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David Hume and the political economy of agrarian civilization.

In a recent book I considered two notable Enlightenment attempts to solve the problem which I have termed the 'riddle of the modern world', that is the possibility of the escape from the constraints built into the political economy of agrarian civilizations. I analyzed the work of Montesquieu and Adam Smith, each of whom considered different aspects of the puzzle.¹ In their answers they seldom contradicted each other or differed on essentials. Indeed they show a surprising agreement and continuity of approach while each adds a set of new insights to supplement the others.

Here I will look at David Hume's attempt to answer the riddle of how a new world was emerging. In order to understand Hume's contribution to this debate it is necessary to set it against a wider background of contemporary thought.² Only then can we see that while he emphasized and deepened many of the insights of Montesquieu and anticipated those of Adam Smith, he also contributed some novel twists to the general Enlightenment vision.

Montesquieu and Smith were united in their specification of what the central problem is. They agree that human beings are creative, inventive, curious, often motivated by strong drives to better their position. In appropriate conditions they will tend to increase their manipulation of the natural world so that their standard of living rapidly improves. They have the potential for cumulative or non-linear growth in their ability to produce resources. Indeed, for short periods in their histories, many regions or civilizations have seen such a growth.

On the other hand, experience showed them that the majority of such periods of growth came to an end quickly and that long periods of stasis or even decline were the norm. Growth was exceptional, stasis was the usual condition. Thus there must be a set of very powerful, negative, forces which crush man's natural abilities and desires. Their concern was to specify these constraints or traps and to show how they had operated and sometimes been avoided for limited periods.

They were well aware that as the potential for rapid growth became greater, through higher levels of knowledge and technology, so likewise the negative pressures grew at an equal or greater pace. As each form of civilization succeeded the previous one it faced new and more significant problems. This can be seen if we look at the extremes. To move from hunter-gatherer to tribal societies required a relatively minor shift - domestication of plants and animals. The checks on this were relatively light,

¹ Macfarlane, **Riddle of the Modern World**.

² The following paragraphs are a modified version of the first few pages of the conclusion to **The Riddle of the Modern World**, pp. 269-274. I am grateful to Richard Whatmore and his colleagues for suggesting this expansion of my original article and for other comments.

though starting at a subsistence level with practically no technological support; the transition was immensely difficult. The push was weak, and the counter-push was also quite weak. The two were well enough balanced to prevent any change in most of the world for over five hundred generations of human existence.

At the other extreme, if one took a great Empire like China, it was possible to see how both the potentials for transformation and the negative pressures were huge, and again just about balanced each other. The technological, intellectual, cultural and social sophistication of China by the fourteenth century was immense, far ahead of Europe. It had developed a knowledge of almost all the techniques necessary for industrialization, it had a very sophisticated and literate ruling group; it was peaceful and orderly. People were generally hard working and profit oriented. Yet four hundred years later, apart from the undoubted success in feeding a much larger population, it had made limited technological, scientific or social 'progress' and was now 'falling behind' Europe.

Nearer at home, the greatness of the Roman Empire, heir to all of Greek science and with its own developed organizational technologies, had collapsed, and more recently the promise of the Hapsburg Empire, of Renaissance Italy and southern Germany or even **ancien regime** France, had faded away or reached a plateau.

The potential of all these civilizations for rapid cumulative transformation was immense. Millions of hard-working, ambitious, inventive citizens surrounded by a wealth of practical, reliable, knowledge of how to manipulate the natural world to their own uses should have gained in opulence from generation to generation. The fact that they did not do so shows the strength of the negative pressures.

Much of the thought of the Montesquieu and Smith is concerned with these negative pressures and how, occasionally, they were overcome. Their central understanding was that as productive technologies grew in power, they were more than counterbalanced by predatory tendencies, which began to halt productive growth. Within these predatory tendencies they included not only obvious external predation, warfare and raiding of others, which often checked a civilization, but equally important, internal predation, that is to say the predation of priests, lords, kings, and even over-powerful merchant guilds. This internal predation usually took the form of increasingly sharp stratification - castes and estates - and increasingly absolutist religion and government and hence the destruction of personal liberty of action and thought.

