



Horyzonty Polityki
2017, Vol. 8, N° 25



RAFAŁ LIS
Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow
The Institute of Political and Administrative Science
rafal.lis@ignatianum.edu.pl
DOI: 10.17399/HP.2017.082501

Adam Smith, Commercial Society and the Challenges of Republicanism

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The aim of this article is to examine the challenges Adam Smith's account of commercial society pose to republicanism.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: Although I do not dispense with the conventional depiction of Smith as a critic of republics, it is shown that from a republican point of view there are certain aspects in his narrative that can be more interesting. Conceptualized in this way, my argumentation is both interpretative and theoretical, describing what Smith had to say on republican issues as well as finding some elements in his considerations that could considerably enrich republican theory. To make these prospects clearer I briefly refer to some parallels to Smith's suggestions in the republican thought of the late 18th Century.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The article deals in the beginning with Smith's criticism of republicanism, identifying its core in his general distance towards the ideals of a more ardent citizenry. In the main section it proceeds to the discussion of several elements in Smith's considerations which could be of some value to republican theorists.

RESEARCH RESULTS: According to Smith, due to their obsolescence in the times of commercial society, which were characterised especially by the growing importance of private pursuits, republics become difficult to administer. However, one could still use some of his arguments (especially those that can

Suggested citation: Lis, R. (2017). Adam Smith, Commercial Society and the Challenges of Republicanism. *Horizons of Politics*, 8(25), 9-28. DOI: 10.17399/HP.2017.082501.

be easily filtered from their doctrinal connotations) to the task of modernizing the republican tradition.

CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: Smith's considerations could be valuable to all those republican theorists who continued in their efforts to modernize their conception of a republic. Seen in this way, they can be perceived as an interesting reference point in the area of republican theorizing.

KEYWORDS:

Scottish Enlightenment, Adam Smith, Commercial Society, Republicanism, Division of Labour

1. INTRODUCTION

Since at least the distinguished analysis of Donald Winch (1978), in which he attempted to go further along the revisionary path of John G.A. Pocock's *Machiavellian Moment* (1975, p. 498-499, 502), the problem of situating Adam Smith against the background of the tradition republicanism has become a more problematic task. Thanks to similar attempts, it has become plausible to portray Smith as an ardent advocate of civil liberty, while still not abandoning his contribution to a better understanding of more conflicting forces, and perhaps pitfalls, behind its growth. At any rate, given the significance of liberty to the tradition of republicanism, one can perhaps easily identify Smith's merits. But of course, the latter had been well recognized long before. Already indicative in this respect could be the suggestions of Caroline Robbins, who was ready to classify Smith within a broader tradition of the British "Commonwealthmen," admitting however that "he had not the missionary zeal of a Priestley or a Burgh" (Robbins, 2004, p. 191).¹

1 One should admit of course that after 1689 only a small margin of the writers classified within the tradition of – to use Robbins' term – Commonwealthmen can be categorically counted as "republicans" (that is, the followers of a republican form of government). As can be argued, it was not until the emergence of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* that the monarchical (hereditary) element was to be seriously called into question (see Wootton, 1994). But notwithstanding these characteristics, it would not be a great exaggeration to say that this tradition could still be characterized as emphasising – within the confines of the compromise of 1689 - in the first place the role of an active citizenry.

Nonetheless, there are strong arguments which – in spite of a substantial body of revisionary literature that is very inspiring in itself – can still prompt us to count the Scottish philosopher as being among the most profound adversaries of republicanism, especially when understood more conventionally. Yet while for the most part this article subscribes to a similar perception of Smith’s stance, I will try to find some promising republican dimensions in his approach. My thesis is that at least as long as they may be classified as scientifically or philosophically valid, his considerations could help us better understand the challenges that the commercial stage of civilization poses to republicanism and for that reason could be of much value to theorists of republicanism. To present this problem, I will focus on those aspects of his argumentation which in my opinion best exemplify both what he had to say on republicanism or its challenges in the time of commercial society and what in the following decades slowly began to come to the fore within the broad spectrum of republican traditions. Thus, my analysis will be as much interpretative as conceptual. More precisely, after analysing some passages from Smith’s works, including especially his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* and *The Wealth of Nations*, I will indicate in each case how it might contribute to the development of republican theory. To make these hints more recognizable within the framework of republican vocabulary, I will refer, albeit very briefly, to some examples of the 18th-century accounts. Although taken together all these references would certainly not lead to a perfectly coherent theory, in some instances even calling into question the then dominant notions of republicanism, they should add some credibility to a potential usefulness of Smith’s considerations in this area.

