

Needs and passions of human subsistence in the moral economy of the early 18th century

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1.Introduction¹.The analytical focus of the eighteenth-century social thinkers was human nature and the relationship between the individual and society. Along the century the discourse moved from a political and natural-law one to the political-economy analysis of the provision of necessities and conveniences that constitute the wealth of nations. The change was one of language, not of object as both analytical perspectives keep the focus on the relationship between the individual, as a moral and political animal, and society. This continuity has been finally recognised in the recent readings of Adam Smith *Works*.² Nonetheless, we can detect a certain reduction of perspective between the beginning and the end of the century. The way man and society are seen in the mercantilist thought of commercial capitalism is quite different from the way they are seen in productive capitalism. Thus, on the one hand, it is important to keep the unity of focus; on the other hand, it is necessary to grasp the differences of language and context.

To understand the richness of the social thought of the eighteenth century it is important to seek its roots in the major philosophical, scientific and political innovations introduced in the seventeenth century, the ‘century of genius’. Galileo, Descartes, Spinoza, Hobbes and Locke all helped to open new spaces for modern reflection on human nature and society and change knowledge of the

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² With *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, published in six volumes by the Clarendon Press in 1976, we can work on the connections between the *Wealth of nations* and the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, clearly evidenced by the editors. Among a great many other works that have contributed to the recent debate on the Scottish Enlightenment, see the volume, M. Ignatieff and I. Hont, eds. *Wealth and Virtue*, and works by D. Winch, 1978, 1983 and K. Haakonsen, 1996. Useful references are also offered by the Italian editions of the works of Smith, in particular the introduction by E. Pesciarelli to *Lezioni di Glasgow (1989)* and by A. Zanini to *Teoria dei sentimenti morali (1991)*. A summing up of the debate on the relationship between the *Wealth of Nations* and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* can be found in Tribe, 1999. An important work by Rothschild (2001) also follows through the link between ethics and economics.

universe, of the state, the concept of reason and passions, ethics and reflection on individual identity.³ In this process of reassessment the whole system of social values was shattered. There was a new awareness of the complexity of social relations and of the inner tensions of individual identities, as well as a new confidence in scientific method. These changes define a new phase of humanism.

Reflection on human experience was undertaken at different levels of cognition: from the mathematical and physical sciences, to the natural sciences of animals and plants, to a bio-psychological science of the human race. The styles and degrees of abstraction, for expressing the knowledge and self awareness of human nature also varied, from classifying, measuring, listing and ranking the different objects under scrutiny, to the study of philosophy, law, ethics and aesthetics, generally seen in a historical perspective. In dealing with human nature and the paradoxes of human life, a wide range of linguistic styles emerged: tracts, pamphlets, sermons, fables, poems and plays were the literary means used to share knowledge about human experience with a wider public which was not only the object of study but also a subject of change. A key concept in this connection was subsistence as a sustainable state of the conditions of individual and collective life.

In the social thought of the time subsistence does not mean bare survival, although survival is a form of subsistence and self preservation is considered the most powerful force in human activity; the closest we may get to the concept of subsistence is by reference to sustenance and maintenance. The term subsistence is used by Smith also as a synonym for "manner of life" (Smith, 1978, p. 179). As such it cannot be reduced to a packet of goods, let alone a sum of money. Rather, it represents a normal state of living conditions that have over time settled into material and traditional practices (Picchio, 1999). Thus subsistence includes the ideas of endurance and reiteration and the social and individual memory of past practices reflected in on-going habits and conventions. Subsistence was also at the basis of natural rights. Locke, for instance, saw property as founded in the

³ An example of the change of perspective can be traced in the history of the reflection on individual passions that in the seventeenth century played a central role and were

natural right to subsistence, although he acknowledges a tension between the biblical gift of the earth to “mankind in common” to be used for just what is necessary to support life, and the possibility and practice of using money to accumulate “oversurplus” (Locke, 1936, pp. 129-141).

The process of subsistence, and individual rights of access to it, mark the social quality and dynamics of the economic system.⁴ The question facing eighteenth-century social theorists is how to get a conceptual grasp on the functioning of what we would call a dynamic-complex order: dynamic in that it includes active subjects, and driving forces such as insatiable needs and aspirations to increasing refinement; complex in that it consists of different interacting subjects, acting on the basis of turbulent passions and moving in different spheres and social strata. On the ground of subsistence major dynamic forces are at play and individual and social tensions have to find sustainable balances. Nevertheless, despite the leading role that the concept of subsistence plays in the vision both of the individual and of the social system, it remains one of the least studied in the history of economic and social thought.⁵ One way of analysing its density in the eighteenth-century thought is through its reflections in related aspects, such as luxury, population, liberty, slavery, poverty, property, wages, and Poor Law.

The aims of this paper are to highlight the concept of subsistence and grasp, by so doing, some of the elements of the complexity of the man-and-society relationship, and to speculate on the ways in which it was acknowledged at the beginning of the eighteenth century, with reference both to its meaning and to its role as a dynamic fact at the basis of any social system. We will not attempt an empirical and historical description of living conditions at the beginning of the eighteenth century, though that would be of great interest, but rather work on the

directly related to action, reason and knowledge. On this see the seminal work of James (1997).

⁴For instance, the inherent dynamics of the modes of subsistence are seen by the theorists of the Scottish historical school as the key to epochal changes in the modes of production in a four-stages theory of human development. See Meek (1976), reviewed in Q. Skinner (1976), Hont (1987). In Italy, the theory of historical stages was formulated by Vico and applied by Genovesi, on this see Pesciarelli (1978).

⁵In this respect it is perhaps worth noting that the term subsistence is used by Smith about 160 times in the *Wealth of Nations*, but it generally finds no place in the indexes.

definition of subsistence and its location within the analytical vision of the individual and society.⁶

More precisely, the present analysis is restricted to how human subsistence emerges in two literary works which had an important impact on economic thought and were written by two authors who lived in London around the same period. We shall refer to the novel *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner*, by Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), published in 1719, and the *Fable of the Bees, or Private Vices, Publick Benefits* by Bernard Mandeville (1670-1733), published in the form of a short verse fable in 1705 and then in more extended form in 1714, with a second part containing dialogues, which came out in 1729.⁷ On the one hand, *Robinson Crusoe* is taken as a mythical account of the process of ‘making a life’ in the case of a male individual with needs and passions moving him to action in the extreme environment of a desert island, while Mandeville is of interest for his lucid account of interactions between individual passions and the dynamics of markets and national wealth.⁸

This paper is divided in five sections; the first one sets its aims and focus, the second provides some insights on the common context in which Defoe and Mandeville write, the third and fourth speculate on the idea and role of human subsistence as it can be drawn from their works; in the fifth we see how a direct focus on human subsistence gives different colours and perspective to the vision of the economic system.

