

# Repulsion and attraction in migration. Poverty and the poor in the moral works of Hume and Smith<sup>1</sup>

PAULO EURICO ALVES VARIZ

Universidade Católica de Lovaina

## Introduction

In his message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2014, on 19 January, His Holiness Pope Francis mentioned the following<sup>2</sup>:

«From the Christian standpoint, the reality of migration, like other human realities, points to the tension between the beauty of creation, marked by Grace and the Redemption, and the mystery of sin. Solidarity, acceptance, and signs of fraternity and understanding exist side by side with rejection, discrimination, trafficking and exploitation, suffering and death. Particularly disturbing are those situations where migration is not only involuntary, but

<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the ECSSS conference “Scotland, Europe & Empire in the Age of Adam Smith & Beyond” (La Sorbonne, Paris, 3-6 July 2013) and it benefited from the feedback of the conference attendants. The usual disclaimer applies.

<sup>2</sup> Pope FRANCIS, *Message for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees 2014*, [URL] [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130805\\_world-migrants-day.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/migration/documents/papa-francesco_20130805_world-migrants-day.html)[14.06.2014]

actually set in motion by various forms of human trafficking and enslavement. Nowadays, “slave labour” is common coin! Yet despite the problems, risks and difficulties to be faced, great numbers of migrants and refugees continue to be inspired by confidence and hope; in their hearts they long for a better future, not only for themselves but for their families and those closest to them.»

This quotation reminded us of literature we had recently become acquainted with on the mental health conditions of sex workers smuggled across borders, and in particular on the rates of lifetime prevalence of conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder, even in cases where the victims of such forced migration flows were retrieved and delivered back to their countries and communities of origin<sup>3</sup>.

There are many diverse forms of migration, voluntary and involuntary, that are driven by economic needs or by the absence of economic alternatives (which is not exactly the same); by the power of attraction performed by the promise of a better life or by the repulsion caused by unpromising life perspectives; and then there are still forced movements (yet a specific case of involuntary migration, as His Holiness rightly noted) which are possibly but not necessarily related with the economic situation of the victim.

Though the phenomena do not always overlap, the quotation above reminds us after all of how migrations and poverty are deeply interlinked, and makes us wonder how poverty economics, or its precursors, have modelled such a relationship, at least for some forms of migration.

This article endeavours to explore the approach to poverty of David Hume and Adam Smith, respectively in *A Treatise of Human Nature* and in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. To some extent, we shall try to suggest how Smith’s approach to poverty can be seen as a follow-up to the one of Hume, and how his depiction of the attitudes and reasoning of the Scottish Enlightenment’s man, and most notably of that same man’s vision of the poor, creates grounds for his approach to poverty in *Wealth*

<sup>3</sup> We are thinking for instance of W. ROSSLER *et al*, *The mental health of female sex workers*, [URL] [https://www.collegium.ethz.ch/fileadmin/autoren/pdf\\_papers/10\\_roessler\\_sexwork.pdf](https://www.collegium.ethz.ch/fileadmin/autoren/pdf_papers/10_roessler_sexwork.pdf) [14.06.2014]

of Nations<sup>4</sup> – including the geographical paths trailed by the poor. After exposing Hume’s approach to poverty (section 2) and plotting Smith’s approach against it (section 3), we argue afterwards (section 4) that, while *Theory of Moral Sentiments* starts by putting emphasis on those who before were wealthy and now have fallen in disgrace, more to the end of this *opus*, Smith’s analysis develops into a broader understanding of the mass of poor, in the context of which the concept of an invisible hand is already central, paving the way to yet a third approach to poverty dynamics, accomplished in *Wealth of Nations*. We shall argue that this leap completes Smith’s transition from a “relativisation” of the phenomenon of poverty to a more analytical approach to *relative* poverty. Section 5 concludes. Along the whole article, we quote Hume and Smith extensively, so as to render transparent our analysis and to allow the reader to disagree with the conclusions we take from the quotations.

Two remarks deserve being made before we continue. The first refers to the relevant theoretical and doctrinal background against which we are plotting our analysis. Before Hume and Smith – way before them – the thought of the scholastics on the poor (the sort that one could identify as a precursor of an economic analysis or poverty) already dedicated a special place to poverty and migrations: either under Christian, Jewish or Islamic thought, the travelling poor and the pilgrims always must always be given food or shelter<sup>5</sup>; even if the poor are not expected to invoke their previous social situation (if it was a more favourable one) and the wealthy are not expected to search for those in need of assistance, a travelling poor that falls within the immediate reach of a well-off person deserves comfort to be provided. Later on, pre-physiocrat author Richard Cantillon sees that cyclical and structural factors of poverty explain migratory movements of those lacking employment and therefore seeing their own maintenance challenged.