As is well known, the two terms used in the title cannot easily be reconciled with one another. Perhaps the first term, commercial society, needs less explanation. It is understood in the way the Scottish philosophers of the 18th century, including Smith, proposed – it simply designated the fourth stage of societal progress (following the third – that of agriculture) and was characterised by the dominance of the commercial professions. As Smith encapsulated it, it is a society where – “every man,” finding his way of using “the surplus part of the produce of his own labour which is over and above his consumption” to his own advantage, “lives by exchanging, or becomes in some

measure a merchant" (Smith, 1904, I, p. 24). As such, it was commonly associated by the Scots with certain kind of virtues – concomitant with the existence of, again, a society of merchants. Christopher Berry identifies in this regard especially industry, humanity, knowledge, frugality and prudence (2015, p. 139-141). More generally, it would not be an exaggeration to say that it was the advent of commercial society that helped us best understand the gap between what most of the Scottish theorists of multi-stage progress would depict simply as civilization and that what belonged to the past, with its barbarism and idleness, and – it can be added – bellicosity (Berry, p. 135 ff). And similarly, it would not be a great overstatement to say that it was precisely due to similar shifts in social values and characteristics that republics, more or less socially exclusive by the way, with their dependence on heroic virtues, seemed more and more at odds with commercial society and, broadly speaking, civilization. From what has been said thus far, it is already clear what the term 'republican', by no means unproblematic to contemporary scholars, could designate. Yet here again I will not go beyond what at the time was in common usage or, even more importantly, what Smith must have had in mind. Anticipating some of my descriptions, in Smith's vocabulary it denoted an advocacy for republican forms of government (divided into aristocracies and democracies and as such differentiated from monarchies) and especially a preference for a certain model of political culture – one that required more engaged citizens who were very jealous of their privileges and thus carefully watched over those in office.

Now, it becomes obvious that the very task of juxtaposing the values of commercial society with those of republicanism must remain very problematic and challenging. To put it simply, at that time – long before the final settlements of the American War of Independence and, even more significantly, the French Revolution – republics, dominated by powerful monarchies, were not only believed to be in decline but were often considered – for the reasons mentioned above – as a much worse basis for developing commercial society. And as can be easily found, Smith was by no means particularly committed to the republican cause to resist that tendency. However, I will try to show there are sound reasons to harness some of Smith's findings to the purpose of republican theory.

2. SMITH'S POLITICAL STANCE AND CRITICISM OF REPUBLICANISM

As suggested above, when viewed from a conventional perspective one cannot of course count Smith among the adherents of republicanism as such. Conversely, there are even more reasons to describe him as one of the most convincing debunkers of republican beliefs, continuing in this respect the tradition of – to use Duncan Forbes's term – “scientific” (1954) or “sceptical” (1976) whiggism, initiated by David Hume. Perhaps this term can be a little bit misleading as it may obscure their criticism of – or at least distance from – what they themselves depicted squarely as whiggism, regardless of more subtle categorizations of their then political stances by the twentieth century commentators. And more importantly, if taken beyond its limits, it may lead us too easily to the conclusion that both Hume and Smith were in every aspect doctrinally neutral and as such scientific. But this classification at least reflects very well both philosophers' evaluations of British political traditions and especially their approaches to the doctrine of political obedience. And in this respect Smith's condemnation of a more categorical idea of conditional obedience, derived from Locke and Sidney (Smith, 1982, p. 315-317), no matter what he had to say on the opposite side of the recognized doctrinal spectrum, could be very indicative of his own political stance. Let us cite for this purpose the two most suggestive fragments of Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence*. In the first report of his lectures we can read:

Government was established to (...) yet (...) they must agree to give up a little of their right, (...) resistance is to be made if the consequences of it be worse than the thing itself (p. 324).

And in the second report one finds a similar argument:

Exorbitant taxes no doubt justify resistance, for no people will allow the half of their property to be taken from them; but tho' the highest propriety be not observed, if they have any degree of moderation people will no complain. No government is quite perfect, but it is better to submit to some inconveniences than make attempts against it (Smith, 1982, p. 435).

