Authority and utility: John Millar, James Mill and the politics of history c.1770-1836
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Authority and utility are complementary concepts that embody two contrary ways of understanding how political power is conferred, to whom that power is confided and under what conditions public allegiance is ultimately due. According to the concept of authority the conveyance of power is the consequence of natural inequality. Obedience on the part of the people is considered to follow unproblematically from their subordinate position, and disobedience is accordingly held to be a great danger to the natural order. The concept of utility reads that political power is created for the common good and that it is devolved to only a minor part of the community for practical reasons. A great danger is that those entrusted with power wield it in their own advantage alone. Utility spells that, as soon as power is employed to the detriment of the public, allegiance may be withheld. This study writes a part of the interwoven histories of those two concepts. The story of authority and utility is taken from enlightenment, of a full-blown Scottish variety, to utilitarianism in its classical British form. In the period that lasted from about 1770 to 1836, political authoritarianism was for many (and certainly for the two protagonists of the present study, John Millar and James Mill) cause for exasperation. Utility was a common aspiration. Authority was the counter-concept of utility and also the limit to utility’s effectuation. Utilitarianism was first and foremost an anti-authoritarian doctrine but even an acknowledged utilitarian like James Mill expected the people to obey their superiors. This is not to say that authority and utility were wholly rigid concepts that held those who employed them hostage. The authors studied here positioned themselves politically by widening the range of application of utility. By doing that, they theoretically expanded that part of the people whose good was to be taken into account. These same authors, however paradoxical that may seem, also extended the critique of authoritarianism to a larger political or social caste than had formerly been the case. Their censure went down the social ladder until it reached a virtuous breed: the natural representatives of the people, leading popular opinion and heeding the public good. John Millar (1735-1801) as well as James Mill (1773-1836) promoted his own party or class by accusing others dealing with power of taking the assent of the people for granted and of foresaking the ‘commonwealth’. Because they associated the vice of ruling imperiously almost exclusively with the governing class and the selfless serving of the public good mostly with themselves, their writings had a self-righteous air about them. Mill, for instance, accused Millar’s party but not the middle class that he favoured himself of being insufficiently utilitarian and very authoritarian.
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The authority-utility antinomy was usually expressed in historical controversy. The ruling class legitimated its position and policies by invoking political history, and by hiring pens to write histories that were agreeable to it. Critics replied by contesting the politics, periods and persons of such histories, and elaborated alternative histories of a supposedly less authoritarian and more utilitarian make. The complex interconnections of these historiographical exchanges cannot well be unravelled with the encyclopedic and quantitative approaches of recent projects of conceptual history. The present study is a hybrid, embedding conceptual history in a multi-layered monograph. Main subject of investigation is the polemical symbolism and the political significance of historical writing. The central figures are John Millar and James Mill, two political writers whose historical work exhibited changes of which authority and utility were the parameters, and of which political renewal and symbolistic reversals were the result. This study can also be called a critical history. The contributions that Millar and Mill made to political theory are shown to have suffered the same flaws that they found in others. Neither thinker managed to abandon authority as he claimed to, or to fulfil utility as he aspired to. To understand who blamed who, and who was culpable of what, we must specify John Millar’s and James Mill’s political affiliations.

Establishment and Opposition

The traditional denominations of Tory and Whig have proved to be inadequate to represent the major divisions in eighteenth-century British political life. Their counterparts for the early nineteenth century, Conservative and Liberal, are positively misleading: people from both parties, if parties they were, stood for existing constitutional freedoms and for change that was presented as preservation of ancient practices. The distinction between Court and Country is commonly made and helpful, but scarcely applies after the 1760s. For want of a more specific pair of notions, this study reconstructs a crucial political distinction that held true from the 1770s to the beginning of Victoria’s reign as that between Establishment and Opposition. In fact, the elasticity of these two notions is what makes them suitable for explaining the ideological ins and outs of the period. With ‘opposition’ is meant a fluid group of (mainly Whig) politicians that was organised in the House of Commons to the express purpose of taking a stand against the ruling oligarchy. That oligarchy, whose composition was as changeable as that of the opposition, is called ‘establishment’.

