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13 Epilogue

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In 2021 the Finnish government began, after 15 years of political debate and five failed attempts, to implement a major change in healthcare, social security and rescue services. The government presented the change as an improvement with respect to the prevailing situation in basic healthcare and social security services which, though quite good in global comparison, many citizens found under-resourced and poorly organized (rescue services were included due to a political compromise). There had been attempts to improve these services in a piecemeal fashion, but since Finland is one of the first industrial countries to face the practical problems and increasing expenditure due to ageing population, it was thought that there was a need for a complete overhaul of the existing system. This was to be called a reform.

As in any democratic country, opposition parties claimed from the start that the reform would hardly be an improvement, while all parties agreed that once the reform had been implemented, there would be a need for further improvements. Whatever the outcome of the reform may be, it certainly will not be the restoration of some older state of affairs. On the contrary, it suggests a radical departure from the Finnish tradition of strong municipal self-governance, since services will be now organized by larger administrative counties that had not previously existed. It is worth noting that the forward-looking character of the reform is hard-wired into the Finnish language. While the word *reformi* is part of the Finnish vocabulary, the most common equivalent for “reform”, always used in an official context, is *uudistus*, a noun connected to the adjective *uusi* (new) and the verb *uudistaa* (to renew). *Uudistus* is a project in which an entirely new order is established. Thus it is particularly difficult for Finnish speakers to imagine a reform that would be a revival of some previous condition. When they refer to the Reformation with an original Finnish word (instead of *reformaatio*), they use the backward-looking Lutheran term *uskonpuhdistus* (the purification of faith).

The above is one example of how notions of improvement and reform, explored historically in this collection, are visible in political discourse of today. Reform is not connected to any reformist ideology or idea of progress but is conceived as a pragmatic reaction to new problems and budgetary constraints, and its main function is its assumed ability to increase

efficiency. Of course, this is not always the case. In the United States, for example, many on the left may still see healthcare reform, reform demands connected to racial equality and a more extensive welfare system as elements of a broader progressive agenda. And it seems likely that in the future there will be more demands for reforms motivated not by any conception of progress but by the existential threat associated with climate change, though so far it has been difficult to make such demands politically attractive without a promise that they will somehow improve our lives. Be that as it may, if reflected in terms of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideologies that called for a choice between reform and revolution, modern distinctions between improvement and reform easily appear insubstantial. One may think like the Polish social theorist Zygmunt Bauman, perhaps echoing his own communist youth, that whereas “a hundred years ago to be modern” meant to chase “the final state of perfection”, now it means merely “an infinity of improvement, with no ‘final state’ in sight and none desired”.¹ The same applies to historical analysis. What made the study of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European political ideas meaningful for the pioneering historian of the Enlightenment, Franco Venturi, a scholar committed to anti-Fascist reformist ideology, was the possibility of presenting the Enlightenment as an age of reform directly relevant to twentieth-century political concerns (see the chapter by Adriana Luna-Fabritius in this volume). From such a perspective, early modern discourse on improvement appears as something peripheral that only becomes significant when it can be reconceptualized in terms of reform.

This volume has argued that improvement deserves to be studied just as carefully as reform, and when the word “reform” is found in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century texts, it should not be automatically identified with the connotations the term acquired in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Reform could be a synonym for improvement or correction, or it could indicate a return to some previous condition, but it was hardly ever connected to the idea of progress. Furthermore, the volume has shown that the discourse of improvement was not a speciality of England and Britain, though below you will find a few textual examples that could be seen as supporting the argument that the English were early on particularly fascinated by the word “improvement”. Yet, especially in the eighteenth century, the culture of improvement was a broad European phenomenon, very much visible in German-speaking countries, and it was still influential in the nineteenth century, when new disciplines of national economy presented concrete suggestions for national improvement. These observations are not mere semantic niceties. They affect how we understand the emergence of new ideas and social practices in early modern Europe, and how we conceive the relationship between these ideas and practices and our current historical situation. For example, if one calls the Enlightenment “the age of reform”, this gives it a sense of a forward-looking totality which encourages clichés like “the Enlightenment project”, an eclectic *mélange* of ideas oscillating

between Kant's moral autonomy and Bentham's Panopticon, and which many of today's social theories claim constitutes, for better or for worse, the intellectual and cultural foundation of modern Western societies. If, on the other hand, we observe that there was a widespread culture of improvement in early modern Europe, the participants of which most often did not share any progressive ideology, this liberates us from the need to associate every demand for change encountered in eighteenth-century texts with the Enlightenment. It also helps us avoid treating the Enlightenment as a historical epoch affecting every aspect of culture and society, from philosophy to table manners, and instead to define it in ways that are more restricted and informative. Of course, even this will not save the Enlightenment from being what Frank Ankersmit has called a narrative substance, a notion we need to make sense of the past, but whose boundaries will never be given to us by historical sources and so will be constantly redefined by new studies on the topic.²

