

WHAT'S NOT TO SEE? FOUCAULT ON INVISIBLE POLITICAL ECONOMY IN ADAM SMITH AND ADAM FERGUSON

BY
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In his lectures of 1978–79, published posthumously as *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault addressed versions of liberalism in which an invisible market appears immune to government intervention. Among the thinkers discussed were Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. This essay offers critical reflections on Foucault's description of Smith as emphasizing the invisibility of the economy, as well as on Foucault's interpretation of the "invisible hand" and his ascription of egoism to Smith's economic agents. Foucault also appeals to Ferguson's notion of civil society to resolve incompatibilities between economic agents and the sovereign. However, Ferguson's theory of society does not provide the assistance that Foucault thinks it does. Moreover, like Smith, Ferguson holds no egoistic view of economic motivation. Nonetheless, and surprisingly, Foucault would have found enticing Ferguson's use of conjectural history, with its appeal to the unintended, contingent, and conflictual basis of social change.

I. INTRODUCTION

In lectures delivered at the Collège de France during 1978–79, Michel Foucault sought to render visible specific versions of liberalism that embraced a market economy whose invisibility sealed it from government intervention. To do so, Foucault turned to the eighteenth century to survey Adam Smith's political economy and Adam Ferguson's account of civil society. Moving to the twentieth century, he expanded on the "Ordo" liberals of postwar Germany, the neoliberal approach of Gary Becker, and features of the work of Friedrich A. Hayek. These lectures, published posthumously as *The Birth of*

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Biopolitics (2008),¹ have received a fair amount of attention, but scrutiny of Foucault's treatment of Smith or Ferguson has been relatively scarce. A sustained assessment is merited.

Foucault's discussion of Smith's *Wealth of Nations* ([1776] 1981) pivots on the idea of an invisible economy, the "invisible hand," and the egoism of economic agents. The appeal to invisibility, which is more about knowledge than perception, is not without justification, but it neglects the vision Smith grants to individuals who seek to better their condition. Without this vision, hardly egoistic, the claim of invisibility makes little sense. Foucault also maintains that the economic agent, or "subject of interest," proves incompatible with the "subject of right" required by juridical sovereignty. This difficulty, Foucault contends, is resolved with the invocation of "civil society," exemplified in Ferguson's work *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* ([1767] 1995). However, Ferguson's study hardly performs the service Foucault envisages. Moreover, the egoism Foucault imputes to Smith's actors he ascribes also to Ferguson, though Foucault disregards Ferguson's attention to a pursuit of improvement that need not be construed egoistically. Although Foucault approaches Smith and Ferguson in similar ways, there remain aspects of Ferguson's use of conjectural history—its emphasis on unintended outcomes, its reliance on contingencies, and its attention to the natural but positive role of conflict—that Foucault would have found particularly appealing. There is, therefore, an important and overlooked affiliation between Foucault and Ferguson.

The general focus of Foucault's lectures is a "particular form" (p. 59) of liberal rationality, a perspective on government reason ("governmentality") emergent in the eighteenth century. Unlike a medieval market, structured by norms of justice, the modern economy, says Foucault, appears as a complex, spontaneously evolving order in which both market processes and the overall totality of things remain opaque to both sovereign and citizen. Given this invisibility, a sovereign's intervention in markets would "only impair and distort" (p. 31). Foucault describes an "art of governing ... the reasoned way of governing best" (p. 2) as establishing a "regime of truth" (p. 10) whose representations and conceptualizations determine, effectively, the truth and falsity of practices and ideas—what the government should or should not do. A government is evaluated less by its juridical legitimacy than by whether its practices are beneficial or successful, as determined by political economy (p. 16).

During the past three decades, scholars have sifted Foucault's account of governmentality (Burchell 1991; Lemke 2001; Tribe 2009), along with its economic implications (Miller and Rose 1990; Ewald 1999; Dilts 2011); assessed the nature and use of a Foucauldian genealogy (Biebricher 2008; Koopman 2008; Lesham 2019); and debated Foucault's attraction to liberalism (e.g., Behrent 2015, 2016, 2019; Newheiser 2016; Zamora and Behrent 2016; Gane 2018; Sawyer and Steinmetz-Jenkins 2019). With one exception (Ashenden 2015), none have addressed, with specificity, Foucault's treatment of Smith or Ferguson, though some have offered general remarks (Burchell 1991; Tellmann 2009; Guizzo and Vigo de Lima 2013). Others have challenged Foucault's contention that Smith held doctrinaire views on government intervention (Williams 2015), commented on Foucault's interpretation of the "invisible hand" (Tellmann 2009;

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, additional citations of Foucault will refer to *The Birth of Biopolitics* (2008).

Schliesser 2017, pp. 249–251), or revisited his account of ordoliberalism (Goldschmidt and Rauchenschwandtner 2018).

Perhaps the paucity of discussion on Foucault's treatment of Smith or Ferguson resides in the fact that scholars of eighteenth-century Scottish thought and scholars of Foucault read and research in parallel universes. Scholars of eighteenth-century thought who pierce the parallel may find Foucault's readings reductive. But if so, there remains the interesting question of *how* Foucault goes wrong, if he does. Alternatively, the sparsity of scholarly interest may rest on the nature of Foucault's enterprise: a genealogy, not a history of ideas. As one scholar quips, one should not read Foucault "to learn about Machiavelli" (Tribe 2009, p. 686; and see Guala 2006). This caveat may suggest an objection: to read Foucault as an intellectual historian is to *mis*-read him.² Foucault is not interested in the fundamental nuances of the thought of Smith or Ferguson but in larger themes of liberalism or neoliberalism.³ He states explicitly that his lectures are analogous to his genealogies on punishment, sexuality, and madness (p. 19). An intellectual history manifests "objectivity, the accuracy of facts" (Foucault [1971] 1998, p. 383), but a genealogy relates how a practice, institution, or self-conception arises not out of continuous development but from discontinuities and disruptions, the catalysts for which involve power, struggle, or conflict. In sum, a genealogical narrative moves not via rational progression but through reports of contingent acts and testimonies of power and contest (Saar 2008; Bevir 2008; Biebricher 2008). Through its emphasis on contingencies, a genealogy reveals how things could have been otherwise, employing an "artful and excessive rhetoric" that encourages self-reflection, if not change, in the listener or reader (Saar 2008, p. 308). If, by this account, a genealogy does not require accurate, detailed readings of intellectual figures, then criticisms along these lines miss their targets.