Throughout the period studied here, critique of authority was invariably levelled at what those critical of authoritarian government saw as the ruling oligarchy or establishment. Depending on who formulated the criticisms, the nature of those criticisms varied as much as the persons and institutions against which they were directed. A constant in almost the
entire period were the Whigs in opposition. From 1770 up to 1830 a varying number of Whigs, first called Rockingham Whigs and later Foxite Whigs, seemed to be wed to parliamentary opposition. In those sixty years they, or at least their name givers, held office only three times. Their ministries lasted three, ten and nine months respectively. The critique of authority went hand in hand with an appeal to *utility*. The Whigs in opposition said to speak out against oligarchic government in name of the people and the common good. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, utilitarians began to contest the anti-establishment and utilitarian rhetoric of the Whigs. Utilitarians reasoned that the opposition was really part of the establishment and thus operating against the interests of the people. In their eyes, the opposition was the establishment’s most insidious department, for it served its own good by pretending to represent the people at large and by denying any involvement with the persons and institutions whose authoritarianism it criticised. Utilitarians took, as it were, Whig criticisms one step further and redirected those criticisms against the Whigs themselves.

John Millar was a Rockingham, later a Foxite Whig. The mainstay of both Rockingham and Foxite Whiggism was a thoroughly aristocratic-minded condemnation of the crown’s pretensions. The establishment that Millar accused of ruling in its own interests alone consisted of the king and his party. The king appointed the ministers and (either personally or through his cabinet) created state functions and titles, places and pensions. Through peers, placemen and pensioners the king dominated the House of Lords. By the same practices, known as ‘corruption’, he managed to influence part of the House of Commons as well. Most contemporaries agreed that that was how the British constitution had come to function in the eighteenth century, but it was the opposition party that stressed that because of this situation the integrity of the entire constitution was at risk. That party saw itself as liberty’s last resort. The opposition ideology was confronted by establishment writers according to whom the new forms of exerting royal power hardly outweighed what parliament had recently gained in power at the cost of the crown.

To understand those deep-rooted differences of opinion we must go back to the face-off between the Stuart kings and the parliamentarians in the tumultuous and traumatic seventeenth century. What happened then was a constant point of reference for opposition and establishment writers alike. The eighteenth-century (let alone nineteenth-century) clashes between king and parliament were not nearly as dramatic or bloody as those of the previous century yet seventeenth-century political distinctions, discussions and discourses were very persistent. Until at least 1832 the contradistinction of king to parliament was a main theme of British political debate.

From the 1720s to about 1760 British politics was controlled by a ‘Whig oligarchy’ that nevertheless faced staunch opposition. The ideological bravery of the first opposition leader, the erstwhile Tory Bolingbroke (1678-1751), set the tone of opposition for about a
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century, and the defence of government along with it. Bolingbroke and his press turned seventeenth-century parliamentarian (or Whig) arguments against the oligarchs. The opposition depicted itself as propertied and privileged therefore independent, as feudal so honourable and trustworthy, and as abiding ancient laws thus rightful. One of the establishment’s replies consisted in refurbishing the historical argumentation that had served seventeenth-century royalists well: the thèse royale that negated or negatived everything that made the parliamentary and now the opposition party look good. In political history establishment-style, prerogative overtook privilege, feudalism was countered with antifeudal arguments and Anglo-Saxon laws were declared long dead. Another way in which the establishment stood its ground was by contesting the claims of the opposition to be public spirited and independent. The ministry was called virtuous, the opposition corrupt, and the selfishness of the ‘envious aspirants to office’ a threat to government led in the national interest.