2. The common context. Both Defoe and Mandeville were religious but not deists, finding their place in the movement for a change of the traditional order of a hereditary aristocracy, ecclesiastical supervision of religious experience, and

⁶ For a useful source on material living condition see Malcomson (1981)

⁷ Henceforth reference to these works will be according to the editions used: Defoe, 1998 and Mandeville, 1988.

⁸ By ‘making a life’ we mean the process of making life sustainable not only in the sense of providing for necessities and conveniences but also in controlling emotions and self-reflecting on the meaning and context of one’s own life. Thus is a process of feeling, doing, making, knowing and self reflecting.

state control over commercial exchange. Whereas Defoe's novel places the individual in time and space, Mandeville places him in the historical time of social institutions and the human passions upon which those institutions are based.⁹ For Mandeville and Defoe conventions, manners and forms of government constitute the pragmatic and historical manifestations of a constant search for individually and socially sustainable practices. Defoe tells the story of an isolated individual who, in the process of 'making a life', applying reason, self-control, experimentation and planning, succeeds in securing safety, emotional stability and relative plenty. Robinson Crusoe increases the resources available by exploring and colonizing the island, raising animals and introducing new crops. His economy is a dynamic one, activated by a profound vital instinct, regulated by a moral and religious sense, and implemented through labour and imagination. It takes on the form of 'art', as innovative direct intervention in nature.¹⁰

Both authors share a common context defined by the great changes occurring in the social structure at the end of the seventeenth century, when social experience was more and more related to the growing size and variety of international and domestic trade in a context of increasing mobility of commodities and fluidity of markets.¹¹ Economic required a restructuring of social power relationships in order to adjust the new wealth of the commercial class in relation to religious institutions, state, landowners, and civil society. The internal structure of the commercial class was also changing to make room for new tradesmen active in the booming credit market financing trade, war and innovative productive enterprises.¹² Moreover a rampant consumer society was developing, centred in

On the meaning of *Robinson Crusoe* as a myth of modern individualism see Watt (1951, 1996, pp. 141-228). On the domesticity of Crusoe's experience in the island see Rogers (1974).

⁹ For an appraisal of Mandeville thought see Kay (1988), Hundert (1994), Goldsmith (1987). On this particular issue of the embedness of the individual in social institutions see Branchi (1998, p. 15).

¹⁰ On the use of the term art to express innovative productive practices see Johnson (1937).

Robinson, however, as Virginia Woolf noted, shows no interest in aesthetic contemplation, proving blind to one of the great forces transforming society and, indeed, part of the 18th century tradition.

¹¹ This context is well presented in Earle (1976) and Rogers (1976, pp. 25-51). Some insights are also presented in Pocock (1975, pp. 422-61).

¹² The financial boom was characterized also by speculative bubbles as it was the case with the South Sea Bubble in 1720. On the advantages and risks of credit Defoe wrote

London but also spreading to the country.¹³ These changes were approached in a new perspective leading to a new field of knowledge, later to be named “political economy”, which focussed more closely on trade and tradesmen’s interests. This led to gains in the understanding of the economy, and to a progressive loss in the awareness of the complexity of the social matrix and tensions of the “man-and-society” relationship.¹⁴ At the individual level analytical speculation required taking into account the needs and passions of human subsistence; and at social level it needed to bring out the inner order which made collective life sustainable in spite of inherent tensions and conflicts. To abstract human behaviour, the social thinkers of the eighteenth century often used concepts, such as passions and sentiments, which were neither precisely defined nor indeed clearly definable, remaining open to reflect degrees, social conventions and living practices in a constant state of flux.¹⁵

New criteria of order had to be indicated in a world still seen as created by God but known and managed directly by men. A new system based on a greater human autonomy with regard to laws and spiritual and moral values, had to be formulated in a consistent and viable picture, within a process of self-awareness. Within this new picture the individual had changed position, becoming more central. New actions could be undertaken with confidence, but also with scepticism, given the awareness of the complexity and inherent tensions of a subject driven to action by turbulent passions. This growth in individual autonomy increasingly saw social aggregation by trade as certainly less destructive than wars between states and religious strife, and this opinion also changed the system of values in favour of self-interest rather than virtue.¹⁶

extensively in the *Review* see, for example (1706, pp.17-24). In 1692 Defoe himself had gone bankrupt for the enormous sum of 17.000 pounds and was committed to prison (Rogers, p. 165).

¹³ For a wide scope of references on the subject see Brewer and Porter, eds. (1993), Mckendrick, Brewer and Plumb, eds.(1983).

¹⁴ The concept of a social matrix comes from Bryson (1945, p.4).

¹⁵ The ambivalence and paradoxes of human life were at the core of poems, plays and literary works of the time when also Pope, Swift and Samuel Johnson were very authoritative figures. They were moving in the circle of what was called the “Augustan Humanism” and were on the whole more pessimistic than Defoe and Mandeville on the progressive nature of the new developments. On their contribution to social thought of the early seventeenth century see Fussel (1965, especially pp. 110-135).

¹⁶ On the notion of ‘douce commerce’ see the classic Hirshman (1977).

The juxtaposition of poverty with luxury was particularly important at the end of the seventeenth century. As long as national wealth was seen as aimed mainly at the maintenance of the state, and surplus as amassable only in the form of 'treasure', then sumptuary laws served for moral and juridical regulation of the tensions resulting from the luxury enjoyed by landowners vis-à-vis the interests of the nation's wealth, and the perils of social inequality.¹⁷ In fact, luxury imports meant an outflow of money, while the ostentation of luxury spread envy, resentment and a sense of injustice. Both Mandeville and Defoe conducted the debate on luxury on a different plane, no longer merely in moral and political terms but, rather, in terms of trading efficiency and growth, taking full account of the fact that merchants had become an active social subject in the conflict over the issue. They were in fact both new consumers of luxuries and agents a direct interest in the development of a system of commercial interdependence, free from the direct control of the state, unimpeded by moralistic social control, and answering solely to commercial interests (Ashley, 1897). With regard to the labouring poor, i.e. the majority of the population, their luxury was idleness which was definitely considered a vice. Control of his and her virtues and vices in fact remained one of the main functions of the legislator (Sekora, 1977, p. 90).

3. Robinson Crusoe. Defoe¹⁸ was a child of his time – a time profoundly marked by religious strife and scholarly debate on matters of both the natural sciences and natural law.¹⁹ His work *Robinson Crusoe* reflects, among much else, his participation in the Royal Society of London, which familiarized him with methods of classifying, keeping diaries, recording changes, differences and gradations.²⁰ Bacon had a strong influence on the inductive observational method

¹⁷ A very interesting history of the idea of luxury in the history of social and economic thought is Berry (1994).

¹⁸ The most recent and rigorous biography of Defoe is Novak (2001); less weighty but more enthralling is the biography by West (1998).

¹⁹ Here we largely neglect the religious aspects of Defoe's background as a dissenter; a choice dictated by considerations of prudence and economy, which would obviously be unjustified in a more systematic treatment of the author.