The process within agrarian societies was a circular one. As productive technology produced greater surpluses, these almost automatically increased predation by increasing temptations. Success created envy and smaller states or cities were destroyed by neighbours. Predating Mongols devastated even huge civilizations such as China or India or Eastern Europe. A perpetual leveling took place. Likewise the growing wealth led to the temptation to expand and conquer and the centre was finally ruined by the burden of imperial dreams, as had happened in Rome, the Hapsburgs or Louis XIV's France. Almost automatically surpluses generated aggressive behaviour. And such militaristic activities directly led to the twin forms of internal predation - higher taxes, rents and social stratification, and increasingly absolutist power and political predation.

This was the central trap, supplemented powerfully by the Malthusian tendency for rapid increases in population to outstrip all growth in production and hence to add famine and disease to war and internal predation as checks on sustained growth. This was the trap which imprisoned agrarian civilizations and every great civilization up to the seventeenth century had finally become entangled in it and either collapsed or, like China and Japan, become immobile.

The riddle to which Montesquieu and Smith addressed themselves was how one escaped this apparently inevitable fate. During their lifetimes they speculated on the growing realization that against all the apparent predictions and laws, an escape to something else perhaps conceivable.

There seems to be a consensus among that an answer to the riddle must lie in the balance of forces. They were all aware that a structural solution, that is to say one which focused on the **relations** between the parts, rather than the parts themselves, was necessary. The key to the mystery lay in the difference between the normal tendency, which was towards a certain set of interlocked and rigid institutions, and the exceptions, where the parts remained independent, antagonistic even, and hence flexible.

Putting this more explicitly, they suggested that the normal tendency was as follows. In tribal societies, almost everything was encompassed within kinship - political power, religion, economy were all embedded within this. Hence economic or political developments was severely constrained. To change one element was to attack them all. The development of civilization depended, to a certain extent, on the weakening of kinship (status) and the growth of the power of other institutions - the economy and technology, the political structure (State systems) and religion (universalistic religions of the book). This was the huge leap and it allowed a freeing of energies and growth in all forms of production.

Yet there seemed a powerful tendency in agrarian civilizations for the structure to solidify again, this time into a new form of overlapping and dominating structure usually based on an alliance of priests and rulers. As productive wealth increased, the tools of power, both military and ideological, increased proportionately. The history of almost all civilizations, or periods within ancient civilizations such as China, was for a period of anarchy and confusion, where productivity was low but flexibility high, to settle down into higher productivity, but declining flexibility. A clear example of this lay, they thought, in the history of western Europe, as most of the continent moved from a lightly populated, technologically backward, but mobile, flexible and highly contractual feudal world which covered the continent from the sixth to twelfth centuries, into increasingly rigidified, status-based, politically and religiously absolutist civilizations from the thirteenth to eighteenth centuries.

They argued that as part of the swing from production to predation, there was increasing domination of all life by an increasingly closed world of politico-religious power which had crushed kinship, or suborned it to its use (as in China) and tried to maximize short-term, and even immediate benefit (as in war) from the productive labours in the economy. As the gaps, tensions and balance between institutions were closed, the space for technological and productive growth was increasingly reduced. Indeed, any advance in the wealth of producers - whether craftsmen and manufacturers, or merchants,

or even peasants, was a distinct threat, as well as an opportunity for predation, and hence quickly crushed. Likewise any growth in intellectual production outside the central circle of power was potentially undermining and quickly put down as heresy.

In a sense we can see the development as a tendency towards centralization and inequality, of concentric rings of power and status, as the Sun King or God-Emperor, in which all countervailing forces or relatively independent centres of production of artifacts or ideas were crushed. Uniformity, homogeneity, a rigid and level landscape emanating from the centre, where all forms of activity were again made inter-dependent was the growing tendency. The weight of the fruit of increased production increasingly brought down the tree. Or, to use a mechanical analogy, a negative feedback loop was in operation.