My point is that although having much to do at first glance with uniquely British controversies, similar discussions reveal Smith's apparent distance toward republicanism *per se*. One can conclude it directly from the propositions made already in the lectures. While commenting on these issues, he simply classifies the "principle of utility" not only as the one preferred by the Whigs but also as precisely the one that prevails in republics. As such, it is contrasted with the principle of "authority", characterised in turn as preferred by the Tory and typical to monarchies (Smith, 1982, p. 318-319). But there are more general reasons to see the whole discussion as an indicator of his approach toward republicanism. After all, putting the reign of political power in the hands of the citizenry, republicanism perfectly coincides with the commented belief of the Whig doctrine – that every government should be based on the consent of the people who, in addition, are perfectly entitled to dismiss a government encroaching on their rights and liberties. Certainly, Smith cannot be counted among the defenders of passive obedience and those who altogether reject the right of the people to resist a tyrannical ruler. But he is categorically against, as Hume was before him, transforming it into a constitutional rule. In doing so he betrayed a strong tendency to prioritize the values of public safety and social peace over the citizens' feeling of being the ultimate sovereign in their own commonwealth. Such a reading can be especially justified when juxtaposed with similar, so to speak, conservative traits of his arguments from his published works, especially *The Wealth of Nations*. Perhaps the most telling in this respect is what he said when acknowledging the necessity of a standing army against – as he explicitly put it – "men of republican principles", who considered this invention "dangerous to liberty" (Smith, 1904, II, p. 200). I will come back to his discussion about this institution in the next section, but let us expose here just one argument he made in this passage. According to him,

The security it gives to the sovereign renders unnecessary that troublesome jealousy, which, in some modern republics, seems to watch over the minutest actions, and to be at all times ready to disturb the peace of every citizen (p. 201).

And Smith develops this argument in the following way:

That degree of liberty that approaches to licentiousness can be tolerated only in countries where the sovereign is secured by a well-regulated standing army. It is in such countries only, that the public safety does not require, that the sovereign should be trusted with any discretionary power, for suppressing even the impertinent wantonness of this licentious liberty (p. 201).

As we can see, Smith – first – is explicitly critical of too ardent an activity of the citizenry and – second – he finds it typical to republics. And what can be concluded from the second quotation, he tends to see it in a way – that of warning against licentiousness and its consequences to the public safety – that at the time being indicated criticism of republicanism and popular sovereignty.²

Of course, one can argue that in demonizing political zeal Smith perfectly subscribed to a traditional criticism of the mob rule or what Madison would soon coin as factionalism. As it is known, this criticism was at the core of his understanding, however problematic it might seem, of republicanism (Ball, 1988). Yet, one should not forget that there is nothing in his works to suggest that he was ready to consider the people (the citizenry) as the ultimate source of sovereignty. But notwithstanding these obvious differences in their approach to constitutionalism, Smith's reservations about a more passionate political engagement of the citizenry are from the beginning of a more, so to speak, conservative provenience, perhaps not that far away from the one that was soon to be taken by Edmund Burke. It is indeed hard to resist the feeling that his main concern in this respect seems to be more about preserving the existing social or, for that matter, political order, if only not perceived by the great body of the people as unbearable, than finding a way of arriving – through the process of public elections or deliberations – at a better public decisions.

All of the above observations about Smith's tendency to value peace and order over civic vigilance may lend strong support to the

2 I should add that I would not see this somewhat paradoxical if not extravagant argument as giving evidence to the thesis that Smith went far beyond Hume's approach to politics, having – as Pocock observed – more in common with the Court tradition than that of the Country (1975, p. 494). But for a more nuanced view, see Forbes, 1976, p. 183-184 and Winch, 1978, p. 110.

