

## INTRODUCTION

**T**HIS essay has its origin in the incapacity of contemporary social science to shed light on the political consequences of economic growth and, perhaps even more, in the so frequently calamitous political correlates of economic growth no matter whether such growth takes place under capitalist, socialist, or mixed auspices. Reasoning about such connections, I suspected, must have been rife at an earlier age of economic expansion, specifically the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. With the “disciplines” of economics and political science not yet in existence at the time, there were no interdisciplinary boundaries to cross. As a result, philosophers and political economists could range freely and speculate without inhibitions about the likely consequences of, say, commercial expansion for peace, or of industrial growth for liberty. It seemed worthwhile to look back at their thoughts and speculations, if only because of our own, specialization-induced intellectual poverty in this field.

Such was the original motivation of the present essay, the idea that prompted me to venture into the edifice of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century social thought. Given the rich and complex nature of this edifice, it is not surprising that I emerged with something rather broader and even more ambitious than what I had come to look for. In fact, the very answers to the questions I began with yielded, as an intriguing by-product, a new approach to the interpretation of the “spirit” of capitalism and of its emergence. It may be useful here to outline this approach, reserving a fuller presentation for the last part of this study.

#### THE PASSIONS AND THE INTERESTS

A vast literature has contrasted the aristocratic, heroic ideal of the Feudal Age and the Renaissance with the bourgeois mentality and the Protestant Ethic of a later era. The decline of one ethic and the rise of another have been exhaustively surveyed and have been presented as precisely such: as two distinct historical processes, each of which had as its protagonist a different social class, the declining aristocracy on the one hand, and the rising bourgeoisie on the other. Historians have of course found it attractive to present the story as a pageant in the course of which a young challenger takes on the aging champion. But this conception has appealed equally, if not more, to those searching for scientific knowledge of society and its so-called laws of motion. While the Marxian and Weberian analyses disagree on the relative importance of economic and noneconomic factors, they both view the rise of capitalism and of its "spirit" as an assault on preexisting systems of ideas and of socioeconomic relations.

A group of historians has recently questioned the class character of the French Revolution. In dealing here with the history of ideas I do not aspire to be quite so iconoclastic; but, in a similar vein, I shall present some evidence that the new arose out of the old to a greater extent than has generally been appreciated. To portray a lengthy ideological change or transition as an endogenous process is of course more complex than to depict it as the rise of an independently conceived, insurgent ideology concurrent with the decline of a hitherto dominant ethic. A portrayal of this sort involves the identification of a sequence of concatenated ideas and propositions whose final outcome is necessarily hidden from the proponents of the individual links, at least in the early stages of the process; for they would have shud-

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dered—and revised their thinking—had they realized where their ideas would ultimately lead.

In the reconstruction of such a sequence of linked ideas one must normally draw on evidence from many sources and can give but scant attention to the systems of thought in which that evidence is embedded. This is indeed the procedure followed in the first part of this essay. In the second part the focus narrows to concentrate on the high points of the sequence. The authors who have fully developed these points, such as Montesquieu and Sir James Steuart, are treated at greater length, and an effort is made to understand how the specific propositions underlined for the purposes of our story relate to their general way of thinking. The third part of the essay comments on the historical significance of the intellectual episode here presented and on its relevance for some of our contemporary predicaments.