That this was a natural tendency was not surprising. Montesquieu and Smith were agreed that alongside sexual and intellectual drives, the desire to dominate and exert power over others was a basic human instinct. Indeed, much of human progress had arisen from the energy, which this desire prompted. But the desire was ultimately selfish. Each individual would try to maximize his or her own power, and perhaps that of his small co-ordered group, whether family or caste. With this powerful aim, and with increased wealth and technologies of domination, predation founded on an alliance of the rulers and the thinkers, kings and priests, subjecting the rest (the workers and 'producers') to increasing pressure, was an obvious strategy.

Indeed it was a strategy which could even, plausibly, be argued to be in the general interest. In a world where three quarters of the Eur-Asian continent was subject to periodic devastation from the wandering tribes of central Asia, or more locally from neighbouring powerful states, it made sense to put a great deal of productive wealth into predation and counter-predation. The philosophy of Machiavelli epitomizes this world where offence was the best form of defence, where those who aspired to virtue, peace, equality and liberty, were soon devastated. Even Christianity, founded on a gospel of turning the other cheek, witnessed the Crusades, the Inquisition and the final defeat of the Islamic threat at Lepanto.

Yet desperate though the ravages of war could be, there were recognizably equal dangers in too much peace. This again was best shown by the history of China and Japan. Long centuries of peace, in both civilizations, when military expenditure was relatively small and there was fairly light taxation, and even a powerful control of disorder, led only to the stagnation of technology and economy. Of course this could partly be explained by the Malthusian tendency towards rapidly increased population. Or it could be explained by the encouragement of stratification and labour rather than capital and technologically intensive agriculture partly caused by the peculiarities of rice cultivation. In a sense these countries were a warning of the dangers of too much success. The climate and agriculture produced huge surpluses, there was little to struggle against, and the system rigidified. It was a phenomenon which Montesquieu and Smith also noticed in contrasting the early fertility and abundance of Mediterranean Europe, with the need to struggle and produce in the Protestant north.

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Like his contemporaries, David Hume was well aware of the contradiction at the heart of political economy. As wealth accumulated there would be a tendency towards increasing political absolutism and hierarchy. 'For so great is the natural ambition of men that they are never satisfied with power; and if one order of men, by pursuing its own interest, can usurp upon every other order, it will certainly do so, and render itself, as far as possible, absolute and uncontrollable.'³ Such hierarchy and absolutism would crush wealth production. Hume noted that 'It has become an established opinion, that commerce can never flourish but in a free government', and he agreed that 'notwithstanding the efforts of the French, there is something hurtful to commerce inherent in the very nature of absolute government, and inseparable from it...'⁴

Hume's explanation for the link, however, was not the conventional one. 'Commerce, therefore, in my opinion, is apt to decay in absolute governments, not because it is there less **secure**, but because it is less **honourable**. A subordination of rank is absolutely necessary to the support of monarchy. Birth, titles, and place, must be honoured above industry and riches. And while these notions prevail, all the considerable traders will be tempted to throw up their commerce, in order to purchase some of those employments, to which privileges and honours are annexed.'⁵ His theory that it was basically the search for honour and political privileges which would destroy economic progress fits well with his central argument that there was a deep connection between commerce, manufacture and political liberty.

Hume believed that a purely agrarian population would of necessity be economically stagnant. 'Where manufactures and mechanic arts are not cultivated, the bulk of the people must apply themselves to agriculture; and if their skill and industry increase, there must arise a great superfluity from their labour, beyond what suffices to maintain them. They have no temptation, therefore, to increase their skill and industry; since they cannot exchange that superfluity for any commodities, which may serve either to their pleasure or vanity. A habit of indolence naturally prevails. The greater part of the land lies uncultivated.'⁶ All efforts to raise agricultural productivity would have to rely on force and would largely be fruitless.

