



ISHA NEWSLETTER

International Social History Association

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*Keynote speech at the European Social Science History Conference,
Glasgow, April 2012*

Adam Smith: Opulence, Freedom and a Moral Economy

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Christopher J. Berry is Professor (Emeritus) of Political Theory and Honorary Professorial Research Fellow at the University of Glasgow. His published scholarship is wide-ranging and he has established himself as a leading international scholar of the Scottish Enlightenment. In addition to seminal articles, and contributions in this area, he is the author of the key text *Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1997), which is shortly to appear in both Japanese and Chinese translations. His scholarship ranges more widely. The author of six books in total, his *Idea of Luxury* (Cambridge, 1994) has had widespread influence both outside and inside academia and appeared in a Chinese translation (Century Press, 2005). The quality of his scholarship was recognised by his election at his first nomination to Scotland's 'national academy' – the Royal Society of Edinburgh. He is currently editing a large volume of original essays on Adam Smith for Oxford University Press and writing a book *The Idea of Commercial Society in the Scottish Enlightenment* for Edinburgh University Press.

Adam Smith was a student and professor at this University. In a gesture to that biographical fact my title derives in part from the student notes of lectures he gave at this University in 1762/3. A student records Smith professing in these lectures that 'opulence and freedom' were the 'two greatest blessings men can possess' (*LJA* 185). This positive linkage of opulence with freedom is central to Smith's vindication of commercial society and thence of modern liberty and its realisation in an economy imbued with moral values.

For Smith the key to the modern world is that it is a world of commerce; it is a world where everyman 'becomes in some measure a merchant' (*WN* 37). A society wherein this was true would for thinkers from Plato and Aristotle onwards would be of an inferior sort; indeed would frequently manifest corruption. By his use of the term 'blessing' Smith is signalling his departure from that negative assessment. By positively associating freedom and opulence Smith is claiming that a commercial society is morally better than that celebrated by Aristotle and his heirs- everyone [not a select few] is free and everyone enjoys a materially better life. A modern commercial economy is in a recalibrated manner a 'moral economy'. This brief lecture is effectively an elaboration of that claim. As a first step I wish to explore those two 'blessings'.

I start with Opulence. For Smith one characteristic of a developed commercial society is the presence of a

'universal opulence which extends itself to the lowest ranks of the people' (WN 22). A mark of this opulence is that these ranks are supplied 'abundantly' with what they have 'occasion for'. The source of this abundance is the division of labour, which Smith conjectures is a consequence of the 'trucking propensity' in human nature. Smith illustrates how an extensive division of labour produces opulence with the famous example of a 'very trifling manufacture' - pin-making, where, without the division of labour, an individual could make scarcely 20 pins a day, while, with the division, ten workers each could make 4800 a day (WN 14). A society where tasks like pin-making are minutely divided must necessarily be complex. The members of a commercial society are deeply interdependent. Smith illustrates this with the example of a coarse woollen coat. Indeed he truncates an enumeration of the various trades involved in its manufacture by declaring that 'many thousands' are implicated in this 'humble product' (WN 22-23). The fact of interdependence means that each individual 'stands at all times in need of the co-operation and assistance of great multitudes' (26). So extensive does this become that we arrive at a 'properly commercial society' where, as we saw, 'everyman thus lives by exchanging or becomes in some measure a merchant'.

By being 'blessed' by opulence the members of a commercial society are able to enjoy a far better standard of living than those in earlier ages. In material terms their basic needs of food, shelter and clothing are better and more adequately met (cf. respectively WN 90, 74, 870). This enhanced 'quality of life' extends beyond 'goods' or things to relationships. In the Introduction to the *Wealth of Nations* Smith says that the inhabitants of 'savage nations of hunters and fishers' are 'miserably poor' so that, as a consequence, 'they are frequently reduced or, at least, think themselves reduced, to the necessity sometimes of directly destroying and sometimes abandoning their infants, their old people and those afflicted with lingering diseases, to perish with hunger or to be devoured by wild beasts' (WN 10). This is a powerful and important argument. Contrary to Stoic 'frugality' or Christian asceticism or, again, Algernon Sidney's characteristic civic republican view that poverty is 'the mother and nurse of...virtue' (*Discourses concerning Government* [1698] II §25), Smith is firmly repudiating any notion that poverty is ennobling or redemptive. And since the abundance that commerce brings is precisely such an improvement then Smith's repudiation of the nobility of poverty is key factor in his vindication of 'modern' commercial society.