In response, it bears noting that the genealogical *aim* that Foucault announced, in the first of his 1978–79 lectures, was to show that liberal governmentality arises "by a series of conflicts, agreements, discussions, and reciprocal concessions" (p. 12). However, as the lectures progress this purpose recedes, replaced by an emphasis on emblematic ideas of political economists and philosophers (noted by Vallois 2015, para 22; Guala 2006, p. 437). Even if Foucault is not an intellectual historian, he draws on thinkers because of their relevance to liberalism. Since he attributes specific (and similar) claims to Smith and Ferguson, there is justification for assessing his treatment of them (and doing so in a unified way).⁴ Nothing in the idea of genealogy suggests immunity from objections to how a particular genealogy tethers one feature or idea to another. In fact, an emblematic

² Foucault's lectures do contain errors of fact, as well as misplaced emphases, some of which are corrected in editorial endnotes to each lecture. However, some errors are grave, as in Foucault's false assertion that Walter Eucken "remained silent during the Nazi period" (p. 103). The truth is just the "opposite," as noted in the editorial endnote (p. 122n7). I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing the importance of these matters. See also Goldschmidt and Rauchenschwandtner (2018).

³ Foucault's distinction between liberalism and neoliberalism is somewhat loose, but the former has relevance to his discussion of eighteenth-century figures; the latter, to economists of the twentieth century. Henceforth, I shall use only the former term.

⁴ Of course, other eighteenth-century thinkers are noted by Foucault, but Smith and Ferguson have signal importance to his enterprise. However, as an anonymous reviewer has reminded me, Foucault fails to mention the work of George Berkeley, whether on perception (*Essay towards a New Theory of Vision*, [1709] 1952) or economics (*Essay towards Preventing the Ruine of Great Britain*, [1721] 1953; *The Querist*, [1735–1737]

feature of genealogy, expressive *affect*, would imply that a reader or listener *should* find the linkages comprehensible and, at least in part, warranted. To the extent that affect is relevant to a genealogy, then so is the opportunity for assessment of the constitutive links that yield such affect.⁵

In the paragraphs to follow, I turn first to Foucault's portrayal of "the unavoidable text," Smith's *Wealth of Nations* ([1776] 1981, p. 278). As noted above, Foucault treats Smith's political economy in terms of the trope of invisibility, but this flourish overlooks both the descriptive intent of Smith's text and the way in which Smith emphasizes knowledge of a local and circumstantial sort. This local knowledge forms the basis of Smith's metaphor of the "invisible hand" and helps counter the charge, ascribed to Smith by Foucault, that economic agents are egoistic. The third section focuses on Foucault's linkage between Smith and Ferguson: a supposed "incompatibility" between a subject of interest and a subject of moral right necessitates a solution epitomized in a notion of civil society. However, any ineluctable incompatibility is less than evident. In the fourth section, I examine the remedy that Foucault finds in *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. Ferguson's notion of civil society hardly fits the form that Foucault gives it. In addition, Foucault attributes to Ferguson an egoistic analysis of economic action, thereby dismissing Ferguson's emphases on action, ambition, and improvement. Despite Foucault's common misreadings of Smith and Ferguson, there are particular aspects of Ferguson's approach to history—its attention to the unintended, the contingent, and the conflictual—that Foucault would have found appealing. Notwithstanding the cautionary tenor of my remarks, Foucault's chief insight endures: there is a version of liberalism—not utilitarian, contractual, or rights-based—that justifies political norms in relation to our understanding of society. This insight may not only illuminate our understanding of the thought of Smith and Ferguson but provide the basis for unexpected critical reflection.

II. THE UNAVOIDABLE ADAM SMITH

Within Smith's *Wealth of Nations* ([1776] 1981), Foucault locates his theme of an invisible economy, along with the invisible hand and the egoistic agent. Foucault's rhetoric of invisibility—imaginative, dramatic, and vague—epitomizes one aspect of a genealogical approach and expresses a real insight: Smith employs the study of economy

1953). This omission, perhaps notable given Foucault's emphasis on what is visible or invisible, cannot be addressed fully here. However, Berkeley's philosophic focus on perception takes up the process and object of vision per se, not what the economic agent or political actor perceives or cognizes. That there may be important connections between a process of perception and what agents actually see (or know) is broached by Schliesser (2017, for example, pp. 3–5), and Glenney (2014). As to Berkeley's economic discussions, he espouses a perspective akin to mercantilism and more generous to the vision of the legislator than either Smith or Ferguson would endorse. On Berkeley's economic views, see the classic essays by Hutchison (1953) and Petrella (1966).

⁵ This argument does not deny that in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, we encounter transcribed lectures, not polished writing, and neither does it ignore Foucault's expressions of hesitant approximation scattered throughout the lectures (e.g., "We can say, roughly ...", p. 279).

and society as a way of determining, even justifying, the responsibilities of the sovereign.⁶ Even so, the emphasis on invisibility omits that which remains visible (and knowable) to Smith, including the circumstances in which individual agents develop beliefs, expectations, and plans. Without these bits of local knowledge, however imperfect, there would be nothing to coordinate. That a situation is visible to the economic actor is an important and visible feature of Smith's political economy but rendered invisible in Foucault's telling. Without visible endeavors across society, there would be scant reason to assert that invisible processes produce unforeseeable outcomes.

To assume something is invisible is to presume it exists. Knowledge of an invisible entity or process must depend, therefore, on other things being visible or knowable. At times, perhaps through an informal but unfortunate choice of words, Foucault links invisibility to unknowability, suggesting that invisibility, for Smith, comes in two guises—unknowability about process, or about total outcome. Both citizen and sovereign are limited, Foucault maintains, by the “unknowability of the totality of the [economic] process” (p. 282). This *process* also yields its own totality—a total *outcome*, also invisible. The totality to which we are blind is a “collective outcome” (p. 279) wrought by a process that coordinates the actions and interactions of individuals with disparate ends and beliefs.

After invoking this rough distinction between processes and outcomes, Foucault is not unjustified in appealing to the invisibility of the former. Smith admits that some processes may be invisible. In the *Wealth of Nations*, he describes “the silent and insensible operation of foreign commerce” (III.iv.10:418)⁷ and the “gradual and insensible rise in the real value of silver” (IV.v.a.5:507).⁸ In these instances, certain processes may be invisible *ex ante*, but these processes may be given, in many instances, an *ex post* description by the theorist. In this way, invisible processes function as part of a larger theoretical explanation. In his early essay on the history of astronomy, Smith explored how the sentiment of wonder is kindled by the recognition of a “gap or interval betwixt” two expected or familiar objects. The postulation of an invisible process may fill this gap and “bind together ... disjointed objects” (Smith 1982, II.12:45). The process may be depicted abstractly, but, for Smith, there is nothing in the idea of such representation that precludes further description—a reduction of invisibility to visibility wrought by the application of an apt theory. In this sense, a theory helps render visible what would

⁶ Foucault asserts that he wants “to show ... that a particular form of reflection, analysis and calculation appear at this time [the eighteenth century] which is integrated ... into political practices” (pp. 58–59). However, Smith's treatise hardly contributed to the art of government within the eighteenth century. The publication of the *Wealth of Nations* (1776) did not “herald the coming of ‘political economy’ as a new mode of intellectual discourse,” and neither was Smith's desire to influence “legislators and statesmen” realized within his lifetime (Teichgraeber 1987, pp. 338, 356; see also Willis 1979, and Rashid 1982). The idea that “political economy was a proven, ‘true’ science whose principles ought to be studied ... and whose policy recommendations ought to be implemented was a phenomenon of the nineteenth, not the eighteenth century” (Willis 1979, pp. 543–544).