The second remark deals with the necessarily ongoing reappraisal carried out by the history of economic thought. While we are aware of, say,

<sup>4</sup> Adam SMITH, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, [URL]<http://socserv.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/smith/wealth/index.html> [8.9.2006].

<sup>5</sup> This analysis is further developed in Paulo Eurico VARIZ, *História da economia da pobreza de Aristóteles a John Stuart Mill* (PhD thesis), University of Évora (unpublished), 2012.

Sen's revisiting of Smith's take on poverty<sup>6</sup> (namely on his definition of relative poverty and the relationship between his conception of poverty and of inequality), in an attempt to save the image we make of his doctrinal contribution (or, more precisely, the doctrinal uptake of his writings) and to show how he was not indifferent to human distress and to some public intervention addressing it, we do not see that such a repossession necessarily conflicts with the approach that follows.

## The detachment of the poor man in Hume

In Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, several are the passions that poverty triggers, or that are put at the service of managing one's relationship with the poor man. One of those is pride: every man's pride is something that spurs, among others, from his own power to purchase assets (being those estate, currency or others) and it forcefully involves comparisons with the purchasing power of others. And it is out of pride that the human being tries to put at a distance the poor men that do not exhibit a similar fate, as the presence of someone who is our akin and evidences signs of poverty is bound to embarrass us.

«As we are proud of riches in ourselves, so to satisfy our vanity we desire that every one, who has any connexion with us, should likewise be possess of them, and are ashamed of any one, that is mean or poor, among our friends and relations. For this reason we remove the poor as far from us as possible; and as we cannot prevent poverty in some distant collaterals, and our forefathers are taken to be our nearest relations; upon this account every one affects to be of a good family, and to be descended from a long succession of rich and honourable ancestors.» (Hume, 1739, Book II, Part I, Section IX, par. 10)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See Amartya SEN, «Introduction», in Adam SMITH, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. R. P. Henley, New York: Penguin, 2009. Elsewhere (see VARIZ (2012, *op. cit.*) we recognise inter alia that Smith refines the measurement in real terms of poverty, and formulates it in terms of exclusion from the market (that is, the incapability to effectively exercise the demand for goods and services, a conceptual advancement worth of notice). See also the concluding section for remarks on absolute and relative poverty in *Wealth of Nations*.

<sup>7</sup> All quotations from Hume come from Book II of David HUME. *A Treatise of Human Na-*

Later on, we come to understand that, according to Hume, shame and embarrassment are felt by the poor man himself, as the poverty of an individual who is poor yields despise among those who are not. To some extent, from here we derive that people have an expectation regarding the behaviour from the poor: the latter must become aware of the discomfort he triggers, and should go away to minimise that discomfort.

The image the Scottish Enlightenment man has of the poor man, which Hume reveals, as well as the social attitude expected from the poor man, is consistent with his broader moral philosophy, in the context of which he reconciles the ideal of human liberty (the power to decide whether or not to act) with the belief that Man is part of a deterministic universe. In that context, need (i.e., the existence of a motive behind action) is a pre-condition for the existence of liberty. It therefore results that, for an individual to be morally responsible for a situation, his behaviour has to be caused by himself.

This way, the poor man must go to destination unknown, so that his family of origin cannot be traced and is not shamed. Detachment and distance must be ensured vis-à-vis his relatives and acquaintances, ensuring contiguity to those who are strangers to him. Implicit in this expectation is the understanding that the individual is responsible for the actions that drew him into poverty, and that he accommodates to that new situation; and the aim of this detachment, as Hume explains, is to relieve the poor man himself from his own discomfort and to make his poverty more acceptable.

«We shall be unknown, say they, where we go. No body will suspect from what family we are sprung. We shall be remov'd from all our friends and acquaintance, and our poverty and meanness will by that means sit more easy upon us. In examining these sentiments, I find they afford many very convincing arguments for my present purpose. First, We may infer from them, that the uneasiness of being condemn'd depends on sympathy, and

*ture*. [URL] < <http://socserv2.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3ll3/hume/treat.html> > [9.9.2006]. Each of them refers that book, the part, the section and the number of the (originally not numbered) paragraph where the quotation was retrieved from.

that sympathy depends on the relation of objects to ourselves; since we are most uneasy under the contempt of persons, who are both related to us by blood, and contiguous in place. Hence we seek to diminish this sympathy and uneasiness by separating these relations, and placing ourselves in a contiguity to strangers, and at a distance from relations.» (Hume, 1739, Book II, Part I, Section XI, par.14-15)

It is in this context that the feeling of “sympathy” is approached – a feeling of empathy through which a human being identifies with his close one, tends to share the feelings and anguish of his neighbour sometimes even more intensely than those of his own, until a point where he might face difficulties in following his own reasoning and natural inclinations:

«No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own. This is not only conspicuous in children, who implicitly embrace every opinion propos'd to them; but also in men of the greatest judgment and understanding, who find it very difficult to follow their own reason or inclination, in opposition to that of their friends and daily companions. (...) Hatred, resentment, esteem, love, courage, mirth and melancholy; all these passions I feel more from communication than from my own natural temper and disposition. So remarkable a phaenomenon merits our attention, and must be trac'd up to its first principles.» (Hume, 1739, Book II, Part I, Section XI, par. 2)

The concept of sympathy implies replicating feelings that are broader than pride or despise, and it is mostly felt by those who are our similars. Therefore, contiguity is a necessary condition for sympathy to occur:

«(W)e find, that where, beside the general resemblance of our natures, there is any peculiar similarity in our manners, or character, or country, or language; it facilitates the sympathy. (Hume, 1739, Book II, Part I, Section XI, par.5) The sentiments of others have little influence, when far remov'd from us, and require the relation of contiguity, to make them communicate themselves entirely. »(Hume, 1739, Book II, Part I, Section XI, par.6)

This explains why the distance the poor man establishes towards his original group contributes to a lesser degree of sympathy that he would yield upon the group: a lower amount of suffering on the rich man is induced by replication of the suffering of the poor.

«(H)ere the relations of kindred and contiguity both subsist; but not being united in the same persons, they contribute in a less degree to the sympathy.»  
(Hume, 1739, Book II, Part I, Section XI, par. 16).

Later on, it is added that the despise felt towards the poor man, just as the esteem one has for the rich man – which, according to Hume, is just one variation of the feeling of love – does not operate but through the sentiment of sympathy, in that esteem results from the fact that we share the pleasure of the latter, and despise results from us sharing the discomfort of the former. In other words: the discomfort of the poor man is felt by the rich man, and despise is a feeling derived from it. And, still, poverty will not raise hate or despise when embodied in someone with whom no relation has been established – which ends up making life easier for those who receive a new poor man among themselves.

We might infer that the outcome of this attitude is that, from a perspective of individual action, no reaction to anonymous cases of poverty is bound to emerge. Furthermore, and as previously seen, in the presence of situations of poverty that are close to us, there is also an expectation of not having to take any initiative at all, as such an initiative – to gain distance – is totally up to the poor man. The action expected from the poor man takes the form of migration. Indeed, it is possible to identify an aspect which is common to medieval Christian thought: while Christian scholastics were building a coherent model in which an action from the individual holding a surplus is always triggered – in the form of a charitable donation – what Hume offers is also a coherent model of action, but action from the poor man only, who migrates; the underlying assumptions of both models attempt to «convince» us that, in one case and the other, the adopted behaviour is the best one for the poor man, for the rich man, and for the society as a whole.

We also see that, amidst the displeasure of being poor having been rich before, the individual attitudes – of the rich man that does not react and of

the poor man from whom we expect the initiative to go away – contribute, after all, to freeze the social stratification that can be observed following to the occurrence of eventual social downward shifts. This stabilisation is actually reinforced by the fact that the poor man is expected to reckon, through respect and reverence, his inferiority. The social descent associated to those movements therefore degenerates into a situation of lowness and there it stays. Determinism and guilt imply that such a descent hence becomes irreversible, and the newly poor must understand it as such.

Given this general rule of behaviour (and of non-action) of those who maintain a stable (and fairly high) social status, it should be noted that different behaviours – and possible actions/reactions – in the presence of misfortune and vulnerability are expected. In particular, the feeling of benevolence can be expected to be triggered before a high level of disgrace (or, as Hume clarifies, when the degree of sympathy is exceptionally high). This means that, while some levels of poverty yield despire, levels of poverty which are more severe – or are perceived as such – generate pity and benevolence. Therefore, a certain threshold of misery will have to be surpassed to trigger a possible reaction, with Hume making it clear that a (significant) increase of the level of misery and the (equally high) increase in the degree of sympathy towards that misery spell are virtually equivalent. In any case, we understand from Hume that the aid to the poor man is likely to be residual, the rule being ostracism and the decision of the poor man to gain distance.

### **Smith: the horror faced by the poor man**

The *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith's opus on moral philosophy, begins by studying the convenience of individual action, then proceeding to analyse merit and demerit, the foundations of judgments the individual makes on his own feelings and conduct, sense and duty, the influence of habits and customs over the feelings of moral approval and disapproval and, before concluding by defining the systems of moral philosophy that encompass those elements, he still analyses virtue.