When Smith compared favourably the accommodation enjoyed by a lowly member of a commercial society to that of the African king he included in his description of the latter, that he was the 'absolute master of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages' (WN 24). One of the major positive hallmarks of a commercial society is that not only are its members materially prosperous but also they enjoy a liberty denied to the subjects of that African monarch. Here is the second 'blessing'.

Since in a commercial society its members are not tied into relationships of dependence, like that of master/slave or landlord/serf, then they are, for example, able to change occupations as often as they please (WN 23). In the middle of the *Wealth of Nations* Smith observes that it is the presence of a choice of occupation, along with the ability to have one's children inherit and to dispose of one's property by testament, that makes individuals 'free in our present sense of the word Freedom' (and its absence is a principal attribute of 'villanage and slavery') (WN 400). This is almost an aside but the self-consciousness it manifests reveals an appreciation that there is something novel abroad. The *Wealth of Nations* is a great book in the history of liberalism not least because of that appreciation. He is, of course, not alone and I emphatically do not want to claim that he was a lone voice.

What this modern liberty of choice taps are the deep wells of human motivation. Smith postulates that everyone has, from the womb to the grave, a natural desire to better their condition (WN 341). In order that this desire might generate opulence efficiently individuals should enjoy the private liberty to decide for themselves how to deploy their resources (454). This is what Smith calls the 'obvious and simple system of natural liberty' where everyman is 'left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way' (687). With the crucial proviso (to which we shall return) that they do not violate the laws of justice, individuals are to be left alone to identify and develop what interests them. On this understanding modern liberty consists in living under equitable laws. Unlike the pre-modern view which looks upon the political life as the humanly fulfilling life, the modern liberal views as equally, if not more, human the 'economic job of meeting household needs, or procuring the basic wherewithal for life. From the Stoic and teleological view it was not that men could not adopt the commercial life but that such a life was unworthy, it was (as Cicero, Seneca and others had observed) the inferior, sub-human/sub-masculine, concern of animals, slaves and women. In Smith 'economics' is the natural business of humanity.

There is another important dimension to this. Modern liberty is enjoyed by all and this inclusiveness demarcates it sharply from 'ancient liberty'. Ancient liberty was exclusive; it was only enjoyed by those who had leisure and that was made possible, as Smith pointed out, by the presence of a class of slaves. The abolition of slavery was part of the civilising process brought about by the emergence of commerce. (Smith observed that slavery was economically unproductive [WN 387,684] - wealth was increased by diligent workers and diligence is enhanced by high wages, by what he refers to as the 'liberal reward for labour' [WN 99].)

According to Smith's system of natural liberty, government has only three tasks; protection from external

foes, maintenance of public works and 'an exact administration of justice' (687). As we have already noted it is the last of these that is crucial to modern liberty but the second of these (public works) has a significant role to play as we will see. He declares in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in a piece of high-flown rhetoric which that work on occasion contains, that 'Justice is the main pillar that upholds the whole edifice. If it is removed, the great, the immense fabric of human society...must in a moment crumble into atoms' (TMS 86). Justice upholds society by means of rules. These rules have two important characteristics and it is here where the link between justice and the liberty of commercial society is forged. These rules are both general and inflexible

Smith concludes the *Moral Sentiments* by contrasting the circumstances where the 'rudeness and barbarism of the people' make the system of justice irregular to those in a 'more civilized nations' where the 'natural sentiments of justice' arrive at 'accuracy and precision' (TMS 341). It is only in 'commercial countries' that the 'authority of the law is always perfectly sufficient to protect the meanest man in the state' (TMS 223). Smith refers to justice as a negative virtue. Justice is negative because it requires forbearance, not hurting another. As a consequence Smith declares that 'we often fulfil all the rules of justice by sitting still and doing nothing' (TMS 82). There is, contrary to the civic republicans, no need to involve oneself in the forum, in the *res publicae*, in order to be a good citizen (cf. TMS 231).

Smith likens these rules of justice to the rules of grammar since both possess the qualities of precision, accuracy and indispensability (TMS 175). This precision makes both grammar and justice amenable to instruction; in the same way that we can be taught how to conjugate verbs correctly so we 'may be taught to act justly'. Justice is now, once again, inclusively in the reach of all, because everyone 'by discipline, education, and example' can learn to respect general rules (TMS163). The effect of this process of instruction is to establish certainty and predictability, for 'without this sacred regard to general rules there is no man whose conduct can be much depended upon' (*Ibid*).

