’s triumph in the Napoleonic Wars, these accounts suggest, could it resume the march of liberal progress it had begun in 1688.

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Yet this narrative fails to take into account precisely those insights into the nature of Smith’s political economy that scholars have spilled so much ink in attempting to recover. For not only does the anachronistic characterization of classical political economy as “conservative” obscure its role in movements for reform throughout the British Empire from the 1790s onward, but it elides the dramatic transformation in the core assumptions distinguishing Smith from James Mill or Ricardo, a transformation which marked not simply an abandonment of his broader political concerns and a turn toward a purely technical emphasis on questions of rent, taxation, and exchange, but the substitution of Smith’s sentimental psychology for a radically different theory of mind altogether.⁹ In doing so, it preserves the link between Scottish Enlightenment philosophy and nineteenth-century liberalism central to Whig historiography, reproducing a narrative which sees classical liberalism as the apotheosis of a moderate but irresistible movement for democratic reform distinct from its violent Continental counterparts. In contrast, this paper will argue that the remaking of political economy during the 1790s, and in particular the ascendance of the utilitarian doctrines so central to classical liberalism, arose precisely from the amenability of those doctrines to the anti-democratic politics of the era. Understanding the remaking of the economic subject in accord with Benthamite utility suggests that what became classical liberalism arose not in spite of political reaction, but rather in close alliance with it.

Making this argument requires moving beyond Rothschild’s posited decoupling of Smith’s political project from his economic doctrines to explore the changing nature of economic theory itself.¹⁰ In particular, this paper focuses on the evolution of the concept of utility – a concept not central to Smith’s own *Wealth of Nations* – during the crucial decade of the 1790s. Beginning in the

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1780s, utility had begun to emerge as a key theme in discussions of political and economic reform. A raft of publications argued that the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number – the maximization of utility – must form the starting point for any theory of proper governance. Yet definitions of utility remained supple and unfixed, with numerous authors deploying conflicting conceptions of the term. Focusing on the parallel lives of Jeremy Bentham and William Godwin, the two most influential of these early utilitarian writers, this paper traces the fate of their competing notions of utility during the years of political reaction which followed the outbreak of the French Revolution. Specifically, it demonstrates the close relationship between Godwin’s concept of utility and that developed by Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, both of which placed utility in a relational theory of human psychology emphasizing the imaginative faculties of the human mind. Bentham, on the other hand, understood utility as a calculable function derivable from the predictable actions of self-interested, atomized individuals, radically diverging from both Smith and Godwin in proposing a “felicific calculus” which would allow for the mathematical calculation of human pleasure and pain. Extracting utility from the psychological framework proposed by Smith and Godwin, Bentham instead placed it within a purely material context, dismissing sympathy and antipathy as mere “sources of irrational exercises of the will” and imagination as merely “the source

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11 Utility first appears as a key political concept in the writings of David Hume, but it is in the 1780s that thinkers from a number of traditions began a broader discussion of the term. See Frederick Rosen, *Classical Utilitarianism from Hume to Mill* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003); Michael B. Gill, *The British Moralists on Human Nature and the Birth of Secular Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).


14 Smith’s objections to the mathematical modeling of human behavior are well known. See his comments on the field of political arithmetic in *The Wealth of Nations*, vol. ii, 42. See also Adam Smith to George Chalmers, 10 November 1785, in *The Correspondence of Adam Smith*, Ernest Campbell Mossner and Ian Simpson Ross, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 288. For the felicific calculus see Bentham, *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, ch. IV.
of irrational exercises of the understanding." It is here, rather than in Smith, that the outlines of an identifiable *homo economicus* come into view.

Understanding the process by which Bentham’s unusual conception of utility became embedded in the emerging discipline of political economy requires an approach to the history of ideas concerned as much with political contingencies and institutional constraints as with readings of particular texts. Amidst a concerted campaign by the British state against alleged republican subversion, radicals such as Bentham and Godwin had to navigate the active threat of persecution by the authorities while pursuing their own dreams for political reform. Here, their different conceptions of utility were crucial. Bentham, preoccupied with utility as an end achievable through scientific legislation and administrative efficiencies, and intensely hostile to doctrines of natural rights, could present his radical philosophy as a means of depoliticizing controversial issues, isolating economic problems as purely technical questions concerned with the facilitation of material development. Godwin, attached to a holistic conception of utility embedded in the psychological faculties of interrelated human beings, instead took up the cause of economic justice as a pressing political issue, riding the wave of post-1789 Revolutionary optimism only to crash upon the rocks of conservative reaction.


16 All the more remarkable, then, is the general lack of attention paid to Bentham in the scholarship on political economy after Adam Smith. The sharp break in attitudes toward economics after 1789, and Bentham’s centrality to this shift, has not, however, gone entirely unrecognized. See J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 50.


18 Bentham’s absolute rejection of the concept of rights as a foundation for political action was evident from his very first political writings. His first publication, written with John Lind and solicited by the British government, famously attacked the American colonists’ declaration of independence from Britain as “nonsense upon stilts.” See the essay appended to John Lind and Jeremy Bentham, *An Answer to the Declaration of the American Congress*, 6th ed. (Aberdeen: Printed for J. Boyle, 1777), 119 – 132.

19 For a full treatment of Godwin’s political marginalization in the 1790s, see Johnston, *Unusual Suspects*, ch. 2.
By the end of the Napoleonic Wars, their reputations had experienced dramatically divergent fates. Where Bentham, particularly through his disciples James Mill and David Ricardo, had begun to exert a powerful influence over reformist Whigs chastened by the perceived excesses of the Jacobins, Godwin, entirely marginalized from British politics, found his views slowly rediscovered by circles associated with the early romantics. Here, among Shelley, Coleridge, Wordsworth, and other critics of industrial capitalism, an analysis of society stemming from a kind of sentimental moral psychology experienced a rebirth – an analysis at once opposed to a classical political economy now grounded in Bentham’s conception of utility, and yet, in crucial ways, far more akin to Adam Smith’s own thought than that of his apparent successors. Thus when John Stuart Mill turned to Wordsworth upon despairing of the Benthamite doctrines in which he had been raised, he had not simply found solace in the pleasures of pastoral poetry: he had inadvertently rediscovered the imaginative principles central to Adam Smith’s own economic and political thought.