John Pocock has called the period from 1784 to 1832 the ‘second age of oligarchy’. The nucleus of opposition during that whole time was formed by the Foxite Whigs. Though Charles James Fox died in office September 1806, parliamentary opposition kept going on in his name. Fox himself carried on Rockingham’s oppositional endeavours, that lasted all through the 1770s. Rockingham died in office June 1782. The Rockinghamite/Foxite agenda was largely Bolingbrokean, after the man who had led opposition during the first age of oligarchy. The anti-establishment arguments put forward changed slightly from being generally anti-oligarchical to being guardedly anti-crown. That is, the main object of censure was no longer a club of courtiers and upstarts who threatened the old order but the king trying to do the same. Foxite ideology, to be sure, was not anti-monarchical but anti-oligarchical. The king was considered to be a natural component of the ancient order, and censured only in so far his dealings were seen to endanger that order from the inside out. Such dealings, it was believed, kept the old structures intact but eroded the soul of the ancient constitution (read: threatened the independence of parliament). Due to the king’s patronage most power came to reside in a clique, and parliament was incapacitated for performing its ancient duties. To expose this sorrowful situation the opposition kept on expounding and refining the seventeenth-century parliamentarian thèse nobiliaire, in which most tyrants of British history were scolded, and parliament was shown to have withstood all former invasions on its privileges. This kind of political history, except for minor alterations, was being written for the same reason until the end of the second age of oligarchy. From the beginning of that age the counterdiscourse of opposition history, royaliste establishment history, was on the wane however.

Even though the 1760s and 1770s fell between two acknowledged ages of oligarchy, opposition and establishment histories were being produced in considerable numbers also in
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those years. From the early 1780s matters changed. In 1784 the outcome of a constitutional crisis (which will be explained in due time) confirmed the worst Foxite fears. From then on anti-crown arguments determined the programme of the Foxite Whigs to 1832 at least. In that year Charles Grey (1764-1845), prime minister and Foxite Whig, was responsible for acting out of what is known as the Great Reform Bill. Grey’s and his party’s overriding motive for devising, passing and implementing that bill was, as Leslie Mitchell argues, to justify and put to rest more than forty years of opposition by ‘restrict[ing] royal influence within proper bounds’. Mitchell speaks of the ‘Reform Bill drama’ that amounted to a Foxite ‘exorcism of the shade of George III’. The dramatic action extended back in time to several decades of shadow-boxing. By 1832 the establishment that the opposition relentlessly hammered at had long let down its traditional defence. That leg of our story is best told by the tribulations of Edmund Burke (1729-1797).

In the 1770s Burke was the mouthpiece of the Rockingham Whigs. Serving in the Rockingham administration of 1782, Burke was responsible for putting through some measures of reform that were meant to limit the influence of the crown. Soon after, Burke declared that the crown was contained as much as constitutional safety required and that his party members should stop insisting on what he himself had formerly helped to formulate. By and by, Burke sought the company of what the opposition called the establishment, taking many of his historical arguments with him. Accentuating the aristocratic and ‘unpopular’ elements of opposition history, and toning down its anti-oligarchical elements, Burke legitimated his new political position by invoking feudalist and nobiliare history. Burke’s celebrated reaction to the French Revolution did much to make this outlook the customary establishment ideology. All this meant that the opposition came to share large parts of its favourite creed with the establishment. One of the unfavourable consequences of comparison was that the ‘democratic’ limitations and the aristocratic lineaments that were imminent in opposition discourse became obvious. The opposition looked less like the party of the people than it wanted, and more like a part of the political elite that it haunted. Utilitarians like James Mill seized the opportunity. They reworked anti-establishment ideology into a next phase, minimalising the difference between establishment and opposition by dissecting the language of the latter, and by employing elements from the establishment’s previous anti-opposition discourse.

