

FORUM

Of Bees and the Garden: Natural and Human Orders in Mandeville and Hayek

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Friedrich Hayek regarded Bernard Mandeville as a founding father of the intellectual lineage to which he belonged. This article offers a countergenealogy of his debt to Mandeville. By reading the two philosophers in parallel, it finds continuities beyond those that Hayek himself identifies, notably in their theorizations of evolutionary progress from animals through human savages to bourgeois civilization. Submission to the market, for Hayek, is essential to the civilizing process. The article reconstructs Mandeville's arguments concerning the similarities between animals and the "lower" classes and races, via the allegory of the beehive. Hayek, likewise, tended to anthropomorphize insects and other animals. In his conception of the evolutionary ladder, robins compare favorably to some human groups. In such ways, the article suggests, ideologies of class and race left an imprint on Mandeville's and Hayek's philosophies of nature and human evolution.

One could be forgiven for raising an eyebrow when reading Friedrich Hayek's encomium to Bernard Mandeville, author of *The Fable of the Bees*. The twentieth-century economist and the eighteenth-century physician philosopher could scarcely have been more different, at least in temperament. Hayek, in personality taciturn, phlegmatic, and polite, and in prose dry and systematic, contrasts with the impish Dutchman, his doggerel verse and jaunty prose bristling with mockery and caricature. Of Mandeville's instinct to *épater les bourgeois* or to satirize ecclesiastical and aristocratic life, Hayek possessed not an ounce. Inasmuch as he ever threw barbs at religious figures, the targets were historical and heretical, notably the Gnostics, Bogomils, and Cathars over their challenges to private property.¹ Nor did the Austrian face campaigns of vilification from the gentlemen's clubs or the pulpits, unlike Mandeville, whose *Fable* faced a sustained and ferocious reaction from Tory sheriffs and the

¹Friedrich Hayek, *The Collected Works of Friedrich August Hayek*, vol. 1, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (London 1988), 51.

established Church.² By the standards of his era Mandeville was a radical “proto-feminist,” and in the 1790s, long after his death, his ideas were linked with the French Revolution.³ Commentaries from the time even held him culpable for stirring “radicalism” among the masses and in the London reforming clubs.⁴ Marx and Engels, no less, were drawn to Mandeville: to his materialism and impiety, and to the “socialist tendencies” they discerned in his “bold” and “honest” portrayal of the machinery of exploitation and deceit beneath the veneer of bourgeois order.⁵

What, then, did Hayek value in the *Fable* and why did its author figure so prominently in Hayek’s philosophy as it evolved in the postwar period? To this there is a well-known response: he hailed Mandeville as an early advocate of a methodological-individualist account of human behavior, an invisible-hand model of market relations, and a theory of cultural evolution. On this basis, the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, followed by Edmund Burke and Carl Menger, went on to elaborate the distinctive intellectual lineage of which Hayek saw himself the inheritor.⁶

Hayek consciously emphasized the more liberal elements of Mandeville’s thought, dismissing or overlooking the mercantilist and *dirigiste* inclinations as residues, and for this he has rightly been taken to task.⁷ Yet his identification of his own worldview as Mandevillesque is not unreasonable. I shall suggest, indeed, that the affinities between the two thinkers go far beyond the areas he identified. These include, in addition to a Whiggish take on economic growth and trickle-down economics, the function that they each accorded to the market system as a disciplining device that enabled *Homo sapiens* to become fully human, the connections between market order and the civilizing process in their respective progress narratives, and their appeal to metaphor and precedent from biological organisms in the construction of moral authority. Before excavating these areas, some scene setting is called for: first, to explain why Hayek turned to Mandeville at a particular juncture in his political and intellectual development, and second, to introduce the *Fable of the Bees*, and the role played by the bee metaphor in framing his theory of social order.

²W. A. Speck, “Bernard Mandeville and the Middlesex Grand Jury,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 11/3 (1978) 362–74; Jacob Chatterjee, “One Hundred and Eighty-Two Overlooked British Comments on Bernard Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees*, 1724–1800,” *Historical Research* 95/269 (2022), 447–70, at 450.

³Eric Schliesser, “Mandeville as Proto-Feminist,” (2016) at <https://digressionsnimpresions.typepad.com/digressionsnimpresions/2016/04/mandeville-as-feminist.html>.

⁴Chatterjee, “One Hundred and Eighty-Two Overlooked British Comments,” 449.

⁵Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Holy Family* (1845), Ch. 6, at www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/holy-family/ch06_3_d.htm; Marx, *The Production Process of Capital: A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1861–3), Ch. 3, at www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1861/economic/ch33.htm; Renee Prendergast, “Bernard Mandeville and the Doctrine of Laissez-Faire,” *Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics* 9/1 (2016) 101–23.

⁶Hayek’s methodological individualism entails the proposition that understanding social phenomena, including spontaneous orders, must set out from analysis of individual behaviour. See Alexander Schaefer, “Hayek’s Twin Ideas: Reconciling Methodological Individualism and Group Selection,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 45 (2021), 1209–26, at 1215–16.

⁷Jacob Viner, “Introduction,” in Bernard Mandeville, *A Letter to Dion* (1953), Project Gutenberg, at www.gutenberg.org/files/29478/29478-h/29478-h.htm; Laurence Moss, “The Subjectivist Mercantilism of Bernard Mandeville,” *International Journal of Social Economics* 14/3–5 (1987), 167–84; Christina Petsoulas, *Hayek’s Liberalism and Its Origins: His Idea of Spontaneous Order and the Scottish Enlightenment* (London, 2001).

Mandeville: a proto-neoliberal?

It was in the early postwar years that Hayek began to engage seriously with Mandeville, in tandem with his movement-building activism. Neoliberalism at the time has been aptly described as “a self-conscious insurgency,” a movement aimed at combating “the enemies of liberal capitalism.”⁸ In Hayek’s diagnosis, the market system that underpins all social progress was under threat. A rescue mission was required to liberate it from suffocation by statism, developmentalism, and socialism. Urgently needed was a worldwide “sweeping-away of the obstacles to free growth.”⁹ In the past, “the spontaneous forces of growth”—by which he meant the market economy—could “assert themselves against the organized coercion of the state,” but by the 1950s the moment was approaching when “the deliberately organized forces of society”—that is, governments with social engineers at the helm—could strangle the “spontaneous forces” that made progress possible.¹⁰

As an insurgent, Hayek drew battle lines and developed strategy. His principal tasks were to discredit the rationality of socialism and to reconstruct a liberal vision of governance and market order. He was acutely sensitive to socialist indictments of the “anarchy” of market order, for this charge was uniquely prominent in critiques of capitalism advanced by Austrian socialists,¹¹ and by the Fabianism to which many English intellectuals of his era adhered.¹² Hayek set out to flip the script. The market system may appear anarchic, yet it is precisely through its anarchy that a deeper order arises, one that, he was later to argue, resonates with the structuring principles of complex systems found universally in nature.

Hayek’s 1945 lecture “Individualism: True and False” set out a dichotomy to guide the neoliberal movement. “False individualists” (or constructivist rationalists) hold that human society can be rationally redesigned, with a view to overcoming the miseries of hunger, poverty, and war.¹³ In treating society much as engineers treat materials, they are prone to govern by decree, exhibiting a “contempt for tradition, custom, and history.”¹⁴ In Hayek’s rogues gallery of rationalists, Descartes was followed by the Encyclopedists (with Rousseau the worst offender) and, rather incongruously, the Physiocrats.¹⁵ In the nineteenth century, the constructivist–rationalist cause was taken up by Henri de Saint-Simon and his school; their “scientistic” variant of the disease,

⁸William Davies, “The New Neoliberalism,” *New Left Review* 101 (2016), 121–34.

⁹Friedrich Hayek, “Why I Am Not a Conservative” (1960), at https://press.uchicago.edu/books/excerpt/2011/hayek_constitution.html.