I offer here a short contribution to the study of the notion of improvement in early modern Europe. This is inspired by the introduction of this volume, which points out that improvement and reform have not generally been considered as concepts of classical state theory. It is true that in early modern political thought these concepts were not often directly connected to the theory of the state. Yet one could argue that, in the case of improvement, such a connection is to be found in political theories using the conceptual arsenal of natural law. A case in point is perhaps the most widely read natural law theorist of the period, Samuel Pufendorf (1632–1694). Pufendorf's massive exposition of natural law, *De jure nature et gentium* (1672), was published numerous times in the eighteenth century and translated into several European languages, while his short non-argumentative compendium of natural law, *De officio hominis et civis* (1673), had even more translations and was widely used in Protestant universities. There may not have been many committed "Pufendorfians" in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe – it was not a theory of that kind. Yet his main work on natural law was studied by educated people from the Urals to the Mississippi as a lexicon of moral, juridical and political ideas,³ and the shorter work made some of his ideas and observations available to an even wider public.

Pufendorf wrote in Latin, and his works included no word which would be a precise equivalent for vernacular terms such as *Verbesserung*, *amelioration* and *improvement*. Nevertheless, the theory of the state he presented in Book VII of *De jure* included a short discussion which was clearly connected to the idea of improvement, and similar remarks were included in *De officio*. Pufendorf's short and very general observations on this topic may not have enjoyed any special authority among the improvers of the period, but one could see them as one widely read textual source which legitimated demands for improvement among the broader reading public. Moreover, the fact that Pufendorf's works were translated into several languages makes visible some differences in the way improvement was conceptualized in

early eighteenth-century Europe. It is not possible here to explore this theme systematically, but I will make a few observations about French, German and English translations.

In *De jure*'s Book VII Pufendorf first explained the reasons for establishing civil society, and then explored the characteristics and various forms of civil sovereignty. He concluded the Book with a discussion of the duties of the sovereign. In Book VII Pufendorf was evidently dissatisfied with the way earlier writers had understood the character of civil society, though he admitted the merits of Hobbes on this issue. But when it came to the duties of the sovereign, Pufendorf was ready to say that these have already been discussed by many writers; hence, it is enough for him to present a mere summary of the main themes.⁴ In this context he also referred to the science of governing (*civitatem regendi scientia*), a discipline distinct from the main topic of the *De jure*, the science of natural law.⁵ We know that Pufendorf's library included the Latin translation of Giovanni Botero's *Della ragioni della stato* (1589), and, most notably, *Teutscher Fürsten Stat* (1656) by Ludwig von Seckendorff, commonly celebrated as the founder of German cameral sciences.⁶ Yet, he did not refer to these works in the chapter on the duties of the sovereign or elsewhere in *De jure*. Instead, Pufendorf picked ideas from numerous classical and contemporary texts, many of them not dedicated to the art of governing. No wonder, therefore, that he characterized the science of governing as a most difficult topic which requires all the abilities of monarchical sovereigns, no matter how gifted they happen to be. Sovereigns should avoid studying any discipline which does not help them to master this science, to say nothing about spending too much time with useless amusements.⁷ In *De officio* Pufendorf added that, in order to draw correct prudential conclusions in state affairs, sovereigns must understand the conditions of their own position and the character of their subjects, and for this purpose they should rid themselves of court flatterers and spend time not only with the wise, but also with people skilled in human affairs.⁸ Andrew Tooke's English translation of *De officio* from 1691 spoke here about men "experienced in Business and skilful in the Ways of the World."⁹

The reason for the establishment of civil societies had been the peace and security of citizens, and Pufendorf started his discussion with the commonplace that the safety (*salus*) of citizens is the highest law of sovereigns.¹⁰ He then generally explained how the sovereign should organize education, legislation, jurisdiction, administration and taxation. Several of Pufendorf's remarks on the character of well-organized civil society would have required considerable changes in seventeenth-century European states. For example, he referred approvingly to the Chinese practice of forbidding magistrates to serve in the place of their birth, since their subjects then included no one they might either particularly love or hate.¹¹ Yet Pufendorf did not suggest, at least explicitly, that there would be a need for constant improvements in the above fields of government. In the case of the material resources of the state and of citizens things were somewhat different.