Right in the introductory chapter, Smith's approach to the sympathy we feel for people fallen in disgrace results rather similar to the one

of Hume. Here, too, the individual feels pity for another individual who has fallen, due to the fact that one imagines the horror of being in such a situation:

«The horror which they conceive at the misery of those wretches affects that particular part in themselves more than any other; because that horror arises from conceiving what they themselves would suffer, if they really were the wretches whom they are looking upon, and if that particular part in themselves was actually affected in the same miserable manner.» (Smith, 1759, Part I, Section I, Chap. I, par. 3)<sup>8</sup>

Also as in Hume, someone who is completely unaware of the miserable situation he is found in triggers greater pity; the observed lack of sovereignty of that individual is, hence, something that deserves being compensated for.

«Of all the calamities to which the condition of mortality exposes mankind, the loss of reason appears, to those who have the least spark of humanity, by far the most dreadful, and they behold that last stage of human wretchedness with deeper commiseration than any other. But the poor wretch, who is in it, laughs and sings perhaps, and is altogether insensible of his own misery.» (Smith, 1759, Part I, Section I, Chap. I, par. 11)

The expectations of behaviour of these two Scottish Enlightenment authors towards the poor appear even more clear in the work of Smith, whom recognises that human beings are inclined to sympathise more fully with joy than with pain, and foresees (expects) that an individual will seek to expose his riches and conceal his poverty; Smith also considers that no situation is worse than the one where an individual exposes his frailty before all mankind, which makes that the suffering of the poor man – due to the fact that he is poor, and to the fact that he lives under the fear (the

<sup>8</sup> Adam SMITH, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, [URL] <http://socserv.mcmaster.ca/econ/ug-cm/3ll3/smith/moral.html> [9.9.2006] is organised in parts and chapters. As in Hume, we chose to indicate the (non-numerated) paragraph from which each quotation was extracted. In the (many) cases where a Part is constituted by a single non-numbered Section, we make no reference to that section. A complete reference will hence indicate the part, section, chapter, point and paragraph.

horror) of being recognised as such – is shared by others. Smith naturally derives from here that, with these concerns in mind, individuals will search fortune and try to avoid poverty spells. This declaration already allows us to foresee that Smith's "model" of perception of poverty is more complex than the one of Hume: while both note the likely irreversibility of a fall into poverty, Smith adds the dissuasive effect poverty exerts even before it occurs.

«It is because mankind are disposed to sympathize more entirely with our joy than with our sorrow, that we make parade of our riches, and conceal our poverty. Nothing is so mortifying as to be obliged to expose our distress to the view of the public, and to feel, that though our situation is open to the eyes of all mankind, no mortal conceives for us the half of what we suffer. Nay, it is chiefly from this regard to the sentiments of mankind, that we pursue riches and avoid poverty.» (Smith, 1759, Part I, Section III, Chap. II, par. 1)

Indeed, where Hume saw discomfort, Smith now sees horror: the poor individual lives between the fear of becoming invisible vis-à-vis the general gaze of discontent – knowing that, if he had been rich before, his fortune had been rather visible in that previous life (must probably he boasted it!) – and the sheer fear of becoming visible precisely on account of his poverty.

«The poor man, on the contrary, is ashamed of his poverty. He feels that it either places him out of the sight of mankind, or, that if they take any notice of him, they have, however, scarce any fellow-feeling with the misery and distress which he suffers. He is mortified upon both accounts. for though to be overlooked, and to be disapproved of, are things entirely different, yet as obscurity covers us from the daylight of honour and approbation, to feel that we are taken no notice of, necessarily damps the most agreeable hope, and disappoints the most ardent desire, of human nature.» (Smith, 1759, Part I, Section III, Chap. II, par. 1)

From this array of elements (and most notably, the greater emphasis on the feeling of the poor man, moved by the fear that his current suffering might not be sufficiently shared – a suffering which is magnified by the shame associated to his condition) we could maybe expect to read in

Smith's analysis a greater sensitivity to disgrace than in Hume; however, Smith foresees that the poor man will gear this tension to his own favour, channelling it towards the search for wealth – a kind of mobile to exit a poverty spell. More, this rule seems to apply essentially to those who try (and succeed) to avoid falling in a situation of poverty, and not really to those who have already fallen in that situation (or have always been there). As in Hume, it seems that one expects that such a person adjusts to his new situation and becomes accepting; those who will simply surrender and conform will even deserve a certain degree of admiration for that:

«(B)y the means of his friends, frequently by the indulgence of those very creditors who have much reason to complain of his imprudence, (he) is almost always supported in some degree of decent, though humble, mediocrity. To persons under such misfortunes, we could, perhaps, easily pardon some degree of weakness; but, at the same time, they who carry the firmest countenance, who accommodate themselves with the greatest ease to their new situation, who seem to feel no humiliation from the change, but to rest their rank in the society, not upon their fortune, but upon their character and conduct, are always the most approved of, and never fail to command our highest and most affectionate admiration.» (Smith, 1759, Part III, Chap. III, par. 17)

«We could, perhaps, easily pardon some degree of weakness», says Smith, but the fact is that, because it is assumed that the fall into poverty is a consequence of some sort of misconduct, the feeling of despise for that person prevails; and it results as clear that allowing such a fall constitutes a mistake – committed by the person himself (and only in such a context does it make sense to talk about “forgiveness”): as in Hume, the individual is held responsible for his condition.