This predictable dependency is crucial in a commercial society because it rests on a set of expectations and beliefs. Exchange presupposes specialisation. I will only specialise in making hats in the expectation that others are specialising in shoes, gloves, shirts and so on, so that when I take my wares to market I can, via the medium of money, exchange my hats for their products. This means acting now in expectation of future return. Without some assurance about the future then I will not specialise but make all my own clothes but these will be inferior to those produced by respective specialists.

Justice is the indispensable source of that assurance. Smith illustrates its indispensability with the fact that it makes a society of merchants possible (TMS 86). This example was chosen to identify quite deliberately a society where 'mutual love and affection' are absent. Smith draws a further important conclusion from this, namely, 'beneficence is less essential to the existence of society than justice' (*Ibid*). And since in commercial society 'everyman is a merchant' this further entails that a commercial society's coherence - its social bonds - do not depend on love and affection. You can coexist socially with those to whom you are emotionally indifferent.

This state of affairs is the reality of commercial life. The very complexity of commercial society means, on the one hand, that any individual needs the assistance of many others (the message of the coarse woollen coat) but, on the other, that only a few of this 'many' are personally known (WN 26). In a commercial society we live predominantly among strangers. Relationships of mutual love and affection or friendship are correspondingly relatively scarce. Since the bulk of our dealings are impersonal then they must thus be conducted on the basis of adhering to the rules of justice. In a complex society a shopkeeper is unlikely to be also your friend; to you he provides something you want, to him you are a customer. This pattern of relationships lies behind Smith's famous passage,

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. We address ourselves not to their humanity but to their self-love and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. Nobody but a beggar chuses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow-citizens (WN 26-7).

Smith is not denying that members of a commercial society can be both just and benevolent. And it is an important element in his vindication of commerce that he does not regard them as inversely related. He argues that the concern 'not to hurt our neighbour' constitutes the character of the 'perfectly innocent and just man'. And such a character, he continues, can 'scarce ever fail to be accompanied with many other virtues, with great feeling for other people, with great humanity and great benevolence' (TMS 218). The two virtues of justice and benevolence do however have a different focus. Justice requires forbearance and rule-abidingness. Any positive action, such as deeds of benevolence are typically reserved for those known personally to us. We exercise these positive virtues at our discretion and in a necessarily partial fashion; everybody cannot be our neighbour, everybody cannot be the proper recipient of our beneficence, everybody cannot be our friend. We treat 'everybody' impartially, we treat them in accordance with the rules of justice. Understood in this way, Smith's account results in a re-scheduling of virtues.

Modern society, where the conjoined blessings of opulence and freedom are found, generates its own values and ideals. The 'reward' for acting justly, for keeping to the rules, is 'the confidence, the esteem

and the love of those we live with' (*TMS* 166). In a mutually supportive manner these three traits (confidence, esteem, love) will produce 'regular conduct' (*TMS* 63) or, in other words, the rule-governed, predictable behaviour necessary to the functioning of a commercial society. In its own distinctive way a civilized society embodies the prime Stoic virtue of self-command. But compared to the exercise of that virtue by civilized peoples, in earlier times it is more a matter of repression. Like a coiled spring that leaps unpredictably and uncontrollably once the tension is released, so the actions of the 'uncivilised' when they lose their self-command are 'furious and violent', their recriminations 'always sanguinary and dreadful' (*TMS* 208). It is 'the gentler exertions' of self-command which find expression in commercial society (*TMS* 242). The reference here to 'gentle' signals Smith's subscription to the thesis of 'doux commerce'. The world of opulence and liberty has seen a shift away from an emphasis on virtues, like courage and glory, to a stress upon the 'amiable' virtues of humanity, industry and justice; as he identifies in his Glasgow Lectures, the commercial values are probity and punctuality (*LJ* 539)

This reference to commercial values or virtues leads me to the final element in this lecture. In my opening remarks I made reference to the 'moral economy', it is that I now take up (though as should be evident this is not in the sense associated with E. P. Thompson). Notwithstanding that each individual has a 'natural preference...for his own happiness above that of other people' (*TMS* 82) it is, for Smith, a misreading of human nature to reduce, in the manner of Hobbes or Mandeville, all human motivation to self-interest. That reduction is evidentially false. It cannot accommodate the fact that the interactions of social life 'humble the arrogance of self-love' (*TMS* 83), so that no-one 'dares to look mankind in the face and admit he acts according to the principle of self-preference. For Smith this reveals something profoundly true about the nature of human nature. This is captured in the opening sentence of the *Moral Sentiments*:

How selfish soever a man may be supposed, there are evidently *some principles in his nature* which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derive nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it (*TMS* 9, my emphasis).

