

# The Politics of Progress

---

John Laurent\*

---

This book, by a Professor of politics and history at Griffith University, is by any measure an impressive one. Its 573 pages of text (i.e., outside references and index) are packed with facts and scholarly discussion concerning a grand theme: nothing less than identifying and explicating the roots of modern industrial societies. Whether the author has succeeded to everyone's satisfaction remains to be seen, but certainly no-one can complain about the attempt. It is not really possible to do justice to a book of this kind in a short review but I will try to draw out what seem to me to be some of the book's most original and interesting insights.

A major area of interest to the author (and refreshingly, for an intellectual historian), is the vexed question of 'human nature', and the various interpretations of this which can be seen to underlie political and economic theory. It soon becomes clear that, for the author, the writing of Thomas Hobbes have been especially decisive in these processes, particularly when allied with the "polytechnic rationality" of Enlightenment scientific writers such as Descartes, Bacon and Newton. As Caton notes, Hobbes's boast was that he was "the first to put morality and politics on a scientific footing" (p. 138). Hobbes was in fact Francis Bacon's secretary for a time, apparently, and Bacon was said to have preferred Hobbes to his other secretaries because "he alone understood what was dictated" (p. 171). In any event, Hobbes's version of the "state of nature", with its *Bellum omnium contra omnes* - the war of all against all — was a powerful ingredient in the crucible of intellectual, technological and commercial developments following the demise of theocracy after the Thirty Years War (1618-48).

Interestingly though, and in contrast to later 'survival-of-the-fittest' Social Darwinist theories, which tended to endorse unbridled *laissez-faire*, Hobbes accepted the mercantilist policies of the Tudor and Stuart dynasties. As Caton explains: "The idea of an economics independent of political aims and requisites did not occur in this period; hence the concept of a 'market society' was alien to it" (p. 157). The state, in Hobbes's scheme, was the remedy for the chaos which would otherwise ensue. It is partly for this reason, Caton argues, that some writers (e.g., Tonnies) have declared that Hobbes was equally the father of liberalism and socialism. One outstanding example of the application of Hobbes's ideas to statecraft was in the policies of Louis XIV's finance minister, Jean Baptiste Colbert. Under Colbert the French navy and

*Review of Hiram Caton, The Politics of Progress: The Origins and Development of the Commercial Republic. 1600-1835. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1988. Pp xii+627. Cloth, Aust \$67.00.*

merchant marine, for instance, were brought from an antiquated condition to fleets rivalling those of Britain and Holland through such means as offering high salaries to entice naval architects and master carpenters from both these nations, with the understanding that they were to teach their skills as well as exercise them. Missions were sent abroad to study shipyards, and savants from the Academie des sciences, funded by Colbert in 1666, were set to work finding optimal ship designs and other improvements. State outlays for scientific research and development under Colbert were of the order of 60,000 annually, which compared with a figure of somewhere between 2,000 and 5,000 in Britain a century later (p. 341).

It was this Colbertian mercantilist model, according to Caton, based on Hobbesian presuppositions concerning human nature, which underlay the new United States of America's economic success under Hamiltonian Federalism, with its strong emphasis on central government. Rousseauian idealism regarding the perfectibility of man had been demonstrably exploded in the excesses of the French Revolution, and provided no concrete guidance for the conduct of affairs of state.

Caton goes on to argue with regard to the United States however, that the theories of the Scottish philosopher David Hume and his disciple, Adam Smith were also important, and provided a necessary counterbalance in the delicate juggling of federal and state powers. Caton writes:

Despite [the] Hobbesian program, Hume raised an important objection to its anthropology. He denied that man's self-regard sunders him from his fellows quite so entirely as Hobbes thought. In the bond between the sexes, and in parental care for offspring, Hume urged, one recognizes passions that aggregate human beings. Such natural filiation shows that 'society' has a natural foundation ... [S]pontaneous sympathetic feelings show that man is sociable to a high degree (pp. 470-1).

This conception of man as a 'social animal' was of course further elaborated upon by Adam Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (a book described by Charles Darwin as "striking"), though Caton does not refer to this work. Nevertheless, Smith's vision, in *Wealth of Nations*, of a demand-led market economy becoming increasingly sophisticated through division of labour not only cannot explain the emergence of modern commercial republics based on manufacturing, according to Caton, it was seen as inadequate by America's 'Founding Fathers'. As Caton explains:

Insofar as Smith's strictures were directed against fettering trade and productivity by purchase of privilege, Hamilton [author of *The Federalist Papers*] was in accord with him ... But Smith was critical also of Colbertian attempts to foster manufacture by artificial means as an instrument of state policy. This forced an economy out of its 'natural' track, that is, out of the course established by demand and supply. Here Hamilton disagreed ... Hamilton would not passively await the advent of manufacture because, as an enterprising spirit, his eye had fallen on growth — on the immense mass of improvable matter possessed by the nation ... Domestic capital was to be mobilized by the funded debt and hard money banking (p. 476).

While Smith's *Wealth of Nations* was undoubtedly a "watershed" in economic thought, Caton argues, Smith failed to appreciate the importance of scientific and

technological innovation in economic growth, and had not foreseen the rapid changes that were about to take place in Europe and America based on these developments. More perspicacious, contends Caton, had been the French economist, Say, who wrote (albeit Eurocentrically): "The perfection of our tools ... is that which makes the difference which is observable between us and the savages of the South seas, who have axes of flint and sewing needles of fish bones" (p. 525). Caton has an extended discussion on Say, which, for this reviewer at least, was illuminating. Finally (before a short Afterword presenting an overview of the main themes emerging from the study), Caton discusses the industrial revolution in Britain up to the 1830s, with its factory system; and while his contention that conditions for factory workers cannot have been as hard as is often made out (since great numbers of former cottage spinners and weavers were apparently willing to accept this employment) will no doubt be controversial (one could argue that they had little choice), his account is equally illuminating in many ways. It is also fair and balanced: for example, though Caton cannot agree with what he calls "the legend of wicked capitalism" (as in Marx's writing), neither does he see that we need to accept the "legend of wicked unions", as in the apologist for capitalism, Andrew Ure's *Philosophy of Manufactures*. Caton argues that Ure's description of the management case against unions "enunciated a position that industrialists were to hold for another century," which was that "[s]trikes are no proof of labor disaffection; they are caused by agitators who gain control of workers' behaviour by using criminal means to intimidate them. Left to themselves, workers would stay on the job because it is in their interest to do so" (p. 541).

This is an important book, which will be read with interest by anyone seeking to understand the origins of our modern western way of life. Not all readers will agree with everything Caton has to say, but they will need to do their homework to answer him where they don't — and this is surely commendation for the author in itself.

---

\* Division of Science and Technology, Griffith University.