ELEANOR COURTEMANCHE


Reviewed by Leeann Hunter

This book makes a strong case for the humanities through its interdisciplinary study of political economy in the nineteenth century. Instead of viewing political economy through the lens of literature, Courtemanche writes as a political economist, using realist novels to trace the intricate webs of economic relationships and to illustrate the social and economic thought of the nineteenth century, as inspired by Adam Smith. She thereby shows that compared with economic theory alone, literary irony, tragedy, omniscience, and character can deliver a fuller portrait of political economy. Harriet Martineau, one of the authors featured in this study, made a similar case for the use of narrative—by writing novels to educate her readers in the principles of political economy. While Courtemanche simply writes about novels, she clearly explains how literature can reach across disciplines.

At the center of her inquiry is, after all, a literary-economic figure of speech: the metaphor of the “invisible hand.” First used by Adam Smith in the late 18th century, the “invisible hand” has long come to symbolize the supposed benevolence of capitalism. The invisible hand is said to regulate the self-interest of the individual. When acted upon, this self-interest triggers a series of unseen forces that work together to benefit the larger economic society, but are only “only comprehensible as an unstable composite of the mutually exclusive points of view of sovereign and merchant” (3). For centuries, however, according to Courtemanche, economists have narrowed and oversimplified our understanding of Smith’s complex ideas about social economic theory. By investigating
Smith’s use of the “invisible hand” metaphor in his major treatises, Courtemanche offers us a more effective way of analyzing the economic relationships at work in nineteenth-century England. The novel, she argues, with its “dynamic interplay between the ‘worm’s eye view’ of the characters and the ‘bird’s-eye view’ of the narrator,” offers suitable ground for the study of political economy under Smith’s terms (3). To show more clearly the complexity of invisible hand theory, she defines the gaps between the perspectives of the individual and the sovereign, and then argues that novels most successfully explore these gaps.

Compared with non-literary discourse, Courtemanche argues, narratives can make more far-reaching and long-lasting impressions on their readers.

In her Preface to the nine volumes that make up *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1834), Harriet Martineau justifies her decision to use fictional narratives to illustrate the tensions and struggles of contemporary political economy. She has chosen this method, Martineau affirms, “not only because it is new, not only because it is entertaining, but because we think it the most faithful and the most complete” (xi). For Courtemanche as for Martineau, stories can reveal more variations on moral causation in a political economy than theory alone. Novels, Courtemanche argues, can better explore the irony inherent in invisible hand social theory. As the novel is more adept at exhibiting an awareness of multiple points of view, it can more intricately trace and interrogate the paths of cause and effect in a political economy. The “tragic accidents” that occur in Martineau’s stories, Courtemanche notes, “might also be seen as an acknowledgement of Smith’s doctrine of unintended consequences, but one in which the good of the whole, rather than being ironically created by individual selfishness, is often the cause of individual misfortune” (134). This variation on Smith’s doctrine demonstrates how the novel can expand our understanding of political economy.
Essentially, Courtemanche explores the contradictions of what is known as the “Adam Smith Problem.” Appealing respectively to sympathy and to pragmatism, two of Smith’s major works—*The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and *Wealth of Nations* (1776)—seem to oppose each other. To reconcile their differences, Courtemanche aims to show how Smith navigates the “perplexing gulf between individual and collective points of view” (9). In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, she notes, Smith explains how we can feel sympathy for others: it is only through our individual experience of pain, he suggests, that we can perceive another human’s pain, and transport ourselves “into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations” (qtd. 58). Similarly, she notes, *Wealth of Nations* mediates between the limited perspective of the individual citizen and the sovereign’s expansive view of the nation’s wealth. Smith’s “idea of moral action,” she concludes, “is thus based not just on the embeddedness of the individual within a complex society, but on the fragmentation of the individual point of view between the feeling of his own passionate interests and the dispassionate consideration of those interests from both a local and an infinitely distant point of view” (59). The gaps between those points of view are what Courtemanche investigates.

Courtemanche’s theoretical framework is elegant and compelling. With the aid of Smith’s metaphor, she contraposes a worm’s-eye view with a bird’s-eye view, and then uses this contraposited pair to represent the worker and the landowner, the economist and the literary philosopher, the literary character and the narrator. Worms wriggle through the earth, but can see only what is going on just around them; birds see much more of the world, but lack an intimate, and perhaps muddy, perspective of what it means to be in the action.
In reading the realist novels she treats, Courtemanche writes, she “feel[s] a connection with our own era of networked effects, fantasies of infinite social interconnectedness, and unintended consequences. Yet these novels,” she claims, “do a better job than most of our social media in dramatizing how individual moral choices can be tragically or comically distorted when they are refracted through a vast, exciting, but fundamentally unknowable social system” (3-4). I would not go so far as to claim that realist novels of the nineteenth century can illuminate our present lives. Reaching beyond such novels to contemporary popular media, such as television and films, reveals a much more complex study of our “unknowable social system” than the novels could ever imagine. While prescient in their understanding of invisible social networks, they are nevertheless limited by their genre and time period. If realist novels can illuminate the political economy of the nineteenth century, contemporary literary forms—emerging and complex ways of storytelling—can tell us something about the policies and economics of our own time.

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