The main utilitarian worry was not the king that infiltrated, but the aristocracy that dominated parliament. Like the opposition Whigs, utilitarians feared that patronage threatened the independence of parliament and with that government in the general interest. They also promoted their own politics as the virtuous and impartial alternative. However, utilitarians were critical of the opposition’s ongoing rant at the influence of the crown. That, they said, primarily served to cover up the aristocratic interests which the opposition shared with the
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politicians in office. These interests posed the real threat. The utilitarian variety of anti-establishment ideology profited from the dated establishment strategy of antifeudalism. The antifeudal stance that used to be maintained by establishment historians conveniently criticised the narrowly aristocratic intentions of opposition. Now the establishment and the opposition were at one in appealing to medieval precedents, antifeudalism could be used to argue that they shared the same interests.

JOHN MILLAR AND JAMES MILL

In the early 1760s, and probably already during the 1750s, Adam Smith (1723-1790) taught that the Tory and the Whig party favoured two different doctrines of political obligation, the principles of authority and utility respectively. Whereas the first principle demanded passive obedience, the second set a limit to the duty of allegiance. Following David Hume (1711-1776), Smith derived a political psychology from the notions that originated with the auctoritas of the Roman princeps and the Ciceronian motto ‘salus populi suprema lex esto’. The principle of authority, Smith wrote, was founded on the human propensity to respect ‘natural superiority’ as in parents, elders, the exceptionally brave, and the well-off. The principle of utility (also called the ‘principle of common or general interest’) proceeded from the awareness, growing in history, that the government existed for the good of the people. Adam Smith thought that both principles together explained why people usually settled themselves in a political order. He also saw both at work in the British constitution. There was the authority with which the sovereign was vested, checked by the House of Commons whose use lay in the protection of the common good. Tories let one side prevail, Whigs the other.?

John Millar matriculated at the University of Glasgow before Adam Smith began lecturing there, but, as a student, friend and (from 1761) as a fellow professor, he became the main expert on, and perhaps the foremost all-round proponent of Smith’s teachings. The two principles that Smith said separated the political parties were an important theme of Millar’s lectures and writings. Utility and authority also describe what Millar thought he was doing in teaching and writing. Being a Whig, Millar saw himself on the side of utility. Accepting Smith’s account, he also had history and reason on his side: utility was reason historicised. In common eighteenth-century connotations, Smith and Millar sketched a picture of the political repercussions of the upsurge of ‘knowledge and science’ in the Renaissance. The daring exploits in the arts and on every field reached by the mind, the writing and dissemination of imaginative literature and experimental learning, and the emancipatory effects of debating authoritarianism in church, state and science were held to have brought
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general enlightenment and political consciousness in particular. Like Adam Smith and many others, Millar observed that the flourishing of reason inaugurated the florescence of political reasoning; that from then onwards the reasons for political allegiance were actually debated; and that the more reasonable principle tended to prevail ever since. Millar believed that his project was the continuation of those beneficial developments, and that his party was their political expression. However, Millar’s representation of his own historiographic practice as well as his rendering of the beliefs of his political opponents was far from accurate.

The Smithian distinction between Tories embracing authority and Whigs favouring utility betrayed a seventeenth-century Whig point of view. In Millar’s time the doctrine of passive obedience was anything but current. As far as obedience was concerned, Millar, by borrowing his terms from the seventeenth-century parliamentarians, was content with taking the people’s assent for granted. Quite differently from what he asserted, those Whigs with which Millar associated were busy establishing precedents for parliament’s privileges instead of discussing principles of political obligation. The precedents John Millar and his party had in mind were mostly medieval. Not the attainments of the Renaissance but those of feudal society inspired Millar to write sophisticated and sociologically insightful history. Answering to the same Smithian logic, history that pre-dated the Renaissance could hardly be reconstructed around the theme of utility. It was not. Instead, the bulk of Millar’s work was an elaboration of the principle of authority. Millar lectured and wrote a sort of natural history of political society that is called history of authority here. History of authority, starting from the assumptions that man naturally formed structures of power and conformed to natural changes in these structures, went from family politics and fatherly power to ever widening circles of social subordination and political organisation. Applied to the British situation, Millar used the whole arsenal to argue for the historical continuity and political integrity of parliament.