I. The Utilitarian Moment

When Adam Smith first takes up the question of utility in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, he embeds it immediately within a complex psychological context far removed from *homo economicus*. Describing the dynamic relationship between the “conveniency” of an object and its perceived aesthetic value, he gives the example of a watch, a device designed to facilitate punctuality and precision, a function so prized that, if it “falls behind above two minutes in a day, is despised by one

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curious in watches.”

Yet Smith emphasizes not the utility of the watch for keeping our engagements but rather the ways in which we lose sight of that utility in favor of the intrinsic beauty of its mechanism, going so far as to trade in a slightly faulty watch for a far more expensive one of only marginally greater convenience. The aesthetic experience of utility quickly overwhelms its practical purpose. Indeed, as Smith wryly notes, the owner of a fine watch may in practice “not always be found either more scrupulously punctual than other men, or more anxiously concerned upon any other account to know precisely what time of day it was.” Irrationally, utility loses its connection to convenience and instead becomes valued as a kind of beauty. Smith leaves us with the image of people so obsessed with the aesthetic perfection of useful devices that they “ruin themselves by laying out money on trinkets of frivolous utility,” walking about “loaded with baubles… of which the whole utility is certainly not worth the fatigue of bearing the burden.”

Utility thus becomes, for Smith, not a material quantity one might measure and model but a species of irrational passion, in which the apparent usefulness of an object in producing a particular convenience leads to an irrational fetishization of the object itself. It is a sentiment rather than a quantity. It is from here that he enters into a discussion of economic life. He describes a “poor man’s son” who, comparing his life to that of the rich, comes to despise his own condition, and aspires to obtain their conveniences and pleasures. He imagines himself living in the fine houses of the wealthy, being “carried about in machines” and with a “numerous retinue of servants.” “Enchanted with the distant idea of this felicity,” he becomes consumed with ambition, and “

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22 He owes much of his reading of the relationship between utility and beauty to David Hume, who explores the topic at length in both the *Treatise of Human Nature* and the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. Smith sees his principal contribution as delineating the irrational effects produced by utility’s perceived aesthetic value.

23 Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, IV, ch. i., 179 – 180: “that this fitness, this happy contrivance of any production of art, should often be more valued, than the very end for which it was intended; and that the exact adjustment of the means for attaining any convenience or pleasure, should be frequently more regarded, than that very convenience or pleasure, in the attainment of which their whole merit would seem to consist, has not, so far as I know, been yet taken notice of by any body.”

the most unrelenting industry he labours night and day to acquire talents superior to all his competitors.” Far from relishing his success at the end of his days, however, the poor man’s son instead discovers that he has merely “sacrificed a real tranquility that [was] at all times in his power” for the false dream of an imagined utility, and dies in a condition “in no respect preferable to that humble security and contentment which he had abandoned” for the luxuries of the rich. In the end, “wealth and greatness are mere trinkets of frivolous utility,” and the boy who may have spent his days “[sunning] himself by the side of the highway” instead dies “wasted with toil and diseases, his mind galled and ruffled by the memory of a thousand injuries and disappointments.”

What to make of this curious parable? If read simply as a moralizing diatribe against the false promise of material wealth, it seems ill-fitted to Adam Smith, theorist of capitalism. Yet it is in this very chapter that the image of an invisible hand first appears. In Smith’s account, our economic activities occur within a complex circuitry of psychological desire and aversion. Our imaginative faculties compel us to pursue ends which quickly spiral beyond their logical limit, and it is “this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind,” maintaining that “oeconomy of greatness” which supplies the wealthy with their “trinkets and baubles” even as it supplies the poor with “that share of the necessaries of life, which they would in vain have expected from [the wealthy man’s] humanity or his justice.” Patterns of market exchange arise from a dense network of psychological affinities, and the invisible hand underscores not the tranquil equilibrium brought about by market exchange but the complex interweaving of desire, fear, emulation, and

25 Ibid., 181.
26 Ibid., 181, 185, 181.
28 Smith, TMS, 184.
29 Ibid., 183 – 184.
aversion which shapes our everyday social interactions. If these interactions nonetheless bring about some measure of prosperity, it does not follow, for Smith, that this prosperity represents a good in itself. Continually preoccupied with the moral and psychological dimension of social relations, his political economy never confines itself to pure materiality, and the proper end of a just economic order lies not in greater wealth but in shared access to the conditions necessary for mental wellbeing, that “real tranquility” he cites as the true test of a successful life.  

This concern becomes ever more evident in Smith’s mature economic writings, where the pursuit of utility always comes qualified with correlative psychological drawbacks. Thus he shows how the division of labor, key to the production of all those useful and pleasing objects lusted after by the consuming public, also desiccates the minds of workers. Trapped in an endless cycle of drudgery, mindlessly completing the same set of limited tasks, their imaginative capacities fade in the face of unrelenting repetition. And it is at precisely this point that Smith argues for state intervention: “in every improved and civilized society this is the state into which the laboring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless government takes some pains to prevent it.” Universal education becomes both a moral and, crucially, an economic imperative – for without attention to the mental wellbeing of the workers, how will they continue to invent labor-saving machines, central to Smith’s account of the manufacturing process? A lack of attention to the psychological effects of the economic system will ultimately undermine the system itself.