¹⁰Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960) (London, 2006), 34.

¹¹Examples include Otto Neurath and Otto Bauer, with whose writings Hayek was familiar. Neurath’s objection to capitalism was not its relations of exploitation and domination but its anarchic organization. Gareth Dale, “The Technocratic Socialism of Otto Neurath” (2023), at <https://jacobin.com/2023/02/technocratic-socialism-otto-neurath-utopianism-capitalism>.

¹²Bruce Caldwell and Hansjoerg Klausinger, *Hayek: A Life, 1899–1950* (Chicago, 2022), 319.

¹³Friedrich Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order* (London, 1945), 8.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵On the incongruity see Gareth Dale, “Rule of Nature or Rule of Capital? Physiocracy, Ecological Economics, and Ideology,” *Globalizations* 18/7 (2020), 1230–47.

in turn, infected twentieth-century socialist and social-liberal thought through the writings of Karl Marx and Karl Mannheim, *inter alia*.¹⁶

Counterposed to constructivist rationalism was an empiricist and essentially British tradition that Hayek variously designated “true individualism,” “anti-rationalism” and “critical rationalism.”¹⁷ Skeptical toward the power of reason, its adherents offered a methodologically individualist account of human behavior in which social order arises gradually and unintentionally, as fallible individuals freely pursue their interests. As this lineage’s founding father Hayek nominated Mandeville, alongside John Locke.¹⁸

The constructivists, in Hayek’s portrayal, erred in assuming that social order is designed—whether by Providence, government, or an original social contract. He traced the error to ancient Greece, when philosophers posited social phenomena dichotomously as natural (*physis*) or conventional (*nomos*). Mandeville’s innovation was to discern a third category of social phenomena: the unintended consequences of human action. He understood that social order and civilized culture arise not principally as purposive collective behavior but from the self-interested strivings of multitudinous social actors—the invisible hand, as it later became known. This is the mechanism that Hayek terms “spontaneous order.”¹⁹ In his 1966 lecture on Mandeville, Hayek applauded his recognition of “the spontaneous order which the market produces.”²⁰ Given that the market naturally produces order, government should be constrained to upholding the framework of abstract rules within which individuals can freely act.²¹

Hayek’s evolutionary turn

Hayek appreciated Mandeville as a fellow Whig, as an early theorist of the invisible hand, and for his laissez-faire conclusions.²² Yet his aim went beyond defending market

¹⁶ Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, 4; Friedrich Hayek, “Scientism and the Study of Society, Part III,” *Economica* 11/41 (1944), 27–39; Hayek, *The Counter-revolution of Science: Studies on the Abuse of Reason* (Glencoe, 1952).

¹⁷ Friedrich Hayek, *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (Chicago, 1967), 99; Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 1, *Rules and Order* (London, 1982), 29.

¹⁸ Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, 4.

¹⁹ Hayek borrowed the phrase from fellow Mont Pèlerin Society member Michael Polanyi—or perhaps from Hippolyte Taine via Albert Schatz. If unwittingly from Taine, the borrowing would be ironic, given that Taine was a Saint-Simonian. See Mark Nolan, “Paul Sakmann’s and Albert Schatz’s Mandeville Studies: Their Link to Hayek’s ‘Spontaneous Order’ Theory,” *Journal of the History of Economic Thought* 38/4 (2016), 485–506.

²⁰ Friedrich Hayek, “Dr. Bernard Mandeville. Lecture on a Master Mind” (1966), at www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/2113/52p125.pdf.

²¹ Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order*, 8.

²² I define laissez-faire broadly, as outlined in Gareth Dale, “Justificatory Fables of Ordoliberalism: Laissez-Faire and the ‘Third Way,’” *Critical Sociology* 45/7–8 (2019), 1047–60. Hayek distanced himself from some laissez-faire positions, and yet he did not demur when, upon moving to the USA, he was described as its defender. Jennifer Burns, “Across the Great Divide: Free Markets from Right to Left,” *Modern Intellectual History* 11 (2014), 253–65, at 256. On Hayek’s exaggeration of Mandeville’s laissez-faire inclinations see Nathan Rosenberg, “Mandeville and Laissez-Faire,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 24/2 (1963), 183–96;

economics: he was seeking to define the requisite political and ideological conditions for the self-regulating market, with market society seen as a complex adaptive order and the driver of the civilizing process itself.²³

To develop the argument, an epistemological tweak was required. Early in life, Hayek's strongest suit had been the natural sciences. His father encouraged him to go "insect collecting" and their home, Hayek recalls, filled up with "our collections of insects, minerals, and similar things."²⁴ As a boy, he avidly read scientific literature—including Maurice Maeterlinck's *The Life of the Bee* (as well as *Maya the Bee*, a children's story).²⁵ The family's circle of friends included scientists, such as the insect paleontologist August Handlirsch, and it is little surprise that his brothers went on to become professors in anatomy and chemistry, or that one of his own children became an entomologist.²⁶ Hayek's first epistemological passion was for the positivist empiricism of Ernst Mach; his attraction to the marginalist school of economics was that it appeared more "scientific" than rival schools, and when he later commenced a career in economics he believed strongly "in the universal validity of the methods of the natural sciences."²⁷

In the interwar decades that faith was destabilized somewhat, through encounters with positivistically minded Marxists such as Otto Neurath in Austria and Jack Haldane and John Bernal in England. Whenever "a natural scientist seriously tries to apply his professional habits of thought to a social problem," Hayek now intoned, "the

Laurence Moss, "The Subjectivist Mercantilism of Bernard Mandeville," *International Journal of Social Economics* 14/3–5 (1987), 167–84; Laurence Dickey, "Pride, Hypocrisy and Civility in Mandeville's Social and Historical Theory," *Critical Review* 4/3 (1990) 387–431.

²³There is ambiguity here: does Hayek see the market as a specific type of order, or as the environment in which the evolutionary selection of orders unfolds? See Geoffrey Hodgson, *Economics and Evolution: Bringing Life Back into Economics* (Ann Arbor, 1993), 176.

²⁴Caldwell and Klausinger, *Hayek*, 40, 77.

²⁵Were this paper psychoanalytic in focus, Hayek's reading of these two books would have taken a prominent role, with Hayek's anthropomorphic inclinations the subject. *Maya the Bee* was one of the most popular books among German soldiers during the First World War, and presumably among Austrian soldiers too—of whom Hayek was one. Its content is militaristic, advocating a nationalism blended with racial superiority. Unsurprisingly, its author went on to join the NSDAP. *The Life of the Bee* is almost equally anthropomorphic, in ways that, despite its author's socialism, would have resonated with Hayek. Maeterlinck envisages evolution, in bees and primates alike, as a progressive process that exhibits a "general, constant direction"; it "tends palpably to lessen the struggle, insecurity, and wretchedness of the race, to augment authority and comfort." Maeterlinck presents bees as having evolved from a "primitive" species (comparable to human "cave-dwellers") to the advanced honeybee. The latter lives like those "fortunate" humans who inhabit "great cities." These "modern urban" bees are lauded by Maeterlinck as possessing the "spirit of initiative" and an "enterprising intellect," as well as a sterling "obedience to duty"—and those with the greatest sense of entrepreneurship and duty do the most to "raise the destiny of their species." See Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Life of the Bee* (1901), Project Gutenberg (2003), at www.gutenberg.org/files/4511/4511-h/4511-h.htm; Waldemar Bonsels, *The Adventures of Maya the Bee* (1912) (New York, 1951); Kaspar Maase, "Warencharakter, Serialität und Bürgerlichkeit: Die Biene Maja als Klassiker deutscher Populärkultur," in Harald Weiss, ed., *100 Jahre Biene Maja: Vom Kinderbuch zum Kassenschlager* (Heidelberg, 2014), 79–96; Caldwell and Klausinger, *Hayek*, 103.