Pufendorf discussed this topic in paragraph 11, entitled “The wealth of citizens is to be promoted” (*facultates civium promovendi*). Jean Barbeyrac’s French translations of *De jure* from 1706 spoke here about the duty to maintain and increase the goods of citizens (*procurer l’entretien & l’augmentation des biens des Sujets*),¹² whereas in the German translation from 1711 (the translator is not mentioned) the heading stated that the wealth of subjects should be increased as much as possible (*das Vermögen der Unterthanen soll möglichst vermehret werden*).¹³ Compared to these, the corresponding paragraph in Andrew Tooke’s English translation of *De officio* has a somewhat individualist flavour: “Interest of the Subject to be advanced by Princes”.¹⁴ Yet this was not how all Englishmen introduced Pufendorf’s discussion of the topic. When Basil Kennett’s translation of *De jure* was published in 1703, paragraphs had no headings, but the 1712 edition stated that the paragraph explains how the “Wealth of the State is to be advanced”.¹⁵

In fact, the main theme of paragraph 11 was that the wealth of the state and that of the citizens are intimately linked. Pufendorf started by noting that even though the *salus* of citizens is the highest law for sovereigns, they are not obliged to support their subjects, or at least not those who are physically able to take care of themselves. Yet sovereigns should understand that revenues needed for the preservation of their state are collected from the property of their citizens, and that the strength of state relies not only on the bravery (*virtu*) of its citizens but also on their wealth. Therefore it is the duty of the sovereign to do everything in his or her power to further (*promovere*) the increase of their citizens’ fortune. Here Barbeyrac’s French translation used the same formula as in the title of the paragraph, saying that the sovereign should see to the maintenance and increase of possessions.¹⁶ One might argue that if the German translation had been made later in the eighteenth century, it would have used the term *Verbesserung* in this context. But what it stated was that the ruler should take care that their subjects can secure their own prosperity and are sufficiently nourished.¹⁷ The English translations, however, offer further confirmation for the argument that, already by the 1690s, the notion of improvement had become a core element of English culture (see Marten Seppel’s chapter in this volume). Tooke’s translation of *De officiis* explained that it encourages “Princes to use their best Endeavours, that the Fortunes of their Subjects improve and flourish”, while Kennett’s translation of *De jure* from 1703 declared unequivocally that it is the duty of sovereigns to “take care, that Estates and Possessions of their people be well cultivated and improved.”¹⁸

Specific measures to increase the wealth of citizens were not part of the science of natural law, but this did not prevent Pufendorf from making the general point that sovereigns foster the fortunes of their subjects by disposing citizens “to take the richest possible harvest from land and water, to apply their diligence to materials that arise around them”, and by discouraging their “purchase from others labour which they can conveniently perform themselves.” Pufendorf emphasized that to achieve these aims the

sovereign needs to advance commerce and, in maritime countries, navigation, as well as *artes mechanicae*.¹⁹ The last-mentioned term referred to all systematic methods and technical devices used in manual production, and was translated as *Arts Mécaniques* by Barbeyrac, *Manual Arts* by Kennett and *Manufactur* in the German version.²⁰ It should be added that, while Pufendorf regarded increasing wealth as a requisite for the success of the state, like many of his contemporaries he was worried about the corrupting effects of luxury consumption, especially as this meant that great sums of money were spent on imported goods. Therefore it belonged to the duties of the sovereign to restrict the consumption of luxury goods by sumptuary laws. However, while this was all Pufendorf said on the matter in *De officio*, in *De jure* he qualified his statement as follows:

If the Country abound with Men and Money, it is there convenient to tolerate some unnecessary *Consumption*, and such as may seem to border upon Luxury; that the Common People hence be furnish'd with Opportunities of maintaining themselves, and that the vast Stock of Money may not lie dead and useless.²¹

Pufendorf did not present this idea as a universal principle but as a prudential thing to do if the sovereign was able to take care that “no Encouragement be given to Extravagance and Exes and that the Commodities be not idly wasted at Home which might be exported with Advantage to Forreign Parts.”²²