Likewise, Smith’s emphasis on the necessity of high wages for labor rests on a perceived connection between industriousness and psychological wellbeing. As he puts it, “a plentiful

30 Ibid., 182 – 183.
32 As Smith puts it, “the man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects too are, perhaps, always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding, or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become.” See Wealth of Nations, V., ch. i., 303. On the connection between labor and invention see bk. 1, ch. 1, pp. 13 – 14.
subsistence increases the bodily strength of the labourer, and the comfortable hope of bettering his condition, and of ending his days perhaps in ease and plenty, animates him to exert that strength to the utmost. Where wages are high, accordingly, we shall always find the workmen more active, diligent, and expeditious, than where they are low.”

Even more remarkably, Smith makes the case for a moderate work ethic, noting how “mutual emulation and the desire of great gain, frequently prompted [laborers] to over-work themselves, and to hurt their health by excessive labour.” An awareness of the medical dangers of hard work should encourage the enlightened employer “rather to moderate, than to animate the application of many of their workmen.” Even the desire for “dissipation and diversion” requires attention, and without a chance for ease and revelry, what Smith refers to as the “call of nature,” trade might experience a “peculiar infirmity.”

Far from proposing an economics concerned only with processes of material gain, Smith instead reveals himself as continually preoccupied with the psychological health of the laboring population, a preoccupation not ancillary to his economic arguments but instead essential to his analysis. Utility, far from a simple quantity of happiness produced by the operation of the “system of natural liberty,” instead remains enmeshed in the emotional and imaginative faculties of human beings, whose wellbeing must always remain the central preoccupation of political economy.

With William Godwin utility becomes the central object of political action. Writing to his mother at the age of twenty-eight, Godwin claims to see “nothing worth living for but the usefulness and the service of my fellow creatures. The only object I pursue is to increase as far as lies

33 Ibid., 91.
34 Ibid., 92.
35 This famous phrase is followed, importantly, by Smith’s elaboration of the duties of the sovereign within such a system: “first, the duty of protecting the society from the violence and invasion of other independent societies; secondly, the duty of protecting, as far as possible, every member of the society from the injustice or oppression of every other member of it, or the duty of establishing an exact administration of justice; and, thirdly, the duty of erecting certain public works and certain public institutions.” Given the psychological framework emphasized here, we can safely presume that the state interventions Smith advocates go far beyond the night watchman state supported by so many of Smith’s supposed successors. See IfN, bk. IV, ch. IX, 208 – 209.
in my power the quantity of their knowledge and goodness and happiness.”36 Again in a letter to the novelist Harriet Lee (whom Godwin unsuccessfully attempted to woo), he argues that it is “in acts of utility, which, by producing the happiness of individuals, add to the general stock, a wise and a just man will place his pleasure and his pride.”37 The emphasis on quantity and measure, on a “general stock” of happiness constituted by the happiness of each individual, appears akin to Bentham’s felicific calculus. Yet closer attention to Godwin’s writings reveals a concept instead, like Smith’s, embedded in a rich analysis of human psychology. In Political Justice, the fullest expression of his political theory, Godwin makes a firm distinction between intellectual and material pleasure, arguing that “intellectual and moral happiness is extremely to be preferred to those which are precarious and transitory,” making a case for the infinite perfectibility of men and women premised not on a mechanical hedonism but on the capacities of our moral imagination.38 He decries the tendency to reduce people to “mere machines,” and praises “works of imagination” as the means for presenting the “materials and rude sketches of intellectual improvement,” waxing lyrical on the mind’s capacity to “shake off the fetters of prescription and prejudice, when it boldly takes a flight into the world unknown.”39

Persistently placing utility within a language of moral and intellectual development rather than material satisfaction, Godwin rejects arguments for political economy premised solely on the production and accumulation of wealth. Instead, he argues that the perfection of humanity depends on an economics of redistribution, ending the injustices imposed upon the poor by the rich through

38 William Godwin, Political Justice, 1.
their control of the state apparatus. Much like Smith, his central emphasis is not merely on material, but on psychological wellbeing: “every man is entitled, so far as the general stock will suffice, not only to the means of being, but of well being. It is unjust, if one man labour to the destruction of his health and life, that another man may abound in luxuries. It is unjust, if one man be deprived of leisure to cultivate his rational powers, while another man contributes not a single effort to add to the common stock.”

Godwin claims that “the spirit of oppression, the spirit of servility, and the spirit of fraud… are the immediate growth of the established system of property,” a system “hostile to intellectual and moral improvement.” Instead, he argues for an equal distribution of property, an end to rights of inheritance, and equal access to material resources, which alone can allow for the perfection of our mental capacities. If such “leveling principles” sound far removed from the system of natural liberty proposed in the *Wealth of Nations*, recall Smith’s own castigation of primogeniture and entail as premised on “the most absurd of all suppositions, the supposition that every successive generation of men have not an equal right to the earth, and to all that it possesses.”

For both Smith and Godwin, utility clearly remains embedded in a psychological framework centered more on our moral and imaginative faculties than our material interests. This conception fundamentally shapes their economic analyses, as evidenced by their convergent concern with the mental wellbeing of the laboring classes, their opposition to laws of inheritance, and their consistent

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40 Godwin, *Political Justice*, 22, 24 – 25. See also William Godwin’s letter to the editor of the *British Critic*, 7 June 1795, noting that “the law authorised a rich man to spoil the crop of a poor one, to poison his cattle, or to commit him to jail upon an absurd and sophistical charge of burglary.” *Letters of William Godwin*, 1:117.