²⁶Caldwell and Klausinger, *Hayek*, 43.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 127, 138, 547.

result has almost invariably been disastrous.”²⁸ The essay in which Hayek developed this critique in the early 1940s, “Scientism and the Study of Society,” targeted social theorists who “slavishly” imitated the language and methods of the natural sciences.²⁹ Such trespasses, from Saint-Simon onwards, tended to justify social engineering and totalitarianism. Yet when, ten years later, his research program broadened out from the communicative function of the price system to the knowledge transmission processes of “spontaneous orders,” including studies in psychology and systems, he began to rethink his categories, and to emphasize a new and different line of division: between simple and complex orders.³⁰ These cut across a range of natural and social phenomena; the trespass of social science onto the natural terrain and vice versa was no longer a concern.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Hayek’s inquiries focused increasingly on the evolutionary mechanisms “by which rules, morals, norms, and established practices emerge and operate in governing social order.”³¹ In one representative essay, the examples he gives of complex orders range from galaxies to the human brain, and include diverse subjects of social self-organization: economic actors in market society, “primitive men,” “higher animals,” and bees.³² Much as Mandeville emphasizes continuity in insect–human passions, Hayek looks to insect societies for “instructive” examples of spontaneous complex order in polycentric structures—for example, “the abstract and more complex orders based on a division of labor which we find in such insect societies as those of bees, ants, and termites.” The activities of the worker bee, much as those of individual humans, “could be explained by comparatively simple rules of individual conduct, if we only knew them.”³³ In short, from the 1950s onward, Hayek treated self-organization as a condition of possibility that, in Max Hancock’s paraphrase, “suspends individual liberty, markets, and biological life in a unified field,” such that “subterranean pathways of resemblance” connect the evolution of biological life, group behavior in animals, and the spontaneous order of the market.³⁴

In bringing evolutionary biology together with economic theory under the rubric of evolutionary self-organization, Hayek was emphasizing the *scientific* standing of his theory of order. Market competition and natural selection appeared as comparable ordering mechanisms, each operating in unintended ways that ensure continual progress.³⁵ Within the “biological and social spheres” alike, “spontaneous orders” form as “orderly wholes because each element responds to its particular environment

²⁸Ibid., 547.

²⁹Hayek, “Scientism.”

³⁰Bruce Caldwell, “Some Reflections on F. A. Hayek’s *The Sensory Order*,” *Journal of Bioeconomics* 6/3 (2004) 239–54.

³¹E. C. Skarbek, “F. A. Hayek and the Early Foundations of Spontaneous Order,” in Sandra Peart and David Levy, eds., *F. A. Hayek and the Modern Economy: Economic Organization and Activity* (Basingstoke, 2013), 101–17, at 105.

³²Hayek, *The Market and Other Orders*, 281.

³³Ibid., 281.

³⁴Max Hancock, “Spontaneity and Control: Friedrich Hayek, Stafford Beer, and the Principles of Self-Organization,” *Modern Intellectual History* 22/1–2 (2024), 211–30, at 222, 228.

³⁵Naomi Beck, “In Search of the Proper Scientific Approach: Hayek’s Views on Biology, Methodology, and the Nature of Economics,” *Science in Context* 22/4 (2009), 567–85, at 584.

in accordance with definite rules.”³⁶ The central mechanism in both biological and socioeconomic fields of evolution is selection adjudicated by survival and reproductive advantage. These, in the natural and market realms alike, “rest on competition.”³⁷ Hayek’s account, as Carla Ibled observes, dismisses the brutality of market processes and the polarization of winners and losers as the “unfortunate consequence of the natural selection that accompanies spontaneous evolution. In other words, they belong to the realm of natural necessity.” The selective mechanisms of the catallaxy are harsh, but they are justified by the prosperity that they enable.³⁸

It was above all in theorizing jointly the operation of markets and evolution as a civilizing process that Hayek regards Mandeville’s work as seminal, and this explains his growing interest in him, culminating in his lecture on Mandeville in 1966. Through his studies of the interaction between patterned regularities in human behavior and the regularity of the resulting structures, Hayek proposed in the lecture, Mandeville had discerned the mechanisms of cultural evolution: the “spontaneous growth of orderly social structures,” including markets and money, as well as language, law, morals, reason, and technological knowledge.³⁹ It is a striking claim, given that Mandeville was writing long before Alfred Russel Wallace, Charles Darwin, and even Lamarck. There is no question that changing understandings of the natural world influence conceptions of social organization, but the concept of evolution applied to society is more normally associated with the era of Wallace and Darwin. Sophus Reinert, for example, contrasts traditional conceptions of the harmonious body politic with newer understandings of social organization. The former likens the interdependence of individuals in society to the interdependence of bodily organs. Its “traditional cosmological frame of reference was, with the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species*, overcome by the emergence of evolutionary social systems.”⁴⁰ As the first thinker of the new era, Reinert proposes Thorstein Veblen. Social behavior, for Veblen, evolves “in a cumulative way, according to cultural inheritance and institutional transmission.”⁴¹

Hayek’s claim on Mandeville’s behalf, then, is radical indeed: he was the first to have theorized “the twin ideas of evolution and spontaneous order,” thereby opening the way for an enriched understanding of the interactions, in biological and social structures, “between the regularity of the conduct of the elements and the regularity of the resulting structure.”⁴² In theorizing social development as a cumulative process, its progress facilitated by the competitive selection of rules, norms, and institutions,

³⁶ Hayek, quoted in Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA, 2018), 233.

³⁷ Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit*, 23.

³⁸ Carla Ibled, “The ‘Optimistic Cruelty’ of Hayek’s Market Order: Neoliberalism, Pain and Social Selection,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 40/3 (2023) 81–101, at 5.

³⁹ Hayek, “Bernard Mandeville,” 129.

⁴⁰ Sophus Reinert, “Darwin and the Body Politic: Schäffle, Veblen, and the Shift of Biological Metaphor in Economics,” Tallinn University of Technology Working Papers in Technology Governance and Economic Dynamics 08 (2006).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Hayek, *The Market and Other Orders*, 289.

Mandeville was proposing an analogous mechanism to what in biology, since Darwin and Wallace, has been known as natural selection. Indeed, by instigating the study of sociocultural evolution, the Dutchman was behind some of the greatest of breakthroughs in biological science.⁴³ “It is probable,” Hayek proposed (without offering evidence), that Darwin’s theory of biological evolution “was derived from the cultural evolution concept of Bernard Mandeville.”⁴⁴

From clocks to bees

Before looking more closely at Mandeville’s account of the part played by market forces in cultural and biological evolution, it is instructive to look at his use of metaphor and allegory in relating the workings of society and economy to the natural world. In his native Netherlands and in England, and in parts of France too, market forces were transforming economic life, and metaphors seeking to make sense of the new order proliferated. Some drew on William Harvey’s studies of the circulation of blood (1616), which had offered a newly mechanical understanding of the interconnection of organs via the flow of blood.⁴⁵ Others took astronomy, hydrology, and mechanics as reference points, as in the mercantilist economist Gerard de Malynes’s likening of the balance-of-payments system to clockwork, or Edward Misselden’s likening of the balance of trade to rivers and oceans.⁴⁶ Hydrological metaphors featured, similarly, in Dudley North’s account of economic processes.⁴⁷ The “ebbing and flowing of Money,” this early advocate of laissez-faire proposed, “supplies and accommodates itself, without any aid of Politicians. For when Money grows scarce, and begins to be hoarded, then forthwith the Mint works, till the occasion be filled up again.”⁴⁸ The tidal allusion doubtless took inspiration from Isaac Newton’s discovery a few years earlier that tides are pulled by the Moon, as set out in his equilibrium theory of tides. North’s law operates through individuals—taking coins to the Mint and so on—but each is acting in self-interest, and not with the aim of a general design. A self-regulating system emerged from the process of exchange between profit-motivated individuals.⁴⁹

In such ways, seventeenth-century thinkers were taking inspiration from scientific discoveries and theorems to portray the emerging market economy as a law-governed system within a mechanical universe engineered by God—the divine watchmaker. “The course of Nature is exact and regular,” proposed the theologian Thomas Burnet in

⁴³ Hayek, “Bernard Mandeville,” 127; Hayek, *Studies in Philosophy*, 77, 86.