History of authority was incompatible with Millar’s utilitarian aspirations. The concurrence of reason and history that Millar thought culminated in the Whig party had but little to do with his practice of writing the history of patriotic parliaments whose task was now taken over by opposition. Still, Millar himself thought he made good on his claim by identifying his party and its predecessors with the people and the public good. According to Millar, these fulfilled the condition that the principle of utility set to the exertion of political power, that is they served the general interest. The reasons that Millar actually gave or rather implied for his party’s privileged position were all based on priority, prescription, longevity or seniority. It were exactly such (tacit) appeals to authority that, by Millar’s own account, had come to be questioned in the era of utility (when the grounds for obedience ceased to be taken for granted). In other words, Millar’s history of authority went against the historicity of utility. The discursive emancipation of the people was smothered in parliamentary
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It was a relatively small step from Millar’s practice of conflating reason and (medieval) constitutional history to Edmund Burke’s well-known doctrine of prescription, according to which rights should not to be reasoned about outside their historical settings lest the venerable edifice of law and order was jeopardised. From there it was but a small step to Jeremy Bentham’s censure of history as counteracting reason. Bentham (1748-1832) famously thought that historical questions should be distinguished from (or sooner left alone in favour of) questions of a ‘critical’ or ‘censorial’ nature. He criticised the use of historical arguments as contempt of reason by exposing what his close collaborators called the fallacies of authority. James Mill was one of Bentham’s collaborators, and the Benthamite language-political critique of authority was characteristic of his utilitarianism. Among the fallacies of authority Bentham reckoned invoking the so-called wisdom of our ancestors, mistaking the duration of political and legal arrangements for their usefulness, and equating constitutional innovation with anarchy. Mill agreed with Bentham that authoritarianism was a linguistic construct that badly needed to be taken apart, but he disavowed the latter’s opinion that history could never be more than a ‘record of uninstructive error’. James Mill, according to himself, historicised reason just as John Millar had done.

It is odd to see Mill describe his utilitarianism as the continuation of exactly that part of Millar’s undertaking that failed by his own standards. John Millar did emphatically not succeed in historically working out the principle of utility like he said he did. The people as a politically conscious actor with a will of his own did figure in Millar’s work but their part was wholly subsidiary. In the end, the public good lay in the hands of his party in parliament to which Millar thought the public must subscribe. Mill needed to rework Millar’s writings drastically to render plausible the assertion that Millar had really written the history of utility instead of the history of authority. Mill declared that Millar was the first to write ‘philosophical history’ as the march of mind and the progress of political righteousness. Mill invested Millar’s work with mentalistic and moralistic meanings it scarcely contained. Against these odds, it might be said that Mill captured Millar’s spirit (Millar died the year before Mill embarked on a journalistic career and several years passed before Mill transformed his work in abovementioned fashion). The present study presents Mill as being involved in the same undertaking as Millar, as sharing his aspiration of historically representing political reasonability and popular responsibility in the form of utility. Mill freely changed Millar’s arguments but he was faithful to the direction in which Millar would have them point. Both went to great lengths to make sure that they were sanctioned by history and therefore utility. Mill also drew conclusions from which Millar would or could only shrink away. But even the fact that Mill’s anti-authoritarianism was primarily directed against Millar’s very own Whig party betrayed more likeness then one would guess and could
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perhaps have counted on Millar's partial acknowledgement. The intellectual relationship between James Mill and John Millar may have been somewhat forced (time, political temperament and interpretational leeway taking their toll), it provides us with a wonderful insight into the dialectics of authority and utility in the decades embracing 1800.