⁷ Citations of Smith, unless otherwise noted, will refer to the *Wealth of Nations* ([1776] 1981), taking note of book, chapter, and paragraph, followed by page number. Citations to other works of Smith will be indicated specifically.

⁸ Attending to the origin of language, Smith makes explicit how linguistic rules arise “insensibly, and by slow degrees” but “without any intention or foresight” ([1761] 1985, §16:211).

otherwise be invisible. To see things as part of a process demands that one perceive individual items as being of a certain kind or as capable of linking to other sorts of items.

As for a total outcome, Smith's description of the economy constitutes his attempt to "arrange and methodise" (1982, II.i.1:38) the conditions and processes that generate wealth, "the necessities, conveniencies, and amusements of human life" (I.v.1:47). Although any outcome would change from moment to moment, its *total visibility* seems, to Smith, less germane than its genesis. In other words, given the visible economic growth (an outcome) in eighteenth-century Scotland, Smith sought to describe the "system of natural liberty" in which creatures favored with dispositions to "truck, barter, and exchange" (I.ii.1:25) and blessed with natural desires to improve their conditions would develop a division of labor. With increased specialization and exchange, individuals would augment their capital and, over time, witness a crescendo of productivity. Smith seeks to render visible the concepts and structures of this "system."⁹ The role of capital (in distinct forms); the nature of value; the movement and determination of exchange prices; the role of competition in governing wages, rents, and profits; the circulation of paper money; and the operation of banks—these reveal an economy both visible and productive. Smith employs plain language and ordinary examples to render visible what might otherwise be opaque: a woolen coat illustrates the division of labor (I.i.11:22–23); the production of corn reveals the resolution of price into wages, rent, and profit (I.vi.11–12:68). As noted above, some of these processes, including the determination, for example, of the price of corn several months hence, will remain "insensible" to the economic agent and perhaps, except abstractly, to the theorist. If some outcomes may be visible (the price of corn *post hoc*), it remains the case, as Smith admits, that some macro-outcomes prove difficult to know, such as average wages or the average profits of stock:

Profit is so very fluctuating, that the person who carries on a particular trade cannot always tell you himself what is the average of his annual profit. It is affected, not only by the good or bad fortune both of his rivals and of his customers, and by a thousand other accidents to which goods ... are liable.... To ascertain what is the average profit of all the different trades carried on in a great kingdom, must be much more difficult. (I. ix.3:105)

A statistical measure of average profit, a macro-outcome that might inform a sovereign, is difficult, if not impossible, to ascertain.

However, in the context of indicating this specific invisibility, Smith points out a general and knowable truth: "It may be laid down as a maxim, that wherever a great deal can be made by the use of money, a great deal will commonly be given for the use of it" (I.ix.4:105). This maxim relates, in fact, to the kind of knowledge that individual agents possess. It is as if Smith were to assert "individuals who know (or believe) their investment or undertaking will be rewarded, will expend effort to secure that reward." The truth of the maxim depends on the availability, to individuals, of local knowledge

⁹ This might be one reason why Smith admits, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, "Some general, and even systematical, idea of the perfection of policy and law, may no doubt be necessary for directing the views of the statesman" ([1759–1790] 1976, VI.ii.2.18:234). An *idea* of the perfection of policy or law need not require complete visibility of every aspect of society. In fact, the lack of total visibility may contribute to the formulation of such an idea.

regarding circumstances, consumer wishes, available capital, and so on.¹⁰ That Smith appeals to local knowledge, the situational visibility of an agent, need not undermine Foucault's idea of the invisibility of process or outcome.¹¹ Nonetheless, the omission of local visibility bears significance. If Foucault's genealogy is to say something about the governing of the self, then Smith's account of local knowledge would be relevant. Yet as shown below, Foucault treats the economic agent merely as egoistic actor.

This situational knowledge—beliefs and expectations acquired by observation, interaction, testimony, and prudent conjecture—is emphasized in Smith's analysis of the system of the Physiocrats. Foucault rightly distinguishes Smith's outlook from that of François Quesnay, the leading Physiocrat, in terms of distinct attitudes to what is visible. Foucault points out how Quesnay's *Tableau Économique* gives the sovereign the "possibility of exact knowledge of everything taking place within his country," but "Smith's invisible hand is the exact opposite of this" (pp. 285, 286). Whereas the Physiocrats—whom Foucault had discussed in lectures the previous year (2007)—defend a free market, they grant "total knowledge" to the sovereign (p. 285). However, Smith's sovereign cannot know the economic process or its totality. Because of this deficit of knowledge, it is not in the sovereign's interest to intervene, since doing so would disrupt if not thwart the augmentation of wealth that serves the sovereign as much as his subjects. Foucault formulates this conclusion by drawing, in this instance, on Adam Ferguson's prescient comparison of the relative economic success of English and of French colonies, in America, as emblematic of distinct attitudes toward the knowledge of the sovereign (pp. 280–281).

Foucault's characterization of the Physiocrats in terms of the visible and knowable overlooks Smith's attention to what the Physiocrats fail to see within society: the agent whose effective action depends on local knowledge. Smith questions whether Quesnay, in opting for a "certain precise regimen" (of perfect liberty and justice), has failed to perceive what *is* visible, the natural tendency of each individual to "better his own condition" (IV.ix.28:674). Smith observes how "every man of common understanding will endeavor to employ whatever stock he can command" to secure present enjoyment or future profit (II.i.30:284–285). Unlike the sovereign's decision-making, an individual's incorrect judgment will not endanger the nation (II.v.7:361–362).

Foucault stands on solid ground in emphasizing the sovereign's failure of perception. When Smith summarizes his assessment of Quesnay's "ingenious system" (IV.ix.2:663), he clarifies how the sovereign may be deluded; however, unlike Foucault, Smith adds that the private person is, in comparison with the political leader, graced with vision, even if imperfect (e.g., IV.ii.6:454). Within Smith's system of natural liberty, the "sovereign is completely discharged from a duty" in which he will be "exposed to innumerable delusions, and for the proper performance of which no human wisdom or knowledge could ever be sufficient." That "duty" is the responsibility of "superintending the industry of private people" and directing it to the most productive employments (IV.ix.51:687).

Smith's assessment of the local knowledge of economic agents re-emerges in his use of the phrase *invisible hand*. Foucault maintains that the emphasis of many interpreters

¹⁰ On the relevance of maxims in Smith's economics, see Levy (1992, pp. 34–49).