Recall that within the 'society of strangers' Smith does not deny the presence of friendship or mutual love just the scope of their application.

I want to develop this point by picking up on another of the tasks of government, namely, the provision of public goods. An example of such provision is education. In the *Wealth of Nations* he made it clear that the 'wealth' lay in the well-being of the people. This well-being covered not only their material prosperity but also their moral welfare. Accordingly, as we have already seen, he thought to be in poverty is to be in a miserable condition and he regards opulence as a blessing. Despite that last point Smith is alert to the potential moral damage attendant upon life in a commercial society.

In a well-known juxtaposition, in the opening chapters of the *Wealth of Nations*, he celebrates, as we have seen, the productiveness of the division of labour with the example of pin-making but he expresses concern, in Book 5, for the 'social' and 'intellectual' (as well as 'martial') 'virtues' of pin-makers. He notes that those whose lives were spent performing a 'few simple operations' (a phrase employed in Book 1 about pin-making) were rendered 'stupid and ignorant' and incapable of 'conceiving any generous, noble or tender sentiment and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life' (*WN* 782). The 'morality' into which they are socialised is defective. Smith likens society to a 'mirror' but what these pin-makers see reflected back to them to is their own 'mutilated condition, as Smith describes it (*WN* 788). The all-enveloping nature of their shared work experience deprives them of perspective. This weakens their self-command and moral discipline and they become prey to enthusiasm and superstition (*WN* 788). This at any rate is the probable course of events unless 'the public' takes remedial steps by instituting a subsidised system of elementary schooling (*WN* 785). Enabling, through education, the pin-makers to lead lives of 'virtue' is an example of Smith's commitment to the embedment of the 'economy' within a 'moral' societal setting.

It is not indeed the role of government to make people make pins. This is part of Smith's famous polemic against the 'mean and malignant' (*WN* 610) mercantilist endeavour to direct economic activity; an endeavour that he criticises as ill-conceived and injurious to the wealth of nations, that is, to the welfare of its inhabitants. What government does do properly, via the exact administration of justice, is enable the 'system of natural liberty' to function (*WN* 687). Liberty is a blessing and enabling it is good. It is morally wrong to use the power of the state to direct individual actions, as in choice of employment or dress. But Smith does see a proper role for government regulation (including that of banks [*WN* 324]). Nor is he above criticising those private individuals who would distort the 'market'. His well-known judgment of merchants belongs in this context – they are hypocrites who complain of others while being silent on the 'pernicious effects' of their own gains (*WN* 115); they are conspirators as they contrive to raise prices (*WN* 145), indeed they have an 'interest to deceive, and even to oppress the publick' (*WN* 267).

To summarise: that Smith continued to work on the *Moral Sentiments* (1790) after he had published the *Wealth of Nations* (1776) should alert us to the fact that Smith never forsook his roots as a professor of moral philosophy in this University. More significantly it indicates that Smith's thought is a 'whole'. For Smith 'economic' activity took place within society; its participants were socialised beings. This socialisation was also necessarily a moralisation. He rejected an Aristotelian version of a moralised

economy based on the meeting of imputed finite needs and posited on a conception of a 'good life' devoted to transcending the essentially animalistic realm of appetite and desire. But that rejection does not mean that he 'de-moralised' the economy. Rather what he did was shift the basis of valuation.

This occurred on two fronts. On the political or civic front, Smith undermined the republican's emphasis on active citizenship or deliberate pursuit of the public good. For Smith the true public good lay in the world of material well-being and that was best obtained via 'commercial' endeavour (making pins and coats) not via privileging the political over the economic. Opulence is a blessing.

