

FICTION, FAMINE, AND
THE RISE OF ECONOMICS
IN VICTORIAN BRITAIN
AND IRELAND

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CHAPTER I

History as abstraction

CONDILLAC'S PHILOSOPHY OF SIGNS

Among Adam Smith's early works are an essay "Concerning the First Formation of Languages" (1761) and a piece in the early *Edinburgh Review* (1755) largely concerned with Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality*.¹ While Warburton's *Divine Legation of Moses* inaugurates the origin of language debate in England, his influence is less apparent in Smith's early work than that of Etienne Bonnot, Abbé de Condillac, a key figure in eighteenth-century philosophy, though little read today. Though Condillac's major works were among the books in Smith's library, he does not refer to Condillac in any extant writings; at the very least, Smith would have known of Condillac's work from Rousseau's liberal use of it in the *Discourse on Inequality*.² Whether Smith had access to these ideas through the work of Rousseau or through some other source, it is clear that the theory of language which Condillac described, in particular his understanding of the role of what he calls abstraction, functioned as a founding principle in all of Smith's work.

Condillac worked in the empiricist tradition of Locke, and his first book, *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge* (1746), attempted to correct the errors he saw in Locke's theory of sensations. Condillac was persuaded by Locke's strictly empirical account of human consciousness, but he argued that Locke was imprecise in demonstrating that higher mental activities could have developed from sensations alone. Condillac's signal innovation is his argument that it is through the operation of language itself that the human capacity for knowledge develops. "I am convinced," he writes in his introduction, "that the use of signs is the principle that develops the seed of all our ideas."³ Condillac's task in the remainder of the book is to demonstrate how the capacity for complex ideas develops in the individual consciousness, and to trace the history of early human language use.

He begins with the synchronic element of his argument, describing the psychological development of a single mind in the present, and then uses this as a model for the diachronic development of human consciousness in history.

Let us consider a man at the first moment of his existence. His soul [*âme*] first has different sensations, such as light, colors, pain, pleasure, motion, rest – those are his first thoughts . . . [W]hen he begins to reflect on what these sensations occasion in him . . . we shall find that he forms ideas of the different operations of his soul, such as perceiving and imagining – those are his second thoughts.⁴

It is in the process of “reflecting” on initial sense impressions, what Condillac calls “perceptions,” that more complex thought develops. The first and simplest form of reflection is “reminiscence.” This is the awareness, when confronted with a particular perception of an object, phenomenon, sound, etc., that we have perceived it before. It is this potential to remember a perception that forms the basis of what we call experience. “Experience tells us,” however, “that the first effect of attention is to make the mind retain its perceptions in the absence of the objects that occasioned them.”⁵ To retain and recall to the mind a perception when absent from its object, or cause, is the power of “imagination.”

But for Condillac, imagination is a difficult and taxing mental operation, requiring the mind to reproduce a total sensory “image” of the object. There is, however, another operation that can recall some aspects of an object without imagining its total sensory impact; this is “memory.” “[W]e are not always able to revive the perceptions we have had. It can happen that we manage only to recall the name, some of the circumstances that accompanied the perceptions, and an abstract idea of perception . . . The operation that produces this effect I call ‘memory.’”⁶ Memory is a simpler and more efficient means of recalling an absent object, and thus “we see why the imagination at our command evokes certain figures of simple composition, while we can distinguish others only by the names that memory brings to mind.”⁷

As this passage indicates, what is necessary for this more efficient form of reflection is a sign, a marker that can hold the place of the object in our memory without requiring the imagination to reproduce each aspect of its full perception. It is on this basis that Condillac declares that “the use of signs is the true cause of the progress” of the mind from imagination to memory.⁸ As long as the imagination operates on its own, “we cannot by ourselves govern our attention.”⁹ However, “the beginning of memory is sufficient to begin making us the masters of the exercise of our imagination.

A single arbitrary sign is enough for a person to revive an idea by himself, and there we certainly have the first and the least degree of memory and of the power we can acquire over the imagination.”¹⁰ The passage from a passive imagination – where mental activity is limited by immediate sensory perception of present objects – to an active memory is the key transition in human psychological development for Condillac; the key principle of the transition is an increasingly efficient use of the perceiving power, through the tool of the arbitrary sign.

Once the habit of using signs is established, the mind is increasingly freed to conceive of abstract and general ideas, which are not connected to any single sensory perception but to the common properties of a whole class of objects. Only through the sign-using power can the mind consider a number of objects simultaneously and weigh their similarities and differences. And this operation will produce new signs to mark these general or transferable qualities a number of objects share. It is this process of mental generalization, which can only occur in retreat from the specific properties of objects, that Condillac calls “abstraction,” and it is the process responsible both for the development of language and higher mental functioning.