By erecting utilitarianism on anti-authoritarian grounds Mill laboured under the same restraints as Millar had. Reading through Mill's lines, it is easier to see why the class that he thought was synonymous with the establishment should be distrusted than why Mill's 'middle rank' deserved to be entrusted with the power to rule. The increase of political consciousness on the side of the people apparently did not call for the use of rational arguments in this case. Like Jeremy Bentham, Mill countered the myths and mystifications of the fallacious discourse of authority with a purportedly transparent language of utility and science. He brought his clearly moralistic message that history tended to the common good with numerous incontrovertible proofs, incontestable certainties and other objective irrefutabilities. In spite of Mill's peremptory choice of words, it was he himself that, through his insistence on the dangers of authoritarianism lurking in language and on the priority of answerable politics, invited critical analysis of his own language. Mill helped to increase the awareness that where phrases were made to speak for themselves, dogma was close by; that one needed to clarify political questions by dispelling the linguistic mist spread over constitutional invocations; and ultimately that it needed to be proved rather than taken for granted that power was in good hands. To see how authority and utility fared from John Millar to James Mill not only serves to see how a critical tradition was being construed but also to elucidate a way in which political modernity came to be conceptualised.

The Conceptualisation of Modernity and the Politics of the Past

There are many ways of understanding modernity. And there are several ways in which contemporary historiography may affect our understanding of what makes societies modern. In an article called 'Modernity and Anti-Modernity in the Anglophone Political Tradition' John Pocock stresses that the concept of modernity is inevitably couched in historical terms.

We call something (perhaps ourselves) modern in order to distance that of which we speak from some antecedent state of affairs. The antecedent is most unlikely to be of neutral effect in defining either what is to be called 'modern' or the 'modernity' attributed to it; and in understanding the uses of this whole family of words, it is usually important to understand what is being excluded from the 'modern', to what past it is being relegated, and what structures of past and history are being imposed upon experience.\textsuperscript{11}
Pocock names three possible antecedents implied in the Western European consciousness of modernity: ‘ancient, medieval and pre-industrial’. Pocock’s piece, like the rest of his oeuvre, deals with the early-modern development of mindsets that renounced the ancient and the medieval. As the third prong of Pocock’s pre-modern triad makes clear, the discursive subjects of his studies were not modern in our sense. Late eighteenth-century Britons, for instance, lived and reasoned in a society that could embrace or condemn ‘commerce’ (to use one of their phrases for economic activity) but was unaware of the large-scale machinated forms that production for the market would later assume. The present section argues that this third part of Pocock’s scheme on what constitutes modernity (which holds good for much scholarship of early-modern political discourse and its relation to modern concepts) is problematic.

The problem that manifests itself in the work of Pocock and many other scholars is that of investing modernity, rather finalistically, with its latest meaning. The prospect of imminent industrialisation and advancing capitalism burdens the historian of early-modernity with a conceptual apparatus that is insufficiently historical and his informants with unduly economistic preoccupations. Modern ideology, according to consensual conception, is wed to the market and provides its scientific underpinning by reducing man’s being to economic motives. Pocock’s perception of what was modern and what was not in eighteenth-century Britain is for the better part decided by prevailing attitudes towards commerce and its repercussions on man, as the following case shows. Pocock has captured the novelty of the politics of Adam Smith and other figures of the Scottish enlightenment in the term ‘commercial humanism’. Humanism, according to Pocock, ran through early-modern Atlantic political thought, and the Scottish enlightenment was perhaps its last stand. The innovative combination between economic arguments and humanistic motivations (that seem to come down to concern for the integrity of political personality) culminated in Smith’s synthesis of political economy and moral philosophy. Contending that self-realisation was best performed in the economic freedom and civilised spaciousness of market society, Smith could vindicate a standing army for its efficiency and enlightened self-interest for its productivity. But, Pocock writes, Smith thought there was a limit to what economics was able to accomplish. He squarely objected to a division of labour, the very determinant of the wealth of nations, that reached industrial heights because of its alienating effects.

Smith’s humanism made him espouse a pre-industrial economy, according to Pocock, and thus decided the sense in which his politics was pre-modern. John Pocock’s story effectively stops with Smithian political economy. Not because he does not know what came after, but because he cannot explain how that came about. The transition to modernity, as Pocock sees it, occurred when commercial humanism was replaced with classical economics, when the concept of economic man took the place of concern about the political self. Pocock
himself illustrates the possibilities and pitfalls of his approach by referring to the long-
standing ‘Adam Smith problem’. That problem, on how to relate Smith’s moral philosophy
to his economics, has ceased to be problematic at the cost of having to face a similar
problem, inverted and postponed. How was economics separated from morality?