⁴⁴ Hayek, *Rules and Order*, 154; and similar in Hayek, “Bernard Mandeville,” 141.

⁴⁵ Franz Borkenau, *Der Übergang vom feudalen zum bürgerlichen Weltbild: Studien zur Geschichte der Philosophie der Manufakturperiode* (1934) (Darmstadt, 1971), 5.

⁴⁶ Malynes in Robert Brown, *The Nature of Social Laws: From Machiavelli to Mill* (Cambridge, 1984), 43; Edward Misselden, “The Circle of Commerce or the Ballance of Trade” (1623), in Lars Magnusson, ed., *Mercantilism*, vol. 1 (London, 1995), 217–36, at 228.

⁴⁷ William Letwin, *The Origins of Scientific Economics: English Economic Thought, 1660–1776* (London, 1963), 198.

⁴⁸ North quoted in Brown, *The Nature of Social Laws*, 60.

⁴⁹ Bert Tieben, *The Concept of Equilibrium in Different Economic Traditions: An Historical Investigation* (Cheltenham, 2012), 107.

Sacred Theory of Earth, with animals acting as “Nature’s Clockwork.”⁵⁰ From imagining the universe as a machine it was a short step to envisaging society and economy as determined by lawful regularities akin to those that govern the natural world. Depicting society as an aggregation of individuals who predicably respond to incentives represented an overturning of traditional thought on social order, which tended to present individuals as status-bound within an organic community.⁵¹ Boisguilbert described the economy as a realm of ceaseless motion wherein myriad individuals’ self-interested acts interact much as cogs within the “machine” of a watch.⁵² Just as Lake Geneva provided a reservoir that stabilizes the level of the Rhone, he suggested, market trade provides a natural mechanism for smoothing price fluctuations. Nature and Providence ensure harmony and equilibrium; hence his famous phrase of 1707, “on laisse faire la nature.”⁵³

A few years later, Mandeville, too, likened the workings of society to machinery. In the *Fable* he invokes a music box: after its mechanism has been designed and the components correctly fitted, it will play tunes “with great exactness.” In like manner, once a society’s legal system has been established and its laws “brought to as much Perfection, as Art and Human Wisdom can carry them, the whole Machine may be made to play of itself, with as little Skill, as is required to wind up a Clock.”⁵⁴ But Mandeville’s major lines of enquiry, on human behavior and *evolving* forms of social order, were ill-suited to representation through hydrological or horological tropes. His recourse instead was to the beehive. Of course, *prima facie* it too was an unsuitable candidate. The beehive was a classic metaphor used to portray social order as the dutiful pursuit of their objectives by each individual within an organically integrated social hierarchy, with each subordinating their private interests to the monarch and to the social whole. It epitomizes the ideological operation of naturalizing structures of social power, in that it recruits a trope from the natural world to justify a particular form of human order. Bees were widely depicted as, by nature, orderly and chaste, virtuous and industrious; their hive a harmonious corporate body in stasis.⁵⁵ A well-known English example from the seventeenth century was Charles Butler’s classic text *The Feminine Monarchie*, which presented apian society as a microcosm of the divine order, and one that brought the bonus of supplying humans with a “Store of Delicate Sweets.”⁵⁶ In using the metaphor

⁵⁰ Thomas Burnet, *The Sacred Theory of the Earth* (London, 1691), available at www.cedarcitylodge.org/books/sacred_theory_of_earth.pdf.

⁵¹ Andrea Finkelstein, *Harmony and the Balance: An Intellectual History of Seventeenth-Century English Economic Thought* (Ann Arbor, 2000); Richard Olson, *The Emergence of the Social Sciences, 1642–1792* (New York, 1993).

⁵² Tieben, *Concept of Equilibrium*, 113.

⁵³ Paul Christensen, “Epicurean and Stoic Sources for Boisguilbert’s Physiological and Hippocratic Vision of Nature and Economics,” *History of Political Economy* 35/Supplement (2003), 101–28, at 115.

⁵⁴ Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 2 vols. (Indianapolis, 1988), 323.

⁵⁵ Nicole Jacobs, *Bees in Early Modern Transatlantic Literature: Sovereign Colony* (London, 2020), 1.

⁵⁶ Frederick Prete, “Can Females Rule the Hive? The Controversy over Honey Bee Gender Roles in British Beekeeping Texts of the Sixteenth–Eighteenth Centuries,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 24/1 (1991), 113–44; Joseph Campana, “The Bee and the Sovereign: Political Entomology and the Problem of Scale,” *Shakespeare Studies* 41 (2013), 94–113, at 99.

to cast human mores in natural form, Christian moralists were insinuating that human social hierarchy is blessed, in that it mirrors the divinely ordered natural realm.

As Danielle Allen has argued, Mandeville discerned that what is at stake in depicting human society as a virtuous beehive is not so much the virtues themselves but “the very idea of order, the process of constructing categories and delimiting of differences, that grounds the virtues.”⁵⁷ He uses the metaphor with his own ideological purpose: to naturalize, through the beehive metaphor, a new and bourgeois image of the interconnection of nature with culture. This he does by presenting the bees as simultaneously more human and more animal than in traditional imagery. That is to say, the human-bees, once they enter society, retain their animal nature—with all its “appetites” and “impulses”—while also creating a new system, a new “oeconomy” of “interconnected, passionate individuals.”⁵⁸

Yet Mandeville’s use of the analogy is also satirically upending it, and in multiple ways. His bee society is only “natural” when its social organization *disintegrates*, into a swarm. In its hive phase, it is artificially organized, consciously crafted through laws and norms; its workings are even likened to machinery.⁵⁹ Its order arises not naturally from the divinely authored dutiful instincts of each creature but circuitously through the interactions of their “vicious” and self-interested acts.⁶⁰ This dedication to egoistic selfhood is where the grumbling hive most strikingly departs from its predecessors, in which bees labored altruistically for the common good.⁶¹ And whereas in traditional accounts the division of apian labor is fair and just, in Mandeville’s hive the toiling millions labor to supply the gluttonous minority.⁶² Whereas traditional political bestiaries associated bees with virtues antithetical to luxury consumption, namely productivity, frugality, and even an abhorrence of “luxury and delicate living,” Mandeville’s are the antithesis: they, or at least the lucky ones, “liv’d in Luxury and Ease.”⁶³

In one respect, however, Mandeville’s hive does repeat earlier tropes of apian behavior. This is in the coupling of private vices and public benefits.⁶⁴ It is hinted at, for example, in the letters of the seventeenth-century philosopher Margaret Cavendish, in which she proposes that while most people are “Lazy to the Publick Good, yet they are Active and Industrious for their Private Pleasure, or their Particular Designs [and] their Ambitious and Covetous Ends.” Unlike a beehive, which contains “more Bees than Drones ... amongst Mankind there are more Drones than Bees, that is, there are

⁵⁷ Danielle Allen, “Burning *The Fable of the Bees*: The Incendiary Authority of Nature,” in Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal, eds., *The Moral Authority of Nature* (Chicago, 2004), 74–99, at 78–9.

⁵⁸ Elisabeth Wallmann, “The Human–Animal Debate and the Enlightenment Body Politic: Emilie Du Châtelet’s Reading of Mandeville’s *Fable of the Bees*,” *Early Modern French Studies* 42/10 (2020), 86–103.

⁵⁹ William Farrell, “The Role of Mandeville’s Bee Analogy in ‘The Grumbling Hive,’” *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 25/3 (1985), 511–27, at 526.