²⁰ In the Philosophical Transactions published by this institution we find many applications of Bacon's scientific method based on induction, the use of reason in the solution of problems and an idea of scientia activa finalised to 'every day need of life' and to peace and plenty in man's life. See Vickers (1996, p. 111-112).

of the Royal Society; his interest was in classifying more than in measuring, and according to him individual perception more than sense led to actions, rooted in custom;²¹ and this approach was shared by Defoe who spent his life in publishing an incredible number of articles and books to explore human passions, activities, trades, and influence social customs of a growing public of readers.²² As Bacon writes:

Men's thoughts are much according to their inclination; their discourse and speeches according to their learning and infused opinions; but their deeds are after as they have been accustomed. And therefore, as Machiavel well noteth [...] there is no trusting to the force of nature nor to the bravery of words, except it be corroborate by custom [...]

Many examples may be put of the force of custom, both upon mind and body. Therefore, since custom is the principal magistrate of man's life, let men by all means endeavour to obtain good customs." (Bacon, 1906, p.119-120)

The work by Defoe most closely reflecting the methods prescribed by the Royal Society is the *General History of Trade* (1713), where he classifies human activities, arts and technologies and analyses trades as commercial and productive activities woven together in a network of exchanges that can bring advantage to the country (Vickers, 1996, p. 3). This is not the place to list Defoe's numerous economic works,²³ but it is worth noting how they reflect shifts in moral viewpoint with regard to individual initiative, and recognition of the interests of the middle classes in terms of property, trade and the imperial designs of Great Britain. Important, too, is the internalisation of labour control. It derived, in part, from the insecurity of access to subsistence and in part to the puritan recognition of

²¹ Whitehead gives a particular evidence to Bacon's discrimination between "*perception* and *taking account of*, on the one hand, and *sense* and *cognitive experience*, on the other hand" (Whitehead, 1927, p. 52). In particular he says:

In this respect Bacon is outside the physical line of thought which finally dominated the century. Later on, people thought of passive matter which was operated on externally by forces. I believe Bacon's line of thought to have expressed a more fundamental truth than do the materialistic concepts which were then being shaped as adequate for physics. We are now so used to the materialistic way of looking at things, [...] that it is with some difficulty that we understand the possibility of another mode of approach to the problems of nature. (loc. cit., p. 53)

²² Defoe was strongly convinced of the necessity of good manners and of addressing the morality of society, of the rich as well of the poor (Novak, pp. 131-32).

²³ A list is given under the entry "Defoe" by Montague in the Dictionary of Political Economy by Palgrave (1901, pp. 535-6).

vocation exercised through work in an effort of moral edification (Mieggie, 1985). Defoe tackled economic matters with analytical insight as well as experience, offering valuable contributions to analysis of the British economy, and in particular on the "Londonization of England" (Hill, 1980, p. 195), the division of labour and the social stratification of the population.²⁴ In *Giving Alms no Charity* (1704), he took up the cudgel against projects for public works and subsidies for the poor, which he considered ineffective and dangerous if they did not open new paths for production and markets. The problem was not to give work to the poor but compel them to seek it, keeping them in conditions of poverty, "[...] for man cannot starve, and will work for anything rather than want it."

Here we shall confine our attention to Robinson on the desert island, taking his plight as a case of subsistence economy in the sense of a process aiming at making a life as distinct from one that produces for exchange. Although they partly overlap and mutually interact, the two productive contexts differ radically in terms of aims, motives, passions, and thus of dynamics. The interesting element in Defoe's experiment consists in taking a man socialised in a capitalist context and, as a result of a shipwreck, forcing him to revise the criteria upon which he bases his identity. Indeed, from the slave merchant he was at the time of the shipwreck he finds himself in a situation where money has no meaning, there being no one else to enter into trade relations with.²⁵ On his island there would be no point in stooping to pick up gold coins from the ground since they could not serve the interests of subsistence, while a pair of shoes would be of great value.²⁶ Indeed, the money symbol proves meaningless and the notion of capital has no sense in a

²⁴ Braudel considers Defoe an accurate source, observing:

For a true picture of the establishment and creation of a national market by London, one cannot do better than read – or still better reread *The Complete English Tradesman* by Daniel Defoe. He is such a precise observer in every detail that although the words "natural market" nowhere appear, the reality of this market, its unity and the interlocking nature of exchange with the advanced division of labour operating over wide areas, leap from the page to provide a thoroughly instructive sight. (Braudel, 1984, p. 366)

²⁵ Robinson agreed to procure for himself and other Brazilian planters the slaves they needed since "[...] they [...] as well as I, [...] were strained for nothing so much as

²⁶ Actually, on various occasions Robinson picks up the money found on shipwrecks (Defoe, 1998, pp. 189, 193).

situation devoid of commodities, money, profit and trade, while the use value of tools is to be found fundamental.

Important, however, is the ownership of the island; indeed, following in the steps of Locke, Defoe sees property as a founding element of society, being an institution that guarantees [some] against uncertain access to subsistence (Novak, 1963, p. 15; Wood, 1984, pp. 78-79). After 25 years of solitary existence Robinson also becomes the owner of a slave – a ‘savage’, a cannibal rescued from other cannibals (Defoe, 1998, pp. 199-204).²⁷ His capture formed part of a rational design to "get a savage into my possession" as a useful tool for a possible attempt to get away, and to use as a "servant", "companion" and "assistant".²⁸ By virtue of his rights of ownership he gives his savage a name (Friday), imposes on him his religion, and has command of his feelings of affection and dedication as well as his labour.

Robinson Crusoe is often considered a paradigm of modern homo economicus, even in contemporary economic literature. In other words, he is represented as a subject optimising utility in choosing between goods, time and labour under the constraint of scarcity, as established in the axioms of neoclassical theory.²⁹ Here we suggest a different viewpoint, taking real life as a process that can prompt reflection on the meaning of both the individual and the economy. This focal perspective centres on the specificity of subsistence as a pragmatic process recounted as an individual specific way of making a living and forging an identity.

Robinson finds himself in a state of evident necessity that might be taken as representing the natural condition in an initial stage in human development, namely that of the hunter-gatherer. Following upon this initial stage come the stages of the livestock and crop farming. By contrast, output in the world of his contemporary civilisation, before and after the strange adventures on the island, is

²⁷ “Savages” in the natural state were very topical in the 18th century, inserted in a borderline condition between humanity that could be salvaged with a process of civilisation and Christianisation and inferior humanity – possibly accorded mythical status as “uncontaminated”, in a state of natural freedom (Novak, 196, pp. 36-50).

²⁸ Robinson himself, when made a slave by pirates, had had to perform “the common Drudgery of slaves about [the] House” (Defoe, 1998, p. 19).