Condillac is quite careful to point out, however, that the categories and ideas which this process of abstraction produces are themselves creations of human thought, rather than properties inherent in nature. In his central chapter “Of Abstraction,” he writes, “it is less by reference to the nature of things than to our manner of knowing them that we determine the genera and species, or to speak a more familiar language, that we distribute them in classes by subordination of some to others.”¹¹ He argues that earlier metaphysical philosophy, “vain and ambitious, wants to search into every mystery; into the nature and essence of beings, and the most hidden causes; all these she promises to discover to her admirers, who are pleased with the flattering idea.”¹² But when philosophers talk about “essences” in this way, he argues, they refer not just to “certain collections of simple ideas that come from sensation and reflection; they intend to go deeper by finding specific realities in each of them.”¹³

When they ask “whether ice and snow are water”; “whether a monstrous fetus is a human being”; “whether God, minds, bodies, or even the vacuum are substances,” then it is obvious that the question is not whether these things agree with the simple ideas collected under these words, “water,” “human being,” “substance,” for that question would resolve itself. The point is to know whether these things include certain essences, certain realities which, it is supposed, are signified by the words “water,” “human being,” “substance.”¹⁴

For Condillac abstract ideas are products of linguistic combination, not natural truth. But once the construction of an abstraction from a number of simple ideas is accomplished, once the abstraction is encoded in a sign, its construction is forgotten, and that sign seems to represent a natural essence instead of a bit of human shorthand.

This theory of human mental development leads to and justifies Condillac's theory of world history. Since his notion of the progress of the human mind is the story of the "mastery" that language gradually lends, he portrays the progress of civilization through the story of the origin of languages. The first humans' mental operations, he argues, were limited to the perceptions of their immediate surroundings and needs from moment to moment. Condillac uses as models of the first humans two children, left by God to wander alone and untutored, in the time following the great flood. He imagines that:

the sensation of hunger made these children call to mind a tree loaded with fruit which they had seen the day before. The next day the tree was forgotten, the same sensation called to mind some other object. Thus the exercise of the imagination was not within their power. It was no more than the effect of the circumstances in which they found themselves.¹⁵

Gradually, after much repetition, the children begin to connect their "cries of each passion" – sounds produced in fear, hunger, surprise – with the sensations that provoked them. Their cries may accompany "some motion, gesture, or action" to indicate them more completely to the other.¹⁶ Still at this point, the cries and gestures are produced only when suggested by immediate perceptions – of hunger, cold, etc. Gradually the cries and gestures become so strongly associated with familiar perceptions that they could be used to recall those perceptions at any time. The cries and gestures pass from being what Condillac calls "natural" or "accidental" signs into "instituted signs," which allow human "mastery" over the power of the mind. From this point, abstract thought begins: "The use of [instituted] signs extended the exercise of the operations of the soul, and they in turn, as they gained more exercise, improved the signs and made them more familiar. Our experience shows that those two things mutually assist each other."¹⁷ Signs compound each other, as they increase the mind's power to use signs of greater abstraction and complexity.

While Condillac argues that gestures – the "language of action" – were more commonly used for the first instituted signs, "articulate sounds" eventually became more common. But "when speech succeeded the language of

action, it retained the character of its predecessor.” Thus “to take the place of the violent bodily movements, the voice was raised and lowered by strongly marked intervals.”¹⁸ This expressive power of intonation gave rise to music; the coded bodily language of action “the ancients called . . . dance.”¹⁹ These arts were originally integrated with language: “If prosody at the origin of languages was close to chant, then, in order to copy the sensible images of the language of action, the style was a virtual painting, adopting all sorts of figures and metaphors.”²⁰ Condillac argues that “the most abstract terms derive from the first names that were given to sensible objects,” and concludes, “at its origin, style was poetic.”²¹ Thus poetry, dance, and music all emerged from the expressive fullness of early language. As language grew more efficient, these arts were codified and separated from the expressive power of linguistic signs, cultivated as mere ornaments or entertainments.

Seen in the context of the ideological pressures on language-study in Condillac’s day, Condillac’s theory places European civilization at the leading edge of global history. European society represents the height of “efficiency” and “mastery,” in Condillac’s history, exercising a business-like dominion over the rest of the world, which remains mired in its inefficient sign systems. However, Condillac’s very emphasis on language as a tool, a material technique, threatens to undermine this deliberate ethnocentrism, for Condillac’s underlying critique of metaphysical essences renders any distinction between civilizations radically contingent. His work nostalgically assumes a unity of speech and poetry in early languages. But within Condillac’s theory, there can be no permanent and essential differences between human societies, only different modes of conventional practice, encoded in “instituted signs.”²²

Condillac’s theory of an increasing “efficiency” in human mental evolution becomes, eventually, the cornerstone of Smith’s political economy, and the critique of a metaphysical philosophy in Condillac’s work produces similar instabilities and radical potentials in Smith’s. Condillac’s theory of history is also taken up by Rousseau, but with crucial alterations. For Rousseau the increasing capacity for abstraction is the story not of the rise of civilization, but of its tragic decline away from the natural principles of the human heart. The instabilities in Condillac’s work are addressed substantially in Rousseau’s, as he crafts the more durable romantic mythology of an essential human nature, which distinguishes one nation from another and marks it indelibly with its own “national character.” These two opposite adaptations of Condillac’s theory of language, Smith’s and Rousseau’s, will form the two major streams of economic thought in the modern period.

Their dialectical movement through the nineteenth century will produce economics as it is practiced today.