¹¹ On the significance of local or ecological rationality, see V. Smith (2008). Haakonssen (1981, pp. 79–82) distinguishes "contextual knowledge" and "system knowledge" in Smith.

has been misplaced, focusing on the noun (“hand”) rather than the adjective (“invisible”). In Foucault’s eyes, the typical interpretation compresses the “remains of a theological conception” by which God views the totality of the economic process and “draws together” various interests (pp. 278, 279). However, according to Foucault, Smith effectively rejects a “transparency” of the economic world that would allow God to see what transpires and to arrange things beneficially; therefore, “Economics is an atheistic discipline ... a discipline without God” (p. 282). Foucault’s blithe dismissal of an omniscient perspective also repudiates, thereby, the idea that there is something that could be known. However, a postulation of invisibility implies that there *is* something that could be known, if not seen. A more forgiving interpretation of Foucault’s quip about atheistic economics allows it to express a “fundamental epistemic humility” (Schliesser 2017, p. 250), thereby permitting knowledge of the invisible.

Foucault interprets the invisible hand less as a set of descriptions than a package of injunctions.

For there to be certainty of collective benefit ... it is absolutely necessary that each actor be blind with regard to this totality. Everyone must be uncertain with regard to the collective outcome if this positive collective outcome is really to be expected. Being in the dark and the blindness of all the economic agents are absolutely necessary. The collective good must not be an objective. It must not be an objective because it cannot be calculated, at least, not within an economic strategy. Here we are at the heart of a principle of invisibility. (p. 279)

Foucault urges, subsequently, that invisibility is “not just a fact arising from the imperfect nature of human intelligence” but is, by his understanding of Smith, “absolutely indispensable” (p. 280). Effectively, a descriptive claim of blindness provides the basis for a normative injunction: “not only no economic agent, but also no political agent” should pursue any collective good (p. 280).

However, Adam Smith does not assert of invisibility a necessity that is “absolute,” a term more apposite to Quesnay’s “precise regime.” Neither is it indispensable that each agent be “blind” to some collective outcome (Schliesser 2017, p. 249). If some individuals had some partial, halting—even full—grasp of a collective outcome, that alone would not preclude the result from realization. Second, Foucault moves tacitly from a *totality* to a collective or public good. But a totality of outcome should not be identified with a collective or public good. Smith clearly allows governing authorities to pursue collective goods (also noted by Schliesser 2017, p. 249): among the duties of the sovereign is “erecting and maintaining certain publick works and certain publick institutions” (IV.ix.51:687–688).

With that said, Foucault would not be mistaken in ascribing to Smith a less absolute injunction against the pursuit of a *totality* of outcome. But that injunction would pertain less to the private agent than to the sovereign who bears *public* responsibilities. A sovereign might confuse public duties with interventions of a totalistic nature. If some public pursuits presume knowledge of economic process or totality, then it makes sense to issue a normative caution against the sovereign acting in these situations.¹² It may not

¹² “The statesman, who should attempt to direct private people in what manner they ought to employ their capitals, would not only load himself with a most unnecessary attention, but assume an authority which could safely be trusted, not only to no single person, but to no council or senate whatever, and which would nowhere

be as pertinent to levy the same injunction against the private citizen who acts, typically, within circumstances both physically and psychologically close.

The sovereign tempted to pursue a totality of outcome exemplifies “the man of system,” described in Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Although Foucault interprets the “invisible hand” with little emphasis on “hand,” when Smith highlights the “man of system,” he observes a visible hand. This individual

seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the *hand* arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board. He does not consider that the pieces upon the chess-board have no other principle of motion besides that which the *hand* impresses upon them; but that in the great chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own. (Smith [1759–1790] 1976, VI.ii.2.17:234; emphasis added)

The “man of system” fails to comprehend how, within society, individuals constantly act, react, and interact according to their own beliefs and wills. This is the sort of person who should heed Foucault’s injunction, perhaps less urgent for the individual with his or her own “principle of motion.”

That principle, in the *Wealth of Nations*, is the desire to better one’s condition. Individuals motivated by this principle are part of a process that yields a total outcome that was not intended. In characterizing this process, Smith invokes the “invisible hand.”

As every individual, therefore, endeavours as much as he can both to employ his capital in the support of domestick industry, and so to direct that industry that its produce may be of the greatest value; every individual necessarily labours to render the annual revenue of the society as great as he can. He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestick to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce maybe of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was not part of his intention. (IV.II.9:456)

From this passage—the sole instance in the *Wealth of Nations* in which Smith employs the famous phrase—it seems hard to glean that the “invisible hand” should be understood simply in terms of general invisibility. Except for those who seek to dismiss the phrase (Rothschild 2001; Samuels 2011), many take Smith to be using this figure of speech to reference some function or process (e.g., Schliesser 2017, p. 235). This is not an implausible interpretation, but it diverts from the *figurative* function of Smith’s phrase. In his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* ([1762–63] 1985, Lecture 6), Smith indicates how metaphor is employed to unite things not typically connected—in this case, the actions of discrete individuals and a larger social outcome (Heath 2014). A metaphor should be invoked, in a specific context, to be “striking and interesting”; otherwise, it has “no intrinsick worth” (Smith [1762–63] 1985, i.v.66:29; i.v.57:26). In other words, for Smith, a metaphor should be *affective*. Like the rhetoric of genealogy, metaphor should encourage one to take up a perspective otherwise overlooked. The “invisible hand” suggests a frame for envisioning effects and causes within society.

be so dangerous as in the hands of a man who had folly and presumption enough to fancy himself fit to exercise it” (IV.ii.10:456).

To regard the phrase as but a designation of invisibility sidesteps the purpose of Smith's metaphor. Although not irrelevant, a singular focus on the invisible omits the vantage point of illumination from which to appreciate or consider how individual endeavor to improve one's local condition might coordinate with the deeds and ends of others, thereby coalescing into an outcome not otherwise intended.

Whereas Foucault stresses a general invisibility, Smith prioritizes the visibility of the local: "the law ought always to trust people with the care of their own interest, as in their local situations they must generally be able to judge better of it than the legislator can do" (IV.v.b.16:531). These perspectives need not conflict. Yet to mention one without the other hardly secures a sense of what is or is not seeable. For example, at the local level, the vision requisite to ameliorating one's condition involves an estimate of the circumstances and activities of others and, in light of that, to adjust one's actions to what others do, offer, or accept. We need not, in Smith's case, understand these adjustments to always be adequate to one's expectations, beliefs, or perceived circumstances. However, an immediate adjustment is, in general, visible to the participating parties even as sequential adjustments of one party to other parties are less visible. Although Smith seems to allow room for improving one's perception, whether economic or moral, the events of a more distant future remain largely invisible, even if an individual possesses stronger knowledge of his or her circumstances than any other person. Nonetheless, by taking up the perspective afforded by the metaphor of the invisible hand, the economic agent, or the theorist, may infer the reality of more distant processes, even a new total outcome.¹³

Foucault's neglect of the local thwarts a recognition of how Smith's focus might carry implications for a sense of self, a topic too large for this essay.¹⁴ Foucault suggests, instead, that agents who act on desires to improve their conditions are "perfect egoists" (p. 279), a point often repeated by scholars who read Foucault.¹⁵ However, Smith does not describe his economic actors as egoistic. Foucault traces Smith's alleged egoism to the notion of a "subject of interest" as developed, supposedly, by David Hume. According to Foucault, Hume reduces choice to pleasure and pain, not judgment or reason; in this way, interest, constituted "irreducibly" as *my* pleasure and *my* pain, becomes egoistic (p. 272). In contracting Hume's thought into a kernel of egoism, Foucault shunts aside how Hume—once regarded as "*le bon David*"—deemed

¹³ Would a medieval market, governed by juridical norms rather than norms of interest, be more visible than a modern market? Presumably so, yet neither the processes nor totality of that market would be fully visible (the medieval market has its own complexity). However, Foucault's real point remains: What is the *object* of vision? In the medieval market moral or juridical norms are visible (or knowable) in ways that an economic process or totality is not.