²⁹ A brief overview of the way economists have taken Robinson Crusoe as a metaphor can be seen in White, 1986; electronic updating of the overview shows that Robinson continues to find frequent mention, albeit without any textual reference.

that of commercial and productive capitalism.³⁰ In the novel necessity is truly the mother of art, and production occurs in a dynamic context activated not by the desire to accumulate wealth and profit, but by the passions inherent in the fear of death, the urge to live and the need for socialisation.³¹ Robinson spends 25 years of his 28 years, two months and nineteen days on the island in solitude (Defoe, 1998, pp. 204, 278). Nevertheless, he remains a socialised being, considering solitude profoundly unnatural and painful and continually going back in his mind to the past. It is worth noting, however, that with regard to human relations Robinson never manages to take them on equal terms. In time, and ever faster as the novel draws to an end, the island is populated by “savages”, slaves, landless settlers and, finally, seven women (sent with other goods) “such as I found proper for Service, or for Wives” (Defoe, 1998, p. 306).³²

Robinson’s subsistence economy, both at the survival stage and when he was creating for himself a state of stability and plenty, is based on self control, tenacity and knowledge of the physical environment. Self-control is also helped by bible reading and a regular daily routine. While fortifications are necessary to allay the fear of attack, the organisation of domestic space is important to regain a sense of the self. Robinson records the use of time in a diary which helps him to rationalise his anxieties, reflect on the resources available and plan innovation in the methods of production.³³

“During all this time I work’d to make this Room or Cave spacious enough to accomodate me as a Warehouse or Magazin, a Kitchen, a Dining-room and a Cellar; as for my Lodging I kept to the Tent [...]

³⁰ A rough version of the theory of stages, where the passing of time does not denote historical epochs but individual practices. However, it is an interesting reference given the fundamental role the theory would play in the Scottish school’s view of economic dynamics.

³¹ On the role of the affections as “moving springs” activated by the “power of imagination”, see Defoe, 1998, p. 188.

³² In this paper we do not refer extensively on how women are seen because the subject would require too much space. Nevertheless it is worth mentioning that the issue is of crucial relevance in the social thought of the eighteenth century in general and in Defoe and Mandeville in particular.

For a reading of Robinson Crusoe from a feminist viewpoint see Grapard (1995) and Samson (1995). Hymer (1971, p. 26) notices that Friday is described “not as a person but as a sort of a pet, a mindless body that is obedient and beautiful” and that this is consistent with the way “rulers conceive of the ruled only as bodies to minister their needs”(ibid.) He then, in the passage introducing Friday, substitutes “she” for “he”, very effectively disclosing a clear similarity between the way women and slaves are seen.

³³ The diary begins at a brisk pace and goes on steadily for the first few months to falter and finally break off.

and of course Defoe's – concentrates on the experience of problems, keeping fear at bay and self-reflecting on one's material and moral conditions. Robinson also draws up a table for the comparison of costs and benefits, or rather between comforts and miseries, good and evil. This assessment is the balance sheet of his life based on effective choices, whose results are weighed in terms of satisfied need, secure survival and real solitude (Defoe, 1998, p.66). Thus we have a very different costs-benefit analysis from the one which maximizes an hypothetical total psychological utility on the basis of abstract counter-factuals as assumed in

³⁴ For some authoritative readings of the novel see the Norton Critical Edition of *Robinson Crusoe*, edited by Michael Shinagel.

today's marginalist theory when they use Robinson as a paradigm of utilitarian market behaviour.

Marx too comments on *Robinson Crusoe* in the first book of *Capital* (1961, pp. 81-84), and in the opening pages of the *Grundrisse*, denying him any role as a symbol of the progressive fortunes of capitalist labour. The difference between a system based on independent, free workers and one based on wage labour is fundamental to the analysis of modes of production and exchange value. Robinson's island life on the desert island is taken by Marx to point out the qualitative difference between a subsistence economy, finalised to the livelihood of the producer, and a capitalist profit-directed economy. Transition from the subsistence economy of an isolated individual to capitalistically socialised production implies the loss of any possibility of conceiving the production of commodities as a social system in which the social producer, i.e. the working population, can have control over the social product and its distribution.

Not only is the particular nature of the 'man and society' link the outcome of specific historical processes propelled by real subjects, rather than a natural progression in production in general, but the quality of this link is not reducible to material productive processes and technological progress. Rather, it is given by the material and moral sustainability of the whole process of composing individual and social lives. The moral and historical interpretation we have been following in this paper is, we feel, closer to the time and original purposes of the novel, recommending endurance and self consciousness via a fable.³⁵ The literary language used in the novel is radically innovative just because it constitutes an exercise in opening up to the variety of humankind in a close encounter with the lives of ordinary people and their "inexhaustible, heroic resistance to the strain of need, adversities and solitude" (Montale, 1951, p. 10).³⁶

4. The *Fable of the Bees*.. A Dutch doctor of medicine practising in the field he defined as "hipochondriack and histerick passions", Mandeville went to

³⁵ Defoe himself uses the term fable in the introduction to *Serious Reflections*, subsequently added to the novel.

³⁶ Our translation.

London at the age of 24 to learn the language, and spent the rest of his life there (Kaye, 1988, p.xix).³⁷

Mandeville belongs to the relatively liberalist tradition of the early 18th century, analysing the effects that spending on luxury goods had on the circulation of goods. His work legitimates luxury consumption at the level of collective interests, while retaining a rigorist attitude at the level of individual morality. In his case, too, the method employed is inductive and experiential, finalised to revelation of the realities behind appearances, as he asserts in the *Essay on Charity* and repeats self-quoting in the *Vindication*.³⁸

“The short sighted Vulgar, in the Chain of Causes, seldom can see farther than one Link; but those who can enlarge their View, and will give themselves Leisure of gazing on the Prospects of concatenated Events, may in a hundred Places see Good spring up and pullulate from Evil, as naturally as Chickens do from Eggs.” (Mandeville, 1988, p.404)

The language used is varied: the first part of the work is in verse for the *Fable* and in prose for the *Remarks*, while the second part is in the form of a dialogue on moral sentiments and government. The aim of the work as a whole is, as clearly stated in the "Preface", to achieve an analysis of human nature according to the methods of the natural sciences and moral philosophy:

“Laws and Government are to the Political Bodies of Civil Societies, what the Vital Spirits and Life itself are to the Natural Bodies of animated Creatures; and those that study the anatomy of Dead Carcases may see, that Chief Organs and nicest Springs more immediately required to continue the Motion of our Machine, are not hard Bones, strong Muscles and Nerves, nor the smooth white Skin that so beautifully covers them, but small trifling Films and little Pipes that are either over-looked, or else seem inconsiderable to vulgar Eyes; so they that examine into the Nature of Man, abstract from Art and Education, may observe, that what renders him a sociable Animal consists not of his desire of Company, Good-nature, Pity,

³⁷ For some idea of the extraordinary power of attraction exerted by London as a lively centre of intellectual and commercial activity, see Brewer, 1996.