ROUSSEAU'S REVISION

Rousseau's 1755 *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* (hereafter the second *Discourse*) borrows from but revises Condillac's theory of language and history. Rousseau opens by arguing that there are two different kinds of inequalities that mar contemporary European society. The first are "natural" and stem from differences of "age, health, bodily strengths, and qualities of mind." The second are "artificial" and "depend upon a sort of convention and are established, or at least authorized, by the consent of men."²³ These two categories support a two-stage theory of human history which corresponds substantially with Condillac's. The first humans lived in a direct world of sensation, and mental awareness of sensation. At some point, however, human thought became abstract, connected to no particular object, no specific sensuous experience. In the new abstract world, concepts and signs are purely conventional, established through use and habit.

However, where Condillac accepts that the first humans, in their fallen state, begin life with no received ideas, Rousseau claims that the mind begins with "two principles."

Leaving aside therefore all scientific books which teach us only to see men as they have made themselves, and meditating on the first and simplistic operation of the human soul, I believe I perceive in it two principles anterior to reason [*antérieurs à la raison*²⁴], of which one interests us ardently in our well-being and our self-preservation, and the other inspires in us a natural repugnance to see any sensitive being perish or suffer. (*DO* 95)

The "conjunction and combination" of these two principles – each presumably limiting the other – shape early human history. Much like Condillac's two children, the early human exists without the capacity to control the objects of their thoughts, to conceive time or space beyond the present: "His imagination suggests nothing to him: his heart asks nothing of him. His modest needs are so easily found at hand, and he is so far from the degree of knowledge necessary for desiring to acquire greater knowledge, that he can have neither foresight nor curiosity" (*DO* 117). However, it is the belief in these forces which precede language, impulses *antérieurs à la raison*, which ultimately defines the difference between Condillac's materialist model of cognition and Rousseau's revision of it. Identifying these principles provides

Rousseau with a ground he can call “nature,” an unquestioned point of authenticity, an anchor of social value.

In the second stage of society, the directness of self-love and pity is replaced by sociability, reason, and convention. The mark of this transition for Rousseau is the multiplication of what he calls “desire.” For early “man”: “his desires do not exceed his physical needs, the only goods he knows in the universe are nourishment, a female, and repose; the only evils he feels are pain and hunger” (*DO* 116). But in the second stage, desire is unlinked from physical need and can expand limitlessly. This artificial appetite Rousseau calls “moral desire,” and his defining example of the difference between moral and physical desire is, of course, sexuality. Rousseau writes, “the moral element of love [*le moral de l’amour*²⁵] is an artificial sentiment born of the usage of society and extolled with much skill and care by women in order to establish their ascendancy and make dominant the sex that ought to obey” (*DO* 135). For Rousseau, a primary masculinity gets subverted here in the second stage of history, where the presumed vanity of women establishes the foundation of the higher orders of civilization.²⁶

Rousseau’s aim in this foundational essay is to recover what he has identified as the primary and original principles of human social organization and to cancel the contemporary order of artificial inequality. But this larger goal requires that Rousseau show how those original principles were lost to begin with. The difficulty for Rousseau is thus to explain the transition from the period of pure physicality to the stage where humans act by imitating conventions. “The more one meditates on this subject,” he writes, “the more the distance from pure sensations to the simplest knowledge increases before our eyes; and it is impossible to conceive how a man, by his strength alone, without the aid of communication, without the stimulus of necessity, could have bridged so great a gap” (*DO* 118). To approach this perplexing question, Rousseau launches an extended digression on the origin and history of human language, and he draws directly on Condillac. But where Condillac sees the rise of human knowledge as a single continuity, a more or less unified progression from “natural” to “instituted” signs, Rousseau sees an “impossible” history, involving an unimaginable leap from ignorance to knowledge.

Rousseau argues that language begins with the “cry of nature” (*DO* 122), and these “cries” correspond to Condillac’s “natural signs.” At some later point “when the ideas of men began to spread and multiply, and when closer communication was established among them, they sought more numerous signs and a more extensive language” (*DO* 122). But while he suggests that new signs spread only with new ideas, he also argues (again following

Condillac) that new ideas are produced by words: “General ideas can come into the mind only with the aid of words, and the understanding grasps them only through propositions” (DO 124). General ideas (what Condillac called abstractions) are pure products of language, produced as categories of objects come to be remembered, compared, and labeled with a sign. But while Condillac conceives the progress from “natural” to “instituted” signs as more or less linear, Rousseau sees it as an insoluble paradox. “For myself,” he writes, “I leave to whomever would undertake it the discussion of the following difficult problem: which was most necessary, previously formed society for the institution of languages; or previously invented languages for the establishment of society?” (DO 126). It is this quandary that guides Rousseau throughout the second *Discourse*: How can language exist when it requires language itself to generate it?

In Rousseau’s first stage, the stage without language, there is a direct physicality of desire and a harmonious balance of the first principles of human nature – pity and self-love. These first principles are figured as the voice or will of God, uncluttered by the artificial abstractions of linguistic categories. On the other hand, however, while early human beings are tied like animals to the moment-by-moment perceptions of their senses, sign-users are freed to develop ideas and describe objects not within their immediate presence. This capacity of human beings to improve the very substance of their own thought is, for Rousseau, the greatest advantage of the human condition. But it is also its ultimate curse, since the expansion of abstract thought, with the multiplication of arbitrary signs, leads to the inequality in contemporary society that Rousseau sets out to critique. The two-stage system Rousseau establishes can thus be shown to disintegrate completely: human beings before language possess in one way the ultimate freedom, yet are in another way the ultimate slaves; human beings in linguistic society demonstrate the freedom of the capacity for improvement, but by choosing to live in a world of injustice they are ultimately prisoners as well. Each of Rousseau’s categories threatens always to flip over into its opposite.