42 *Ibid.*, 432. Godwin is acutely aware of the moral degradation induced by the continual experience of economic inequality: “Humanity weeps over the distresses of the peasantry of all civilised nations; and, when she turns from this spectacle to behold the luxury of their lords, gross, imperious and prodigal, her sensations certainly are not less acute. This spectacle is the school in which mankind have been educated. They have been accustomed to the sight of injustice, oppression and iniquity, till their feelings are made callous, and the understandings incapable of apprehending the nature of true virtue,” p. 429.

denunciation of the injustices committed by landlords, merchants, and employers against the mass of the population. With Bentham this changes. For him, utility simply comprises the sum of pleasures over pains, considered with regard to their “intensity, duration, certainty or uncertainty, and propinquity or remoteness.” He makes no distinction between mental and physical pleasure, and rejects systems of morality, such as Smith’s, premised on the “principle of sympathy and antipathy,” which falsely relate our emotional sentiments to ethical action. A convinced materialist, Bentham expressed profound hostility to any politics based on “groundless uninstructive and delusive falsehoods,” rejecting the entire tradition of political thought from Hobbes to Rousseau in favor of the principle of utility. Considering concepts such as the state of nature or the social contract as mere “principle[s] of delusion,” he instead sought to imitate Newton, claiming that “what Newton’s three laws of nature are or at least were meant to be in dynamics, J.B.’s pathological axioms will be” for the principles of legislation. Proposing a Copernican revolution in political theory, Bentham believed that by focusing his attention solely on the “sensations” produced by particular acts he could produce an entire framework of government rigorously grounded in material outcomes, a “pannomion” so comprehensive as to render politics itself irrelevant. Shunning the emphasis on communication, social affinity, and imaginative empathy shared by Smith and Godwin, the “hermit of Queen’s Square Place” sought to reform humanity from his drawing room, continually perfecting his schemes “with reference to the service of mankind.”

46 Jeremy Bentham to Étienne Dumont, 14 May 1802, Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham, 7:25.
47 Ibid., 27.
49 Bentham repeatedly refers to himself in his correspondence as a hermit, “never seeing anybody but for some special reason,” and refers to his home at Queen’s Square Place as a hermitage. See Jeremy Bentham to John Mulford, 1 November 1810, Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham, 8:77 – 78.
Political economy was central to this program of radical reform. A convinced disciple of Smith, whom he referred to as “that illustrious master,” Bentham believed that the science of political economy offered the key to the achievement of material prosperity, and as such, to utility itself. Yet his professed allegiance to the Scottish master betrays profound differences, differences stemming from their divergent conceptions of human nature. Attempting to write a “manual of political economy” in the mid-1790s, Bentham preempts critics who might object that the subject “has already been treated by Dr. Adam Smith… a writer of great and distinguished merit” by noting that Smith had “with matters belonging to political economy… mixed matters foreign to that subject.”

To what “foreign matters” does Bentham refer? Plainly, the very moral and psychological concerns central to Smith’s approach. As Bentham understands it, political economy is a science concerned with “directing the national industry to the purposes to which it may be directed with the greatest advantage,” the sole end of which is the accumulation of wealth. He dismisses outright the notion that economic equality, or rather the problem of ensuring “that the poorer should be less poor rather than that the richer should be less rich,” belongs to the subject at all, dismissing it as something which “will hardly be thought to come within the pale of political economy.”

Where Smith in the Wealth of Nations dwells at length on questions of economic justice, Bentham banishes them entirely from consideration. Severing the connection between psychological wellbeing and economic growth, Bentham argues for a strictly delimited economic materialism, emptied entirely of broader political and social concerns.

\[50\] Jeremy Bentham to George Ross, July 1799, Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham, 6:184. In his “Manual of Political Economy” he again refers to Smith as “that illustrious writer.” See Economic Writings, 1:223. See also his letter to Adam Smith in July 1790, Correspondence, 4:134; In another letter to his brother regarding recent corn riots, he writes that “my prepossessions are certainly in favour of liberty and Adam Smith,” Jeremy Bentham to Samuel Bentham, 15 September 1800, Correspondence, 6:359 – 360.

\[51\] Bentham, Economic Writings, 1:224.

\[52\] Ibid., 1:226.

\[53\] Ibid., fn. 1.
Instead, he occupies himself only with explicating “the axioms and principles relating to subsistence and abundance.” Gain and loss, taxation and exchange, profit and price: these, for Bentham, form the sole object of political economy, of which the mind “can abstractly consider everything… and form a general theory concerning it.” At the center of this general theory lies not the Smithian subject, motivated by a complex concatenation of competing desires, emotions, sympathies, and aversions, but a subject in which “self-regarding interest is predominant over all other interests put together… by the principle of self-preference… every human being is led to pursue that line of conduct which, according to his view of the case, taken by him at the moment, will be in the highest degree contributory to his own greatest happiness, whatsoever be the effect of it, in relation to the happiness of other similar beings, any or all of them taken together.” Only now does something resembling homo economicus resolve into view. Individual actors, concerned strictly with their own material well-being, interacting in the market with a view only to heightening their own pleasures and lessening their own pains: utility-maxizing agents competing under the golden rule of laissez-nous-faire.

II. Radicalism and Revolution

Explaining why Bentham’s conception of utility became central to classical political economy requires an account of the fate of political radicalism in Britain during the late eighteenth century. The years between the loss of the American colonies in 1783 and the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 were years of flux, an era of ideological “eclecticism” marked by a willingness to draw “freely on a wide range of intellectual traditions and [to mobilize] rhetoric from a variety of political languages.”