⁶⁰ Mandeville, *Fable*, 2: 64.

⁶¹ Farrell, “Mandeville’s Bee Analogy,” 517.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 514; Mandeville, *Fable*, 1: 17.

⁶⁴ Sylvie Kleiman-Lafon and Charles Wolfe, “Unsystematic Vitality: From Early Modern Beeswarms to Contemporary Swarm Intelligence,” in Peter Fratzl, Michael Friedman, Karin Krauthausen, and Wolfgang Schäffner, eds., *Active Materials* (Berlin, 2021), 259–98, at 281.

more Unprofitable, than Good Commonwealths men.”⁶⁵ Mandeville, of course, gives this a creative twist: the good commonwealth is generated from the aggregate of private desires.

Luxury and its discontents

With Cavendish, Mandeville disparages the drones. He likens them—in anticipation of the “welfare dependency” thesis—to the idle beneficiaries of charity. The bees that he presents as model citizens are they that actively promote “Luxury.” In this, his pamphlets contributed to two ideological shifts. One concerned legitimation. In earlier social orders, rulers had generally legitimated their power with reference to landed property and the protection they supposedly provided to subordinates, a stance buttressed by ecclesiastical authority. By the eighteenth century, ruling-class self-justification was shifting to the provision of management and the possession of wealth. The other, relatedly, was the debate over the effect upon morality of “luxury” (i.e. prosperity, affluence, and lavish consumption). Early eighteenth-century Britain was witnessing rapid commercial expansion, with an influx of colonial “luxuries.” “The interest of the state being thereby involved in this increasing trade,” remarks Frederick Kaye, “the safeguarding of this activity became naturally a chief end of political theory.”⁶⁶ Against this, the factions that gathered within the “country party” expressed skepticism toward the new rule of money and its associated avarice and conspicuous consumption.⁶⁷ They counterposed virtue and frugality to commerce and mobile capital, the latter being identified with rootless cosmopolitans: stockjobbers and plutocrats, Huguenots and Jews.⁶⁸ To the country party, these urban parvenus appeared unruly and licentious, corrosive of civic virtue and social order. Their voices grew to a clamor during the financial crises of 1696, 1710, and 1720.⁶⁹

Within this debate, Mandeville’s *Grumbling Hive*, and the *Fable*, took up the cause of Luxury. Against traditional wisdom—from Socrates to Seneca, St Augustine, the Puritans and all—Mandeville insisted on the separation of economics and ethics. “Religion is one thing, Trade is another,” and the latter, self-interested economic acts, forms the true basis of social order.⁷⁰ If we redefine luxury as merely consumption by rich individuals, rather than as spending beyond subsistence needs, he reasoned, “then there is no luxury at all; for if the wants of men are innumerable, then what ought to supply them has no bounds.”⁷¹ Luxury, along with avarice and pride, were hardly vices at all. In the commercial order of Mandeville’s day, with the producing classes increasingly dispossessed by capitalists and their states, elite greed could be framed in beneficent guise, as the demand that affords the masses gainful employment.

⁶⁵Margaret Cavendish, *Sociable Letters* (1664), ed. James Fitzmaurice (London, 2012), 220.

⁶⁶Frederick Kaye, “Introduction” (1924), in Mandeville, *Fable*, 1: xvii–cxivli, at xcvi.

⁶⁷Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1991).

⁶⁸E. G. Hundert, *Enlightenment’s Fable: Bernard Mandeville and the Discovery of Society* (Cambridge, 1994), 12.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 12.

⁷⁰Mandeville, *Fable*, 1: 356.

⁷¹*Ibid.*

This notion forms the core of the growth paradigm, a modern ideology to the formation of which Mandeville contributed influentially, not least by justifying the maxim that any act conducive to national prosperity is virtuous. Growth is good, and “government’s first care” should be “to promote as great a variety of manufactures, arts, and handicrafts, as human wit can invent,” and “to encourage agriculture and fishery in all their branches, that the whole earth may be forced to exert itself as well as man.”⁷² That Mandeville enjoined lawgivers to “force” the earth “to exert itself,” as Nicole Jacobs observes, appealed to the “developing anthropocentrism” of his era, one that advocated “relentless growth among dwindling resources” as a plausible aim for the grumbling hive.⁷³

If this was Mandeville’s growth theory viewed from the supply side, then his more original and better-known contribution was from the demand side. Insofar as his protagonists of growth were not the worker or landowner but the consumer, he prefigures marginalism, and it is hardly a stretch to see him as the originator of trickle-down economics. Greed is good; indeed, it is so *because* it stimulates growth. In Mandeville’s world, prosperity usurps God as the umpire of ethics. Consequently, frugality and self-sufficiency are deplorable: they enervate society and enfeeble the state.⁷⁴ Far from luxury rendering a nation effete and decadent, as feared by the traditionalists, it is the very engine of imperial power. The empire’s prowess, ultimately, depends not upon land but on demand from the nation’s dandies and popinjays for ever more baubles and trinkets: “the sensual courtier that sets no limits to his luxury; the fickle strumpet that invents new fashions every week; the haughty duchess that in equipage, entertainments, and all her behavior, would imitate a princess; the profuse rake and lavish heir, that scatter about their money without wit or judgment,” and so on. Thanks to the profligacy of these “monsters,” the “multitudes of working poor” can procure a livelihood and the state finds itself “raised into a rich and mighty kingdom.”⁷⁵

Paradoxes of self-denial

A keystone of the growth ideology adumbrated by Mandeville—and later developed by Hayek—is the idea that the driver of growth is the expenditures of England’s wealthy elite. Their avarice is virtuous: it yields growth. Yet Mandeville simultaneously develops a contradictory position, and in this too he is followed by Hayek. This is the thesis that the wealthy elite represent the vanguard of historical progress, of the evolution of civilization itself, thanks to their thrift. In accounts of Hayek’s interpretation of Mandeville, this problematic area has been neglected.

Mandeville, although in his youth taking a Cartesian position on animals (organic machines, without mind or soul), later came to recognize that animals, many at least, do have minds, share passions with humans, and indeed are driven by them “in a way that is not all too different from animals.”⁷⁶ Envy, for example, is “visible in brute-beasts”

⁷²Ibid., 115–16.

⁷³Jacobs, *Bees in Early Modern*, 168.

⁷⁴Mandeville, *Fable*, 1: 223.

⁷⁵Ibid., 137.

⁷⁶Wallmann, “Human–Animal Debate,” 87.

such as horses and dogs, and in children, too—it must therefore be “rivetted in human nature.”⁷⁷ The bees of his *Fable*, it follows, should not be read simply as “bestiary models” that stand in for human beings, but rather as actual insects that live “like Men.”⁷⁸ Humans differ from bees not so much in that they are naturally a higher species but in that their powers, at a crucial point in their evolution, were “artfully managed” in order to suppress and redirect their primary drives.⁷⁹ In this argument, civilization is identified with the simultaneous evolution of morality and economic growth and class hierarchy.

Prior to that moment, in Mandeville’s speculative history of humanity, solitary primitive men subsisted like wild bees. Not unlike Hayek, Mandeville describes savagery as a condition close to nature, a stage intermediate between beast and civilized man. In their primitive form, as savages, humans were “timorous” creatures defined by “Stupidity.” They were childlike, in thrall to their uneducated passions.⁸⁰ Although sharing with civilized adults the emotion of pride, it was not restrained by “any sense of honor.”⁸¹ Savages were “untaught animals ... only solicitous of pleasing themselves.” Indeed, he adds, humans are, of all creatures, especially ill-suited to forming social bonds, given that the “desire for more” is core to their nature;⁸² they have many “appetites to gratify,” resulting in envy and conflict.⁸³ How, then, did such “untaught” creatures evolve the capacities for society, and ultimately of civilization?