³⁸ Mandeville's answers to his critics are set out in *A Vindication of the book, from the Aspersions contained in a Presentment of the Grand Jury of Middlesex, and An Abusive Letter to Lord C.*, published in the London Journal of 10 August 1723 and included in the sixth edition of the *Fable*, contained in the first volume of Kaye's edition and in *A Letter to Dion occasioned by his Book called Alciphron or the Minute Philosopher*, London, 1732, with which Mandeville answered the two volumes written but not signed by Berkeley. A copy of the *Letter to Dion* is held at the University Library of Cambridge and published in Stafford, 1997.

Affability, and other Graces of a fair Outside; but that his vilest and most hateful Qualities are the most necessary Accomplishments to fit him for the largest, and, according to the World, the happiest and most flourishing Societies.” (Ibid, pp.1-2)

According to Mandeville, recognition of the fact that evil and vices may have their uses did not mean dispensation from the moral rules: interests and morality were on two different planes that called for awareness of human behaviour and motivations if hypocrisy was to be avoided. While Defoe held that the behaviour of economic agents might be good or bad, to be evaluated case by case on the basis of motives and effects, Mandeville considered that behaviour could be both good and bad at the same time, being characterised by a moral dualism resulting from the presence of two different canons – one rigorous, in keeping with the religious language of virtue, the other utilitarian, in keeping with behavioral effects.

Mandeville marked himself out from deists Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, who presumed that research in the natural and moral sciences and religious precepts were ultimately all one, since human behaviour and the laws of nature found their origin in God. The laws of nature could be known through the use of reason, which also helped reveal the harmony of creation. According to Shaftesbury, belief in God means a perception of the harmonious order of the universe, achieved through the innate sense of what is beautiful, just, true and good (Abbagnano, 1949, pp. 334-338). With the optimism inherent in the conviction that the natural, social and divine orders ultimately coincide, the deists were able to reduce the complexity of human nature with respect to the material and cultural conditions of subsistence and human society. Mandeville, by contrast, took analysis of human nature and society beyond optimism, attaining a degree of lucidity that remains enlightening. He drew attention to the utility of evil and the need to control its effects with care, applying a prudent engineering of the passions, both individual and social. Luxury – an individual vice at the moral level – has positive effects on production and exchange of riches: poverty – a social evil – is in the absence of slavery the key to control of labour, and thus the nation’s riches. Indeed, poverty constitutes one of the pillars of the wealth of the nation:

“[...] it is manifest that in a free Nation where Slaves are not allowed of, the surest Wealth consists in a Multitude of laborious Poor; [...] without them there could be no Enjoyment, and no Product of any Country could be valuable. To make the Society happy and People easy under the meanest circumstances, it is a requisite that the great Numbers of them should be Ignorant as well as Poor.

[...] I mean inferiors not only in Riches and Quality, but likewise in Knowledge and Understanding. A Servant can have no unfeign'd Respect for his Master, as soon as he has sense enough to find out that he serves a Fool.” (Mandeville, 1988, pp. 287- 288, 289)

It should be noted that, given an economic system still finalised to the sustenance of the population, in its various ranks and classes, and of the State apparatus, Mandeville is thinking of both the workers who produce goods for the market and the vast category of servants. Goods and services are the nation's wealth. It was only when the idea of profit as surplus value became clear that the production of commodities was distinguished from personal services, and productive labour was equated with labour producing surplus value.³⁹

The *Essay on Charity and Charity Schools*, added in the second edition of the *Fable*, where Mandeville argues that poverty is structural as being necessary to the production of goods and services, sparked off venomous reactions.⁴⁰

Mandeville himself noted the different reception the two editions were given:

“In the first impression of the Fable of the Bees, which came out in 1714, was never carpt at, or publickly taken notice of; and all the Reason I can think on why this second Edition should be so unmercifully treated, tho' it has many Precautions which the former wanted, is an Essay on Charity and Charity Schools, which is added to what was printed before. I confess that it is my Sentiment, that all hard and dirty Work ought in a well govern'd Nation to be the Lot and Portion of the Poor, and that to divert their Children from useful Labour till they are fourteen and fifteen Years old, is a wrong Method to qualify them for it when they are grown up.” (Mandeville, 1988, p. 409)

It was in fact a widely held opinion – analytically developed by Petty as early as 1672 in Political Economy of Ireland⁴¹ – that labour was the source of wealth and wages were to be kept low in order to reduce production costs and compete

³⁹On the question of productive labour see Perrotta (1988).

⁴⁰The major criticisms of Mandville are republished in Stafford, 1997. For a collection of critical commentaries, see the second volume of Kaye.

more strongly on the international markets. In the latter half of the 18th century low wage theorisation gave way in part to high wage theories (Furniss,1957; Wilson, 1969, Coats, 1958). Subsistence, in these theories, while analysed as a real production cost, is placed within a dynamic framework which takes account of the effective demand induced by wage rises, to which is added enhancement of labour productivity in terms of the efficiency induced by worker consensus.

Mandeville does not simply argue in terms of low wages in the *Fable*, but also with regard to the structural need for poverty. His is a labour market analysis that sees in uncertain access to means of subsistence the main key to the control of wage labour – so crucial as to leave no room for “humanitarian intervention”. Thus he reveals that the humanist universalism of the sciences of human nature applied in reality to a population divided by class, gender and race. With these divisions comes stratification of the needs, passions, and capabilities, of men and women. This stratification implies not only inequality in incomes but also, at a deeper level, unequal access to knowledge. In very blunt terms that seem even cruder today Mandeville reveals a structural fracture in the social system inherent to the particular form of production of wealth by means of wage labour. Just how deep it runs can be seen more clearly through the entire prism of the social matrix. In the progressive stages of growth that count among their causes increase in the range and refinement of the commodities produced,⁴² the economic system finds a necessary condition in the persistence of poverty and social inequality. This inequality holds in terms not only of income and consumption, but also of identity and social behaviour affecting the development of capacities and self-respect inherent to a sense of self-liking.⁴³ This is no simple matter of horizontal inequality in social space, but has to do with a vertical functional relationship in the

⁴¹ See Marx (1969), Part. 1; Roncaglia (1977).

⁴² On the dynamic aspects of consumption see Perrotta (1997).

⁴³ The difference between self-love and self-liking is explained by Mandeville in the second part of the *Fable* :

Self-love would first make it scrape together every thing is wanted for Sustenance, ...Self-liking would make it seek for Opportunities, by Gestures, Looks, and Sounds, to display the Value it has for itself, superior of what it has for others; [...]

The inward Pleasure and Satisfaction a Man receives from the Gratification of that Passion [Self-liking], is a Cordial that contributes to his Health. (ibid. pp.133-134)

productive processes, and as such inevitable in a capitalist system, although some room is left for an individual possibility of rising socially.

