

Preface: A Political Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment

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Prefacing a festive volume on Chris Berry's work comes with a tremendous sense of responsibility: setting a tone to celebrate an intellectual hero for generations of scholars who have devoted their lives to the study of the Scottish Enlightenment and the voices who animated it, without lapsing into embarrassing hyperbole.

Chris describes his earliest encounter with Enlightenment attempts to understand modernity less as a bold discovery mission than the fallout of accidental encounter (with Jonathan Harrison, J. S. McClelland and Donald McRae mainly) and an inauspicious search for a PhD topic that might pique the interest of a supervisor. 'I just wondered whether there was a Scottish version of the topic,' he recollects. Coming upon the bibliography of W. C. Lehman's edition of John Millar's *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* in the college library, he concluded, 'there might indeed be'.

From the perspective of decades and the explosion of scholarship that followed, it is fair to say that Chris's youthful curiosity was impressive, and that his ultimate approach to exploring Scottish thought as a 'social inquiry' became catalytic, in the grandest sense. There had been some earlier research on the subject – Chris himself credits Gladys Bryson's 1945 monograph, *Man and Society: The Scottish Enquiry of the Eighteenth Century*, a 1965 study of Adam Ferguson by David Kettler, Duncan Forbes's 1966 introduction to the Edinburgh University Press edition of Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, other works by Forbes and Andrew Skinner, engagements with Marxist tropes by Roy Pascal, Ronald L. Meek, E. G. West and Donald Young, and the introduction to Adam Smith's *Moral Sentiments* by David Daiches Raphael and Alec Lawrence Macfie. Chris was among a wave of younger scholars in the 1970s and 80s who began to metabolise this research, and more or less deliberately lay the groundwork for a defined field of inquiry – notably Nicholas Phillipson, Roger Emerson, Hans Medick, Tom Campbell, Donald Winch, J. G. A. Pocock, Albert O.

Hirschman, Knud Haakonssen, John Robertson, John Dwyer and George Elder Davie, among others.

By the 1990s, scholarship on the Scottish Enlightenment had ‘lifted off’, with path-breaking monographs, articles and scores of PhD dissertations published each year. It was during this period that Chris published *The Idea of Luxury* (1994) and *The Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* (1997). Chris’s contributions to this emergent field of intellectual activity can be extrapolated from his own Preface in the 1997 monograph, where he enumerates what he takes to be the concerns of a properly ‘social’ inquiry of the Scottish Enlightenment: historical theorising, political and economic thought, moral philosophy, and a pervasive concern with cultural issues. While these themes pervade eighteenth-century Scottish thinking, Chris’s synthetic approach to them is his greatest contribution. Ideas are not isolated or hermetic, but hang together with other ideas and institutions to produce a distinctive way of thinking about people and society. As genuine members of the Enlightenment this meant a commitment to human progress and civilisation, triumph against superstition and domination, an understanding of order both physical and social, all uniquely refracted in Scottish social theory by their preoccupation with habit and custom, and a deep appreciation for the slow evolution of human institutions and their resistance to rational solutions.

It was during this period in the mid-1990s that I became drawn to Scottish thought. I first encountered Chris’s work during dissertation research at the University of Chicago on Adam Smith’s *Moral Sentiments*, in conversation with Lauren Brubaker, Ryan Hanley and Eric Schliesser. It was an exciting time to study Smith, as scholarship on the Scottish Enlightenment, and on Hume and Smith in particular, was exploding. Winch, Hirschman, Haakonssen were canonical texts by this point; and yet a new book called *The Social Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment* captivated me. It demonstrated a way of doing history, of asking questions of ideas, that was unconventional among the intellectual historians who were most prominent at the time.

As a young political theorist drawn to the rigour of intellectual history, but struggling with a convention that I suppress from my work the social and political impulses driving my fascination with the Scots, discovering Chris’s work was something of an emancipation. Countering a perception that the Scottish Enlightenment belonged to historians (or the occasional wayward philosopher), Chris described himself a ‘political theorist’, and refused to situate his work squarely in a single discipline or be constrained by its method. The great virtues of political theory are its indeterminacy, its critical agility and its resolve to weave across the domains of history,

politics, economy, science, art, medicine, morality, religion, philosophy and culture and to disregard purported margins between them – very much indeed like the Scots themselves. It might be said that Chris's scholarship itself manifests the very best of Scottish social inquiry, so that his subject of inquiry also becomes, in important ways, his method of inquiry – a unique 'Berry method'.

As we celebrate Chris's journey here, we also reflect on where we are headed. In our academic culture of institutionalised silos, where research trajectories are inevitably defined by professional norms, often constrained by a shortage of supervisors capable of overseeing non-traditional and 'cross-disciplinary' projects, or referees capable of evaluating them for their merit, I propose we remain mindful of the transversal impulses of Scottish social science, and resist the inevitable narrowing and over-specialisation of academic research. Foremost, perhaps, is the need to interpret our unique twenty-first-century challenges, as the Scots did theirs, in an inherently integral and cultural way. The dynamics of global poverty, climate change, dramatic migratory shifts, racism and rising 'national hatred' (as Smith described the myopic nationalisms of his own day) are not simply a function of economics, of politics, of ideology, of brain function, or of moral and spiritual decay. Specialists in these 'fields' cannot possibly comprehend our challenges today in isolation, without appreciating the cultural connections and institutions that bind these phenomena together in distinctive ways. The Scots implore us to remain transversal and cultural as we make sense of this phase in the stadial history of modernity.