54 Ibid., 1:94.
55 Ibid., 3:421.
56 For Bentham’s use of the phrase, see Jeremy Bentham to Baron Holland, 13 November 1808, Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham, 7:567.
57 Mark Philp, Reforming Ideas in Britain, 118.
of traditional rhetoric lauding that empire as “protestant, commercial, maritime, and free,” political activists of all stripes committed themselves to plans for reform.\textsuperscript{58} The India Act of 1784, Pitt’s attempted parliamentary reforms of 1785, and the incendiary trial for corruption of Warren Hastings, former Governor-General for Bengal, attest to the unsettled political climate of the years between the two revolutions.\textsuperscript{59}

It was in this climate that young radicals such as Bentham and Godwin first found their political footing. Bentham, educated as a barrister at Oxford and Lincoln’s Inn, published his first summation of the principle of utility as part of a critique of William Blackstone’s commentaries on the common law.\textsuperscript{60} Godwin, trained as a minister in the dissenting tradition, found his religious opinions too heterodox for his congregations, and soon moved to London, where he began writing for Whig newspapers and political journals.\textsuperscript{61} For both, the outbreak of revolution in France elicited euphoric reactions. Writing to his father, Bentham described himself as “full of joy at the dawn of prosperity that opens to them [the French], and of hope for its consummation.”\textsuperscript{62} Likewise Godwin, writing to the opposition Whig minister Charles James Fox, described the era as one “from which the liberty and melioration of the world will take their date. Nothing can stop the dissemination of principle. No power on earth can shut the scene that has been opened.”\textsuperscript{63}

These hopes led both to plunge into agitation for political reform. For Godwin, this meant participating in the political scene of 1790s London, associating with the likes of John Thelwall, Mary Wollstonecraft (whom he married), and Thomas Paine, all radical activists calling for the

\textsuperscript{58} For this pithy phrase, see David Armitage, \textit{The Ideological Origins of the British Empire} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
\textsuperscript{60} Jeremy Bentham, \textit{A Fragment on Government} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988; first published 1776).
\textsuperscript{61} In particular, the \textit{New Annual Register} and the short-lived Whig journal \textit{Political Herald}.
\textsuperscript{63} William Godwin to Charles James Fox, 29 September 1793, \textit{Letters of William Godwin}, 1:87.
overthrow of aristocracy, the redistribution of property, and the rights of man.\textsuperscript{64} A highly visible voice in the press, he publicly rebuked the conservative government of the younger William Pitt, defended Paine during his trial for seditious libel, and spoke out against the regime of domestic surveillance and censorship imposed by the Tory administration.\textsuperscript{65} In a series of letters published under the pseudonym Mucius, Godwin decried the “despotism and injustice” of the campaign against radicalism, condemned the Society for Protecting Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers for their attacks on Thomas Paine, and described the turn against reform in Britain as a revival of the “principles of the inquisition.”\textsuperscript{66} He reached the height of political fame with his celebrated attack on the government during the Treason Trials of 1794, defending members of the London Corresponding Society and the Society for Constitutional Information against the charge of high treason for their activities in support of the French Revolution.\textsuperscript{67} Committed to the optimism unleashed by the events of 1789 even amidst Robespierre’s terror, Godwin became, after Paine himself, perhaps the leading light of Revolutionary politics in Britain – a position for which he would pay a heavy price when the space for radicalism narrowed after 1795.\textsuperscript{68}

Bentham responded to the Revolution quite differently. While he expressed an enthusiasm equal to Godwin’s, his political motives remained distinct. For Bentham, 1789 presented the


\textsuperscript{65} For Godwin’s critique of the so-called “Gagging Acts” of 1795 (the Seditious Meetings Act and the Treason Act), see “Considerations on Lord Grenville’s and Mr. Pitt’s Bills, Concerning Reasonable and Seditious Practices, and Unlawful Assemblies” in William Godwin, \textit{Political Writings II}, vol. 2 in the \textit{Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin}, Mark Philp ed. (London: William Pickering, 1993), 123 – 162.

\textsuperscript{66} See the articles in the \textit{Morning Chronicle}, 8 February 1793; 26 March 1793.

\textsuperscript{67} See “Cursory Strictures on the Charge Delivered by Lord Chief Justice Eyre to the Grand Jury,” \textit{Political Writings II}, 65 – 121.

\textsuperscript{68} For Godwin’s opinion on Robespierre see William Godwin to Alexander Jardine, 25 – 29 September 1793, \textit{Letters of William Godwin}, 1:84 – 85: “Do not exclaim so bitterly upon Robespierre! I, like you, will weep over his errors; but I must still continue to regard him as an eminent benefactor of mankind.” On his prominence in radical circles see Johnston, \textit{Unusual Suspects}, 24.
opportunity for putting his legislative principles into practice. Avoiding the furor of treason trials, reform societies, and public debate, he instead sought to influence the activities of the French Assembly directly. In April of 1789 he wrote to André Morellet, the French philosophe and translator of Beccaria’s *On Crimes and Punishments*, proposing that he distribute his recently written treatise on *Political Tactics* (a comparative study of French and British parliamentary procedure) to the representatives of the Estates General.⁶⁹ Although a French translation of the work ultimately came to nothing, the scheme is representative of Bentham’s obsession with questions of procedure, process, and legislation even amidst the political tumult of the early 1790s. Claiming that he did not “care two straws about liberty,” and that the “best thing that can happen to the Declaration of Rights, will be, that it should become a dead letter,” Bentham’s support for the Revolution was qualified from the beginning by his absolute aversion to the idea of natural rights.⁷⁰ Instead, his interest remained unswervingly in remaking France’s penal and legal institutions in accord with the principle of utility. By 1791, even before the rise of the Jacobins, Bentham had already turned against the Assemblée Nationale, disgusted with the “violent hands” they had laid upon private property, an institution attacked with “so flagrant, and so unnecessary a disregard for the feelings of individuals.”⁷¹ In perhaps the best summation of his own views on Revolutionary politics, Bentham, in response to the news that the assembly had granted him the honorary status of *citoyen*, declared that “passions and prejudices divide men: great principles unite them. Faithful to these - as true as they are simple - I should think myself a weak reasoner and a bad citizen, were I not, though a

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⁷¹ Jeremy and Samuel Bentham to Baron St Helens, 8 July 1791, *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, 4:319 – 320.
royalist in London, a republican in Paris.” Devoted only to ends, Bentham believed he could safely disregard political differences as so much smoke and mirrors – utility alone mattered.