Harsh environmental conditions and the "defective nature" of the human race mean huge efforts, but the toil of living is not equal for all men and women:

“[...] where Men are become taught Animals, and great Numbers of them have by mutual compact framed themselves into a Body Politick; and the more Man’s knowledge increases in this State, the greater will be the variety of Labour required to make him easy. It is impossible that a Society can long subsist, and suffer many of its Members to live in Idleness, and enjoy all the Ease and Pleasure they can invent, without having at the same time great Multitudes of People that to make good this Defect will condescend to be quite the reverse, and by use and patience inure their Bodies to work for others and themselves besides.” (Mandeville, 1988, p. 286).

The luxuries and idleness of some (the few) rest on the labour of (many) others, whose needs and wants must be kept in a state of mortification:

“[...] sturdy and robust and never used to Ease or Idleness, and [...], soon contented as to the necessaries of Life; such as they are glad to take up with the coarsest. Manufacture in everything they wear, and in their Diet have no other aim than to feed their Bodies when their Stomach prompt them to eat, and with little regard to Taste or Relish. [...]

...]To make the Society happy and People easy under the meanest circumstances it is requisite that great Numbers of them should be Ignorant as well as Poor.” (Mandeville, 1988, pp.287-288)

Mandeville makes it quite clear that the problem is not education in general but only the education of the poor, whose aptitude for work was not to be spoiled; he rejects charges of cruelty, arguing that it is no crueller preventing children from studying than it is to condemn them to a penniless existence (ibid. pp. 292, 310). Education is barred to women, too, as well as poor children, for structural and functional reasons having to do with guaranteeing domestic services.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ On the issue of education for women Defoe and Mandeville had different opinions, although they agreed on their function of support to the male sex. In the *Essay on Projects* of 1697 Defoe goes as far as stating:

A Woman well Bred and Well Taught, furnish’d with the additional Accomplishments of Knowledge and Behaviour, is a *creature without comparison*; [...] her Person is Angelick, and her Conversation Heavenly; she is all Softness and Sweetness, Peace, Love, Wit, and Delight: [...]; and the Man that has such a one to his Portion, has nothing to do but to rejoice in her, and be thankful (Defoe, 1975, p.34)

“There are many Examples of Women that have excelled in Learning, and even in War, but this is no Reason we should bring ‘em all up to *Latin* and *Greek* or else Military Discipline, instead of needle-work and Housewifery.” (ibid. 311)

Social inequality does not appear to affect the pursuit of happiness: the poor can be as happy as kings – perhaps happier – if they can only control their passions and feelings, and relate to others in such a way as to keep their aspirations in proportion to the resources distributed to them. Here, indeed, knowledge can be a source of unhappiness since it leads to attempts to override the limits allowed by social power relations (ibid. pp. 314-316).

For much of the population the fear of hunger must remain endemic, since the way to greater well-being characterised by many and varied pleasures of the imagination is barred to them, not by the scarcity of general resources so much as by a political limitation inherent in the nature of wage labour. Paradoxically, poverty and luxury become key factors in a dynamic economy. Humanitarian intervention dictated by benevolence serves only to spread illusions dangerous both to the production of goods and services and to happiness itself. However, knowledge is not so much a source of suffering for the poor as it is a danger (when possessed by the poor) to the dominant classes that exploit the labour market:

“No Body will do the slavish Work, that can help it. I don’t discommend them; but all these things show that the People of the meanest Rank know too much to be serviceable to us. Servants require more than Masters and Mistresses can afford, and what madness is it to encourage them in this, by industriously increasing at our Cost that Knowledge which they will be sure to make us pay of over again!” (Mandeville, 1988, p. 302)

Ignorance and need are the ultimate keys for control over labour, but there can be no cut and dried definition of them since they reflect social conventions and power relations, and respond to the force of the imagination which, as Defoe said, makes the lack of the object of desire unbearable and constitutes a "secret moving Spring" (Defoe, 1998, p.188). Mandeville is aware that concepts regarding living conditions such as necessities, conveniences and luxuries are inevitably blurred and changeable:

“If everything is to be Luxury (as in strictness it ought) that is not immediately necessary to make Man subsist as he is a Living Creature, there is nothing else to be found in the World, [...] This definition everybody will say is too rigorous; I am of the same opinion, but if we are to bate one Inch of this Severity, I am afraid we shan’t know where to stop.

[...] The same obscurity I observe in the words Decency and Conveniency, and I never understand them unless I am acquainted with the quality of the Persons that make use of them.

[...] if once we depart from calling everything Luxury that is not absolutely necessary to keep a Man alive, that then there is no Luxury at all; for if the wants of Men are innumerable, then what ought to supply them has no bounds; what is called superfluous to some degree of People, will be thought requisite to those of higher Quality; [...].” (Mandeville, 1988, pp. 107-108)

Indeed, the concept of luxury cannot be specified in absolute terms since not even that which is necessary can be defined with precision given the complexity of the body-mind tissue, which means that even the concept of what is necessary must be considered in given contexts. Relations between luxury and need are, as Braudel pointed out, dynamic and in conflict:

“[...] every luxury dates and goes out of fashion. But luxury is reborn from its own ashes and from its very defeats. It is really a reflection of a difference in social levels that nothing can change and every movement recreates. An eternal "class struggle.” (Braudel, 1974, p. 123).

Even in the absence of absolute poverty Bluet, one of Mandeville’s critics, sees the insatiability of needs and social emulation as the source of an endless supply of subservient labour:

“Every Day’s Experience shews, that some People will labour as hard to improve their Income, or heap up Wealth, as others to earn their daily Bread, and will condescend to any employment to this Purpose. Mens Wants are their Desires. Till bounds are set to *these, those*, are not satisfied. This always has been and always will be the Temper of Mankind.” (Bluet, 1725, p.191)

For Francis Hutcheson, who held a chair in Moral Philosophy at Glasgow and had Smith among his students, the concept of luxury was, by contrast, to be

understood in relation to the individual capacity to pay and common sense.⁴⁵ The only vice is reckless spending beyond the limits of income and rank:

“Luxury is the using more curious and expensive habitation, dress, table, equipage, than the person’s wealth will bear, so as to discharge his duty to his family, his friends, his country or the indigent [...]. There is no sort of food, architecture, dress, or furniture, the use of which can be called evil of itself. Intemperance and luxury are plainly terms relative to the bodily constitution, and wealth of the person [...] so that, it is impossible to fix one invariable quantity of food, one fixed sum in expences, the surpassing of which should be called intemperance, luxury or pride. [...] a man of good sense may know how far he may go in eating and drinking, or any other expences, without impairing his health or fortune, or hindering any offices of religion or humanity.” (Hutcheson, 1750, pp. 56-57).