How did the complex synthesis of ‘moral sentiment’ with ‘the wealth of nations’ evolve or
degenerate into the science of classical economics; how did it come to be denounced as cold,
mechanical and dismal, founded on a restrictive and reductionist theory of the human personality
it had sought to liberate from classical restraints? ... If the last of the civic humanists was the first
of the Scottish economists ... then the classical economics seem rapidly to have hardened into a
paradigm which operated to deny the ambivalent historicism of late Whig culture. Bentham
and the elder Mill ... would seem to have much to do with this, and we are left trying to see how their
thought emerged in history. The space from Smith to Ricardo is replete with problems and
possibilities.

Pocock’s challenge has been taken up by Michael Ignatieff. Ignatieff thinks that John Millar
was not equal to the task of sustaining Smith’s ‘complex synthesis’ of classical republicanism
and classical economics. Sometimes Millar bewailed the pre-modern society that faded before
his eyes, sometimes he hailed the impending market society.

Millar’s contradictions were those of a theorist caught between two languages which bifurcate in
his own lifetime—civic humanist moralism and political economy. I see no reason why his
inability to choose between the evaluative premises of these two discourses should be referred to
a ‘social’ explanation. Smith and Millar both lived at approximately the same social moment and
in the work of both there are deep tensions between the language of corruption and the language
of markets and interests. But only one of them had the resolution to force his way to an internally
consistent discourse. This is surely a matter, not of differences in ‘social’ positioning, but in
tenacity of mind. The same tensions which Smith was able to hold under control broke Millar’s
work into irreconcilable layers.

Millar ‘marginalised’ both himself and the ‘moral critique of commercial society’, according
to Ignatieff. This Millar achieved by confining his moral concerns to the private sphere and
reserving his faith in the market to public spheres. Holding on to ‘old-fashioned republicanisms’ and failing to whole-heartedly endorse the ‘new language of economics’ he
was an ‘anachronism’ already to his contemporaries. By irreconcilably (and, it is presumed,
irreversibly) separating the ideological strands that Smith had managed to bring together,
Millar prepared the way for later economists who thought that the broadly informed approach
characteristic of Scottish moral philosophy was irrelevant to the science of economics.
Ignatieff does not solve Pocock’s problem of having reached the ‘outer limits’ of the ‘civic humanist paradigm’. In overstretched that paradigm he shares in Pocock’s fault of reconstructing the transition from a pre-modern to a modern mindset in the contrasting terms of humanistic morality and economistic reductionism. Both take the nineteenth-century criticism of industrial society and a late twentieth-century conceptualisation of modern society as indicative of how politics came to be perceived after 1800. But surely, not all contemporaries mistook the market for the whole of their society. Nor did everyone discuss politics within the confines of political economy. Moralising, with or without the use of economic arguments, was a favourite occupation in Victorian Britain. More to the point, it must be acknowledged that also those Britons ignorant or critical of political economy as well as those engaged in several other activities could reasonably think of themselves as being modern. Or that enlightened eighteenth-century Scots were significantly innovative outside commercial humanism. It is the probing of possibilities of exactly this sort that the present study undertakes.

