more appropriate to the former function and the causal explanation more appropriate to the latter. If so, then the causal explanation in a sense supplies the generative structure of agential behaviour that underlies the normative explanation. This way of putting things defers somewhat Hornsby’s worry. If the normative explanation takes precedence in the particular case, the agent is recovered there. Of course, when it comes to the underlying structure of agency, Hornsby’s worry resurfaces. Naturalistic talk of wants and beliefs seems to displace the agents who lie behind those wants and beliefs and whose wants and beliefs they are. This worry remains as much an issue for CR as for philosophical orthodoxy, as does the question with which Mele wrestles. A&A thus constitutes both an opportunity for CR to contribute and for CR to be challenged. I very much encourage critical realists to read it.


More than a decade ago, Ian Shapiro and Jeffery C. Isaac sought to articulate a critical realist approach to the study of the history of ideas.1 To the best of my knowledge, they later dropped this project and it was continued by no one else. Since I believe such a project to be promising, I was glad to find out that Leonidas Montes’ reading of Adam Smith was shaped by critical realism (hence the ‘critical’ in the book’s subtitle).

This rich and insightful book should be mandatory reading for scholars who are interested in Adam Smith, if only for the admirable manner in which Montes moves back and forth between Greek and Roman philosophy, Smith’s own work, the works of Smith’s contemporaries, and commentaries about Smith’s work from the earlynineteenth century to 2004. However, those who want to find in this book a model for a critical realist study of the history of ideas or for a critical realist interpretation of Adam Smith will be disappointed. Since the readers of this journal are

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more likely to be interested in the latter, I focus on the ‘critical’ aspect of Montes’ study at the expense of a discussion of its contribution to the scholarship on Adam Smith.

Shapiro and Isaac situated their initial realist approach to the history of ideas against that of Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge School. They argued that Skinner’s emphasis on the study of historical texts as forms of linguistic action overlooks the ways in which these texts are also reproduced social conventions because they are shaped by prevailing ideologies. Montes, who does not cite or discuss Shapiro and Isaac, takes a different direction. He describes his study as shaped by both a realist ontology and a Skinnerian methodology, one which seeks to ‘recover a text as an intended act of communication, written at a particular time for the specific audience the author had in mind’. (p. 6) I would argue that Montes is right to try and break the schism between realism and the Cambridge School. These two approaches can supplement each other in a fruitful way. Unfortunately, he does not discuss the way these two approaches are synthesized in his study but instead presents them as separate sources of inspiration. In a somewhat abstruse statement he writes that ‘if the ontological focus of critical realism—in other words, the concern with the nature of things—has influenced my journey, the chapters which follow are not ontologically explicit’. (p. 5) Since Montes does not make his discussion ‘ontologically explicit,’ let us try and examine what is critical or realist in his study of Smith.

The first way in which the reading is realist has to do with it offering an interpretation which is ‘ontologically informed’. (p. 6) Montes sees philosophical texts as statements that have to be understood in their historical context, not as sets of timeless universal statements to be evaluated according to their truth value. Thus, texts and their writers are shaped by and are reacting to a complex web of social structures. Critical realism helps us to understand why a study of the ‘nature and causes’ of a philosophical text (to use a term that Montes adopts from Smith (p. 5)) does not imply a ‘death of the author’. Authors can have agency in writing philosophical texts and still be creatures of their time. Montes suggests (ingeniously and rightly) an analogy between a realist study of the history of ideas and Smith’s account of the way impartial spectators rely on the sentiment of sympathy to evaluate social situations. (p. 2) Both these processes require not only an awareness of the relevant contexts (material, social, intellectual, and ideological) of the agent we study but also of that of the spectator who makes the evaluation.
Having said that, it is not entirely clear how Montes selects the relevant contexts for his interpretation of Smith. Take for example, the study of the origins of the claim that ‘an Adam Smith problem’ exists. It is commonly asserted that such a problem exists because of an alleged discrepancy between Smith’s writings on moral philosophy and his writings on political economy. Montes argues that the formulation of this ‘problem’ originated in the German Historical School of the nineteenth century and should be understood as a response to the economic hegemony of Great Britain. (p. 15) While such an argument points at a study of ideas in their social context, much of the discussion itself turns out to be an internal history of political economy, one which traces how later texts responded to earlier texts with little regard to the shifting social contexts. Furthermore, if the original formulation of the problem was a response to British hegemony, are today’s interpretations related to American hegemony? Montes does not address this question. To be sure, Montes’ discussion is in some ways insightful. The problem is that the reader remains unable to trace the method by which the relevant contexts are chosen.

If Montes does not pay enough attention to our own context as interpreters, he also pays insufficient attention to Smith’s political and ideological context. He could, for example, have elaborated on the claim that thematizes Chapters Three and Four where he posits a ‘dialogue between virtues and commerce in Smith, between the twilight of a civic humanist tradition and the rise of political economy’. (p. 58) This claim is thoroughly substantiated through a discussion of Smith’s own writings, but its importance is left unexplored. Moreover, we never get a more general evaluation of Smith’s project, its contribution to development of political economy or moral philosophy, and of the political commitments of Smith himself.

The second way in which Montes’ reading is realist is in the claim that Smith’s philosophy of science can be vindicated by critical realism. In Chapter Five, Montes discusses Smith’s Newtonianism and convincingly shows that Smith’s (and Newton’s) scientific method did not follow positivist precepts. Furthermore, he suggests that critical realism can be used to explicate Smith’s philosophy of science and particularly his understanding of terms Smith often used but never fully explained: ‘nature’, ‘systems’, ‘causes’, and ‘mechanisms’. On the one hand, I am not surprised by the fact that I find the argument convincing. I believe that the strength of critical realism as a philosophy of science is that it provides an adequate explication of scientific practices. Therefore, it is not only Smith that can be
vindicated by critical realism but many other allegedly positivist social scientists, including many of those that erroneously describe their practices in positivist terminology. On the other hand, critical realism can only explicate Smith’s approach up to a limit. Montes perceptively points at the similarity between the Smith’s account of the role of surprise and wonder as psychological motivations for scientific inquiry and a similar claim by Tony Lawson. However, he overlooks the role admiration plays in Smith’s account of scientific inquiry. According to Smith, both ordinary people and legislators are often motivated by the ‘love of system’—the admiration for harmony and order—even at the expense of truth and reality. While Smith sometimes criticized such overemphasis, he himself also engaged in such ‘system-building’.

Montes discusses Smith’s methodology only to the extent that is required to refute the positivist reading of Smith as a proto modern economist whose main contribution is in anticipating a theory of general equilibrium. In narrowing his focus, Montes misses a great opportunity to pursue a more general discussion of the methodology underlying Smith’s economic and sociological historiography. In fact, it seems to me that Smith held a Bhaskarian transformational model of social activity. Ordinary people and legislators, in Smith’s account, always act in a way that reproduce and transform relatively enduring social, ideological, cultural, and material resources whose ‘nature and cause’ they do not always fully understand.

Perhaps, however, my criticisms are unfair. Montes’ text is mainly about Smith’s arguments and their intellectual context. At points, it seems that the comments on critical realism are only an afterthought, most likely directed at Tony Lawson as a mentor and an inspiration. In any case, I believe that Montes’ insights are important and deserve an elaboration. The book demonstrates that the author has the knowledge and the analytical skills to carry out such an analysis further.