Secondly, on a wider philosophical front this interpretation of the materiality of well-being represented a rejection of the classical/Christian perspective. For Aristotle mutability was characteristic of normative imperfection. And this set up the basic classical/Christian distinction between, on the one hand, the tranquil/ascetic life, devoted to the contemplation of the immutable First Cause or the eternal perfection of God, and, on the other, the mundane life which is unceasingly at the beck and call of the demands of bodily desires. One consequence of rejecting the normative superiority of the eternally immutable was the acceptance of the worth of the mundanely mutable. Life, self-preservation, from being for the Stoics a 'thing indifferent' or for civic moralists being sacrificeable *pro bono publico*, became valued for its own sake.

Politically this means that desires are to be accommodated not proscribed. It is the particular desires of individuals that determine what they judge subjectively to be worthwhile and they properly should have the freedom to pursue those desires within the framework of the rule of law. Liberty is a blessing. The sovereign's interest lies not in the specific content of the desires only in the likelihood of their peaceful co-existence; not in the choice of music but the volume at which it is played, not in the religious ritual performed but in its confinement to those who have chosen to practise it, not in the nature of the business enterprised but in its conformity to general rules and so on. This is the view that comes to be called liberalism. In effect, liberalism valorises the mundane. As a mundane liberal, Smith's 'economy' is 'moral' embodying as it does the blessings of opulence and liberty.

This is an abridged (and adapted for verbal delivery) version of my 'Adam Smith's Moral Economy', *Kyoto Economic Review*, (2010) LXXIX: 2-15; itself effectively reprinted as 'Adam Smith and the Morality of Economics', *Journal of Social Business*, (2011) 1: 10-28.

References are to:

- WN - Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* [1776], Glasgow Edition, eds. R. Campbell and A. Skinner (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1981).
LJ - Lectures on Jurisprudence, Glasgow Edition, eds. R. Meek, D. Raphael and P. Stein (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1982).
TMS - The Theory of Moral Sentiments, [1759/90] Glasgow Edition, eds. A. MacFie and D. Raphael (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1982).

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Preparations for the foundation of the Italian Society for Labour History

Andrea Caracausi and Laura Cerasi



On 1 May 2012 the incipient Italian Society for Labour History (Società Italiana per la Storia del Lavoro – SISLav) organized its initial meeting at the 'Sala Santi', 'Camera del lavoro' in Reggio Emilia. The participation of proposers and supporters of the Society's Declaration of Principles or Manifesto (see <http://storialavoro.wordpress.com/english/for-an-italian-scholarly-society-of-labour-history/> for an English version) has been considerable, enthusiastic and promising. First, the justification and the basis of the 'Manifesto' were evoked, emphasizing the urgent need to establish a collaborative network between groups and/or individual researchers and scholars whose interests relate to labour history and, generally, the study of Work and Workers. Second, the participants at the meeting started a broader conversation on the main topics or concerns, which include the following objectives:

- cultural reasons and aims

- organizational design
- relationships with other International Associations of Labour History as well as with specifically focussed Italian organizations (for example, Research Centers, Chambers of Labour, Historical Archives)
- fundraising activities
- future plans and activities

With respect to the first point (i.e. the aims of the Society as laid down in the Manifesto), participants agreed on the renewed stress on various aspects of disaggregated research on the subject of labour. They also emphasised the importance of creating a space for the exchange of communication and information on the subject, consistent with the plan to enlarge the scope of the chronological and thematic aspects of research on labour history. Members also reminded those present of the importance of applying an interdisciplinary perspective; instigating a continuous dialogue with social scientists and economists at the expense of downplaying influential paradigms and avoiding hegemonic claims. Moreover, members proposed the inclusion of the 'pre-industrial period' as well as the use of new approaches to the 'history of labour movements'. With respect to the internal structure of the Society, members approved the major points of the 'Statute'. They also decided that the planned proposal will be organized in a manner that will allow for the proper functioning of the Society. This will assist in counter-balancing the various, specifically focussed, scientific and operational segmented structures. Networking, collaboration and contacts with international organizations and scholars are considered as one of the most important goals, in addition to links with specifically focussed organizations. Generally, the participants emphasised the need to disseminate the 'Manifesto' through seminars and workshops.