thesis that he is indeed at odds with the ideals commonly associated with republicanism. As will be seen, his analysis of the changes commercial society brings about, which reduces the scope of public engagement of the citizenry, will add new arguments to that approach. But before proceeding to that issue, let us focus on yet another element of Smith's narrative in his *Wealth of Nations*, which, betraying a surprisingly republican approach, demands more comment. I have of course in mind Smith's condemnation of cowardice and a plea for the strengthening of the martial spirit among the citizens, put forward while commenting on the already mentioned problem of a standing army. More precisely, as Smith concluded (in the chapter devoted to "the expenses of the institutions for the education of youth," book V) that with the progress of civilization "the practice of military exercises, unless government takes proper pains to support it, goes gradually to decay, and, together with it, the martial spirit of the great body of the people" (Smith, 1904, II, p. 271). He considers this change very dramatic, because – as he continues – "the security of every society must always depend, more or less, upon the martial spirit of the great body of the people." It should be admitted that a similar vocabulary, especially when taken out of context (to which I will come in the next section), seems profoundly republican (Montes, 2009, p. 322ff). One can only wonder how it is possible for Smith to argue for such measures, given his approving remarks on the effects of the increasing division of labour and the invention of a standing army. In spite of many attempts to explain a similar tension in Smith's thought, one can still feel unconvinced. Certainly, part of the problem is that the solutions Smith is ready to propose to prevent the negative consequences of the division of labour seems insufficient (Berry, 2013, p. 180). It is easy at any rate to argue that Smith seems interested mainly in maintaining commercial society and it is mainly with this purpose in mind that he borrows from republicanism, not the other way around (cf. Winch, 1978, p. 113). But even within these confines, the problem remains rather unsolved, because arguing simultaneously for the awaking of the military spirit and – again – the appeasement of the citizenry seems simply contradictory.

3. SEVERAL REPUBLICAN LESSONS FROM SMITH'S POLITICAL SCIENCE

Now that we may locate his stance more precisely on a broader doctrinal spectrum, we are in a better position to deal with more theoretically the compelling aspects of his considerations, having at their centres the problems of commercial society and the prospects of republics. Arguably, Smith's insistence on a stronger promotion of martial virtues among the common people reveals a more nuanced approach. Perhaps to some extent calling in question our assumptions about the desired shift in the values of civilization (but cf. Berry, 2015, p. 144), suggested in the introduction, they betray in the first place a strong inconsistency in Smith's narrative. After all, there is nothing in Smith's evaluation of the shortcomings of commercial society to indicate anything approaching the criticism of Adam Ferguson (1966) and Lord Kames (1778, II, p. 314-340).³ On the whole, his apprehension of the notion of the people having too active a role as such, underpinning his attack on the (radical) Whig lines, in which, incidentally, he did not go far beyond Hume (Hume, 1985, p. 32-41, 64-72, 465-492), renders both writers a rather problematic source of direct republican inspirations. But here I would argue that many of Smith's accounts could be still of considerable value to republican theorists. Although they will often confirm Smith's distance towards republicanism, providing in most cases its adversaries with more subtle scientific and theoretical arguments, my point is that its advocates can take advantage of them as well, if only they were ready to think in a more challenging way. It is because their main value lies in what they have identified as the main obstacles in the way of a more modern, or otherwise compatible with the "commercial" reality, society. Still more positively, notwithstanding Smith's criticism of republicanism, one should, however, bear in mind that – as Christopher Berry notices – "a commercial society is defined in terms of neither politics nor law" (2015, p. 206). If that is true, the question of the republic should be seen as more open than even Smith's own doctrinal stance may suggest, leaving perhaps more room for

³ For a fuller discussion of those writers in a similar context, see e.g. Berry, 2015, p. 156-167, 169-170, 172.

diverse intellectual interconnections. I would argue then that as long as Smith's argumentation can be easily taken out of its doctrinal inclinations (and classified therefore as – again – scientific), it can serve different political purposes, including – perhaps – republican.

So, let us try to read Smith through the prism of thus understood science of commercial society. The first such potential contribution I would recognize is his analysis of the institution of slavery. Perhaps there is no better place in Smith's thought to suggest that the more commercial a society becomes the less republican it must remain. To put it very briefly, in his view republicanism simply presupposes slavery. As we can read in his *Lectures*,

The more arbitrary the government is in like manner the slaves are in the better condition, and the freer the people the more miserable are the slaves; in a democracy they are more miserable (Smith, 1982, p. 185).

It was simply because of the fact that the slaveholders were in such a state precisely because they were responsible for legislation. One could predict that “they therefore will never incline to part with so valuable a part of their property (...)” (p. 186). In a monarchy the condition of the slaves and villains can be much better because – as Smith continued – “the monarch here being the sole judge and ruler, and not being affected by the easing the condition of the slaves, may probably incline to mitigate their condition” (p. 186).