¹⁴ A consideration of these implications could appeal to Smith's discussion, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, of the attitudes and outlook of the prudent individual ([1759–1790] 1976, VI.i.5–15:213–216), along with Smith's tale of the "poor man's son" whose imaginative fancy leads him to ruin and to self-realization (IV.I.8:181).

¹⁵ In a lecture (14 March 1979) delivered prior to those that take up Smith and Ferguson, Foucault suggests that *homo economicus* was "in the classical conception ... the man of exchange" (p. 225). This description is not inconsistent with Foucault's ascription of egoism to Smith's economic agents. In this context, Foucault compares the "man of exchange" not to egoistic agents but to the *entrepreneurial* agent of neoliberalism. The "man of exchange" requires a motive and, for Foucault, that motive is egoistic.

benevolence an irreducible passion.¹⁶ Among eighteenth-century thinkers, Bernard Mandeville complies best with Foucault's portrayal, since he maintains that any action that *also* satisfies a passion or pleasure is "vicious," or egoistic. But Mandeville was a target of Hume, as well as Ferguson ([1767] 1995, pp. 35–36), not to mention Smith, who decried his "licentious system" (Smith [1759] 1976, VII.ii.4:306–314). Foucault's argument that interest reduces to pleasure is difficult to sustain conceptually or historically, though he admits that the notion of *homo economicus* is not well-conceptualized prior to the close of the nineteenth century (p. 271). In fact, the terminology was never invoked by Smith, as was made clear a half-century ago (Macfie 1967, p. 71; and see Gane 2014, pp. 15–16).

If there is a chief motive operating in Smith's political economy, it is the desire, "generally calm and dispassionate" (II.iii.28:341), to better one's condition: "The uniform, constant, and uninterrupted effort of every man to better his condition, [is] the principle from which publick and national, as well as private opulence is originally derived" (II.iii.31:343). This desire, crucial to the generation of wealth, falls within the category of passions that Smith labels "selfish," though not in an egoistic sense: such passions relate to self, though not wholly so, and in many instances prove harmless, even praiseworthy.

With that said, one might object that throughout the *Wealth of Nations* Smith refers regularly to the *interests* of individuals, including groups of individuals, such as landowners or consumers. However, these references are not attributions of egoism. For Smith, "interest" is a term of economic analysis employed to describe something objective: an interest refers to what one needs to carry out one's project (Fleischacker 2004, p. 98). Landlords and farmers may have interests that diverge from their interests as consumers (I.xi.m.12:251). Individuals may act against their interests (II.ii.53:302; IV.ii.4:454). On occasion, Smith uses "interest" to indicate self-interest, as when he refers to "the regard that all men have for their own interest" (II. iv.2:350). Such "regard" need not indicate a particular motive of conduct.

Foucault's appeal to invisibility overlooks the visibility available to the individual who seeks "to better his condition." Without the local visibilities there would be no reason to proclaim that a multitude of disparate visibilities are coordinated, by economic processes, into totalities, largely beneficial, which no individual had envisioned. Taking these local visibilities into account restores an unnoticed but essential element of Foucault's original perception—and Smith's. The appeal to the local also features in Adam Ferguson's account of civil society. Although Ferguson's chief work, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, appeared almost a decade prior to Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, Foucault understands Ferguson's notion of civil society to resolve a quandary that accrues as the sovereign encounters the invisible political economy. The nature of that problem is the focus of the next section.

¹⁶ Hume states, "To the most careless observer there appear to be such dispositions as benevolence and generosity..." ([1751] 1975, app. II, p. 298). One might object that Foucault is not intending to attach egoism to Hume's view of the individual but to an economic tradition grounded, in part, in Hume's ideas. If so, then the focus should be the tradition, not the specific author.

III. THE INCOMPATIBILITY OF INTEREST AND RIGHT

Liberal political economy postulates a market in which individuals pursue their interests within a sphere governed by juridical norms. This arrangement, observes Foucault, produces a predicament: “the art of government must be exercised in a space of sovereignty ... but ... [that] space turns out to be inhabited by economic subjects” (p. 294). Foucault expresses this incompatibility in two essential formulations: first, the “logic” of interest and that of right are mis-matched; second, the conduct of economic subjects deprives the sovereign of power. The resolution of this incompatibility is “civil society.”

Foucault contends that the subject of interest, unlike the subject of right, never has to relinquish his or her interest (p. 275); in this way the “logic” of these two subjects differs. Foucault illustrates how liberal political economists encourage grain sales because the more that merchants pursue their interests, the greater the outcome. An “egoistic mechanism” ensures that “the will of each harmonizes spontaneously ... with the will and interest of others” (pp. 275–276). Foucault cites Mandeville as one whose thought demonstrates that “the subject of interest is never called upon to relinquish his interest” (2008, p. 275). However, Mandeville admits that one’s interests may be limited by the sovereign precisely because some interests do not harmonize with other interests. In the moral to his poem “The Grumbling Hive,” he states, “So Vice is beneficial found. / When it’s by Justice lopt and bound” ([1705] 1988, p. 17; italics omitted). Sovereign justice requires harmful vices to be “lopt and bound.” Perhaps Mandeville’s real point is a *redirection*, not a relinquishment, of interest: given an interest in avoiding a confrontation with the sovereign, one must surrender a vice or interest that harms others. Even so, redirection would testify to either a relevant categorical distinction among *kinds* of interest or, alternatively, a reconciliation of interest and juridical norm.

The first alleged incompatibility seems, therefore, less than evident. The second focuses on the sovereign’s loss of power. Since the sovereign is *not* to interfere with the subject of interest, the sovereign loses a sphere of control: “what will government be concerned with if the economic process, and the whole of the economic process, is not in principle its object?” (p. 286). It is not obvious that deprivation of power is tantamount to an incompatibility; in any case Adam Smith’s sovereign is not prohibited from intervening in the economy.¹⁷

To resolve this incompatibility Foucault contends that liberal governmentality must open “a new domain or field” that will preserve the “unity and generality of the art of governing over the whole sphere of sovereignty” (p. 295). This new domain, “civil society,” includes individuals “both as subjects of right and as economic actors.” Within this “ensemble,” the sovereign finds “not just the connection or combination of these two elements [interest and right], but a series of other elements in relation to which the subject of right and the economic subject will be aspects, partial aspects, which can be integrated insofar as they belong to a complex whole” (p. 295). The notion of a civil

¹⁷ Foucault asserts that Smith’s invisible hand “prohibits any form of intervention” (p. 280). However, in drawing on the subject of famine, Callum Williams explains that Smith was “a fundamentally pragmatic thinker” (Williams 2015, p. 185; cf. Hill 2020, pp. 16–17). Ute Tellmann recognized a similar point: Smith did not assert the economy to be invisible, only that our economic judgments are contingent and uncertain (Tellmann 2009, p. 20).

society allows the government a basis for limiting what it does, so that the economy proceeds, while nonetheless furnishing a field of focus (larger than the economy) in which the principles of juridical right may be enforced.