Central to Mandeville’s account of the evolution from primitive society to civilization is a Hobbesian diagnosis of the social problems that arise when the savage gains “Knowledge.” Once this forbidden fruit is in his hand, “his Desires are enlarged (and consequently his Wants and Appetites are multiply’d),” and this, in turn, gives rise to scarcity and conflict.⁸⁴ At this juncture, a progressive transition to society, and ultimately to civilization, required that humans, or at least some of them, were able to *check* and *manage* their passions and appetites. Mandeville proposes that the pivotal moment arrived with the division of European society into classes. The designers of human society divided the population into “two Classes, vastly differing from one another: The one consisted of abject, low-minded people [who] differ’d from Brutes [i.e. animals] in nothing but their outward Figure,” while the other consisted of “lofty high-spirited Creatures.”⁸⁵

Strikingly, the gap that Mandeville draws between lower-class humans and other animals is narrower than that between the two classes of humans. It is indexed by the tendency, or not, to follow the somatic passions: the lower classes are slaves to their

⁷⁷ Mandeville, *Fable*, 1: 137.

⁷⁸ Farrell, “Mandeville’s Bee Analogy,” 515.

⁷⁹ Hundert, *Enlightenment’s Fable*, 52.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁸¹ Mandeville, *Fable*, 2: 92.

⁸² Francesca Pongiglione and Mikko Tolonen, “Mandeville on Charity Schools: Happiness, Social Order and the Psychology of Poverty,” *Erasmus Journal for Philosophy and Economics* 9/1 (2016), 82–100.

⁸³ Mandeville, *Fable*, 1: 206.

⁸⁴ Pongiglione and Tolonen, “Mandeville on Charity Schools.”

⁸⁵ Mandeville, *Fable*, 1: 43–4. On “brute” deployed as a trans-species term to denigrate and dehumanize see Amitav Ghosh, *The Nutmeg’s Curse: Parables for a Planet in Crisis* (London, 2022), Ch. 15.

appetites; the upper classes master theirs.⁸⁶ Only the upper class learnt self-denial and thereby gained the right to rule, while the hoi polloi remained, like animals, enslaved “to every gross desire.”⁸⁷ The evolution of civilization, then, hinged on the renunciation of selfish immediacy.⁸⁸ It required that individuals, in order to gain greater long-term prosperity, subdue their egotistical impulses and acquiesce to management by the governing class.⁸⁹ The latter, by their “legislative tact and ideological cunning,” shepherded the flock toward society and civilization.⁹⁰ As depicted in Mandeville’s imagined reconstruction of this historic moment, “The Chief Thing which Lawgivers and other wise Men, that have labored for the Establishment of Society, have endeavour’d, has been to make the People they were to govern believe that it was more beneficial for every Body to conquer than indulge his Appetites.”⁹¹

In Hayek the account is similar, except that the “innate instincts” of savages are understood as geared to group solidarity, in contrast to civilized individuals who have learnt to obey the abstract rules of private property and market exchange.⁹² The principal function of the rules of civilization, for Hayek, is “to restrain the innate or natural instincts” in a manner that ultimately makes the Great Society possible. (By “natural,” here, Hayek takes care to remind readers that he means brute, merely animal.)⁹³ In his account, more than in Mandeville’s, the market is the central actor, the mechanism of discipline and restraint. “It was men’s submission to the impersonal forces of the market,” he argued in *The Road to Serfdom*, that enabled civilization to evolve.⁹⁴ These acts of repressing our primitive socialist instincts to construct market society, in Hayek’s emphasis, occur on an ongoing basis. It is in obeying the rules of private property “that we are every day helping to build something that is greater than any one [*sic*] of us can fully comprehend.”⁹⁵ Civilization itself, he later expanded the point, “rests on the fact that the individuals have learnt to *restrain their desires* for particular objects and to submit to generally recognized rules of just conduct.”⁹⁶ This is, moreover, why Hayek reserves such contempt for adherents of the 1960s counterculture (“non-domesticated savages”), for progressive social scientists (who inspire “a noticeable proportion of today’s terrorists”), and for Freud (the great “destroyer of culture”).⁹⁷

⁸⁶ Mandeville, *Fable*, 1: 43.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Tony Brown, “How Savages Came into the World (Bernard Mandeville),” *The Eighteenth Century* 59/4 (2018), 471–91, at 482.

⁸⁹ Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2001), 625.

⁹⁰ Hundert, *Enlightenment’s Fable*.

⁹¹ Mandeville, *Fable*, 1: 42.

⁹² Friedrich Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol 3, *The Political Order of a Free People* (London, 1982), 160.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (1944) (London, 1986), 151.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁹⁶ Hayek, *The Political Order of a Free People*, 7, added emphasis.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 174–6.

In advancing the case for the restraint of the passions, Mandeville and Hayek almost literally want to have their cake and eat it. In their accounts of the civilizing process, they “have” it: the upper classes and market innovators are the agents of progress. Guided by lofty ethics and steely willpower they defer their gratification, in contrast to the infantile grasping plebs. In their accounts of the workings of capitalist economy, they “eat” it. The upper classes are the drivers of economic growth, hoovering up the cake with such dedication that the *pâtisseries* have to continually hire new hands.

Market gardening

In Mandeville’s and Hayek’s stories of human evolution, the role of lawgivers is critical to guiding the transition from savage to civilization and beyond. Yet the process rested on the suppression of the appetites of the many in order to ensure the luxury and ease of the few. Both thinkers preached frugality to the poor and prodigality to the rich, and neither had time for the penniless masses, who should uncomplainingly submit to their lot.⁹⁸ To police and control such a steeply class-divided population required vigilance and sharp blades. In Mandeville, the sadistic forms this takes, as David McNally has observed, are especially egregious, notably in his advocacy of consigning poor citizens’ children to “Dirty Slavish Work” for as many hours as possible.⁹⁹ He not only supported the death penalty but advocated the dissection of the bodies of thieves, as a punishment that, as if to preempt Kafka’s *In the Penal Colony*, amounted to the reading of “lectures upon their bodies.”¹⁰⁰

Mandeville’s advocacy of the strong-armed state sits closer to Hobbes than to liberal theorists such as Adam Smith, in whose view the “taming and controlling” of the human passions is effected principally by market forces, and not state violence.¹⁰¹ With Hayek, a twentieth-century neoliberal strategist concerned with defending bourgeois hierarchy in the face of fissiparous tendencies, the arc curves back toward Mandeville, even if the vocabulary is less lurid. The lawgiver’s task, for Hayek, is to “induce” the establishment of order in ways conducive to market economics.¹⁰² In *The Road to Serfdom* he elaborates with a horticultural metaphor: market society is like a garden. It is natural, not in the pejorative sense (for Hayek) of wild or primordial, but rather that it grows organically, analogously to biological evolution. Gardens and societies alike require disciplined cultivation. Much as gardeners “create the conditions most favourable” to the growth of plants, so the liberal governing class establishes a market framework conducive to growth.¹⁰³ In his 1955 essay “Degrees of Explanation” he developed the argument. Activities in spheres that are complex and with limited scope for detailed predictions are better described “by the term *cultivation* than by the familiar term ‘control’—cultivation in the sense in which the farmer or gardener cultivates

⁹⁸ Mandeville, *Fable*, 2: 358 and *passim*.

⁹⁹ David McNally, *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires, and Global Capitalism* (Leiden, 2011), 19.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Fredric Jameson quoted in Neil Davidson, *How Revolutionary were the Bourgeois Revolutions?* (Chicago, 2012), 47.

¹⁰² Hayek, *Constitution of Liberty*, 141.

¹⁰³ Hayek, *Road to Serfdom*, 71.

his plants, where he can control only some of the determining circumstances, and in which the wise legislator or statesman will probably attempt to cultivate rather than control the forces of the social process.”¹⁰⁴ In gardens, the lawmakers impose their patterns with force: their heavy hands must uproot the weeds of constructivism and socialism before the Garden of Eden can yield its harvest.¹⁰⁵ The line dividing Hayek from rationalist constructivism is, here at least, blurred.