It is at this point that Derrida famously intervenes into Rousseau’s discussion. Derrida argues that one can only understand these contradictions in Rousseau’s theory according to the logic of what he calls “the supplement”: a seemingly minor addition to a larger category which takes over or takes the place of the larger category.²⁷ The common interpretation of Rousseau argues that his primary focus is on the “savage” as a “noble” creature, motivated by the Godly influence of self-love and pity, while the more minor disadvantages of this primary state, like the inability to think abstractly, are

ranked as secondary or “supplementary.” For Derrida, however, these two sets of attributes – the “liberty” and the “slavery” of the early human – exist side by side, revolving with each other, each taking primacy in a moment of ideological necessity.

From this position Derrida argues that in Rousseau’s work “the concept of nature and the entire system it commands may not be thought except under the irreducible category of the supplement.” Nature in Rousseau’s text is that principle of paradise which is caught up in the idea of direct expression; it is also that principle of stagnation or symbolic death in the inability to use one thing to substitute for another. The passage into the second stage of civilization, marked, according to Rousseau’s appropriation of Condillac, by the emergence of abstract symbolization in language, is figured as the birth of human potential for freedom, as well as its ultimate death. Nature is thus not a definable category in Rousseau’s thought, since the attributes that describe “nature” always seem to slide toward their opposites; rather, nature occupies a space of “regulated contradiction.” Nature for Rousseau “is the ground, the inferior step: it must be crossed, exceeded, but also rejoined.”²⁸ Nature, as the state of primitive inaction, must be killed to bring about the progress of human intellection and sociability. But nature is also that first principle of pity, which can mediate the evils brought about by human self-love and thus prevent the rise of artificial social inequalities.

It is only by understanding Rousseau’s idea of nature in this way that we can begin to see in fullest terms the break Rousseau represents from the earlier scholarship on the origin of languages. For Condillac and his tradition, human history was linear. Human consciousness had moved from the cumbersome expression of immediate perceptions to an increasingly efficient system of symbolic codes. Language moved from its original physical and then “poetic” modes, to an increasing use of abstract signs. In this model of progressive efficiency, history is figured as the continual “abbreviation of signs,” “the becoming-prose of the world.”²⁹ Rousseau’s historiography represents a major break from this tradition: not a straight line of technological progress but a circular return to spiritual beginnings. The divine origins of the human soul were not questioned by Condillac, Warburton, or Locke. But for them human beings’ earthly existence was one of total alienation from divine influence, where the purely material influence of sense data provided the only origin point one could locate for human intellection. Writers in this tradition perceived human history as the advancement toward an increasingly powerful mode of human thought, but not necessarily toward the manifestation of divine will. For Rousseau however, the narrative of the fall from grace and return to heaven is transposed onto global

history. “Nature” in Rousseau stands for the divine origin of the soul, and the end point of human civilization is a kind of circular reappropriation of divine will. Rousseau’s conception of nature, and the powerful romantic conceptions of childhood, femininity, and “the primitive” it eventually supported, thus functioned by inventing what was in the eighteenth century a new way of imagining history.

Rousseau’s version of human history and the human subject proved a more effective and long-wearing response to the eighteenth-century crisis than Condillac and his generation were able to provide. If human character originates prior to language, *antérieurs à la raison*, then it can resist the threat posed by the modern marketplace. The notion of a wholly integrated human subject, which precedes and in some fundamental way survives the social process and shapes individual character, is still the dominant one in European and American culture. With the gradual spread of this particular ideology of the self, through the course of the nineteenth century, literature becomes increasingly dominated by the narrative of self-development and the struggle of “the individual” to resist social influences in an attempt to discover the primary characteristics of its own nature. Individual actions and collective customs, within this Romantic psychology, are understood as expressions of essential character, personal or national. As I will try to show, Adam Smith belonged to the world of Condillac. The history of political economy after Adam Smith, and particularly after Ricardo, is the history of its gradual acceptance of Rousseau’s conception of nature, history, and an expressive subjectivity. The blindnesses and limitations of contemporary economics can be substantially traced to these Rousseauist categories.

ADAM SMITH ON THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE

With these aspects of Condillac and Rousseau’s work in mind, we can begin to understand Adam Smith’s position in the debate on the origin of language. In Condillac and Rousseau the question of the origin of language leads to their most fundamental arguments. In a similar way, a theory of the origin of languages occupies a central position in Adam Smith’s work. Smith addressed the origin of languages problem perhaps as early as the late 1740s, as part of his series of lectures on rhetoric and *belles lettres* at the University of Edinburgh.³⁰ He published a short essay on the subject in 1761, “Considerations Concerning the First Formation of Languages,” an essay that was later attached to the third edition of Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in 1767. Smith’s exposure to the French philosophy of language is thought to have come from his reading of Diderot’s encyclopedia, and from

various other French works.³¹ That he was familiar with Rousseau's second *Discourse* we know from his 1755 review of that work in the *Edinburgh Review*. But this review confines itself to a comparison of Rousseau and Mandeville, and it is not until the 1759 "Considerations" that we find Smith taking a clear position on Rousseau's theory of language. Here in a mere thirty pages Smith dismisses the problems that were so perplexing for Rousseau. Smith produces what linguistic historian Steven K. Land describes as the simplest answer to the language question in his period, a theory which "traces a line of continuous development from the primal name to modern language structures."³²