The above short excursion via Pufendorf’s remarks on the duties of the sovereign shows that they can easily be located within the European discourse of improvement. Moreover, these remarks, together with Pufendorf’s observations regarding money and commerce, dealt with topics we find in numerous eighteenth-century treatises, classified as *Kamerawissenschaften*, “*économie politique*” and the like, which were part of the discussion on how to better organize state and society, together with the living conditions of the people. As was proposed in the Introduction to this volume, there are good reasons to hold that Adam Smith’s multifaceted argumentation for the system of natural liberty was a contribution to the same conversation, not a poorly organized attempt to present principles of political economy à la David Ricardo. Thus, in one respect, celebration of Pufendorf as a predecessor of Smith is correct, as Pufendorf “anticipated” Smith just as he anticipated many other eighteenth-century authors writing on economic topics. If, however, what is meant is that Pufendorf was, through to his assumed influence on Smith, a grandfather for nineteenth-century political economy, this misses the mark.²³ As for Smith, one could argue that for him, the implementation of the system of natural liberty in Britain would not have meant merely an improvement but also a major reform of the prevailing social order. This may be the case, but then he might not have understood reform as a progressive step towards something entirely new, but as a return to some previously existing condition (see Keith Tribe’s chapter in this volume).

In the *Wealth of Nations* Smith remarked that due to the prejudices of the public and the interests of “master manufacturers”, to “expect that the freedom of trade should ever be entirely *restored* in Great Britain, is as absurd as to expect that and Oceana or Utopia should ever be established in it”.²⁴

Notes

- 1 Zygmunt Bauman, “Foreword to the 2012 Edition”, in *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012), viii.
- 2 Frank Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian’s Language* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1983).
- 3 I here modify the observation in Richard Tuck’s *The Rights of War and Peace. Political Thought and the International Order from Grotius to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 165.
- 4 Samuel Pufendorf, *De jure naturae et gentium*, ed. Gerald Hartung (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1998), Book VIII ch. 9 §1.
- 5 The distinction between the art of prudential governing and the demonstrative science of natural law is articulated in Pufendorf, *De jure*, Book I, ch. 2 §4. See also Kari Saastamoinen, “Pufendorf on the Law of Sociality and the Law of Nations”, in *The Law of Nations and Natural Law 1625–1800*, ed. Simone Zurbu-chen (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 107–31.
- 6 Fiammetta Palladini, *La Biblioteca di Samuel Pufendorf. Catalogo dell’asta de Berlin del settembre 1697* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz Verlag, 1999), 69, 362.
- 7 Pufendorf, *De jure*, Book VII, ch. 11 § 2.
- 8 Samuel Pufendorf, *De officio*, ed. Gerald Hartung (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997), Book II, ch. 1 § 2.
- 9 Samuel Pufendorf, *The Whole Duty of Man According to the Law of Nature*, Trans. Andrew Tooke (1691), eds. Ian Hunter, David Saunders (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003), 215.
- 10 Pufendorf, *De jure*, Book VII, ch. 11 § 2.
- 11 Pufendorf, *De jure*, Book VII, ch. 11 § 9.
- 12 Samuel Pufendorf, *Les droit de la nature et de gens*, trans. Jean Barbeyrac (Amsterdam, 1706), 319.
- 13 Samuel Pufendorf, *Acht Bücher vom Natur- und Völker-Rechte* (Frankfurt am Main, 1711), 690.
- 14 Pufendorf, *The Whole Duty of Man*, 219.
- 15 Samuel Pufendorf, *Of the Law of Nature and Nations*, trans. Basil Kennett (Amsterdam, 1712), 564.
- 16 Pufendorf, *Les droit de la nature*, 319.
- 17 Pufendorf, *Acht Bücher*, 709: “Es soll aber doch hohe Obrigkeit allerdings Sorge tragen/daß Unterthanen zu gutem Vermögen kommen und Außertragliche Nahrung haben mögen.”
- 18 Pufendorf, *The Whole Duty of Man*, 219. Pufendorf, *Of the Law of Nature and Nations*, trans. Basil Kennett (Oxford, 1703), Book VII, ch. 9 § 11, p. 230.
- 19 Pufendorf, *De jure*, VII.9.11. The translation is from Samuel Pufendorf, *Political Writings*, ed. Craig L. Cair, trans. Michael Seidler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 243.
- 20 On *artes mechanicae* in the seventeenth century, see Marcus Popplow, “Diskurse über Technik in der Frühen Neuzeit”, in Herbert Jaumann, Gideon Stiening, eds., *Neue Diskurse der Gelehrtenkultur in der Frühen Neuzeit. Ein Handbuch* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 739–64, see pp. 752–54.
- 21 Pufendorf, *Of the Law of Nature* (1703), Book VII, ch. 9 § 11, p. 230.

22 Ibid.

23 Cf. Arild Saether, *Natural Law and the Origin of Political Economy. Samuel Pufendorf and the History of Economics* (London: Routledge, 2017).

24 Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, eds. R.H. Campbell, A.S. Skinner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 471. Emphasis KS.