More concerning, the metaphor hints strongly at an unconscious excess. Gardeners tear out the weeds and thin the seedlings, to leave space for the more vigorous plants. This is of a piece with Hayek’s defense of market forces: they clear out the dead wood, separating the profitable from the unprofitable to enable accelerated growth. For Hayek, some individuals, like garden plants, are “superior” to others, their preeminence registered by the impersonal workings of the market order. As Ibled has argued, in crediting the market system with the task of sorting the wheat from the chaff, Hayek can conveniently avoid “being accused of aristocratic, not to say eugenicist and racist, elitism—since he claims he is not in a position to determine the metrics for selection.” At this point “an affective atmosphere of cruelty” is hard to miss.¹⁰⁶ For Hayek the role of the market is to “help to spontaneously determine a hierarchy between useful and non-useful lives so that the latter may be disposed of when situations occur where ‘a painful choice between competing aims’ needs to be made in the name of evolution.”¹⁰⁷ By way of example, consider his comments on what he calls “overpopulation” in the Third World: “there is only one way to curb overpopulation, namely, that only those peoples who are able to feed themselves will subsist and increase.”¹⁰⁸

Socialists and other animals: taming the savage

For Mandeville and Hayek, the direction of cultural evolution is toward greater complexity, culminating in commercial capitalism, but vigilance is necessary, given the ever-present possibility of a relapse into savagery. For Mandeville, relapse is visualized as a moralism-driven retreat from luxury—and therefore from civilization. In the Grumbling Hive the now virtuous bees end up abandoning the hive and returning to their primitive and unorganized condition, the swarm. Having been persuaded by moralists (or by Jove, in the *Fable*) to abandon their natural passions, they sink back into a state of nature. For Hayek, savagery’s recrudescence is socialism, with its appeal to primitive instincts, “tribal ethics,” and “tribal sentiments.”¹⁰⁹ Just as the repression

¹⁰⁴Friedrich Hayek, *The Collected Works of F. A. Hayek*, vol. 15, *The Market and Other Orders*, ed. Bruce Caldwell (London, 2014), 210.

¹⁰⁵Geoffrey Hodgson, “The Political Economy of Utopia,” *Review of Social Economy* 53/2 (1995), 195–214, at 205.

¹⁰⁶Ibled, “Optimistic Cruelty,” 7.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 15.

¹⁰⁸Friedrich Hayek, “Den Markt besser begreifen,” *WirtschaftsWoche* (1977), at www.wiwo.de/politik/deutschland/nachdruck-aus-heft-8-1977-den-markt-besser-begreifen/5678832.html, translation by the author.

¹⁰⁹Friedrich Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 2, *The Mirage of Social Justice* (London, 1982), 133.

of instincts brings economic growth and civilization, the liberation of instincts that a socialist system would inaugurate would trigger economic decline, hurling Western civilization “back to the state of savages.”¹¹⁰

Savagery, for both thinkers, is racialized.¹¹¹ Mandeville tends to conflate race and class, treating the lower races and the lower classes as species distinct from his own. He is also the more cavalier. When defining as savages African people who have been kidnapped and sold as slaves, he feels no need to explain. Writing under an alias in the *Female Tatler*, he contrasts the “Meanness as well as Ignorance, [the] groveling State and despicable Condition,” of the “Negroes and other Savages [who inhabit the] unpolishd Nations of Africa and America” with “the Knowledge and Comforts of Human Life which the more Civilised Countries, and more especially the Politer Parts of Christendom, enjoy.”¹¹²

In Hayek’s account, evolution runs along scales from simple and primitive to complex and advanced: in the natural world from worms to primates, and in the human order from savagery to the capitalist West.¹¹³ A key metric for judging how primitive or advanced is a creature or a society is the extent to which its behavior is determined by instinct as opposed to the learning of rules. In chimpanzee society the role of learning is greater than in the world of worms; likewise citizens of commercial society vis-à-vis savages.¹¹⁴ Savages, to Hayek, do not, at first glance, appear quite as brutish as to Mandeville. They are driven by instincts “of solidarity and altruism” and by “shared aims” that were then, more and more, supplanted by adherence to rules that governed property, privacy, and so on, eventually enabling civilization to arise.¹¹⁵ One should recall, however, that in Hayek’s lexicon solidarity is a four-letter word. It is a *weakness* found among animals, savages, and socialists.¹¹⁶

The connections among the categories (animal, savage, civilized humans) are explored with particular clarity in Hayek’s final book, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism*. Its provisional title was *The Taming of the Savage*, and it is instructive to comb its pages for that word. It refers to the peoples whom Columbus encountered and other Indigenous nations; collectivistically minded humans, prior to civilization, who are governed by their instincts; people who reject civilization; people who do not recognize private property (citing Adam Ferguson’s definition of savages); Spartans (*contra* civilized Athenians); and the myth of the noble savage (an atavistic longing for which was Rousseau’s “fatal conceit” and “the main source of the collectivist tradition”). Also pertinent to my argument is Hayek’s claim that “morals and tradition ... lifted men above the savages.”¹¹⁷ Like Mandeville, he frequently drew a sharper line between civilized men and savage humans than between the latter and animals. And

¹¹⁰ Friedrich Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago, 1948), 159.

¹¹¹ Hayek, *The Political Order of a Free People*, 156.

¹¹² Bernard Mandeville, *By a Society of Ladies: Essays in The Female Tatler* (1709), ed. M. M. Goldsmith (Bristol, 1999), 98.

¹¹³ Hayek, *The Political Order of a Free People*, 164.

¹¹⁴ Hayek, *Rules and Order*.

¹¹⁵ Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit*, 12.

¹¹⁶ Hayek, *The Political Order of a Free People*, 90, 96, 162.

¹¹⁷ Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit*, 29.

he hints, although less vocally than Mandeville, that workers are lower down the evolutionary ladder. This appears, for instance, in his claim that the values of “polite society” represent the difference between civilized humans and savages.¹¹⁸

For further insight into Hayek’s conception of savagery, it is instructive to read a passage from *Law, Legislation and Liberty* while holding in mind his definition of savages as people who do not recognize property. Notice that Hayek sees the likening of avian or crustacean and human property regimes as scientific comparison, not metaphorical allusion:

In many animal societies the process of selective evolution has produced highly ritualised forms of behaviour governed by rules of conduct which have the effect of [securing order]. This order is often based on the delimitation of territorial ranges or “property.” ... Nobody who has studied the literature on animal societies will regard it as only a metaphorical expression when for instance one author speaks of “the elaborate system of property tenure” of crayfish, or when another concludes a description of the rivalry between robins by saying that “victory does not go to the strong but to the righteous—the righteous of course being the owners of property.”¹¹⁹

Savages are ignorant of property rules but robins and crayfish are experts who construct and navigate them with aplomb. The righteous among the robins—“of course”—are they who have pecked their way into the landowning class.

Does Hayek misrepresent Mandeville?

In Hayek’s exposition of Mandeville, the civilizing process occurs largely spontaneously. Civilization evolves via the unintended consequences of innumerable human actions in a “compositive” manner. Hayek can be charged, here, with overstating the clarity with which Mandeville separates spontaneous and designed processes, and overlooking how the behavioral evolution that he charted involves a shift from instinctual patterns to one in which force must continually be applied—in a manner that can only with difficulty be seen as spontaneous in the Hayekian sense.¹²⁰

Hayek’s misreading of Mandeville has been explored in some detail by Christina Petsoulas. The Austrian, she charges, failed to see that Mandeville’s allusions to the “management of the skilful politician” represent his speculative historical account of the civilizing process, centered on the *intentional* manipulation of human passions and instincts by the civilizing elite in a cumulative trial-and-error process. This is not a functionalist–evolutionary account: it lacks a mechanism of group selection operating independently of human reason. Hayek, she goes on, conflates trial-and-error processes, the outcomes of which are preserved because they enable a group “to

¹¹⁸ Hayek, *The Political Order of a Free People*, 156.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 75. For a related and in-depth discussion see Lars Corneliussen, *Race and Neoliberalism* (Stanford, 2025).