III. A Conservative Reaction?

Godwin and Bentham’s divergent political responses to the French Revolution would have profound effects on their respective fates during the turn against radicalism which began with the passage of the Treason and Seditious Meeting Acts in 1795. The so-called “Gagging Acts” marked a sharp authoritarian turn in the government’s response to revolutionary activism, a turn which would drive Godwin and many other radicals out of politics altogether. Bentham, however, remained untouched. Why? Answering this question demands a more nuanced reading of British political culture in the 1790s than typically provided, moving beyond its characterization as purely “conservative” or “reactionary” to understand precisely which kinds of radicalism became out of bounds, and which – more importantly – proved useful. Here Bentham’s peculiar doctrines, at once unquestionably transformative and yet committed to a kind of anti-politics, concerned above all with placing legislative and judicial procedures on a firmly “scientific” footing, proved especially suited to the times.

Godwin’s politics, on the other hand, did not. His erasure from public life began in earnest in 1798, with the publication of his *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Hurriedly written through a haze of grief in the months following Mary Wollstonecraft’s death in childbirth in September 1797, the memoirs offer a compelling, affectionate, and all too truthful account of his dead wife. Open about her unconventional lifestyle and her controversial attitudes towards contemporary sexual mores, the book provoked a storm of invective against Godwin and

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72 Bentham to Jean Marie Roland de la Platiere, 16 October 1792, *Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham*, 4:401 – 402. The French Assembly granted Bentham his honorary citizenship by virtue of his proposed draft for a reform of the French judiciary.

73 Kenneth Johnston describes Godwin as being “virtually erased as an independent individual.” *Unusual Suspects*, 24.

Wollstonecraft. *The Anti-Jacobin Review*, a successor to the government sponsored *Anti-Jacobin*, published a series of cruel and misogynistic articles on their relationship, the tenor of which is adequately captured in the satirical poem “The Vision of Liberty: “William hath penn’d a waggon-load of stuff/ and Mary’s life at last he needs must write/ Thinking her whoredoms were not known enough… Being her spouse, he tells, with huge delight/ How oft she cuckolded the silly clown/ And lent, o lovely piece! Herself to half the town.”

This was compounded by a series of attacks upon Godwin by former friends and political allies, many of whom had by now turned against the revolution. Samuel Parr, a committed supporter of Charles James Fox and one-time mentor to Godwin, preached a long sermon on Easter Tuesday 1800 against the doctrines of *Political Justice*. James Mackintosh, author of the *Vindiciae Gallicae*, one of the first rebuttals of Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, renounced his former views by denouncing Godwin in a series of lectures at Lincoln’s Inn in 1799, to which Godwin wryly responded by noting that he seemed “to be of the same use to him [Mackintosh] as the devil is to a fanatical parson.” Publishers refused to work with him. Writing to Thomas Wedgwood, brother of the famous potter, Godwin noted that “some booksellers are averse to any dealings with me, on account of the political obloquy annexed to my name.” In another letter, he claimed that “many of them [booksellers] are prejudiced against me by political considerations,” and he feared that “Mr. Godwin, the republican and atheist” would soon find himself driven to the poorhouse as a result of

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75 *Anti-Jacobin Review*, August 1801, 518.

77 William Godwin to George Tuthill, 27 August 1799: “You have probably heard of Mackintosh’s Lectures, which he delivers in Lincoln’s Inn Hall, & in which I am regularly gibbeted, & seem to be of the same use to him as the devil is to a fanatical parson,” *Letters of William Godwin*, 2:92. See also Godwin to James Mackintosh, 27 January 1799; Godwin to Mackintosh, 2 – 3 February 1799, 2:64 – 65, 2:70. See also Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, 274.
the blanket refusal to publish his writings.\textsuperscript{79} Writing to Robert Southey, one of the early Romantic poets, he described how “the scribblers of reviews & periodical pamphlets had entered into a combination by the silliest & most impudent misrepresentations to write me down. You must have seen how the leaders of the church, & the fawning slaves of priestcraft & tyranny, were united against me.”\textsuperscript{80} Despairing of his political hopes, by the early 1800s Godwin had retreated into obscurity, his revolutionary dreams dashed, his hopes for reform abandoned.

This experience was far from unique. Attacks on republican radicals, and indeed on anyone remotely suspected of “jacobinical tendencies,” were a defining feature of the political landscape throughout the Napoleonic era.\textsuperscript{81} Above all, the campaign against radicalism was a campaign against “leveling principles,” against demands for economic justice of any sort. Here Adam Smith’s contested reputation took center stage. Many republicans saw Smith as an ally. Thomas Paine based his economic writings on the \textit{Wealth of Nations}, referring favorably to him in the \textit{Rights of Man}. Yet he argued not only for free trade but for an estate tax and a minimum income, proposals far beyond the bounds of polite discourse.\textsuperscript{82} Many of Godwin’s own comments in \textit{Political Justice} were deeply influenced by Smith’s writings, suggesting a close link between the \textit{Wealth of Nations} and radical schemes for economic justice and redistribution.\textsuperscript{83} Dugald Stewart’s famous memoir of Smith, published in Scotland amidst a series of sedition trials, was intended as much to defend Smith from the taint of heretical doctrines and association with “French principles” as it was meant to provide an account of his life and work.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{83} Halévy, \textit{Growth of Philosophic Radicalism}.
\textsuperscript{84} See Rothschild, “Adam Smith and Conservative Economics,” 80 – 81. For Stewart’s memoir, see \textit{The Collected Works of Dugald Stewart}, vol. 10 (Edinburgh: Thomas Constable & Co, 1858). An extended discussion of Stewart’s reworking of Smith can also be found in Milgate and Stimson, \textit{After Adam Smith}, 97 – 121.
The controversial political status of Smith’s economic writings is aptly summed up by the debate over Samuel Whitbread’s proposal for a minimum wage in 1795. As Emma Rothschild has shown, Whitbread invoked Smith repeatedly in his speech in parliament, basing his argument for reform specifically on Smith’s call for providing laborers with high wages – noting specifically Smith’s comment in the *Wealth of Nations* that when regulation “is in favour of the workmen, it is always just and equitable.” William Pitt responded with a more conservative reading of Smith, arguing for a removal of restrictions on the movement of labor and calling for the “unassisted operation of principle.” The invisible hand first begins to loom as the solution to economic injustices. It was this reading, “Pitt’s Smith” rather than Whitbread’s, which won out. By 1800, “Smith had been transformed… into the modern hero of commerce.” His linkage of political and economic rights had been severed, and the doctrine of free trade alone remained out of the complex interweaving of politics and economics central to the *Wealth of Nations*. Out of the tumult of revolutionary politics, “conservative economics” was born.86