In order to maintain the exchange of information among people interested in labour history a provisional web-platform has been established. Also, a specific website will be launched as soon as possible and a blog is currently available on <http://storialavoro.wordpress.com/>. The blog includes information on the Society, relevant information on who to contact, and the various calls for papers, conferences, events, books reviews and articles. Finally, the participants agreed on the following forthcoming events scheduled for the next few months. These include:

- a. The establishment of a steering committee to decide on statutory, organizational and specific matters as well as fund-raising activities;
- b. the organization of a first meeting to be held in the period September and October at which the 'Statute' will be presented and voted upon by the participants (who will be required to pay membership dues);
- c. Ideas and themes for a conference to be held in 2013 to discuss the 'state of art' of labour history in Italy and elsewhere.

This first meeting was followed by a working seminar held in Rome on 25 May 2012 at the Senate Library of the Italian Republic. The seminar, entitled 'La Storia come Storia del Lavoro' ('History as Labour History') was intended to discuss the main issues underlying the SISLAV project. This was done by Luca Baldissara who introduced the morning session at the meeting. Other speakers talked about the current situation of the Italian Labour studies:

- Stefano Musso proposed a framework for the beginning of the 21st century;
- the development of the global Labour history and its potential for the Italian researches (Christian G. De Vito);
- the history of the 'working class movement' concept in the Italian tradition (Michele Nani);
- the changing perspectives on the Industrial revolution, and the need to revise its periodization (Giovanni Favero);
- the relationship between labour history, the working class movement, trades union history, and politics in 20th century Italy (Jorge Torre Santos).

Overall, both the contributions and the debate focused on the general necessity to strengthen the links between the different approaches to Labour History (Pietro Causarano), and to extend the chronological boundaries back to what is considered 'labour' to include the late modern period and also to reconsider the legacy of the medieval corporate tradition (Angela Groppi). Suggestions were also made to take into account the connections with other disciplinary fields, such as economic history (Simone Selva).

The afternoon session was meant to explore some of the 'open' questions in current research relating to Labour history in a broader perspective. The key role of labour has been examined in the context of the building of the corporate State during the Fascist regime; the corporatist practices before and after its establishment (Laura Cerasi), and with regard to the making of the civil and constitutional laws during the XXth century (Irene Stolzi). The working class movement and the trades unions were instrumental in the establishment of the Italian Republic after WWII; and their role has yet to be examined (Lorenzo Bertucelli). Another topic was the controversial and frustrated transition from the Fascist regime to

democracy after 1945 (Michela Ponzani). Finally, the relationship between migration and labour was analysed, focussing on the birth of a modern social security system in e 20th century Italy (Stefano Gallo).

Prior to the seminar, some members of the steering committee gathered a day before to discuss issues such as the Statute; the first plenary meeting for the official foundation of the Society; the website; and other formal activities. In particular, the members at the initial meeting advocated that the Statute should underscore the main aims of the society; emphasise the importance of disseminating labour history studies in every possible form, both within and outside the academic environment.

The meeting for the formal foundation of the Society is scheduled to be held in Milan between mid-September and early October, at the Camera del Lavoro venue.

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David Montgomery (1927–2011)



David Montgomery, one of the founders of “new labour” history – history written from below or from the perspective of the shop floor and “ordinary” workers – died of a brain haemorrhage on 2 December 2011.

[\[1\]](#)

Montgomery was born in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania on 1 December 1927. His parents were reasonably well off, as his father was continuously employed in an insurance firm. In 1945 he enrolled at Swarthmore College but was drafted into the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers the following year. He was stationed briefly at Los Alamos, New Mexico and frequently interacted with the physicists who had designed the atomic bomb.[\[2\]](#) After his discharge from the military, he resumed his studies at Swarthmore College and received his bachelor’s degree in 1950. He then became a self-taught machinist and was also very active in the union movement. From 1951 to 1956 he was a member of Local 475 of the United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) in Brooklyn, New York. He also joined the Communist Party, attracted by its struggle for social equality and anti-racist position. In 1952 he married Martel Wilcher, an African-American comrade and their mixed-race marriage was unlawful in several American states at the time. Around 1957 Montgomery left the party, disillusioned by Khrushchev’s revelations, the events in Hungary, and the party’s dogmatism. Despite this, he remained a radical union activist and experienced discrimination at the hands of employers, which meant that he was unable to earn a decent livelihood. The McCarthy era basically forced him back into academia. In 1959 he joined the University of Minnesota graduate school, where he obtained his PhD in 1962. He later explained: “I was driven out of the factory; I was blacklisted. Becoming a historian was *not* my first choice. I had to do something, so I took the second-best choice that was around then.”[\[3\]](#)