The alleged incompatibility and its proposed remedy appear ambiguous. The first formulation is expressed in terms of ideas (the “logic” of interest); the second, in terms, largely, of practice (the deprivation of sovereign power). Foucault’s solution, civil society, is then presented not as a “philosophical idea” but as a “concept of government technology” (p. 296), an example of one of his “transactional realities” (p. 297). Civil society is that “plane of reference” (p. 297) around which conduct, interaction, and exchange will occur and needs and desires will orient (see Villadsen 2016, pp. 12–13). There is no given or inherent meaning to the concept of civil society; it is an emergent reality “born precisely from the interplay of relations of power and everything which constantly eludes them, at the interface, so to speak, of governors and governed” (p. 297). In effect, “civil society” is both emergent practice and discourse, the art of government reasoning.

It remains unclear where an incompatibility originates. One might demand evidence of a salient instance in which a thinker grapples with this sort of incompatibility. However, to put things briefly, Hume found “industry, knowledge, and humanity” to move together and to influence both the private and the public (Hume [1754] 1985, p. 272); Smith sought a vision of the “system of natural liberty.” Perhaps the incompatibility emerges in practice and radiates into our discourse, but its origin remains less than visible.¹⁸ Nonetheless, Foucault locates, in Ferguson, a work that demonstrates the resolution of the incompatibility.

IV. THE FUNDAMENTAL ADAM FERGUSON

In Adam Ferguson’s *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* ([1767] 1995), Foucault finds “the most fundamental, almost statutory text regarding the characterization of civil society” (p. 298). Ferguson draws from literature, ancient history, and travelers’ reports to trace a history of society from “rude” stages, with bands of hunters and gatherers, to a more “polished” state in the eighteenth century. Along the way, Ferguson sets forth features of human nature, theses about societal change, and his own concerns about the dangers of corruption and loss of national spirit. Despite the title of his book, Ferguson offers no definition or focused consideration of “civil society.”

Nonetheless, Foucault contends that Ferguson’s notion of civil society exhibits four features: it is a “historical-natural constant,” a “spontaneous synthesis of individuals,”

¹⁸ Foucault understands civil society to represent a shift from John Locke’s identification of civil with political society (p. 297). However, Locke planted the seeds of an independent civil society by distinguishing several ways in which we relate to one another apart from the political: “the power of a *magistrate* over a subject may be distinguished from that of a *father* over his children, a *master* over his servant, a *husband* over his wife, and a *lord* over his slave. All which distinct powers happening sometimes together in the same man, if he be considered under these different relations, it may help us to distinguish these powers one from another” (Locke [1690] 1988, §2; original emphases). The differing relations of authority, obligation, and motivation that constitute Locke’s understanding of society compose an “ensemble” in which individuals relate to one another in distinct ways, a feature of civil society that Foucault locates in the eighteenth century.

the “matrix of political power,” and the “motor of history” (pp. 298, 300, 303, 305). Presumably these features show how civil society resolves the incompatibility of the subject of interest and the subject of right. However, these features do not illustrate a conception of civil society so much as Ferguson’s method of social and historical explanation. As Foucault sets these out, he presents Ferguson as hewing, like Smith, to an egoistic notion of motivation. In treating Ferguson in this way, Foucault also misses Ferguson’s more interesting and nuanced account of human endeavor.

Foucault mistakenly identifies civil society with society: civil society is “an historical-natural constant ... a given beyond which there is nothing to be found” (p. 298).¹⁹ However, for Ferguson, civil society is, effectively, *civilized* society, emergent out of prior stages of savagery and barbarism. Ferguson’s expression does not always signal a clear referent either for “society” or “civil society,” but the latter suggests a society with laws, including certain “dignities” and “offices,” or “establishments” (Ferguson [1767] 1995, pp. 17, 79, 135). Within civilized society we “engage in a variety of pursuits” and witness a “diversity of ranks and professions” ([1767] 1995, p. 179), along with “civil and commercial arts” ([1767] 1995, p. 204).²⁰ Despite the unhappy identification of society with civil society, Foucault has otherwise grasped that Ferguson’s civil society, in its developed stage, describes a space in which individuals interact with purposes that include but extend beyond the economic. Although Ferguson finds a place for commercial endeavors in society ([1767] 1995, pp. 138, 141, 247), it is difficult to see how his account reflects a resolution of some conflict between interest and right.

The additional three features that Foucault delineates say less about civil society than about Ferguson’s assumptions about the development of social institutions. As a second feature, Foucault explains, “civil society assures the spontaneous synthesis of individuals” (p. 300). Civil society emerges from neither explicit social contract nor the delegation of rights. It involves an historical synthesis in which individuals create steady patterns of conduct and institutions in a manner similar to how the economy generates profit: “For in civil society, that which joins men together is indeed a mechanism analogous to that of interest, but they are not interest in the strict sense, they are not economic interests” (p. 301). However, the union to which Foucault refers is not, for Ferguson, unique to eighteenth-century civil society but applies to *any* society. And although Ferguson’s natural history of society suggests the unintended emergence of social patterns, these do not arise via a mechanism akin to prices in a market. Ferguson’s history presupposes lawlike qualities of human nature—a disposition to adhere to the group, a tendency to imitate, an unreflective ease in communicating passions, a proneness to habit, an inclination to opposition, and a tendency to seek improvement. These operate within specific historical, social, or physical circumstances (Heath 2009; Hill 2006, pp. 101–122). Out of these varied facets, new arrangements arise.

¹⁹ “It is difficult to see the moment in time when Ferguson claims that society became ‘civil’” (Oz-Salzberger 1995, p. xviii; and see Allan 2006, p. 143). For Craig Smith, Ferguson’s civil society is civilized society (C. Smith 2019, pp. 149–191).

²⁰ Foucault contends that Ferguson’s notion of “civil society” has “more or less the same meaning” as the term “nations” in Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*. This equation is dubious. In the introduction to his economic treatise, Smith references a variety of “nations,” including those of “hunters and fishers” along with “civilized and thriving nations” (Smith [1776] 1981, Introd.:10). See also Boyd (2013).