Like Condillac and like the Rousseau of the second *Discourse*, Adam Smith argues that the first human communication arose from physical needs. Early human beings "endeavor to make their mutual wants intelligible to each other, by uttering certain sounds, whenever they meant to denote certain objects."³³ Sidestepping the question of gestures, Smith argues that these sounds quickly functioned as proper nouns. "The particular cave," he writes, "whose covering sheltered them from the weather, the particular tree whose fruit relieved their hunger, the particular fountain whose water allayed their thirst, would first be denominated by the words cave, tree, fountain" (FFL 203). Eventually, as "their necessary occasions obliged them to make mention of other caves, and other trees, and other fountains, they would naturally bestow, on each of these new objects, the same name, by which they had been accustomed to express the similar object they were first acquainted with" (FFL 203).

To illustrate the process through which these common nouns gradually emerged, Smith turns to a contemporary illustration: "I have known a clown, who did not know the proper name of the river which ran by his own door. It was *the river*, he said, and he never heard any other name for it. His experience, it seems, had not led him to observe any other river" (FFL 204). The "clown," because of his limited experience, can identify a particular river with the generalized common noun "river," given that no other rivers would be confused under this heading. Conversely, Smith argues, one can apply a proper name to a different but related object which shares certain characteristics with the bearer of the proper name. "An Englishman, describing any great river which he may have seen in some foreign country, naturally says, that it is another Thames" (FFL 204). This practice of borrowing a proper name to describe all objects in the same class as that which the proper name signifies is called, in rhetoric, *antonomasia*, and Smith argues that the prevalence of this rhetorical strategy in modern writing "demonstrates how much all mankind are naturally disposed

to give to one object the name of any other, which nearly resembles it, and thus to denominate a multitude, by what originally was intended to express an individual” (FFL 203–04). Smith identifies then a continuity between the “clown” who, because of limited experience, can substitute the place of proper and common nouns, and the contemporary flourish of antonomasia. Here he follows the tradition of Warburton and Condillac in arguing that the internal principles of linguistic development in early human society become rhetorical ornaments and separate arts in later human culture. “Clown” in Smith’s day would have signified most strongly a countrified or ignorant person: the Oxford English Dictionary cites Cowper’s *The Task* (iv.623): “the clown, the child of nature, without guile.”³⁴ In this way Smith’s theory looks forward to the romantic conception of the rustic, the child, the “savage,” as embodying the earliest and purest principles of human history. However, for Smith the principles of early language in the child or the “clown” are the same as those which appear in the sophisticated speech of modern orators. As linguist Frans Plank argues, Smith emphasizes “the mental operations which the language-formers are capable of performing, and which are essentially the same as those still performed, if more expertly, by present-day man.”³⁵ There is no catastrophic break in the history of human language development, but rather a single principle of human communication that bridges any supposed gap between the state of nature and the state of culture.

This example in the first pages of Smith’s essay illustrates the way Smith breaks with the historiography of Rousseau. For both, words and concepts together move away from concrete objects to classify the qualities that define objects. And Smith agrees that human history is characterized by increasing levels of abstraction in language and thought. But for Smith the growth of abstraction does not tear human society away from its natural roots; rather, the growth of abstraction fulfills human nature, multiplying and expanding the earliest and most fundamental principles of human behavior. This understanding of abstraction is a feature that unites all of Smith’s work, from his abrupt intervention into the origin of language debates, to his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, to his history of economic civilization in the *Wealth of Nations*. The key intellectual leap made by early human society, according to Rousseau’s account, is between the cry of nature, which would signify an immediate objective threat, and the common noun, which would signify an entire class of objects. Conceiving of a common noun, Rousseau argues, would require the broad comparison of the similarities and differences of a variety of objects, considering their attributes in common. This is the transition in human thought which Rousseau finds “impossible

to conceive,” and it is the reason why he devotes so much space in his essay to “the obstacles to the origin of languages.”³⁶ But what represents for Rousseau a cataclysmic fall from immediacy into abstraction is covered by Adam Smith in a mere paragraph, where he explains how the principle of antonomasia guided the development of common nouns.

It is this application of the name of an individual to a great multitude of objects, whose resemblance naturally recalls the idea of that individual, and of the name which expresses it, that seems originally to have given occasion to the formation of those classes and assortments, which, in the schools, are called genera and species, and of which the ingenious and eloquent M. Rousseau of Geneva finds himself so much at a loss to account for the origin. (FFL 204–05)

A footnote here refers the reader to the second *Discourse* as the site of Rousseau’s unimaginable confusion. For Smith, antonomasia identifies the simple operation of comparison and observation which must have allowed language to spread in a uniform and consistent manner.