On the other hand, the presence of trade and manufactures would naturally encourage the agricultural worker to produce more. 'It is a violent method, and in most cases impracticable, to oblige the labourer to toil, in order to raise from the land more than what subsists himself and family. Furnish him with manufactures and commodities, and he will do it of himself.'⁷ It was for this reason that 'The most natural way, surely, of encouraging husbandry is, first, to excite other kinds of industry, and thereby afford the labourer a ready market for his commodities, and a return for such goods as may contribute to his pleasure and enjoyment.'⁸

³ Hume, 'Of the Independency of Parliament', **Essays**, 29

⁴ Hume, 'Of Civil Liberty', **Essays**, 52

⁵ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 53

⁶ Hume, 'Of Commerce', **Essays**, 153-4

⁷ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 155

⁸ Hume, 'Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations', **Essays**,

Wealth would tend to accumulate through this process. 'When a nation abounds in manufactures and mechanic arts, the proprietors of land, as well as the farmers, study agriculture as a science, and redouble their industry and attention. The superfluity, which arises from their labour, is not lost; but is exchanged with manufactures for those commodities which men's luxury now makes them covet.'⁹ Furthermore, the increase of commodities 'are a kind of **storehouse** of labour, which, in the exigencies of the state, may be turned to the public service.'¹⁰

The beneficial side effects of a growth of commercial and manufacturing activity were numerous. 'Laws, order, police, discipline; these can never be carried to any degree of perfection, before human reason has refined itself by exercise, and by an application to the more vulgar arts, at least, of commerce and manufacture.'¹¹ Another effect was that 'It is an infallible consequence of all industrious professions to beget frugality, and make the love of gain prevail over the love of pleasure.'¹² The link between a monetary economy and frugality lay in the fact that, in relation to an individual, 'if the employment you give him be lucrative, especially if the profit be attached to every particular exertion of industry, he has gain so often in his eye, that he acquires, by degrees, a passion for it, and knows no such pleasure as that of seeing the daily increase of his fortune. And this is the reason why trade increases frugality, and why, among merchants, there is the same overplus of misers above prodigals, as, among the possessors of land, there is the contrary.'¹³

Another effect was to lower interest rates, hence making economic innovation easier. 'Commerce alone assembles it [money] into considerable sums; and this effect it has merely from the industry which it begets, and the frugality which it inspires...Thus an increase of commerce, by a necessary consequence, raises a great number of lenders, and by that means produces lowness of interest.'¹⁴ Furthermore, a cycle begins whereby prices also drop. 'I may add, that, as low profits arise from the increase of commerce and industry, they serve in their turn to its farther increase, by rendering the commodities cheaper, encouraging the consumption, and heightening the industry.'¹⁵

In general, then, a market economy stimulated by trade and industry becomes dynamic and self-sustaining. Thus men become acquainted with the **pleasures** of luxury, and the **profits** of commerce; and their **delicacy** and **industry**, being once awakened, carry them on to farther improvements in every branch of domestic as well as foreign trade.'¹⁶ Commerce with strangers 'rouses men from their indolence; and presenting the gayer and more opulent part of the nation with objects of luxury which they never before dreamed of, raises in them a desire, of a more splendid way of life than what their ancestors enjoyed.'¹⁷ It is for this reason that 'we find, that, in every kingdom, into which

⁹ Hume, 'Of Commerce', **Essays**, 154

¹⁰ Hume, 'Of Refinement in the Arts', **Essays**, 161

¹¹ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 162

¹² Hume, 'Of Interest', **Essays**, 180

¹³ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 179-80

¹⁴ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 180

¹⁵ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 181

¹⁶ Hume, 'Of Commerce', **Essays**, 156

¹⁷ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 156

money begins to flow in greater abundance than formerly, every thing takes a new face: labour and industry gain life; the merchant becomes more enterprising, the manufacturer more diligent and skillful, and even the farmer follows his plough with greater alacrity and attention.¹⁸ The benefits can be seen by a contrast with a simple agricultural existence. In such a pre-market world, 'It is the simple manner of living which here hurts the public, by confining the gold and silver to few hands, and preventing its universal diffusion and circulation. On the contrary, industry and refinements of all kinds incorporate it with the whole state, however small its quantity may be: they digest it into every vein, so to speak; and make it enter into every transaction and contract.'¹⁹