«The mere want of fortune, mere poverty, excites little compassion. Its complaints are too apt to be the objects rather of contempt than of fellow-feeling. We despise a beggar; and, though his importunities may extort an alms from us, he is scarce ever the object of any serious commiseration. The fall from riches to poverty, as it commonly occasions the most real distress to the sufferer, so it seldom fails to excite the most sincere commiseration in the

spectator. Though, in the present state of society, this misfortune can seldom happen without some misconduct, and some very considerable misconduct too, in the sufferer;» (Smith, 1759, Part III, Chap. III, par. 17)

And still, even if human beings are sensitive to those who have been unjustly dishonoured, we understand that it is up in first place to the person himself to react or to adapt to the new circumstances. To some extent, it is expected that, even if unable to quickly rebel against their new situation at a first stage, the recently poor will manage to find satisfaction within their new situation, and face their new life with dignity. After all, this new stage might exist because the natural order of things so requires: the idea of fate, of some form of determinism, has an equally relevant place in Smith's thought. A similar sense of order, reflecting an idea of fate and embodied in a well-defined social stratification, is also present when Smith sketches the profile of the poor man's son, who attempts, through exterior signs of wealth, to simulate the standard of living of a social group which he did not originate from, and which – Smith tells us – he will never manage to access. Even the thorough education to well perform an activity is voted to ridicule by Smith, as those efforts are seen as ultimately useless. Therefore, the rule seems to be that the poor man lacks virtue. In this narrative of the poor man's son and the ridicule he faces by his peers, it seems that Smith is more than descriptive, subscribing the multiple forces that offer resistance to the attempts of social ascent of that character. Actually, because it illustrates the strength that the natural order of things exerts, the perpetual social declassification fulfils a role: the despise felt for poverty, as unjust as it might be, is seen as necessary to maintain that order, and to maximise the clarity in the distinction of the various strata that make society.

As Hume, also Smith foresees that in the most extreme cases, the individual will be object of such pity that he will not be allowed to fall in a situation of extreme poverty, a reaction which is consistent with the sympathy expressed. However, even in these cases it is believed that individual action should prevent extreme poverty from existing – or, in a more obvious fashion than in Hume, it is recommended that the prevention of extreme poverty must be individually-based. If providence – argues Smith – shall not have left to the abandon all those who appear to have been left aside

the ideal distribution, apparently it shall be the spontaneous and non-conscious action of the naturally self-interested individual the one ensuring that the vagabond is granted the security enjoyed by the individual placed in the highest position of society. And again it seems that, after being sensitive above (and before) all to those who are close to us, the anonymous mass is relegated to second plan as our attention is drawn to those who are found in extreme situations in society, hence following the tradition of a greater sensitivity to most serious cases of distress, and of starting charity at home – which might again suggest a broader universe of potentially disgraced people bound to be supported, as compared with Hume. The «model» consolidated by Smith thickens when, beyond highlighting the fact that rescuing the individual in extreme poverty is subordinated to the search for peace and social order, he establishes that the individual exercising that benevolence is meeting at the same time an individual need, arguing that it allows the rich man to shed some of his surplus that, otherwise, could corrupt him.

There is a moment in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* when riches play a different role: the admiration the rich man's wealth deserves, just as the despise collected by the misery of the poor, serve now as a mobile for the industry of the working poor. The enchantment that other men's fortune irradiates is no longer seen as a source of threats to social peace: it becomes the greatest incentive for the poor man to progress. The feeling of sympathy that now is highlighted is the one felt by the poor man, who imagines himself in the place of the rich man and has a whiff of his comfort. The perspective of luxury – that unconscious, involuntary pulsion – makes the engagement of the poor man.

«We are then charmed with the beauty of that accommodation which reigns in the palaces and oeconomy of the great; and admire how every thing is adapted to promote their ease, to prevent their wants, to gratify their wishes, and to amuse and entertain their most frivolous desires. If we consider the real satisfaction which all these things are capable of affording, by itself and separated from the beauty of that arrangement which is fitted to promote it, it will always appear in the highest degree contemptible and trifling. But we rarely view it in this abstract and philosophical light.» (Smith, 1759, Part IV, Chap. I, par. 9)

To be truly enduring, that stimulus must be, in any case, a moving target, an illusion. A necessary frustration (that all of the sudden reminds us of mercantilism) that is there to promote effort and industry among the lower classes.