Having dispensed with Rousseau’s questions, Smith spends more time explaining the modern diversity of languages, and, in accordance with his strictly linear theory, he argues that the most advanced of the contemporary languages are those containing the highest number of abstract words; the most primitive are the most proper. After every class of objects came to be denoted by its own common noun, Smith argues, it became necessary for speakers to theorize the differences and peculiar qualities of individual objects in order that they might not be confused with each other. This contemplation of particular qualities gave rise to two sorts of words: adjectives, which would indicate the qualities of a given object, and prepositions, which would express relations between objects. In this first period all nouns would be substantives, referring to concrete objects. The spread of adjectives, to denote particular qualities, however, would bring about the rise of abstract nouns to label these qualities, which are themselves divorced from any particular object. Smith writes,

the words *green* and *blue* would, in all probability, be sooner invented than the words *greenness* and *blueness*; the words *above* and *below*, than the words *superiority* and *inferiority*. To invent words of the latter kind requires a much greater effort of abstraction than to invent those of the former. It is probable, therefore, that such abstract terms would be of much later institution. Accordingly, their etymologies generally show that they are so, they being generally derived from others that are concrete. (FFL 206)

Smith’s history of verbs conforms to this same pattern. The first were what Smith calls impersonal verbs: sounds used to designate a specific

event. When a word which originally signified an event came to represent a whole class of similar events, it became necessary to identify a specific event by some particular quality. At this point impersonal verbs, which would express “the whole of an event, with that perfect simplicity and unity with which the mind conceives it in nature” (FFL 216), would give way to those that break down events into constitutive elements of actor and action. Personal verbs lend specificity, but in them “the simple event, or matter of fact, is artificially split and divided” (FFL 216). Through this operation particular actions are separated from individual actors and freed from any particular instance. Actions take on abstract qualities which can be applied interchangeably to any actor.

Because of the linearity of Smith’s history, he has no trouble affirming that the most abstract languages are the best. Early languages, Smith argues, used inflection to express the abstract qualities with which a particular object or event needed to be labeled in order to separate it from other similar objects or events named by the same common noun or impersonal verb. Variation of nouns by case contained the operation of prepositions (FFL 210); variation by gender, though now highly conventionalized, originally contained some of the qualitative differences expressed by adjectives (FFL 207). Variation of verbs by person and number likewise contained in a single word the separation of actor and object necessary to identify events. Modern languages rely much less on inflection and much more on adjectives, prepositions, and pronouns to express abstract qualities. This renders the syntax of modern languages much less flexible and also requires the use of more words to express the same concept. This process, Smith notes, is most exaggerated in English, and from this Smith concludes that English is the most advanced of the modern languages. His anglocentric family tree of European languages thus runs as follows: Greek in combination with Tuscan vernaculars produced Latin, which in combination with Lombard variations produced Italian and French. The latter in conjunction with the Saxon languages produced English (FFL 222–23). English is the most complex language, its syntax the least flexible, its nouns and verbs the least inflected. Smith concludes:

language becomes more simple in its rudiments and principles, just in proportion as it grows more complex in its composition, and the same thing has happened in it, which commonly happens with regard to mechanical engines. All machines are generally, when first invented, extremely complex in their principles, and there is often a particular principle of motion for every particular movement which it is intended they should perform . . . In language, in the same manner, every case of every noun, and every tense of every verb, was originally expressed by a particular

distinct word, which served for this purpose and for no other. But succeeding observation discovered that one set of words was capable of supplying the place of all that infinite number, and that four or five prepositions, and a half a dozen auxiliary verbs, were capable of answering the end of all the declensions, and of all the conjugations in all the ancient languages. (FFL 223–24)

But while the modern languages increase in precision and efficiency, like an increasingly refined machine, they also lose some advantages of the earliest languages. Smith argues that the proliferation of helping verbs, prepositions, and adjectives in modern language results in a “prolixness” which “must enervate the eloquence of all modern languages” (FFL 224). The varied sonority of the inflected languages made them more “agreeable to the ear” (FFL 224) and more suitable to poetic expression.

There is a clear sense of nostalgia in this account: Smith’s idea of a lost sonority and poetry in human speech, and an increasingly “mechanical” mode of modern expression, narrates world history as the transition from an age of idyllic speech to an age of bureaucratic writing. The role of the sign is constrained within a narrative of the decay of proper meaning and the loss of a primitive concreteness.³⁷ But while Smith posits the integrity of the “voice” in these ways, he breaks with Rousseau in portraying this progression as an absolutely linear one, marked by the progressive and consistent unfolding of increasingly abstract mechanisms in language and thought. There is no qualitative separation between the function of language in contemporary society, in ancient society, or in the supposed language of earliest humans. There is no qualitative separation between the “voice” of nature and the “inscription” of culture.

The contrast between this historiography and that of Rousseau will become clearest if we examine Rousseau’s theory of the history of writing. This is a theory he works out not in the second *Discourse*, which we know Smith was familiar with, but in the “Essay on the Origin of Languages.” The date of composition of this essay is unknown; it was only published after Rousseau’s death. But it is in this essay most explicitly that Rousseau introduces another element of Romantic historiography vital to the history of political economy, and that is the relationship between language and national culture.