Furthermore, this quickening impulse spreads from country to country. 'There seems to be a happy concurrence of causes in human affairs, which checks the growth of trade and riches, and hinders them from being confined entirely to one people; as might naturally at first be dreaded from the advantages of an established commerce.'²⁰ This is because, although there are advantages in being an early developer, 'these advantages are compensated, in some measure, by the low price of labour in every nation which has not an extensive commerce, and does not much abound in gold and silver. Manufactures, therefore, gradually shift their places, leaving those countries and provinces which they have already enriched and flying to others, whither they are allured by the cheapness of provisions and labour; till they have enriched these also, and are again banished by the same causes.'²¹

Thus Hume had outlined the expanding power of market capitalism and the advantages of trade, manufacture and money. It is no wonder that he thought that merchants are 'one of the most useful races of men, who serve as agents between those parts of the state, that are wholly unacquainted, and are ignorant of each other's necessities.'²² Indeed merchants 'beget industry, by serving as canals to convey it through every corner of the state: and at the same time, by their frugality, they acquire great power over that industry, and collect a large property in the labour and commodities, which they are the chief instruments in producing.'²³ This increase in wealth, in turn, would lead to the virtuous circle, namely the growth of a balanced political system and the liberty which would, in turn, provide the foundation for future wealth.

The cycle was as follows. 'If we consult history, we shall find, that, in most nations, foreign trade has preceded any refinement in home manufactures, and given birth to luxury.'²⁴ This 'luxury' would then affect domestic life, for 'where luxury nourishes commerce and industry, the peasants, by a proper cultivation of the land, become rich and independent: while the tradesmen and merchants acquire a share of the property, and draw authority and consideration to that middling rank of men, who are the best and firmest basis of public liberty.'²⁵ Thus increasing commercial and manufacturing wealth leads to a

¹⁸ Hume, 'Of Money', **Essays**, 170

¹⁹ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 175

²⁰ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 168

²¹ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 168

²² Hume, 'Of Interest', **Essays**, 179

²³ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 180

²⁴ Hume, 'Of Commerce', **Essays**, 156

²⁵ Hume, 'Of Refinement of the Arts', **Essays**, 164-5

solid middle class which is the basis of political liberty. 'If we consider the matter in a proper light, we shall find, that a progress in the arts [i.e. skilled crafts and trades] is rather favourable to liberty, and has a natural tendency to preserve, if not produce a free government. In rude unpolished nations, where the arts are neglected, all labour is bestowed on the cultivation of the ground; and the whole society is divided into two classes, proprietors of land, and their vassals or tenants.²⁶ In commercial nations, a third, middling estate emerged. A practical demonstration of this was the success of the House of Commons in England in preserving English liberty. 'The lower house is the support of our popular government; and all the world acknowledges, that it owed its chief influence and consideration to the increase of commerce, which threw such a balance of property into the hands of the Commons.'²⁷

Hume was well aware that although there might be a tendency towards wealth accumulation, the historical experience and the present state of the nations of the world showed that there was no inevitability in the progress towards affluence. Like Montesquieu in particular, he needed to understand why China seemed to have reached a 'stationary' state and why Europe had been so dynamic. Within Europe he needed to analyse why England was clearly becoming the wealthiest and most powerful nation.