A third feature of civil society reflects Ferguson's social explanation. According to Foucault, civil society is a "matrix of political power" (p. 303). Political power, he asserts, emerges out of civil society via a "spontaneous formation ... brought about quite simply by a de facto bond which links different concrete individuals to each other" (pp. 303–304). Foucault's construal is well-taken and extends, in particular, to early societies. For example, in Ferguson's account, government emerges out of informal acts and rituals or informal acts of subordination ([1767] 1995, pp. 84, 123): "What was originally an alliance for common defense, becomes a concerted plan of political force" ([1767] 1995, p. 118).

For Foucault, Ferguson's civil society involves a catalytic interplay of economic and non-economic interests (p. 301). For this reason, Foucault claims—and here we move to the last feature—civil society is "the motor of history" (p. 305). Civil society incorporates both a spontaneous bond of unity and a principle of dissociation, *homo economicus* (p. 305). We are linked, says Foucault, by "instinct, sentiment, and sympathy" (p. 301), but a principle of dissociation acts as a principle of disequilibrium (p. 306). Although Foucault admits that this principle of dissociation may involve a quest for political power, he estimates that for Ferguson it is more typically an economic force: "But more frequently and regularly Ferguson invokes actual economic interest and the way in which economic egoism takes shape as the principle of dissociation of the spontaneous equilibrium of civil society" (p. 305): it is "egoistic interest" that fuels the transformation of society even though the overall changes are not foreseen by the individuals who forge them (p. 307).

Clearly, the economic egoism that Foucault applied to Smith he dispenses also to Ferguson. Samantha Ashenden suggests that with respect to egoism, Foucault may be "read[ing] backwards" from later interpretations made about the eighteenth century (Ashenden 2015, p. 46). Perhaps so, but there is more to be said. For Ferguson, it is not egoism that fuels transformation. Recall that Foucault's account of interest draws from Hume's appeal to pleasure and pain. However, Ferguson diverges from (Foucault's) Hume on the question of pleasure and pain. For Ferguson, pleasure and pain concern "but a small part of human life" ([1767] 1995, p. 45). What interests us, says Ferguson, is *activity*: "the demand is not for pleasure, but for something to do" ([1767] 1995, p. 45). For Ferguson, various motives impel us in all sorts of divergent historical situations ([1767] 1995, p. 71), but these do not reduce to the pleasure or pain that Foucault identifies with egoistic interest.

According to Ferguson, the intentional objects of "interest" relate not to pleasure or pain but to an "object of care," including "our external condition, and the preservation of our animal nature" ([1767] 1995, p. 20), as well as property ([1767] 1995, p. 97). Nothing in this construal implies that interests must be egoistic, a point made in different terms by Ashenden (2015, p. 48). In fact, Ferguson's appeal to the objects of our care not only indicates a concern, similar to Smith's, with the local environment but forms an essential part of Ferguson's "love of improvement" ([1767] 1995, p. 13), a principle akin to Smith's desire to better our condition. This natural disposition—also presented as ambition (see, for example, Ferguson's *Principles of Moral and Political Science* [1792] 1995, I.III.viii)—impels labor and encourages a variety of arts ([1767] 1995, p. 138). A diversity of endeavors will increase with the growth of civilization ([1767] 1995, p. 179), but the desire to improve one's situation, manifest in all stages of society, is not unique in fomenting change. A Janus-faced desire to affiliate ensures that we bond in groups;

however, communal identity is also forged in opposition. An attitude of contestation is particularly important in the history of social development, but Ferguson does not identify this drive with egoism either. We are, declares Ferguson, “disposed to opposition” and to bringing reason, argument, and physical strength into competition with others ([1767] 1995, p. 28). Through opposition and contestation, he adds, freedom is secured and maintained ([1767] 1995, pp. 124–125).

Foucault also maintains that, according to Ferguson, a particular interest, the commercial, tends to threaten the bonds of society. Ferguson’s concern is less that the commercial *must* threaten the bonds of society than that it could.²¹ A devotion to commercial interests does not entail that we are “averse to society and mutual affections” ([1767] 1995, p. 38n9), and if business “proceeds on the maxims of self-preservation, the careless hour is employed in generosity and kindness” ([1767] 1995, p. 41). Threats to social unity and affiliation also come from the division of labor ([1767] 1995, p. 207), or from a society grown too large ([1767] 1995, p. 208).

Ferguson insists, in fact, that virtue preserves the bonds of society ([1767] 1995, pp. 225–226). One does not have to agree with Ashenden (2015) that the relevant species of virtue is the “civic republican” sort to conclude that Foucault ignores Ferguson’s various moral appeals.²² In the midst of his descriptive history of civil society, Ferguson remains the moralist, adopting a critical stance designed to remind readers of what is at stake when individuals lose interest in the good of society. Such persons are no longer fit to govern or rule a nation ([1767] 1995, p. 178), much less to defend it ([1767] 1995, p. 182). In the *Essay*, virtue is not simply an orientation beyond self, and neither is it inconsistent with commercial endeavor, but it includes, or presupposes, a facet crucial to the good of individual and society—vigor. Not unique to any stage of society, vigor is both individual and social; it develops by “contending with difficulties” ([1767] 1995, p. 242). As Ferguson states, “without vigour to maintain what is acknowledged as a right, the mere record, or the feeble intention, is of little avail” ([1767] 1995, p. 160).

For Ferguson, egoistic interest is not the basis for social change. Neither is Ferguson’s conception of civil society a means of overcoming some incompatibility between the subject of economic interest and the subject of right. Nonetheless, Ferguson considers his account, with its inclusion of a functional role for virtue (and vigor), to be descriptive. Just as Smith portrays the economy, so does Ferguson depict civil society as the unintended outcome of divergent and contingent actions and events. Foucault’s stipulation that civil society resolves some putative incompatibility between the “logic” or “dialectic” of interest and that of juridical norms founders against Ferguson’s explicit warning: “we endeavour to derive from imagination and thought, what is in reality matter of experience and sentiment” ([1767] 1995, p. 34; see also p. 22).

In the case of both Smith and Ferguson, Foucault misconstrues their understanding of motivation and their accounts of action in relation to local circumstance. Since Foucault also seems to misread Ferguson’s history of civil society, one may well wonder why Foucault even gave thought to Ferguson—he seems an “odd fit,” a “strange choice”

²¹ Ferguson explains, “It is, however, well known from the history of mankind, that corruption of this, or of any other degree, is not peculiar to nations in their decline, or in the result of signal prosperity, and great advances in the arts of commerce” ([1767] 1995, p. 229).

²² That Ferguson sometimes utilizes the vocabulary of civic republicanism does not render him a civic republican (see C. Smith 2019, pp. 134–141, 176–179, 213–217).

(Ashenden 2015, pp. 36, 45). Of course, it is possible that Foucault discovered Ferguson through Karl Marx, who summoned Ferguson in *The Poverty of Philosophy* ([1847] 1955, ch. 2), and then in the first volume of *Capital* ([1887] 1967, chs. 3 and 14), each time portraying him, incorrectly, as Smith's teacher! Or Foucault may have been reminded of Ferguson by a long footnote in Joseph Schumpeter's *History of Economic Analysis* (1954, Part II, ch. 3). Whatever the source—and despite Ferguson's adherence to a fairly typical eighteenth-century outlook regarding the existence of God, Providence, and the necessity of virtue—there are, in fact, reasons why Foucault would find Ferguson's *Essay* of interest, perhaps even more than Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.