ROUSSEAU: WRITING AND NATIONAL CHARACTER

Interest in the character of nations is not unique to Rousseau. Condillac argues that climate and the quality of land will influence the character of a people and the structure of their language.³⁸ But Condillac’s emphasis

falls much more strongly on the way that the expanding structure of a language itself influences culture. For Condillac, humans before language are simply screens for immediate sense perceptions. Within this system one can ascribe no “character,” no particular emotional temperament to humans prior to language. “If we recollect,” Condillac writes, “that the habit of the imagination and memory depends entirely on the connection of ideas, and that the latter is formed by the relation and analogy of signs, we shall be convinced that the less a language abounds in analogous expressions, the less assistance it gives to the memory and the imagination.” “The arts and sciences” will tend to flourish when language has reached the sufficient degree of reflection or abstraction to enable the function of the imagination. “It is with languages as is with geometrical signs; they give a new insight into things, and dilate the mind in proportion as they are more perfect.”³⁹

In this way the operation of language itself on the mind ends up being more important than the particular characteristics of a people derived from climate or location. Language in Condillac’s scheme is not the gauge of temperament; there is only one measure Condillac posits with which to compare languages, and that is the degree of their abstract signification. Within Condillac’s scheme it would be impossible to say that language is formed by the collective personality of a group; rather this collective personality is a function of language. On the other hand, Rousseau proceeds from very different assumptions in the “*Essay on the Origin of Languages*,” which opens as follows:

Speech distinguishes man among the animals; language distinguishes nations from each other; one does not know where a man comes from until he has spoken. Out of usage and necessity, each learns the language of his own country. But what determines that this language is that of his country and not of another? In order to tell, it is necessary to go back to some principle that belongs to the locality itself and antedates its customs, for speech, being the first social institution, owes its form to natural causes alone.⁴⁰

Rousseau looks to some principle of “locality itself” to explain the differences between national groups, and in its locality speech emerges not through artificial convention but by “natural causes alone.” Nature in this essay turns out to leave an essential imprint on the language of each national group, and this imprint becomes the most fundamental indicator of national character.

In order to understand how the “*Essay*” weaves this argument, we need to begin with Rousseau’s basic claim – strikingly different from that of

the second *Discourse* – that early humans were “naturally indolent.”⁴¹ In the second *Discourse* he argues that early humans are motivated by self-love and pity; in the “Essay” he assumes that human beings are naturally passive, lazy. Whereas in the second *Discourse* Rousseau is interested in that transition from a primary stage of human society to a secondary, purely conventional stage, in the “Essay” Rousseau looks more closely at the primary stage and attempts to explain the emergence of the ability to pity others, out of an original torpor. This he links to the operation of the imagination. But while Condillac sees imagination as being progressively enlarged throughout human history, through the increasing use of signs, Rousseau suggests that imagination was most strongly present at the origin point of language, and that it has declined drastically since then.

“Although pity is native to the human heart it would remain eternally quiescent unless it were activated by imagination. How are we moved to pity? By getting outside ourselves and identifying with the being who suffers.” The capacity to “identify” is one of imagination, and Rousseau argues that without an exposure to different human beings – without the opportunity to imagine the suffering or desire of the other – the capacity to imagine will not develop: “He who imagines nothing is aware only of himself; he is isolated in the midst of mankind.” It is clear in one way that Rousseau’s notion of imagination is drawn from Condillac: Rousseau writes, “reflection is born of the comparison of ideas, and it is the plurality of ideas that leads to their comparison.”⁴² But where for Condillac presumably a small glimmer of imagination might emerge with the first comparison of ideas in the mind, for Rousseau a veritable riot of imagination, pity, and “desire” bursts all at once on the scene of early human history, at the single moment when the first comparison takes place. Where “the first rendezvous of the two sexes” would take place, “there too, the original festivals developed. Feet skipped with joy, earnest gestures no longer sufficed, being accompanied by an impassioned voice; pleasure and desire were mingled and were felt together.”⁴³ The birth of the sign is the birth of desire; the rise of reflection as a linguistic principle is the reflection of desire in the desire of the other.

However, once Rousseau finishes laying out this theory, we find that this origin point characterizes not all human beings but only those in “the South.” In the following chapter, “Formation of the Languages of the North,” Rousseau offers a different story: “In southern climes, where nature is bountiful, needs are born of passion. In cold countries where she is miserly, passions are born of need, and the languages, sad daughters of necessity, reflect their austere origin.”⁴⁴ In “the North” humans would have been brought together earlier in their history, out of physical need,

and their collection would have brought about the operation of “difference” and “comparison” in the mind necessary for the birth of abstract thought. But while humans in early northern civilizations were presumably just as “indolent” as those in the south, Rousseau suggests they were forced into action by the harshness of the climate and thus produced a language not of “passion” but of “necessity.” This early influence of the climate on character is imprinted through the function of language, and carries through every following stage of the development of human knowledge and government. In this way world languages are not, as they were for Condillac, gradients on a scale of the progressive unfolding of abstract thought. For Condillac the linear history of abstraction is encapsulated by the history of writing, from pictography to alphabetic script. For Rousseau the difference between national languages is not the gradient of abstraction or efficiency. Rather this difference is the measure of national character, the godchild of “nature”; character is unalterable, after its natural birth, and it exerts its influence in terms of a gradient of passion. In this text an innocent speech is ambushed by a street-wise writing. “[O]ur tongues,” he writes, of the northern languages, “are better suited to writing than speaking, and there is more pleasure in reading us than in listening to us.”⁴⁵

In these texts by Rousseau we can identify the necessary tensions of a given ideological system, struggling to maintain Europe as both endpoint and center of global history. From a twentieth-century standpoint we might easily argue that Rousseau’s texts are in this way fundamentally unreadable, caught in a set of undecidable differences. One might also say that these texts are incomplete in the way that any ideological production must be. But the cult of national identity in the nineteenth century, with its reliance on studies in poetry and language, will build directly on Rousseau’s fundamental assumptions.