As regards the Europe and China problem, Hume put forward two theories. Firstly there was a geographical and ecological argument. Basically, he argued that natural affluence brought human indolence and poverty, while a difficult terrain encouraged industriousness and hence progress. He asked 'What is the reason, why no people, living between the tropics, could ever yet attain to any art of civility, or reach even any police in their government, and any military discipline; while few nations in the temperate climates have been altogether deprived of these advantages?'²⁸ He answered that 'It is probable that one cause of this phenomenon is the warmth and equality of weather in the torrid zone, which render clothes and houses less requisite for the inhabitants, and thereby remove, in part, that necessity, which is the great spur to industry and invention.'²⁹ The same contrast could be seen within Europe. 'It may seem an odd position, that the poverty of the common people in France, Italy, and Spain, is, in some measure, owing to the superior riches of the soil and happiness of the climate; yet there want not reasons to justify this paradox.'³⁰ The reason was that 'In such a fine mould or soil as that of those more southern regions, agriculture is an easy art; and one man, with a couple of sorry horses, will be able, in a season, to cultivate as much land as will pay a pretty considerable rent to the proprietor.'³¹ Likewise, 'The vineyards of Champagne and Burgundy, that often yield to the landlord above five pounds per acre, are cultivated by peasants, who have scarcely bread: the reason is, that such peasants need no stock but their own limbs, with instruments of husbandry, which they can buy for twenty shillings.'³² The opposite was the case in England. 'In England, the land is rich, but coarse; must be cultivated at a great expense; and produces slender crops, when not carefully managed, and by a

²⁶ Hume, 'Of Refinement of the Arts', **Essays**, 164

²⁷ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 165

²⁸ Hume, 'Of Commerce', **Essays**, 158

²⁹ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 158

³⁰ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 157

³¹ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 157-8

³² Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 158

method which gives not the full profit but in a course of several years. A farmer, therefore, in England must have a considerable stock, and a long lease; which beget proportional profits.³³

A second influence of poor natural surroundings was that it tended to force people into commerce and manufacture, for that was the way to wealth. He observed 'that the most commercial nations have not always possessed the greatest extent of fertile land; but on the contrary, that they have laboured under many natural disadvantages. Tyre, Athens, Carthage, Rhodes, Genoa, Venice, Holland, are strong examples to this purpose.³⁴ If he had been alive today, Hume would have surely added Japan to this list. The case seemed to be confirmed by a contrast between Holland and Ireland. 'Sir William Temple, we may observe, ascribes the industry of the Dutch entirely to necessity, proceeding from their natural disadvantages; and illustrates his doctrine by a striking comparison with Ireland; "where," says he, "by the largeness and plenty of the soil, and scarcity of people, all things necessary to life are so cheap, that an industrious man, by two days labour, may gain enough to feed him the rest of the week."³⁵ Necessity was indeed the mother of invention and industriousness.

Hume's second argument was again related to geography, but this time through its effect on political boundaries. The ideal situation, Hume thought, was that achieved in the Greek city states. 'Greece was a cluster of little principalities, which soon became republics; and being united both by their near neighbourhood, and by the ties of the same language and interest, they entered into the closest intercourse of commerce and learning. There concurred a happy climate, a soil not unfertile, and a most harmonious and comprehensive language; so that every circumstance among that people seemed to favour the rise of the arts and sciences.³⁶ Such a favourable situation had partly re-emerged in Europe after the fall of Roman absolutism, when 'mankind, having at length thrown off this yoke, affairs are now returned nearly to the same situation as before, and Europe is at present a copy, at large, of what Greece was formerly a pattern in miniature.³⁷

The reason for this diversity was mainly geographical. 'If we consider the face of the globe, Europe of all the four parts of the world, is the most broken by seas, rivers, and mountains; and Greece of all countries of Europe. Hence these regions were naturally divided into several distinct governments. And hence the sciences arose in Greece; and Europe has been hitherto the most constant habitation of them.³⁸ The advantage came out in the contrast with China. 'In China, there seems to be a pretty considerable stock of politeness and science, which, in the course of so many centuries, might naturally be expected to ripen into something more perfect and finished, than what has yet arisen from them.³⁹ The reasons why this expectation had not been fulfilled took Hume to the heart of his theory. 'But China is one vast empire, speaking one language, governed by one law, and sympathising in the same manners.