He became an historian while he was still an employee. His first article, on the American Railway Union strike in Minneapolis in 1894, was published under a pseudonym in 1958.[\[4\]](#) Initially, his main source of intellectual inspiration was W.E.B. Du Bois, the great African-American scholar, who in the 1950s had also spoken at UE Local 475 and had enthralled the listeners there. Montgomery’s dissertation, a revised version of which was later published as *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans*, reflected a pronounced political-historical orientation, even though the “labor question” served as “a prism with which to study the political spectrum of Reconstruction America.” The failure of Radical Republicanism was principally attributed to the confrontation with the labour movement.[\[5\]](#) The book “set the stage for a broader account of American [post-Civil War] history in which class and collective action were the central theme, and creating a ‘republic of labor’ based not on acquisitiveness but mutualism still seemed within the realm of possibility.”[\[6\]](#) Montgomery truly came into his own some years later. He joined the history department at the University of Pittsburgh in 1963; then worked at the University of Warwick (Britain) from 1967-69, where he teamed up with E.P. Thompson to establish the Centre for the Study of Social History. Here too, he encountered opposition from political rivals. Fellow historian Mel

Dubofsky believed that by addressing trade-union groups in Britain, Montgomery instigated “the Rootes Motor Company (a subsidiary of Chrysler) to employ a private detective to investigate [him] and then [sought] to have him deported from England as an ‘undesirable person’ through the offices of the university vice-chancellor.”[\[7\]](#)

Montgomery’s experience in Britain reinforced a view he shared with Thompson, that labour history should focus primarily on workers’ “common experiences (inherited or shared)” and their confrontations with those “whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.”[\[8\]](#) He first presented this new perspective in articles on workers’ control of machine production, immigrant workers, and

managerial reform between the Civil War and World War II, which later provided the foundation for the anthology *Workers' Control in America* (1979), undoubtedly one of the most influential studies in English-language labour-history circles in the 1970s.^[9] In *The Fall of the House of Labor* from 1987, clearly his most ambitious work, Montgomery elaborated on *Workers' Control in America*, while at the same time greatly expanding the scope. In addition to craftsmen, he examined the lives and work cultures of common labourers and operatives and extended his area of interest beyond the borders of the United States. His basic premise was that between 1870 and World War I “industrial society” comprised three distinct but interlocking geographic regions:

“An industrial core, throbbing with manufacturing activity at continually rising levels, was roughly bounded by Chicago and St. Louis in the west, by Toronto, Glasgow, and Berlin in the north, by Warsaw, Lodz, and later Budapest (as rather isolated outposts) in the east, and by Milan, Barcelona, Richmond, and Louisville in the south. Surrounding that core [...] lay a vast agricultural domain in which capitalist development shattered long-established patterns of economic activity, without cultivating more than scattered pockets of extractive and processing industry. [...] Although this territory shipped agricultural produce, minerals, and forest products to the industrial core, it also exported people. Beyond the periphery lay an even larger third world that became increasingly tightly integrated into the economy of the core as the nineteenth century drew to a close, although it sent forth few emigrants. On the contrary, capital investment as well as workers migrated from western Europe and North America into that portion of the world to develop mines, plantations, railroads, and ports.”^[10]

On the basis of this approach, Montgomery, who edited the journal *International Labor and Working-Class History* from 1979-89, and spoke several languages, is representative of the scholars who prepared the ground for transnational labour history. Montgomery's last book, *Citizen Worker* (1993), was based on the Tanner Lectures he had given at Oxford in 1991. In these lectures he explored the link between the rise of popular democracy and the “free market,” demonstrating that labour markets function entirely thanks to physical coercion and statist intervention.^[11] Montgomery made clear once again that he did not regard labour history as an intrinsic objective but rather as part of a broader effort to understand capitalism.^[12] He tried continuously to relate the micro-history of everyday work to an analysis of broader political and economic developments.

Montgomery had a brilliant career analogous to this intellectual work. After teaching at the University of Pittsburgh from 1963-79 and serving as chair of the history department from 1973-76, he was appointed Henry Farnham Professor at Yale University in 1979. This appointment at one of the most prestigious universities in the United States signified not only a recognition of Montgomery's intellectual stature but was also a breakthrough for labour history as an academic discipline, after its earlier marginal status. Montgomery also received various other acknowledgements in recent decades, including Visiting Professorships at Oxford, Campinas and Amsterdam and an honorary doctorate from Swarthmore College in 1990. He was elected President of the Organization of American Historians from 1999 to 2000, and was the first recipient of the Sol Stetin Award from the Sidney Hillman Foundation in 2007.