THE ABSTRACTION OF DESIRE: SMITH’S *THEORY*
OF MORAL SENTIMENTS

At this point I have laid out what can generally be called Enlightenment and romantic conceptions of the origin of language, conceptions which always imply both a global historiography and a contemporary cultural geography. These are conceptions of world history, through the model of language, which share a great deal, but which differ also in fundamental ways. And we have seen Adam Smith’s involvement in these debates.

What it remains to show now is that Smith’s allegiance to Condillac and what I have roughly called the Enlightenment side of the language

debate has importance in Smith's major works. I do not argue that the language debates play a central role in Adam Smith's thought over the course of his life; that Smith devoted only one essay to this subject, one which formed only an appendix to a late edition of his work on moral philosophy, would suggest that they did not. Nor have I provided the full philosophical context for Adam Smith's thought. This would require a much broader examination of early eighteenth-century philosophy in both England and France, encompassing the work of Hume, Mandeville, Montesquieu, and Hutcheson. However, I contend that understanding Smith's intervention into the language debates will highlight important aspects of his work in moral philosophy and political economy.

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) Smith refuses the Rousseauist idea of an absolute split between nature and culture. With Condillac, Smith argues that the principles that guide the development of individual thought, social interaction, and political organization are present in human society from the very first. The principles he identifies, however, are borrowed directly from Rousseau. Smith opens the first chapter of the volume, "Of Sympathy," as follows: "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it."⁴⁶ Like Rousseau in the second *Discourse*, Smith suggests that human nature is equipped with two unchanging characteristics: selfishness and sympathy. But for Rousseau the operation of sympathy, or what he calls pity, is an equivocal one; pity seems to be the thing which makes humans good in the first stage of civilization, as well as the thing which pulls human beings into more complex social relationships and corrupts them in the second stage. For Smith, however, the capacity for sympathy to mediate the effects of selfishness is a constant principle in human history.

Sympathy, Smith argues, allows us to understand suffering in others, giving us the ability of "changing places in fancy"; understanding the pain of the other will tend to dampen actions spurred by selfish pleasure that might injure other people. But much more importantly, Smith argues that human beings derive pleasure not only through the gratification of their selfish desires, but also through the knowledge that other people sympathize with them. "Nothing pleases us more," Smith writes, "than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast." The injured person, "longs for that relief which nothing can afford him but the entire concord of the affections of the spectators with his own." At the same time, however, the sympathy of spectators enables them to identify

only imperfectly with the feelings of the injured person. Thus it is necessary that the injured person learn to moderate the expression of “his” passion, to soften “his” cries if injured, such that a spectator, given “his” shrunken sense of the injured person’s passion, will not feel that the injured person is reacting excessively. Desiring the pleasure of sympathy, the spectator “can only hope to obtain this by lowering his passion to that pitch, in which the spectators are capable of going along with him. He must flatten, if I may be allowed to say so, the sharpness of its natural tone, in order to reduce it to harmony and concord with the emotions of those who are about him” (*TMS* 10, 13, 22).

Thus the subject learns to feel by imagining the feelings of the other; the experience of passion is educated through the circuit of the spectator. And while it may seem that Smith conceives the direct experience of passion as a natural and unchanging response that exists prior to the moderating influence of the spectator, he makes it clear that feelings themselves are altered by the way they are performed and reflected, according to the codes of spectatorship. “As the reflected passion, which [the original subject] thus conceives, is much weaker than the original one, it necessarily abates the violence of what he felt before he came into their presence, before he began to recollect in what manner they would be affected by it, and to view his situation in this candid and impartial light” (*TMS* 22).

Smith’s theory of the affective life here escapes from a number of romantic preconceptions about the autonomy of passions or desires and the simplicity of individual perception. Perception in every instance, for Smith, is triangulated between the object perceived and the consciousness of an “impartial spectator” which exerts that reflecting influence on a subject. The desire of the subject for any given object is mediated through the spectator; the feeling of the spectator for the subject is mediated through the consciousness of the object of passion. And the feelings experienced in this perpetual triangle are constructed in the mode of their expression. The feeling subject is inconceivable without the feelings of other subjects; desire is social, and feelings are performative.

But while aspects of this theory of intersubjectivity might make it possible to reevaluate the formation of subjects into a given sexual and political order, Smith uses these ideas, laid out in his first chapters, to mount a defense of the existing social order. To understand why a potentially radical theory of the subject activates an explicit defense of capitalism, it is necessary to consider some aspects of Smith’s theory in its eighteenth-century context. This context can be best approached through the gender categories at work in this text. “Men of retirement and speculation,” Smith writes “who are apt