Much of this account remains convincing. However, it fails to explain two key problems: first, the origins of so-called “economic man,” of the vision of the individual as a utility-maximizing economic agent. Classical political economy focused not only on free trade and the invisible hand but on a particular account of human nature, an account which bore little relation to Smith’s psychologically-sophisticated emphasis on our imaginative mental capacities. Second, it ignores the earlier turn to political economy which began in the 1790s in British Bengal. It is in explaining these two issues that Bentham, and the particular style of political radicalism he advocated throughout the Revolutionary era, becomes essential.87 Where the political reaction of the mid- to late-1790s crushed

85 Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 86 For this analysis see Rothschild, “Adam Smith and Conservative Economics,” 84 – 88. 87 Historians of economic thought between Smith and Ricardo have been remarkably silent on the figure of Bentham. Rothschild makes no mention of Bentham in her account of the birth of “conservative economics,” despite Bentham providing a reading of Smith’s work divorced of its politics as early as the 1780s. Donald Winch, likewise, pays scant attention to Bentham in his comprehensive *Riches and Poverty*, focusing instead on Smith relation to Thomas Malthus and
the hopes of republicans such as Godwin, and with them their dreams of a political economy devoted to human wellbeing and political emancipation, Bentham’s utilitarian radicalism, which crucially rejected doctrines such as natural rights, began to find adherents among those searching for a third way, one outside the dichotomy of jingoistic patriotism and Jacobinical radicalism.

For this, Bentham’s own conduct during Pitt’s reign of alarm provides part of the answer. Where Godwin decried attacks on the liberty of the press and the regime of surveillance imposed after 1795, Bentham – despite his professed zeal for free speech – proved himself a consistent defender of the political order. One example is particularly telling. In a letter to Henry Dundas, Pitt’s right-hand man and the director of both East India affairs and political surveillance in Britain, Bentham interceded on behalf of a woman whose husband, an expatriate French shoemaker, had been denounced for subversive political activities. Bentham writes to Dundas of his intention “to give him [the shoemaker] the offer of living at my house, as above, from the day in which the order begins to be in force - viz. Wednesday - to the end that if he really be a dangerous person, the officers of government may know where to meet with him, and if not, that he may not be in the power of his adversary to get him sent away.”

In this, a typical act of political triangulation, Bentham presents himself as both a defender of the man’s interests – provided he is not really a subversive – and a defender of the government’s policy of political surveillance – if the man is guilty, Dundas can send a constable to Bentham’s to arrest him. As Bentham put it in entrusting this information to Dundas, surely “nothing can be more foreign to your [Dundas’] intentions than to convert an instrument of public security into an engine of private injustice and oppression.”

Betraying the faith of the woman who sought to save her husband from the state police apparatus,

David Ricardo. The fact that Ricardo styled himself a disciple of Bentham, and the profound influence of Benthamite utility on Ricardo’s thought, attracts no mention.

88 Jeremy Bentham to Henry Dundas, 4 February 1793, Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham, 4:417 – 418.
89 Ibid.
Bentham salved his conscience with the assurance that an “instrument of public security” would never be turned to less noble purposes.

Such faith in the government’s good will blended easily with Bentham’s persistent efforts to reform state policy. He devoted much of the 1790s and 1800s to his panopticon scheme, a proposal for total surveillance and penal reform which appealed to officials such as Dundas and Pitt as they attempted to manage domestic unrest at home. Bentham’s plans at this time frequently refer to the dangers posed by political protest. In a letter to Evan Nepean, he suggests a plan for “conversation tubes,” which he claims will allow government officials to communicate with the military out of sight of the public. Recalling “the times of Lord George Gordon's Riots, and those of Wilkes and Liberty,” Bentham argues that his conversation tubes might avoid “scandal” while allowing the “chief seats of Government and Justice” to defend themselves from “the outrages of a deluded and suddenly collected Mob.” His letters refer disparagingly to the republican “pandemonians” disrupting the political order, and he compares the Jacobins to the followers of John Wilkes, who kept England “year after year in a flame.” In 1801, the very year Godwin endured the vicious scorn of the Anti-Jacobin Review, Bentham wrote to William Cobbett proposing that he publish his own attack on republicanism and natural rights, the Anarchical Fallacies. Should Cobbett not wish to publish it, Bentham helpfully proposes that he is “welcome to hand it over to the Editors of the Anti-Jacobin Review, who, it is probable enough, may pass judgment on it.”