But Smith had much more to say about slavery and its socio-economic context, and by putting together all these different aspects of his considerations one can arrive at still further conclusions. Here it will be enough to emphasise just one – namely, his remarks on the impact of slavery on the prospects of the national economy. As he observed,

The experience of all ages and nations, I believe, demonstrates that the work done by slaves, though it appears to cost only their maintenance, is in the end the dearest of any. A person who can acquire no property, can have no other interest but to eat as much, and to labour as little as possible. Whatever work he does beyond what is sufficient to purchase his own maintenance, can be squeezed out of him by violence only, and not by any interest of his own (WN, 1, 364).

Smith was not the first to demonstrate especially that in a republican nation the liberty of the governing class goes hand in hand with the subjection, if not the enslavement, of the lower orders of society. And what flows from that is that one can better understand that for those ranks a modern monarchy, providing, arguably, a larger scope of personal liberty, would be a much better solution. But what differentiates Smith's considerations from others is that the former imply a broader socio-historical approach, endeavouring to explain, to an unprecedented extent, the dynamics of progress and civilization.⁴ On the whole, Smith's analyses of different social interests and tensions behind the history of political institutions can be of considerable value to political theorising of any provenience. And along these lines one can presume that by turning to similar considerations the theorists of republicanism could better recognize how difficult and challenging the task of reforming a republic in commercial times was going to be. It can serve the purposes of, so to speak, republican sociology if only because of the prediction of the inevitable and rather relentless reluctance of the actual citizenry to simply share their privileges with people of lower ranks. But on the other hand, the forces of civilization were such that to maintain a republic altogether one had to embark on reforms, however implausible they might have seemed, all the faster. Otherwise, as one could already conclude from Smith's considerations, because they were outdated and inefficient, and belonged to the previous stage of civilization, republics would soon disappear from the map of Europe. One can also better understand that much of this has simply to do with the condition of lower ranks – because their serfdom and consequent indolence do not only prevent the more natural progress of civilization, but ultimately also the prospects of military capacity and defence.

This is presumably what a republican should arrive at when reading Smith. But it may be argued that the republican theorists of the late 18th century were not necessarily unfamiliar with at least some of these challenges. Perhaps those that can be considered to be the most promising in this respect were the Polish reformist writers at

4 This characteristic can be of course attributed to the broader group of the 18th Century Scottish theorists of commercial society, see e.g. Berry, 2015, p. 190ff.

the time of the Four Year Sejm, such as Stanisław Staszic and Hugo Kołłątaj. They both kept warning the ruling nobility that the only way to rescue their precious liberties in, so to speak, the monarchical times is to share them with the unprivileged orders of the nation. And as especially Staszic might add, only by that token could Poland can escape the fate of monarchical absolutism, which was unfortunately the case of almost all European nations. There is no place to focus more deeply on further parallels in this respect. But as I has shown in another place (Lis, 2017), expanding the challenges of transferring the old model of noble republicanism into its more democratic provenience could give some credence to the validity of more sociological republican considerations. One can only speculate that turning to Smith's observations would be of great help in similar tasks.

Another theoretically challenging aspect of Smith's consideration can be recognized in his analysis of the problem of a militia and standing army, closely related to the already signalized issue of defence. I would see it no less provocative because Smith's argument can be easily described as directly undermining the beliefs of – as he put it – “men of republican principles.” As it is well known, according to Smith the time for militia has gone long ago, given both the increasing division of labour and progress in military arts (Smith, 1904, II, p. 194ff). As Istvan Hont recognized, one of the most important lessons from Smith's analysis on the decline of the Greek republics and the Roman empire which modern states should have learned was that once a society advances, which is marked by increasing “commercial inequality”, causing “incompatibility between economic development and warfare”, it has to introduce a professional army as soon as possible (2015, p. 82-84). It was because in such a society it becomes difficult to keep an appropriate level of discipline and military commitment among the members of a militia who with the development of the division of labour, as they become absorbed by their private pursuits, and become simply less and less capable of bearing the burden of defending their country.⁵ As in the case of the

⁵ And Smith could single out yet another factor accelerating the degradation of militia with the advancement of civilization. As we can read already in his lectures, “when arts and manufactures increased and were thought worthy of attention, and men found that they could rise dignity by applying to them, and it became for the rich to go out to war (...), so “the defence of the

Roman legions dispersed throughout the remote provinces of the borderland of the empire,

the civil came to predominate over the military character; and the standing armies of Rome gradually degenerated into a corrupt, neglected and undisciplined militia, incapable of resisting the attack of the German and Scythian militias, which soon afterwards invaded the western empire (Smith, 1904, II, p. 198).