«The pleasures of wealth and greatness, when considered in this complex view, strike the imagination as something grand and beautiful and noble, of which the attainment is well worth all the toil and anxiety which we are so apt to bestow upon it. (Smith, 1759, Part IV, Chap. I, par. 9) And it is well that nature imposes upon us in this manner. It is this deception which rouses and keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind. » (Smith, 1759, Part IV, Chap. I, par. 10)

What is interesting to note is that Smith, more or less of a sudden, leads us to the market economy. The sympathy of the poor man for the wealth of the rich man generates productivity, which in turn generates the economic machine. The expectation of demand (of consumption) stimulates supply.

«We naturally confound it in our imagination with the order, the regular and harmonious movement of the system, the machine or oeconomy by means of which it is produced.» (Smith, 1759, Part IV, Chap. I, par. 9)

In the context of Smith's model, and with the same intentionality, luxury and illusion are also approached from the perspective of the rich man: Smith suggests that he spends less than what he seems to, and that such an illusion is actually necessary, as it motivates the reaction of the poor man we have just seen; in any case, the rich man spends more than the others – enough to ensure that his consumption of commodities and luxuries generates more jobs and more employees at his service. Demand (rendered effective through consumption) creates supply.

«The capacity of his stomach bears no proportion to the immensity of his desires, and will receive no more than that of the meanest peasant. The rest he is obliged to distribute among those, who prepare, in the nicest manner, that little which he himself makes use of, among those who fit up the palace

in which this little is to be consumed, among those who provide and keep in order all the different baubles and trinkets, which are employed in the oeconomy of greatness; all of whom thus derive from his luxury and caprice, that share of the necessities of life, which they would in vain have expected from his humanity or his justice.» (Smith, 1759, Part IV, Chap. I, par. 10)

Demand creates a contagion of well-being which – also involuntarily, also unconsciously – ends up dispensing charity. And it is in this context that we find Smith, still before *Wealth of Nations*, making reference to the invisible hand that leads naturally self-concerned individuals to give start to a distribution of a certain amount of necessities – simulating the distribution of those goods that would exist if property had been evenly distributed from the beginning.

«(I)n spite of their natural selfishness and rapacity,(...) they divide with the poor the produce of all their improvements. They are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessities of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants, and thus without intending it, without knowing it, advance the interest of the society, and afford means to the multiplication of the species.» (Smith, 1759, Part IV, Chap. I, par. 10)

If the “moral” starting points for Hume and for Smith are sufficiently close to each other, we see that the system of Hume, based upon the migration of the poor man to a geographical location that is convenient to all, ends up not showing such a direct link with his writings on economics and does not provide for such an obvious contribution to the latter (which in overall terms tends to be seen as being mercantilist<sup>9</sup>). We believe that the same does not apply to Smith: if at the fringes he seems to foresee the possibility of a «market» for charity that reconciles on an exceptional basis the disparate interests of benefactors and the needy (and among these,

<sup>9</sup> One should recall that, in his «economic» writings, Hume acknowledges the role played by unequal distribution of property, as equality would lower frugality and industry, leading to the impoverishment of the individual; trusting that the expansion of trade brings about economic development, and that societies will become progressively more civilised and generating happier citizens, it seems that some poverty was seen as necessary as a means to avoid greater overall poverty.

only the ones that face severe vulnerability), the dominant force in promoting solidarity is the market. There, society's interests are fulfilled more spontaneously, on the basis of a social order that is not questioned and actually serves as an input, as a catalyst to economic progress. When Smith again renders explicit that the relief of human misery is an action that stems from compassion towards the individual found in that situation, we estimate that he wants to stress that peace and order among the society are more important than that relief – in what seems to be a declaration about the supreme reason behind individually-based charity:

«The relief and consolation of human misery depend altogether upon our compassion for the latter. The peace and order of society, is of more importance than even the relief of the miserable.» (Smith, 1759, Part VI, Section II, Chap. I, par. 20)

This being said, Smith clarifies that the concept of public spirit (which we understand to be equivalent to the one of «common good», or of general happiness of the population) that individuals expect to see embodied in the action of public institutions does not coincide necessarily with the spirit of humanity,

«There have been men of the greatest public spirit, who have shown themselves in other respects not very sensible to the feelings of humanity. And on the contrary, there have been men of the greatest humanity, who seem to have been entirely devoid of public spirit.» (Smith, 1759, Part IV, Chap. I, par. 11)

...which suggests that, beyond the individual-based action responding to extreme cases of misery, poverty relief will in principle not feature among the roles one expects the Government to take up. If existing at all, charity must be based on spontaneous individual action and does not fit naturally among the attributions of public policy – actually, it *must* not be a public policy. This is probably the biggest heritage that Theory of Moral Sentiments leaves for Wealth of Nations, strengthening the *laissez faire* premise that Scottish Enlightenment consolidates.