One need not deny the considerable differences that existed between Adam Smith and later economists to argue that a different historical account of the coming about of modernity can be given that includes Smith. And one need not accept the updated Adam Smith problem to explore the possibilities of which Pocock speaks. This study enters that crucial ‘space from Smith to Ricardo’ in the company of the most attentive pupil of the first and the mentor of the latter. A reconstruction is made of the way in which the denunciation of feudal politics, with the passing of the concepts of authority and utility from Millar to Mill, turned into the unmistakably modern middle-class critique of the ancien régime. What was and what was not modern in the period under consideration is here taken to be decided by the divisions in the British political arena rather than by the nature of economic arguments. It is true that Adam Smith, for one, condemned the medieval nobility for its improductivity and for acting against its own interests. This would fit Pocock’s outlook on modernisation were it not that Pocock himself has argued that Smith’s antifeudalism was part and parcel of establishment ideology that served the interests of an aristocratic minority. Put differently, Smith criticised the ancient constitution in the capacity of ideologist of what we now call the ancien régime. That does not correspond to present-day notions of political borderlines. The same goes for John Millar’s vindication of the ancient constitution as a critic of the establishment of his time. His party was soon to be branded a subdivision of the ancien régime, and there is little in his overwhelmingly aristocratic notions with concern to political obligation that appeals to modern readers. In these two senses, James Mill was a modern. Mill’s criticisms of the establishment were directed against the aristocracy as a whole, and as contrasted with a middle class. Thus modernity became post-medieval.
John Pocock wonders how Smithian political economy, which showed against the background of humanistic doubts concerning economic activity how acting out of self-interest could lead to profit for all, came to be replaced with Ricardian economics that took economic activity for granted and self-interest for its methodological fundament. This question, to the extent that it is meant to inform us about the eventuation of modernity, is here substituted with the question of how the concepts of authority and utility were transferred from John Millar to James Mill and were being transformed in the process. What occupied them as well as most other authors discussed was not that individual interests were regulated through the market but the identity of interests between their respective parties in parliament and the people. The writings of both Millar and Mill were centred around that identification of interests, be it with different parties and different conceptions of who were the people in mind. Approaching the ‘space from Smith to Ricardo’ from this angle provides the continuity that Pocock finds lacking and highlights political modernisation rather differently perceived: not as the separation of morality from economics but as the contrast between ancien régime and a new political order. This reformulation of the ideological turn-abouts of the period also enables us to look with different eyes at the tensions in Millar’s work of which Ignatieff speaks. In the modest literature on Millar tensions are a regular feature and these are usually associated with his position on the brink of the modern age, with him being a ‘transitional figure’. The present study confirms that Millar’s work was tension-ridden and that that had to do with the historical moment in which he lived. But it hopes to refute the scholarly attempts to burden John Millar (or others, for that matter) with problems of our own making. By explaining that most tension in Millar’s work was caused by the irreconcilable complementarity of authority and utility, the transition to modernity is rendered in terms that people living through it could have had a notion of.
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Notes


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15. Michael Ignatieff, ‘John Millar and Individualism’, in Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment eds. Istvan Hont & Michael Ignatieff (Cambridge, 1983), 341-42. The ‘social explanation’ of which Ignatieff makes mention, and which he means to replace, is Hans Medick’s Marxist explanation of the tensions in Millar’s work. Millar, it reads, had confused theories of labour, capital and of class, which made him contradict himself on the topic of property. In one and the same text he declared himself to be in favour of the redistribution of property and against invasion of the inviolable right of private property. (In chapter four it is argued that this text was not as contradictory as it might seem, and that it was not Millar’s anyway). Medick’s explanation consisted in fitting Millar in a Marxian socio-ideological scheme, as theorist of the ‘radical petty bourgeoisie in the transient heyday of petty commodity production’ (as Ignatieff calls it). Hans Medick & Annette Leppert-Fögen, ‘Frühe Sozialwissenschaft als Ideologie des kleinen Bürgertums: John Millar of Glasgow 1735-1801’, in Sozialgeschichte Heute ed. Hans-Ulrich Wehler (Göttingen, 1974).


18. John Millar was the source on the particulars of Smith’s teachings for Dugald Stewart’s Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith of 1794. Jeremy Bentham remarked that James Mill was David Ricardo’s ‘spiritual father’ (and that he was himself Ricardo’s spiritual grandfather). Frederick Rosen, ‘Elie Halévy and Bentham’s Authoritarian Liberalism’, Enlightenment and Dissent 6 (1987), 63.