Smith saw these changes as simply coming about with the advancement of civilization and for that reason nothing could be done about it. It is true that the commented article (II) of book V, ch. 1. p. III, of the *Wealth of Nations* he returned to the issue of a military spirit, warning the commercial nations against the loss of courage, and suggesting the introduction of compulsory military exercises alongside elementary education. But as has been suggested above, there is much evidence that suggests that there is no way back to the republican ideal of the citizen-soldier. But one can find a more hopeful clue in Smith's argumentation, albeit its broader narrative seems very unfavourable to republicanism. As has been already said, Smith favoured a standing army – if only out of necessity and for the sake of the security of the state. But at the same time he endeavoured to persuade its republican adversaries that instead of threatening the liberty of the nation its introduction will contribute to the contrary. As he argued, it was because in countries where the ruler is also commander in chief and the officers are recruited from the higher ranks, which was fortunately the case of Britain, the army, being well intertwined with the nation and its elites, has no interest in doing any wrong to the nation.

By the way, this argument was uttered by Smith in the same passage where he revealed the already commented reservations about the “troublesome jealousy” and “licentiousness” of the republican citizenry. But looking at it less negatively, I would argue that one could easily use this inspiration in a more republican way. If it is the case, their argument would go as follows: it is true that the ideal of

state naturally became the province of the lower (...)” (Smith, 1982, p. 542). Moreover, the concomitant weakening of honour as the principle of military engagement leads to further degradation of a militia (p. 543).

a civic militia irrevocably belongs to the past and one has to come to terms with it – but fortunately, the standing army can be introduced in such a way as to secure the liberties of the people. Still more positively, in this task republicans could count not only on associating more fully the interests of the army with those of the nation but also – hopefully – on permeating the whole nation with military spirit. And looking for historical examples of a similar doctrinal approach before the French Revolution, we can again refer to the Polish reformers of the 1780s, especially the already mentioned Stanisław Staszic. Being under the influence of republican ideals and advocating the idea of a universal republican and military education, he of course understood at the same time the necessity of a particularly powerful regular army, strong enough to deter its neighbouring empires from invading his country.

All this can bring us closer to a more fundamental conclusion of Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. It is about the already signalized problem of the division of labour and how it affects the discussion about the public sphere. And it is where I would identify the fourth and, as it were, most general area of political considerations that can potentially most provoke republican theorizing. As already indicated, Smith found that due to the increasing specialisation of professions, many traditional republican values are simply becoming more and more impractical or otherwise difficult to implement. From what he says one can easily conclude that, absorbed by their private occupations and enterprises, the citizens of "civilized nations" are simply not in the position to participate in more engaging and time-consuming public undertakings. In other words, the public good is gradually becoming a less important factor in our motivation. More broadly, in Smith's works one can find more indicators of our strong preoccupation with our own pursuits and only the limited capabilities of more benevolent or otherwise altruistic commitments.⁶ While they pertain to human nature as such, it can be argued that commercial

⁶ Of course, much has been said about the importance of the sympathy mechanism in Smith's moral theory and for that reason one should not go too far in counting him among the advocates of the so called selfish system. Although all this makes Smith's thought more nuanced and problematic, one can still argue that this mechanism serves in the first place the purpose of justice in its negative sense and, in a similar vein, it rather determines a more, so to

society, being in Smith's view the most natural,⁷ reveals this truth to the highest extent. After all, our day-to-day life is oriented by the assumption that

it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest (Smith, 1904, I, p. 16).

Although it is mainly about our economic motivation, it rather lends support to the opinion that expecting citizens to distance themselves more categorically from their own interests – as the republican tradition is believed to argue while emphasising the need of a more engaged or patriotic citizen – would be rather more problematic. Again, there is nothing in Smith's moral theory to suggest that humans are either unable to help others in need or become more committed citizens when necessary. But the dominant narrative in his *Wealth of Nations* seems very clear: the public good is not a proper objective of our endeavours. What is more, such endeavours would be even detrimental to the very wealth of society – due to the fact that the latter can only prosper only when people are left to their own devices. As Smith famously puts it in this work while explaining the everyday motivation of an entrepreneur,

By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. I have never known much good done by those affected to trade for the public good. It is an affection, indeed, not very common among merchants,

speaking, minimalist approach. For a detailed discussion of all these issues, see especially Haakonssen, 1981.