³³ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 158

³⁴ Hume, 'Of Taxes', **Essays**, 204

³⁵ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 204

³⁶ Hume, 'Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences', **Essays**, 69

³⁷ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 69-70

³⁸ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 70

³⁹ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 70

The authority of any teacher, such as Confucius, was propagated easily from one corner of the empire to the other. None had courage to resist the torrent of popular opinion.⁴⁰

For Hume, political sub-divisions within a common culture were necessary partly because of the competition they encouraged, but even more so because they diminished the danger of innovation being suppressed by traditional authority and received wisdom. The emulation, which naturally arises among those neighbouring states, is an obvious source of improvement: but what I would chiefly insist on is the stop, which such limited territories give both to **power** and **authority**.⁴¹ The distinction between power and authority was essential in explaining why even without physical force, the reputation of someone like Confucius could deaden thought. Hume explained that 'the divisions into small states, are favourable to learning, by stopping the progress to **authority** as well as that of **power**. Reputation is often as great a fascination upon men as sovereignty, and is equally destructive to the freedom of thought and examination'.⁴²

There were other necessities. Wealth and security were also preconditions for advance. In relation to the latter Hume wrote that 'From law arises security: from security curiosity: and from curiosity knowledge. The latter steps of this progress may be more accidental: but the former are altogether necessary'.⁴³ Above all one needed mutual inter-actions between independent entities. Hume, setting the whole sentence in heavy type, wrote that '**nothing is more favourable to the rise of politeness and learning, than a number of neighbouring and independent states, connected together by commerce and policy**'.⁴⁴ Only such a system could slow down the natural tendency towards equilibrium or decline, for, 'when the arts and sciences came to perfection in any state, from that moment they naturally or rather necessarily decline, and seldom or never revive in that nation, where they formerly flourished'.⁴⁵

This left Hume with the final question, of why England was currently so conspicuously successful. The success was not in question. Writing of the two generations since the Revolution of 1688, Hume believed that 'So long and so glorious a period no nation almost can boast of: nor is there another instance in the whole history of mankind, that so many millions of people have, during such a space of time, been held together, in a manner so free, so rational, and so suitable to the dignity of human nature'.⁴⁶ England was a land where 'Public liberty, with internal peace and order, has flourished almost without interruption: trade and manufactures, and agriculture, have increased: the arts and sciences, and philosophy, have been cultivated'.⁴⁷ The fact that England was not only (per capita) the wealthiest nation in the world but that this wealth was spread very widely made it an amazing spectacle. In this

⁴⁰ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 70

⁴¹ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 68

⁴² Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 69

⁴³ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 68

⁴⁴ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 68

⁴⁵ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 78 - the passage is again in bold.

⁴⁶ Hume, 'Of the Protestant Succession', **Essays**, 295

⁴⁷ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 295

circumstance consists the great advantage of England above any nation at present in the world, or that appears in the records of any story', and it was the cause of 'the happiness of so many millions'.⁴⁸

Hume believed that this widely distributed wealth was linked to the social, religious and political pluralism of England. In relation to the social, he noted the 'wonderful mixture of manners and characters in the same nation... and in this particular the English are the most remarkable of any people that perhaps ever were in the world.'⁴⁹ He expanded the social into the political and religious when he described how 'the English government is a mixture of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. The people in authority are composed of gentry and merchants. All sects of religion are to be found among them. And the great liberty and independency, which every man enjoys, allows him to display the manners peculiar to him. Hence the English, of any people in the universe, have the least of a national character; unless this very singularity may appear to pass for such.'⁵⁰