Bentham’s combination of reform with anti-Republicanism proved especially enticing to former supporters of the Revolution. Nascent bastions of liberal politics, including the Edinburgh

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90 Bentham’s correspondence between 1790 and 1812 is dominated by the Panopticon scheme, which ultimately failed due more to his inability to procure land for its construction rather than to any principled opposition.
91 Bentham to Evan Nepean, 10 November 1793, Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham, 4:486.
92 Bentham to the Duc de Liancourt, 11 October 1795; to Samuel Bentham, 23 September 1795; to William Wilberforce, 1 September 1796, Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham, 5:145; 5:153; 5:252 – 253.
93 Bentham to William Cobbett, 30 June 1801, Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham, 6:409.
Review, began to publish favorable reviews of Bentham’s proposals beginning in the early 1800s. The parallels with Godwin’s own career are especially striking. Just as former allies such as James Mackintosh and Samuel Parr turned their backs on Godwin, they sought out a new ally in Bentham. Utility, many began to believe, offered a middle way between conservatism and Jacobinism. Parr, writing to Bentham in 1804, stated that he would address the “question of utility” in a sermon, and that he would “mention you [Bentham], in the Pulpit, by name - nothing shall protect you - fear nothing for you will find me not very distant from you in Principle, and I shall have occasion to commend the correct and logical way in which you state your opinions - not so, by Godwin, and his French Treason.” James Mackintosh, the Whig lawyer who had treated Godwin “as the devil is to a fanatical parson,” likewise turned to Bentham for philosophical guidance. Named recorder for Bombay in 1803, Mackintosh met Bentham at Queen’s Square Place for advice, offering “to carry into execution there, as far as his powers extended - not Panopticon only, but any and all other ideas that I would give him.” The new imperial official even claimed to have tried to “convert” others to Utilitarianism, and “spoke of the means which he hoped to have in his hands for making improvements, and begged of me to communicate to him any ideas of mine etc etc as if assured before hand of finding them meet his own, and undertaking to carry them, if possible, into practice.” Thus, even as Godwin found himself consigned to the margins of British life, Bentham found his views taken up with increasing alacrity by a new generation of disciples, men such as James Mill and David Ricardo who would apply his doctrines everywhere from the British

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95 Samuel Parr to Jeremy Bentham, 23 December 1804, Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham, 7:297.
96 William Godwin to George Tuthill, 27 August 1799, Letters of William Godwin, 2:92.
97 Jeremy Bentham to Étienne Dumont, January 1804, Correspondence of Jeremy Bentham, 7:258 – 259.
administration of India to the cutting-edge of economic theory. As the shadow of political reaction lifted, a new understanding of political economy at last emerged, one which placed Benthamite utility firmly at its center.

**Conclusion**

Yet the story does not quite end here. In 1812, Percy Shelley discovered that William Godwin was alive. Elated with the news, he wrote to the aging radical claiming that his reading of *Political Justice* had wedded him to the principle of universal benevolence for life.99 This story, reflective of both the low state into which Godwin’s reputation had sunk by the end of the Napoleonic Wars, and of the appeal of his scorned radicalism to a new generation of aspiring poets, contrasts neatly with the differing fates of Bentham and Godwin by the end of the Revolutionary era. Around Godwin, a circle of young artists, including Shelley, Samuel Coleridge, and William Wordsworth, began to develop a new critique of the emerging industrial order. Opposed to the stultifying and reductive science of political economy, with its “epicurean selfishness” and disregard for human desires and motivations beyond pure avarice, they turned to nature, to emotion, and to a “rebirth of sentiment” characteristic of early Romanticism.100 Here Godwin’s emphasis on intellectual and moral perfectibility, on utility as a concept embedded within the imaginative faculties of psychologically sophisticated human beings, found a new home – one inveterately opposed to the doctrines of the “dismal science.”

It was, of course, precisely the discovery of Romantic poetry, and of the “sympathetic and imaginative pleasure” which one might find by “improvement in the social or physical condition of mankind,” which had released John Stuart Mill from the black depression induced by his utilitarian upbringing. He would spend the rest of his life attempting to reconcile his earlier views with his

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99 This story is found in Robert M. Maniquis and Victoria Myers, eds., *Godwinian Moments*, 3.
100 Winch, *Riches and Poverty*, 348.
newfound faith in the centrality of the imaginative faculties to the successful improvement of human society, leading him in increasingly radical directions which drifted dangerously far from Victorian laissez faire orthodoxy. By the later editions of his *Principles of Political Economy* he had come to argue for the abolition of the wage system and the introduction of workers’ cooperatives, calling for “the association of the labourers themselves on terms of equality, collectively owning the capital with which they carry on their operations, and working under managers elected and removable by themselves.”[^101]

Such an extreme drift from the mechanistic tenets of Benthamite philosophy naturally aroused reactions. That of William Stanley Jevons, however, is perhaps the most suggestive. For Jevons, a former student of Mill’s at University College London, his teacher’s writings on political economy were the flawed result of an “essentially illogical” mind, stemming in particular from his emphasis on psychological introspection and his rejection of a necessary link between physiological properties and mental phenomena.[^102] The very move Mill had made to escape his youthful melancholy, abandoning material reductionism for the possibilities embedded in our imaginative faculties, aroused Jevons ire. And Jevons, in attacking those doctrines, returned precisely to the theory of mind his mentor had sought to escape: Bentham’s felicific calculus.[^103] This return to Bentham was essential to Jevons’ discovery of the principle of marginal utility, refuting the classical labor theory of value and ushering in the marginal revolution in price theory at the core of neoclassical economics. In a remarkable twist, then, the contest over the mind continued, with notions of Smithian utility echoed in works such as Ruskin’s *Unto this Last* or E.P. Thompson’s...


[^102]: On Jevons criticisms of Mill, and for his intellectual trajectory more broadly, see the essential work by Harro Maas, *William Stanley Jevons and the Making of Modern Economics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Jevons was especially disappointed to ranked only fourth in his political economy examination. See Maas, p. 169.

writings on moral economy, even as the Benthamite conception, embedded in neoclassical price theory, came to dominate the mathematical economics of the twentieth century. At a contemporary moment when attempts to understand the crises roiling democracies around the world have turned repeatedly to the alleged complicity between neoliberal forms of economic management and illiberal forms of politics, the longer historical trajectory of this debate over utility, and its origins in an earlier contest over the future of democratic politics, makes it seem of particular relevance today.

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