7 One can draw this conclusion especially from the last passages of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where he says that “in some countries, the rudeness and barbarism of the people hinder the natural sentiments of justice from arriving at that accuracy and precision which, in more civilized nations, they naturally attain to” (Smith, 2005, p. 403).

and very few words need be employed in dissuading them from it (Smith, 1904, I, p. 421).

The whole passage can be an indicator not only of what the public good in Smith's vocabulary can denote in the first place, but also of how little one can contribute to it if choosing it as a purpose one's own endeavours. And no less importantly, what Smith wants us to understand is that the public good should be also a direct objective of a legislator (Berry, 2013, p. 158). Again, it is because according to Smith this purpose is better served when the government abstains from more positive engagements (Smith, 1904, I, p. 419-421; II, p. 184).

Now, one can argue that what "men of republican principles" could learn from Smith is, above all, that in a commercial society individuals most likely will not commit themselves merely out of their nature to the task of promoting the public good. But forcing them to that will be a cure worse than the disease. What flows from Smith's argumentation, the results of such legislative undertakings will more likely prove contrary to their intentions. Although all these conclusions do not sound promising, my point is that if seriously taken into account, they can only provoke republican theorists to search for a more sophisticated system of promoting the public good. A general solution to that problem can be to construct a mechanism which, while not neglecting the assumption about the prevailing selfishness of individuals and their limited capacity to directly act for the good of their community, would reward more patriotic attitudes of the citizenry. One can argue that a similar concern was aired by the already mentioned James Madison, while looking for a proper relationship between the electorate and representatives. But arguably, one can even argue that similar theoretical dilemmas were not alien to such republican theorists as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (in his *Considerations on the Government of Poland*) (Hont, 2015) and later on, Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès (Sonenscher, 2003). Although the development of both writers on issues such as republican emulation (in the case of the former) or the division of labour (in the case of the latter) were by no means mutually coherent and uncontroversial, together with the findings of Madison they can provide interesting reference points for further republican theorising in this area.

Still another important contribution of the commented aspect of Smith's considerations to the understanding of a modern state can be discerned in his argument that, to use the expression of his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, "in the great chessboard of human society" (Smith, 2005, p. 275) there are many factors that can distort even the best-intended legislative initiatives. But Smith was able to identify still another and no less dangerous difficulty in this regard. It was the often the hidden influence of special interest groups which, due to their efforts to attain monopoly (Smith, 1904, II, p. 130, 435-436), distort the final outcome of legislation so that in the end it serves more their interests to the detriment of the rest of society. It is indeed difficult to overestimate the value of Smith's conclusions in this area for a republic, given the significance attached especially in this form of government to the idea of public interest as a real objective of public deliberations. One could imagine that it would be perhaps not that difficult to develop this theme in a more republican way and see it through the well known prism of "corruption." Here again one could perhaps find a promising linkage to the famous discussion of the danger of factionalism in *The Federalist*. Although it by no means requires adherence to Madison's propositions, not necessarily concomitant with all of Smith's conclusions, it represents an important example of how to recognise the danger special interests pose to the process of legislation in a republic.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The commented elements of Smith's thought do not of course exhaust what the Scottish philosopher had to say on the issue of republics and what one can consider to be important for the republican discourse. But they alone are enough to understand Smith's message to "men of republican principles" in the times of commercial society: the form of government they advocate is not only obsolete and impractical but also contrary to nature. To sum up, his main argument was that due to the increasing specialisation of professions, dramatically narrowing the prospects of more engaging civic undertakings (including those of a military nature), a republic becomes more and more difficult to keep. Overtaken in the age of commerce by monarchies which were more inclined to take advantage of the liberated lower ranks,

republics, with their outdated political and military forms, seemed to belong entirely to the past. And no less pessimistic were Smith's more philosophical assumptions about the limitations of human nature which – as one can conclude – republicans, with their high expectations about the commitment of the citizenry and underestimation of the importance of private, sometimes conflicting and hidden interests, seemed especially predisposed to ignore.