Hume believed that what had happened in England was that, as a result of numerous factors including its island position, the political history of England had diverged from that of most of continental Europe. 'It is evident, from the history of this island, that the privileges of the people have, during near two centuries, been continually upon the increase, by the division of the church-lands, by the alienations of the barons' estates, by the progress of trade, and above all by the happiness of our situation, which, for a long time, gave us sufficient security, without any standing army or military establishment.' On the other hand there was the development in continental Europe. 'On the contrary, public liberty has, almost in every other nation of Europe, been, during the same period, extremely on the decline; while the people were disgusted at the hardship of the old feudal militia, and rather chose to entrust their prince with mercenary armies, which he easily turned against themselves.'⁵¹

The success of England in keeping its monarchy in check was the key to its prosperity and happiness. 'Kings are sure to embrace every opportunity of extending their prerogatives: and if favourable incidents be not also laid hold of for extending and securing the privileges of the people, an universal despotism must for ever prevail amongst mankind.'⁵² The English had managed to avoid this strong tendency by developing alternative institutions and the idea of a constitutional monarchy under the law. Hume believed of such ideas that 'to their prevalence and success the kingdom owes its liberty; perhaps its learning, its industry, commerce, and naval power: by them chiefly the English name is distinguished among the society of nations, and aspires to a rivalship with that of the freest and most illustrious commonwealths of antiquity.'⁵³ England was in a position to continue along the virtuous circle whereby wealth led to further wealth, better 'manners', and, indirectly, to that naval power with which it could protect its superiority. It had the chance to escape from the eternal contradiction between production and predation which had hitherto always trapped mankind.

⁴⁸ Hume, 'Of Commerce', **Essays**, 157

⁴⁹ Hume, 'Of National Characters', **Essays**, 122

⁵⁰ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 122

⁵¹ Hume, 'Of the Protestant Succession', **Essays**, 293

⁵² Hume, 'Of the Coalition of Parties', **Essays**, 287

⁵³ Hume, 'Ibid.', **Essays**, 287

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Hume's work is important in giving us an intriguing glimpse of what the world looked like just before the industrial revolution altered many of the parameters of the argument. It is also important since it clearly influenced the other great outline of the traps and tendencies inherent in agrarian civilizations in the work of Adam Smith. When we combine the insights of Montesquieu, Hume and Smith we can look afresh at a problem which has become overlaid by subsequent events and hence become more or less invisible to us.

Yet Hume's work is not just a shorter version of Montesquieu and Smith. With his uncanny ability to turn conventional arguments on their head, Hume adds richness to the insights of those thinkers from Mandeville to Smith who had considered similar questions. It is difficult to find fault with his analysis, except, after the event, to note that he was unable to anticipate the one great change which would alter the predicament in agrarian civilizations, namely the unlocking of the wealth of fossil fuels through the industrial revolution. The use of coal and steam temporarily suspended the laws of population and energy limits on growth which had appeared manifestly true up to the year of his death in 1776. The new developments in the use of machinery driven by stored energy to supplement human labour meant that the commercial revolution which Hume and Smith analysed with such care was not ultimately caught in the high level equilibrium trap which they had demonstrated as operating in China, Japan and even the Netherlands.

This new development does not diminish the value of their work in any respect, but it does mean that with the impact of new energy resources and organizational structures, as well as increasing reliable knowledge through scientific advance, the 'riddle' changed. It was no longer a matter of how to overcome the predatory tendencies built into the political economy of agrarian civilizations. Now the question became one of how to combine liberty, equality and the new found wealth created by industrialism. The question was now how a post-agrarian world could be held together, combining 'status' and 'contract' in a balanced and creative way. This is the question which Tocqueville, and later F.W.Maitland, Yukichi Fukuzawa and Ernest Gellner would address. But that is another story.⁵⁴

Bibliographical note:

David Hume, **Essays, Literary, Moral and Political** . ('A Careful Reprint of the 2 Vols, 8vo. Edition'), London, Ward, Lock and Tyler, no. date, c. 1870)

⁵⁴ A story which I have told in the second half of **The Riddle of the Modern World; Of Liberty, Wealth and Equality** (Macmillan, London, 2000) and in **The Making of the Modern World; Visions from West and East** (Palgrave, London, 2002).