These tributes did not mean that Montgomery was fully integrated into the academic establishment. Nor did his attitude toward capitalist society soften. He remained the scholar-activist or activist-scholar he had been for so long, fighting against the war in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 70s, and later actively supporting several union campaigns by the Yale University staff. In New Haven he once showed me the street where he helped striking employees of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company build a barricade. Throughout his life, he based his political orientation – as did Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson – largely on the Popular Front politics of the 1930s, when communist parties in his view highlighted the unity of the working class.

As a university lecturer, Montgomery was widely regarded as a profoundly inspiring person. In a 1998 anthology compiled by students, the editors wrote: “Montgomery's pedagogy has involved a clear vision of egalitarian and politically informed engagement, yet his hallmark as a teacher has been his genuine openness and wide-ranging appreciation for the multitude of questions that labor history addresses.”^[13]

Working with Montgomery was always a pleasant experience. He did not have a superiority complex, was a principled man unconstrained by dogma, and was consistently inquisitive. In the mid 1990s we decided to publish several articles written by the German economist August Sartorius von Waltershausen in English. Sartorius had journeyed across the United States in 1879-80 to study the labour movement (particularly the German-speaking movement) and had reported his observations extensively and analytically. This exemplary teamwork impressed me, especially in the way we related to each other as equals, despite Montgomery being a quarter of a century older and, of course, far more renowned than I was.^[14]

The last time I met Montgomery was at a conference in Washington, DC in late September 2011. When I asked him how he was, he answered cheerfully: “I'm retiring from life” – though he still seemed to be full of energy. Two months later, he died. Montgomery is survived by his beloved wife Martel, their sons Edward and Claude, and five grandchildren.

- [1] I'm grateful to Eric Arnesen, Jennifer Klein, and Shelton Stromquist for their comments on this obituary's first draft
- [2] David Montgomery, "Introduction," in: Noam Chomsky *et al.*, *The Cold War and the University. Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years* (New Press, 1997); James R. Barrett, "Class Act: An Interview with David Montgomery," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 1, 1 (Spring 2004), pp. 23-54, at 25.
- [3] [Mark Naison and Paul Buhle,] "David Montgomery," in: MARHO: The Radical Historians' Organization (ed.), *Visions of History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), pp. 167-183, at 175.
- [4] Amos Flaherty [David Montgomery], "The Great Northern Strike of 1894: When Gene Debs Beat Jim Hill," in: Meridel Le Sueur *et al.* (eds), *The People Together: One Hundred Years of Minnesota, 1858-1958* (Minneapolis: People's Centennial Book Committee, 1958).
- [5] *Beyond Equality. Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1967), quotation on p. x.
- [6] Shelton Stromquist, Comments at Memorial Gathering for David Montgomery, Pittsburgh, February 11, 2012.
- [7] www.hillmanfoundation.org/blog/david-montgomery-1927-2011-internationally-renowned-historian-struck-fear-hearts-uk-auto-execs, consulted January 5, 2012.
- [8] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1963), pp. 8-9.
- [9] *Workers' Control in America. Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
- [10] *The Fall of the House of Labor. The Workplace, the State, and American Labor Activism, 1865-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 70-71.
- [11] *Citizen Worker. The Experience of Workers in the United States and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
- [12] "Although my specialty is working-class history, the subject I am trying to get at is the history of capitalism. From this vantage point I have as much respect and esteem for the study of economy or of foreign relations as for that of working people. But the subject I have been looking at, shop-floor relations, does have a special importance because on-the-job workers must define their own world themselves. To study the ways they have done this, however, takes an all-consuming amount of time and effort." MARHO, *Visions of History*, pp. 176-177.
- [13] Eric Arnesen, Julie Greene, and Bruce Laurie, "Preface," in *idem* (eds), *Labor Histories. Class, Politics, and the Working-Class Experience* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), p. xiii.
- [14] August Sartorius von Waltershausen, *The Workers' Movement in the United States, 1879-1885*. Edited by David Montgomery and Marcel van der Linden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

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