Like Foucault's genealogies, Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* is not a traditional narrative history but an instance of an eighteenth-century genre, conjectural history, a kind of precursor to genealogy (Bevir 2008, p. 265). As characterized by Dugald Stewart, in his biography of Adam Smith, a conjectural history traces a sequence from an "uncultivated" to an improved state of society both "wonderfully artificial and complicated" (Stewart [1793] 1982, §45, p. 292). Such histories, devised by Hume to account for religious belief (*The Natural History of Religion*) and by Smith to explain the origin of language ([1761] 1985), sought to show how specific patterns, norms, or practices could emerge from dispositions and faculties of human nature, in conjunction with physical and social circumstances and human interaction more generally. Typically, the histories revealed an unintended transition from one state of things to another, significantly different, state.²³ Institutions and social patterns emerged not from the minds of far-sighted (and efficacious) legislators or designers, and not by explicit consent, but by incremental steps taken by agents who had other things in mind than an outcome both "artificial and complicated." For example, Ferguson suggests a gradual and unintended origin to the emergence of property, political establishments, and some normative features of society. These emerge by "slow, and almost insensible, steps" ([1767] 1995, p. 257) and require "long experience" ([1767] 1995, p. 10).

Ferguson's appeal to the unintended is one feature of his conjectural history that might have piqued Foucault's interest. In the realm of the social, says Ferguson, "an effect is produced before the cause is perceived ... [and] work is often accomplished before the plan is devised" ([1767] 1995, p. 13). In this way the purpose, identity, or meaning of the originating elements proves distinct from the result. Foucault included this same feature in his own characterization of a genealogy in which the "essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms" ([1971] 1998, p. 371). Just as Ferguson admits that we commonly attribute to reason or reflection that which was born of unreflective sentiment or practice ([1767] 1995, p. 22), so does Foucault recognize that we often believe that our current institutions rest on "profound intentions and immutable necessities" ([1971] 1998, p. 381).

For Foucault, a genealogy offers a consideration of the various forces that have affected self and conduct. Here again, Foucault might have discerned in Ferguson's treatise an appreciation of similar forces, certainly an acknowledgment of how history and circumstance affect belief and conduct across ages and societies. In rejecting a primordial state of nature, Ferguson recognized that "all situations are equally natural"

²³ Such histories are not, typically, intended to invoke contrary to fact (counterfactual) claims, only subjunctive conditionals—what would have occurred, given these circumstances and this account of human nature.

([1767] 1995, p. 14): every stage of a society's development reflects some understanding of self and others. Of the qualities and virtues exhibited in "rude" and "savage" societies, Ferguson often expressed admiration. If Hume held the view that "ages of refinement are both the happiest and most virtuous" ([1754] 1985, p. 269), Ferguson seemed sympathetic to a broader compass: "every age hath its consolations, as well as its sufferings" ([1767] 1995, pp. 103–104).

As society changes or develops, Ferguson posits no mechanism (a faculty of sympathy, a moral sense) that coordinates disparate patterns of conduct. Social development proceeds contingently, with no determined end point to history (though Ferguson recognizes a role for God's overall providential design). A third point of interest to Foucault might have been how Ferguson observes that conflict and opposition serve as catalysts for the contingent development of social forms: "he who has never struggled with his fellow-creatures, is a stranger to half the sentiments of mankind" ([1767] 1995, p. 28). Ferguson's appeals to contest and conflict—steady features of the human experience that recall his insistence on moral vigor—might have intimated to Foucault a notion analogous to "power"—the effort or means, perhaps reciprocating, to alter and affect the conduct of others (Foucault 1982, pp. 220–222; and see [1979] 1999, p. 152). Contestation is instrumental to Ferguson's view of how innovative techniques in literature, technical production, public policy, and commerce are often motivated by "the emulations, the friendships, and the oppositions, which subsist among a forward and aspiring people" ([1767] 1995, p. 170).

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the works of Smith and Ferguson, Foucault finds theories of society that shape judgments of political responsibilities. Despite some limitations, Foucault's animating insight—invisibility—presents a positive way to reassess, if not improve, our understanding of the works of Smith and Ferguson. For example, scholars of eighteenth-century political economy might consider further the relevance of the epistemic notion of visibility to Smith's political economy and the ways in which some kinds of situations, or types of processes, are comprehensible, in distinct ways, either to individual or theorist. This sort of inquiry might revisit Smith's depiction of philosophy, whose purpose, he says, includes "representing the invisible chains" that connect phenomena (Smith 1982, II.12:45), or it might undertake a more psychological course and investigate how an understanding of social or economic processes might relate to the actual experience of perception. Second, scholars of Smith might develop more fully the recent suggestion that Smith includes within his overall political economy a notion of society as "a distinct analytical category" (Schliesser 2017, pp. 153–154), and whether or how the contours of that concept extend beyond economic interactions and outcomes. Third, scholars interested in Foucault might explore how his discussion of economic agency might be elaborated in terms of Smith's account of economic agents who exhibit both prudence and ambition. In the case of Ferguson, Foucault's appreciation of this thinker suggests unexplored similarities between conjectural history and genealogy. These offer fruitful avenues of inquiry that would encompass, with distinct emphases, the

conjectural histories set forth by other eighteenth-century thinkers such as Mandeville, Smith, or John Millar.

This essay has not approached Foucault's lectures in terms of any purported genealogical features; however, some readers of Foucault have questioned whether his lectures lack a specific feature of the genre, a critical focus on its subject, in this instance, liberalism. Perhaps Foucault was "intrigued" by or "highly attracted" to liberalism (respectively, Gordon 1991, p. 47; Zamora 2014). Even if Foucault is not particularly critical of liberalism, that would not mean his lectures lack a critical element. A genealogy seeks to encourage critical reflection on conventional ideas, standards, or practices— "to put the readers' identity into crisis by confronting them with descriptions about themselves that radically contradict their own self-understanding and thereby to encourage them to revise their judgements and practices" (Saar 2008, p. 311). Foucault confronts his listeners (readers) with descriptions of a political, social, and economic orientation that they had, perhaps, ignored, dismissed, or misjudged. Even if Foucault's trope of invisibility overlooks some visibilities, or assumes too easily the prevalence of egoism, it raises an epistemic point, with Socratic implications: What do *I* know of society? What do *I think* I know? These sorts of queries *should* have critical implications, less toward the ideas themselves than toward the listeners' beliefs about those ideas. In closing his lectures, Foucault points out that liberalism is "a tool for the criticism of reality" (p. 320), adding, "I would be inclined to see in liberalism a form of critical reflection on governmental practice" (p. 321). To encourage reflection, Adam Ferguson offered moral challenges; Adam Smith invoked the "invisible hand." Perhaps Foucault summoned the trope of "invisibility" to do the same.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

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