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When I began my research, I hoped to investigate the 18th and 19th century origins of modern conceptions of the relation between the poor and the state. In particular, I planned to concentrate on the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, and Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree on poverty and deprivation – and explore how they might have influenced the development of English and American poverty law. Generous support from the History Project and the Institute for New Economic Thinking (INET) allowed me to spend 3 weeks in residence at the Centre for History and Economics and the University of Cambridge (May 12 – June 3, 2016). I spent this time utilizing the resources of the King’s College and Magdalene College libraries, the University library, and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, as well as interacting with students and faculty affiliated with the Cambridge Centre for History and Economics.

As I progressed in my research, I discovered that there was unlikely to be a significant link between the thought of Wollstonecraft, Paine, and Rowntree and Anglo-American poverty law. However, in discussion with 18th century Cambridge historians including Dr Tom Hopkins (a Centre affiliate) and Dr Sylvana Tomaselli (now my M Phil supervisor), a new line of inquiry opened up: the relationship between Wollstonecraft and Adam Smith’s accounts of disadvantage and conceptions of disadvantage in political theory today.

Back in residence at Harvard Law School (September 2016-May 2017), I therefore began to study the idea of disadvantage in historical perspective with a focus on the seminal texts of Mary Wollstonecraft and Adam Smith. Disadvantage on their accounts, I found, encompasses both the lack of access to public goods such as education as well as various forms of social exclusion that is both itself demeaning and further diminishes economic opportunity. More

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recently, Jonathan Wolff and Avner de-Shalit have defined disadvantage as “lack of genuine opportunities for secure functioning.”¹ My question thus became: to what extent were Smith and Wollstonecraft concerned with disadvantage in this sense? Pursuing this question, I realized, would help us better understand Smith and Wollstonecraft on their own terms while illuminating the idea of disadvantage today.

Both Smith and Wollstonecraft highlight the importance of societal arrangements in generating disadvantage. This is the point Adam Smith makes in *The Wealth of Nations* when he notices that “the difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature as from habit, custom, and education” (I.ii.4, p. 120).² In the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792; 1995) Wollstonecraft’s diagnosis of gender disadvantage is similar: the lack of education makes women unequal to the societal roles of Christian, wife, mother, and citizen they are expected to fulfill (pp. 75; 93).³ And if women are weaker, more stupid, and less virtuous than men, it is because their inferior education has made them so.

Moreover, both Smith and Wollstonecraft underscore how cultural attitudes and prejudices entrench disadvantage. As Alan Coffee has argued, Wollstonecraft saw clearly that subjugation could be social rather than legal or political; as a result, women needed not only political rights but also a meaningful opportunity to influence the background social assumptions

¹ Wolff and de-Shalit, *Disadvantage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 16

² Amartya Sen, Introduction, p. xxii, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Penguin Edition, 2009).

³ Sylvana Tomaselli “Reflections on Inequality, Respect, and Love in the Political Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft,” Political Thought and Intellectual History Research Seminar, 10 October, 2016

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that structure politics itself.⁴ Similarly, Adam Smith highlights the importance of social exclusion that results from the lack of what is deemed necessary by society. By necessities, Smith meant not only the commodities that are indispensable for survival, but also “whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without” (V.ii.4, pp. 821). In the times of the ancient Greeks, for instance, a linen shirt was not a necessity. But in Smith's time, a day laborer would be ashamed to appear in public without it (822). Being unable to avoid this kind of shame is part of what it means to be disadvantaged.

I am now pursuing the M Phil in Political Thought and Intellectual History at Trinity College, Cambridge under the supervision of Dr Syvlana Tomaselli. Although I wrote my first M Phil essay on Adam Smith's ethics, I believe that my ongoing historical inquiry into disadvantage – focused on the socio-political and economic views of Wollstonecraft and Smith – is likely to complement my M Phil work and prove productive. As Gareth Stedman Jones has shown, the ideas of Thomas Paine and Condorcet hold tremendous relevance for contemporary debates about the welfare state.⁵ Paine in particular was a pivotal figure in calling poverty an injustice, not only a misfortune, and hence in forging the modern idea of distributive justice.⁶ The recent debate between social egalitarians and distributive egalitarians about the content of equality may similarly benefit from the perspectives of Wollstonecraft and Smith.⁷ If so, this study would help us better understand those seminal thinkers while simultaneously illuminating the idea of disadvantage today.

⁴ Coffee, “Mary Wollstonecraft, Freedom and the Enduring Power of Social Domination,” (2013)

⁵ Stedman Jones, *An End to Poverty?: A Historical Debate* (2004), pp. 225

⁶ Elizabeth Anderson, “Thomas Paine's Agrarian Justice and the Origins of Social Insurance” (forthcoming)

⁷ Amartya Sen, “Equality of What?” (1979); Elizabeth Anderson, “Adam Smith and Equality” (2016)

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