Even if the question of the republic was not central to Smith's considerations, it would be hard to imagine a more devastating evaluation of its prospects. And more to the point, it is also difficult to think of a more subtle and persuasive argumentation – and how its conclusion is anything other than devastating. But again, while helping the adversaries of republicanism, Smith's arguments could be seen as having a more scientific purpose and as such could be taken to the advantage of any political theorizing. Presuming Smith was not much wrong in his observations and assumptions, one can classify him mainly, especially when putting into brackets his doctrinal stance, as an analyst of commercial society and progress of civilization. Viewed that way, Smith's considerations can be also of great value to republicans, if only for the purpose of better understanding the challenges of republicanism in the modern era. Still more positively, one can think of certain ways by which to harness at least some of his findings to the ends of republicanism, and by that token, the task of modernizing this political tradition. On the whole, it is easy to find that Smith's findings may help develop a republican theory which is better aware of the difficulties the public good is exposed to with the coming of, for want of better words, capitalism and modern democracy. Here it can be only indicated that their more general contribution would lie in the suggestion that given the prevalence of selfish inclinations, the pursuit of the public good – once necessarily opened up to a broader population, if only in a very general way – should be purposely promoted and it is up to a legislator to find ways of harmonizing or intertwining such a pursuit with – as Smith saw it – the more natural dispositions of individuals. The signaled references to some 18th century accounts may at least give the impression that perhaps there had already been some potential for such undertakings in the different republican traditions of Europe and America at that time.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ball, T. (1988). A Republic – If You Can Keep It. In: *Conceptual Change and the Constitution*. Lawrence: University of Kansas.
- Berry, C. (2013). *The Idea of Commercial Society in the Scottish Enlightenment*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Ferguson, A. (1966). *An Essay on the History of Civil Society, 1767*, ed. D. Forbes. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Forbes, D. (1954). “Scientific” Whiggism: Adam Smith and John Millar. *Cambridge Journal*, vol. 7, 643-670.
- Forbes, D. (1976). Sceptical Whiggism, Commerce and Liberty. In: A. Skinner & T. Wilson (eds.), *Essays on Adam Smith*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 179-201.
- Haakonssen, K. (1981). *The Science of a Legislator: The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Home, H. [Lord Kames]. (1778). *Sketches on the History of Man*. 4 vols. Edinburgh.
- Hont, I. (2015). *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith*, eds. B. Kapossy & M. Sonenscher. Cambridge – London: Harvard University Press.
- Hume, D. (1987). *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. E.F. Miller. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund [first edition: 1985].
- Lis, R. (2017). Polish Republicanism of the Four Year Sejm at a Doctrinal. *History of European Ideas*, vol. 43, 762-775.
- Montes, L. (2009). Adam Smith on the Standing Army versus Militia Issue. In: J. Young (ed.), *The Elgar Companion to Adam Smith*. Cheltenham: Elgar, 315-334.
- Pocock, J.G.A. (1975). *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Robbins, C. (2004). *The Eighteenth-Century Commonwealthman. Studies in the Transmission, Development, and Circumstance of the English Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund [first edition: Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959]
- Smith, A. (1904). *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. E. Cannan. 2 vols. London: Methuen. Retrieved from: <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/171> <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/smith-an-inquiry-into-the-nature-and-causes-of-the-wealth-of-nations-cannan-ed-in-2-vols> (access: 31.08.2017).

- Smith, A. (1982). *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, eds. R.L. Meek, D.D. Raphael, & L.G. Stein. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund [first edition: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978]
- Smith, A. (2005). *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. K. Haakonssen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [first edition: 2002].
- Sonenscher, M. (2003). Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès and the Idea of Representative Government (introduction). In: E.J. Sieyès, *Political Writings, Including the Debate between Sieyès and Tom Paine in 1791*, ed. M. Sonenscher. Indianapolis-Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Winch, D. (1978). *Adam Smith's Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wootton, D. (1994). The Republican Tradition. From Commonwealth to Common Sense (Introduction). In: D. Wootton (ed.), *Republicanism, Liberty, and Commercial Society, 1649-1776*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1-41.

Copyright and License



This article is published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution – NoDerivs (CC BY- ND 4.0) License <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/>