## Epilogue: the re-centring on social order

While the thought of Hume and Smith (the latter through *Theory of Moral Sentiments*) does not really add to the explanation of the phenomenon of poverty advanced by previous economists, it devotes some attention to the feelings of poor people, therefore contributing to deepening a subjective approach to poverty and providing a doctrinal basis supporting a minimalist intervention of Government in acting towards poverty. Their approach is determined (conditioned) by the vision of the enlightenment man who conducts such an analysis – it is carved to his own convenience – and not by the one of a man in abstract, be him rich or poor. This feature seems to lead – at first view, paradoxically – to a setback (a regression) in the sovereignty of the individual...or, depending on how we see things, to some form of sovereignty in excess, since nothing that is bound to happen to an individual (like falling into poverty) is but his own fault. That lack of sovereignty (or sovereignty in excess) suggests that Hume and Smith keep from previous thinkers (such as pre-physiocrats of the like of Boisguilbert and Cantillon) a critical take on institutions, and stretch it one notch (or a few) further: any public intervention is bound to be avoided, but also the private intervention by an individual seeking to assist the Other, given the sovereignty of that Other, shall be an exception rather than the rule. Therefore, the combination of subjective economics with an anti-mercantilist stance leads Hume and Smith to defend that private charity should be residual. We have seen for instance how they nonetheless foresee that we react to extreme cases (of misery) that are close to us, reason why it is recommended that such cases part away from us – the viewers – and contribute to reducing the number of occurrences of poverty that are close to us, triggering less reaction from our side: the purpose of charity is therefore emptied.

There is an element that clearly emerges from Hume and Smith's perspective; something that, after all, might be the principal element that conditions and guides their analysis, and that might also be what Hume and Smith are attempting to justify with their theory: the consolidation of a social order. They sketch the psychology of the poor man, in the context of a four-tier social structure: those who are rich and always were, those who were rich and fell into poverty, the miserable people, and a

broad population of poor people standing somewhere between the fallen rich and the miser, which is virtually invisible in the moral writings of these authors. These “forgotten ones” are precisely the mass of working poor, and it is this same mass of wage-earners whom Smith has in mind in *Wealth of Nations*.

We suspect that Smith might have drawn conclusions from his analysis of a certain group of poor (those he approaches in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*) to better understand this mass of workers (on his mind in *Wealth of Nations*). As we have been able to appreciate, a significant part of the references to the poor in the work of Hume and Smith show up in the context of their analysis of the individuals fallen into poverty, and while assuming that the loss of fortune is accountable to the imprudence of the disgraced man. However, such an «explanation» of the fall into poverty, just like all the psychology of the poor man, ends up not taking as a starting point a recognition of the sovereignty of the individual: the behaviour of the poor man as presented by Hume and Smith is the behaviour that is expected from him, and apparently it is the one that is more convenient – and burdens less – the rich man, whom is potentially a relative of his. Judgement and prescription precede description and, above all, comprehension of poverty as a phenomenon.

Somewhere between the rich facing the risk of poverty and the miserable ones, the vast mass of poor is, as we mentioned above, mostly absent from the works we’ve just analysed. These people seem to be absolutely stuck in this stratum, as not only labour and education are totally ineffective in making social ascent possible, but also the likelihood of falling in a situation of extreme misery is seen as being minimal – hence they do not constitute a source of concern, including for public intervention. Without prejudice to that “freezing”, the illusion of being able to climb from one social station to the following one above is at the basis of the poor man’s industry. Making the bridge with his masterpiece, Smith subordinates to the economy the moral and social structure: the poor man and his expectation to exit poverty are the key for the functioning of markets. The utility of poverty that was part of the mercantilist doctrine before him, takes a whole new shape.

The main consequence of this approach to (this model of) the poor man is the non-recommendation of any policy action that could minimise

the situation faced by this person, which can be read as a recommendation not to put any policy instrument at the service of these individual cases. The only exception is granted to individual charity, which will tend to benefit exclusively those who are found in a situation of extreme poverty or vulnerability, with Smith extending this action to some individuals who are (geographically) close, and which in any case will remain in that situation. As for the man fallen in disgrace, the initiative to act must come above all from himself – leaving to place unknown and gaining distance from his closest (an initiative already foreseen by Hume).