An important point to note is the different sense Hutcheson and Mandeville had of the inevitable tensions between the idleness of the rich and the idleness of the labouring population. Hutcheson saw benevolence on the part of the rich, the virtue of those caring for the public good, the propriety of the masses⁴⁷ and self-command over work of the labouring poor as he the roots of spontaneous socialising behaviour.⁴⁸ Optimism about the efficacy of natural mechanisms adjusting relations between individual and society derives from an innate sense of harmony, which in turn reflects persistent, systematic benevolence and an intrinsic rationality of the system, prompting the hypothesis of a criterion of order so coherent and stable as to lend itself to presentation in a mathematical calculation of social costs and benefits. The analytic language becomes that of mechanical physics, expressed in terms of moments of force, symmetric compensations of quantities, gradations of intensity, taking into account the number and weight of agents, and axioms and probability providing a definition of an optimising situation which rules: “[...] that action is best which procures the greatest Happiness to the greatest Numbers” (Hutcheson, 1990, pp. 171-195).

Mandeville refers to his opponent’s attempt at “utilitarian” calculation in the second part of the *Fable*, where he questions the possibility of measuring

⁴⁵ On Hutcheson’s influence on Smith see Pesciarelli (1999).

⁴⁶ On the interrelations between the Scottish illuminists see Bryson (1945), p. 2.

⁴⁷ On the difference between virtue and propriety see Waszek (1984).

⁴⁸ For example, Hutcheson defined the "Patience of Labour" as "natural Ability" rather than "moral Quality" (Hutcheson, 1990, p. 182).

quantities and attributing weight to the passions (Mandeville, 1988, II vol., pp. 345-46). Above all, he holds it impossible to determine with precision their positive or negative sign: even virtue can be ambivalent since it may equally reflect the altruism of benevolence or the ambition to win over the liking of the others. The positive or negative social effects depend upon the engineering of the passions and the just proportion (ibid, vol. II, pp.204-205).⁴⁹

Mandeville, too, like Defoe and many others before and after them, sees the origin of the division of labour in human weakness and the imagination – individual and collective – progressively feeding itself:

“But the Necessities, the Vices and Imperfections of Man, together with the various Inclemencies of the Air and other Elements, contain in them the Seeds of all Arts, Industry and Labour:....while we are employed in supplying the infinite variety of our Wants, which will ever be multiplied as our Knowledge is enlarged, and our Desires increase. Hunger, Thirst and Nakedness are the first Tyrants that force us to stir: afterwards, our Pride, Sloth, Sensuality and Fikleness are the great Patrons that promote all Arts and Sciences Trades Handicrafts and Callings: while the great Taskmasters, Necessity, Avarice, Envy, and Ambition, each in the Class that belongs to him, keep the Members of the Society to their Labour, and make them all submit, most of them chearfully, to the Drudgery of their Station; King and Princes not excepted.

The greater the Variety of Trades and Manufactures, the more oporose they are, and the more they are divided in many Branches, the greater numbers may be contained in a Society without being in one another’s way, and the more easily they may be render’d a Rich, Potent and Flourishing People. Few Virtues employ any Hands, and therefore they may render a small Nation good, but they can never make a Great one.” (Mandeville, 1988, pp. 366-67)

Bourgeois pride takes on the form of adornment and decoration of dwellings, clothing and food rather than military valour in war. The arena for social confrontation and individual competition shifts to the plane of the pleasures of the imagination (Brewer, 1997). Socialisation based on interest and trade and the desire for bourgeois refinement opens the way to a less coercive form of governance, although this does not mean it is less embedded in historically

⁴⁹ Cogent criticism of Mandeville came also from Samuel Johnson for his inadequate definition of "luxury" and "wealth", and thus of "vice" and "virtue". In particular, Johnson saw as defective the definition of virtue in terms of self-denial of any pleasure and the fact

changing customs and manners. It is up to social theorists to identify the forces of transformation of the new forms of socialisation manifested by historical social practices and subjects living in specific societies: men become sociable by living together in society coping with passions and tensions (Mandeville, 1988, p. 344). Thus the forms in which individual passions find expression and their harmonisation with collective goals of social well-being depend on historical practices and contexts where forms of self-control and social governance set in. In the early 18th century practices and socialisation based on refinement of everyday life at the level of dwellings, clothing and food structurally tend to exclude the working population. The lucidity with which Mandeville reveals the need for poverty in order to produce the wealth of nations constitutes a major contribution of his analysis, undermining ideological optimism about the possibility of spontaneously achieving an armonious order. The key to and aim of development are directly the living conditions. Dynamic forces are activated by the passions of self-love and self-liking. The means of production are the subsistences of working men and women who, as means, must be excluded from bourgeois luxuries, in the sense of abundance and variety of goods and services, and even more rigidly from such proletarian luxuries as idleness and secure access to subsistence. It is also with a view to this tension that the Fable closes with the reminder that the state must ensure that: "Private Vices by the dextrous Management of a skilful Politician may be turned into Publick Benefits" (Mandeville, 1988, p.369). For Mandeville the results of behaviour, even though spontaneous, can never be taken for granted, and must always be purposefully guided.

In conclusion, for Mandeville growth in production is led by the passion for refinement, which leads to new wants whose satisfaction, however, depends on the unending readiness of the poor to work. The key for control over wage labour lies in poverty, absolute and relative. There is indeed common humanity, but while the owning classes can satisfy both necessities and the pleasures of the imagination, the subaltern classes are of necessity dependent, and kept in a state

that some social costs were included in the concept of wealth solely because they increased the size of market, Boswell (1992, pp. 456-57).

of absolute and relative lack of refinement whether moral or cultural, in taste or in desires. Men and women excluded from ownership do not even have the power to define what humanity means; they must only work to maintain the luxury of the others.⁵⁰

5. Conclusions When human behaviour, including its economic manifestations in terms of production, distribution and exchange of wealth, is framed within a social matrix able to embrace the variety of motivations, the complexity of individuals, different analytical levels (from description and measuring to metaphysics), heterogeneity of social groups and inherent tensions, the result is not manageable. In order to approach it, analytical language and concepts must be adjusted, and criteria forged to bring some order into it. From this point of view the philosophical thought of the early 18th century constitutes a major stage in reflection on the complexity of individual and social living, reflection that is deeply rooted in classical and Renaissance thought.⁵¹

The conception of a historical time in which the lives of individuals, social groups and nations unfold leads Mandeville to conjecture a historical process forming institutions, in which knowledge of human nature and various forms of social interdependence play an increasingly important role, opposing hypocrisy and superstition. Defoe shares this historical perspective on relations between markets, passions and the division of labour but he allows one to keep focus on the foundation of the economy in the oikos. In the island, in his twenty years of

⁵⁰ On the culture of the subaltern classes and their capacity to formulate ideas of justice and humanity autonomously, in dialectical relations with the ruling classes, see the work by E.P. Thompson, who achieves a radical shift in perspective on these issues. He sees in the autonomy of the working population the key to interpret texts and behaviour otherwise hard to penetrate, being cut out from official culture (Thompson, 1971, 1991). This is an approach now followed by many, among whom see Meiskins & Wood, 1997.

⁵¹ This is a crucial philosophical and methodological question; in this regard I find the attempt made by Whitehead in the last century to open a philosophical perspective focussed on the very complexity of the body-mind unity, and on the “nature and life” relationship, seminal and thought provoking and in some consonance with the seventeenth century problematic, although modern in terms of a systemic perspective. His view of human experience as an ever changing organic system that requires an adequate conception of time and space, definition of the conditions of its reproduction, and acknowledgement of the central role of human feelings and symbols in cognition, could be a fruitful view for providing a rigorous approach to the dynamics of complex historical social systems in their material and symbolic features (Whitehead, 1928, 1929, pp.114-219, 1934).

solitude, on which the myth of the self-sufficient, hard-working individual is built, the domestic economy is not the *oikos* of the civic humanist tradition, but a civil, heroic daily struggle, where passions have to be tamed, art and imagination to be used, and there is no separation between the domestic drudgeries and the hard work of producing necessary provisions in relative plenty. The historical perspective is to be seen again in the analyses of the Scottish thinkers, although, like Hutcheson, they do not endorse Mandeville's excessively rigorous definition of luxury as vice. They analyse wealth more as a structure of social processes and take an optimistic view of the effects of division of labour on the incomes and consumption of the working population. However, in order to produce a comprehensive assessment of the final effects, part of the richness of the social matrix is lost as human passions tend to shrink into commercial interests. Most of all the deep dynamic force inherent in the daily struggle for the improvement of human well-being becomes subservient to the aims of the accumulation of profit. While in Robinson's *Crusoe* island the needs and anxieties of making a life shape the modes of production, in the later enlightened vision the modes of production are seen as shaping institutions and individual passions have to adapt. In this regard we could say that reason discloses the fable of *Crusoe* as a myth in the sense of a false ideology and it destroys it as the myth of the individual built by millions of readers and numerous critics who, in over three centuries, identified themselves with the heroic daily struggle against fears, drudgeries, solitude and in its final victory.

The transition from the English authors of the early 18th century to the Scottish and French economists of the latter half of the century involves some significant shifts that merit attention. In the first place, we find a modification in the analytical framing of the process of social reproduction of the population. This has to do with growing awareness of surplus value. While at the beginning of the century the aim of production and exchange was subsistence – of the nation as: state apparatus, landowners, merchants and working population– in the last decades of the century subsistence of the working population was seen merely in terms of necessary consumption for the production of surplus value, i. e. as capital. The real cost of production, as Petty had it, was represented metaphorically by the

"loaf of bread". However, the loaf of bread may be seen as indicator of material living conditions, of the poverty and simplicity of the bundle of subsistence goods or as a symbol of the socially embedded historical conditions of reproduction of the working population.⁵² If, however, we are to appreciate the complexity of issues pertaining to the analysis of relative prices and of value and distribution we must move on to new levels of awareness of the nature of the capitalist economic system including the complexity and tensions related to human subsistence in a class and gendered structure of society. A return to a notion of real cost of labour with direct reference to historical living conditions could open the way to restoring subsistence, as a process of social reproduction, to a central analytical position (Picchio, 1992, pp. 8-29, 2002). This re-interpretation of subsistence could also lead to reconsideration of the analytical question of services to persons. In fact, the problem is not so much the difference between industrial goods and services as making the right distinction between services supplied by servants in an economy finalised to the quality of life of the propertied classes and an economy where, in the modern way, services are produced as an integral part of the economy. The dialectic between the goals of an economy directly finalised to the living conditions of the whole population and goals dictated by the greed and avarice of the propertied classes in a context of increasing inequality is now reopening the moral question of the sense and nature of growth. It is also reopening the political question of human development – the issue, that is, that was left open by the moral philosophers of the 18th century and that concerned the capacity of subaltern subjects to contribute towards the definition of the whole social matrix, including its moral and cultural aspects.

The social thinkers of the 18th century addressed the issue of human subsistence in a moral matrix of needs and passions, but they failed to give due weight to the deep-reaching dialectical effects of a social divide having repercussions on the very definition of humanity. Over time this fracture led to an abstract and

⁵² It should be noted that the meaning of real cost as "loaf" was highlighted by Sraffa, who viewed with regret the transition from the idea of real cost in terms of subsistence goods to cost in terms of labour, launched by Smith, Ricardo and Marx, and finally settled between 1820 and 1870. These observations by Sraffa can be found in the papers available

apparently neutral definition of the individual (in reality male, white and middle-class) and a humanitarian perspective that hid behind talk of solidarity a structural stratification of different levels of humanity, and of their possible definitions and control. To see just how deep the fracture runs, the analytic viewpoint has to embrace the entire matrix, and not reduce social dialectic to the unequal quantitative personal distribution of monetary income and consumption.

Rereadings of the works of Smith tend to return economic analysis to its place in the social matrix of its foundations. Smith himself, who has so much to offer in comparison with neoclassical methodological individualism, introduces a certain reduction of scope moving from the beginning of the eighteenth century. Even from the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* to the *Wealth of Nations*, he modifies partly his account of the origin of the division of labour. In the *Lectures* it is still, as in Defoe and Mandeville, traced back to the "delicacey" of body and mind (Smith, 1978, p.488), while in the *Wealth* he traces the spontaneity of human activities to a natural "propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another"(Smith, 1976, p.25).⁵³

The reduction of individual self-love to the economic interests of profit holders ultimately leads to a change in the sense of economic action and of society as a whole. From being a means to acquire provisions for subsistence and refinement it is reduced to the particular motive for capitalist production. Disclosing the clash between passions – including interests – of women and men of different classes and groups on the very definition and exercise of humanity, and in their ways of 'making a life', brings to light some of the deep tensions at play in the economic system which shape its structural dynamics. Interest is here seen as a component of self-love. The play of passions is associated directly with living conditions, not as a residual of the past or as a separate dimension but as a fundamental economic fact. The relationship between economic interest and passions has class and sex connotations, having to do with unequal access to the means of subsistence and with the daily work of the oikos. The passions of 'making a life'

for consultation at the Wren Library, Cambridge. On the question of net and subsistence wages in Sraffa see Picchio (2002).

are different from the passions of trading. Smith in a way recognizes it, in a very famous passage in the *Wealth*. In this passage, commercial interest is present in the form of profit for the butcher, who, in order to sell, appeals to the self-love of his/her customers, who, Smith says, benefit more from trade than from benevolence (Smith, 1976, p. 26). Thus, in the customer's case, self-interest is self-love in a deeper and wider sense, as it implies security, dignity, social relations, individual rights together with convenience, all related to conventional behaviour and modes of subsistence. The interests of commerce are different from the passions of subsistence also in intensity and in objectives. Which interests are actually subservient has to be seen in an historical, political and anthropological perspective as it is one thing to trade for 'subsistence', meant as individual and social well-being; and quite another one to use human lives of men and women for profit.

⁵³ Actually, also in the *Lectures* we find the natural instinct for barter. On this see note 2 by the editors of the *Wealth*, R.H. Campbell and A.S. Skinner in Smith (1976), p. 25.

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