Where the (consistent) model of Christian scholastic thought recommended the construction of a network of charity based on the deliberate individual release of surplus, Hume devises a model of individual (conscious) expectations prompting the migration of (some) poor, and Smith a model in the centre of which luxury plays a key role in constructing the idea of an invisible hand, also individually-based, but of an unconscious nature... the cognitive distortion that excess brings, once a source of irrationality, is now the solution for the rationality of personal interrelations, through a market that operates in some sort of «general equilibrium». The deliberate pro-poverty action seems to narrow significantly, consistently with the exceptional character of extreme misery. And if previous thinkers open the possibility of justifying public intervention that combats poverty within the framework of some «economic» analysis, Hume and Smith hurry to close that possibility in their moral literature.

## **Conclusion: relative poverty and inequality in *Wealth of Nations***

As for the difference between Smith in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and Smith of *Wealth of Nations*, in the first opus he highlights the fact that, if the person falls socially, he won't get up again (subordinating that rationale to the freezing of social stratification, or using that rationale to justify the existing social stratification), in the second opus, Smith shall no longer put emphasis on the fact that guilt (due to social descent) weighs on the individual: instead he switches to a more positive approach, highlighting the possibilities that are at the reach of the individual, faintly suggested

in his moral opus. As the last quotations suggested, Smith begins already in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* to enounce the mobile to an increased industry of the poor worker, establishing the bridge with the theory developed in *Wealth of Nations*: there he shall defend that a nation can become wealthy through work, and if some individuals can become rich, so can the others – that is to say, if a nation can grow, so can individuals have at their reach the means to avoid falling into poverty and to see an effective expansion of their material possibilities. In other terms: if the access to wealth (and the exit from poverty) is in *Theory of Moral Sentiments* nothing more than an illusion, in *Wealth of Nations* Smith shall integrate in his model the phenomenon that is necessary to make it attainable: economic growth.

In *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Smith takes forward the perspective of exposing poverty in relative terms – still a stub in previous authors – not only in the sense that poverty is relative also in the international and regional plans, but also from a sectoral point of view, as in a historical perspective. Indeed, if authors before him were already strengthening and substantially deepening the comparison of contemporary situations of poverty in different countries, Smith not only extends the range of territories covered by the contemporary comparisons – to encompass places with very disparate levels of development – but also adds historical perspective to such comparisons, deepening the characterisation of poverty and «relativizing» it in time. The historic creation of wealth generates less poverty, and if the latter is defined with resource to another phenomenon – that of inequality – then equality is recognised as a secular achievement. Since a society is rich (richer than others, and richer than what it used to be), a significant intervention pro-poverty will not be required: it depends before all on the poor to access part of that wealth; and because we find ourselves in a context where labour is associated to the poor individual (the need to work is a feature specific to the poor man), that individual is expected to be industrious. Smith's doctrine reveals trust in individual rationality, and because it gains in *Wealth of Nations* an intergenerational dimension, it also implies trusting mostly the functioning of the market.

It is in this context that *Wealth of Nations* sees migratory flows competing with the transportation of goods in promoting closer levels of commodity prices across the nation (and across the border) and narrower

differences in real wage levels, also between rural and urban areas. Actually, real wage differences and even general levels of poverty alone would not justify migration, Smith argues: migration is instead pulled by different labour demand levels, and those are in turn determined by whether the economy of destination is growing or not. As we said above, we do not wish to undervalue the redemption of Smith that Sen and others promote, as we do not question his concern for relative poverty. In any case it seems that the attraction exerted by luxuries in *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, followed by the attraction propelled by wealth creation in *Wealth of Nations*, might have helped later doctrinal developments value a perspective of «relativisation» of poverty. The room for the dominant doctrinal strand in political economy – and afterward in economics – to embrace the Christian vision of the poor man as having a claim (a right!) to the wealthy man's surplus would inevitably be eroded.

\* \* \*

Lack of sovereignty or sovereignty in excess, repulsion or attraction, freedom to choose or lack of choices...such a reflection makes us wish to end this article as we started: with a short quotation on Pope Francis, drawn from the same speech:

«Migrants and refugees are not pawns on the chessboard of humanity. They are children, women and men who leave or who are forced to leave their homes for various reasons, who share a legitimate desire for knowing and having, but above all for being more. (...) While encouraging the development of a better world, we cannot remain silent about the scandal of poverty in its various forms. Violence, exploitation, discrimination, marginalization, restrictive approaches to fundamental freedoms, whether of individuals or of groups: these are some of the chief elements of poverty which need to be overcome. Often these are precisely the elements which mark migratory movements, thus linking migration to poverty.»

Poverties and the migrating poor might be a rather heterogeneous and evolving phenomenon, and many more are the possible threads linking both, but some issues pertaining to both phenomena and the relationship between them seem to remain always the same.