¹²⁰ Brown, “How Savages Came into the World,” 480.

prevail over others” (in Hayek’s words), with the quite different invisible-hand explanation whereby order arises as the unintended consequence of individuals separately pursuing their goals.¹²¹ Of these rival approaches, Mandeville only really developed the latter.¹²²

Petsoulas accurately identifies distortions in Hayek’s presentation, but how significant these are is moot. After all, Mandeville’s chief innovation in Hayek’s eyes, his exploration of how social order can arise in an undesigned manner, is not disputed. Moreover, the contention that Hayek conflated distinct approaches to the evolution of social institutions, the “invisible-hand” argument versus selection of rules and institutions in the context of intergroup competition, can be rebutted with the argument that Hayek saw these not as antitheses but as integral elements within a broad theory of social evolution.¹²³ He did not “scientistically” propose that social evolution is Darwinian. Rather, civilization is “the accumulated result of trial and error”; it is “the sum of experience, in part handed from generation to generation as explicit knowledge,” but also embodied in institutions that, in the competition among alternatives, prove to be “superior.”¹²⁴

Within the trial-and-error process, the role of the “lawgiver” is central in Hayek’s account. Their task is “to create conditions in which” social order can arise and reproduce itself. Just as in nature we understand the formation of a structure without needing to predict the behavior of each atom, so in society the establishment of social order requires not the ability to predict each individual’s acts but behavioral regularities, for that will enable the laws to be designed and enforced.¹²⁵ In his repeated recourse to analogy from nature, and in the pivotal role accorded to the “lawgiver,” Hayek’s account is reminiscent of Mandeville’s, even if the latter gives his lawgivers greater *dirigiste* license. In both accounts the decisive and creative role in the progress of civilization is played by politicians, flanked by other elite groups: merchants and manufacturers in Mandeville’s, judges and entrepreneurs in Hayek’s, as they coauthor the progressive story of common law and the market system.

Progress through polarization

From Mandeville’s era onward, the notion that historical progress takes a racialized stadial form (the economic and moral advance from savagery to Western civilization) strengthened and globalized in tandem with Europe’s colonization of the world and then the US ascendancy.¹²⁶ What Mandeville contributed to this construct was the posited tendency to the achievement by each generation of greater heights than its

¹²¹ Along similar lines, Geoffrey Hodgson charges Hayek with muddling together the very different evolutionary mechanisms of “cumulative reinforcement” and the “sifting and winnowing” of competing alternatives. Hodgson, *Economics and Evolution*.

¹²² Petsoulas, *Hayek’s Liberalism*, 186.

¹²³ Schaefer, “Hayek’s Twin Ideas,” at 1210.

¹²⁴ Hayek, *Constitution of Liberty*, 118.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 230.

¹²⁶ Mandeville did not explicitly link his growth ideology to the colonizing project, but the connections are there. When he repeatedly urges the state to “promote Navigation [and] cherish the Merchant” in order to gain “Great Wealth and Foreign Treasure,” what lies behind the terms “navigation” and “merchant”? To

predecessors, a process propelled by human needs and wants, the insatiable quest for knowledge, artisanal innovation, and cooperative labor. Together, these drive cultural and institutional evolution across a range of fronts: language, money, tools, and the division of labor.¹²⁷ It was a framework that Hayek folded into his own evolutionary narrative: human society passes through progressively more civilized stages. From primitive hunter-gatherers, their behavior steered by instinct, to the organized tribe, which he associates with “communities in Africa,” moral codes grew increasingly complex, allowing the partial suppression of instincts, until, finally, the “open” or “great” society was achieved in the West. Here, social behavior is determined by highly evolved abstract rules, codes, and institutions, notably market economics and the rule of law, which gain greater solidity the more they come to be recognized as tradition.¹²⁸

The continued advance of civilization, for Hayek, is ultimately benchmarked by economic growth, understood as flowing from the “effective utilization of knowledge,” which in turn is enabled by the market system. The market society (or “Great Society”) is therefore equipped to become more productive and prosperous than all rival orders.¹²⁹ It is the *telos* of spontaneous order—“a wealth-creating game” that “leads to an increase of the stream of goods and of the prospects of all participants to satisfy their needs.”¹³⁰ Hayek disavows the idea that his Great Society has a concrete purpose,¹³¹ but in a sense it does: economic growth. He replaces a moral ideal of public virtue with the utilitarian goal of public benefit, identified with economic prosperity.¹³² At minimum, he held, governments must create conditions conducive to economic growth “and then hope for the best.”¹³³

In proposing that Hayek be read as a growth ideologue, I am not suggesting that he was following the orthodoxy of his day. He had no truck with governments’ GDP boosterism, seeing in it the hallmark of constructed order, states imposing their agendas on society and intellectuals (notably Mannheim and Maynard Keynes), developing tools of macroeconomic steering to support their social-engineering schemes. Yet growth ideology should not be equated with this narrow mid-twentieth-century construct.¹³⁴

embellish his argument he refers to sugar traded by “an eminent West India Merchant,” and in another passage the commodity he cites is the pineapple, following which he raises a toast to a merchant, Matthew Decker, who made his fortune through the Royal African and East India companies. Mandeville, *Fable*, 47.

¹²⁷ Mandeville, *Fable*, 1: 206; Ronald Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge, 1976), 29; Renee Prendergast, “Knowledge, Innovation and Emulation in the Evolutionary Thought of Bernard Mandeville,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 38/1 (2014), 87–107.

¹²⁸ Cornellisen, *Race and Neoliberalism*.

¹²⁹ Hayek, *The Mirage of Social Justice*, 115.

¹³⁰ Hayek, *The Political Order of a Free People*, 115.

¹³¹ Hayek, *The Mirage of Social Justice*.

¹³² Louis Dumont quoted in Petsoulas, *Hayek’s Liberalism*, 114.

¹³³ Hayek, *The Political Order of a Free People*, 169.

¹³⁴ Gareth Dale, “Seventeenth-Century Origins of the Growth Paradigm,” in Iris Borowy and Matthias Schmelzer, eds., *History of the Future of Economic Growth: Historical Roots of Current Debates on Sustainable Degrowth* (London and New York, 2017), 27–51; Dale, “A Rising Tide Lifts Us All, Don’t Rock the Boat! Economic Growth and the Legitimation of Inequality,” in Honor Fagan and Ronaldo Munck, eds., *Handbook on Development and Social Change* (Cheltenham, 2018), 151–70; Dale, “Economic Growth: A Short History of a Controversial Idea,” *Open Democracy*, 14 June 2019, at www.opendemocracy.net/en/economic-growth-short-history-controversial-idea.

Its origins lie two or three centuries earlier. Mandeville, I have suggested, was the pioneer; Hayek his follower.

Hayek's growth ideology takes aim at a number of targets. His boyhood rural forays notwithstanding, he was a lifelong critic of environmentalism, strenuously denying that there is anything inherently virtuous in the preservation of nature, and then, in the 1970s, penning a broadside against the Limits to Growth manifesto.¹³⁵ Earlier, his growth ideology had been honed in opposition to that of Keynes, Mannheim, and socialists.

Hayek's growth recipe, like Mandeville's, requires ramping up inequality. This is because the market system operates (here in Ibled's paraphrase) by making visible "shining examples of success that the common person envies and admires. The more superlative the gifts granted to the successful few, the more acute will be the desire of all and the more effort they will make to catch up."¹³⁶ High-net-worth individuals are the trendsetters, for only from their advanced position will new desires and opportunities come into view. They are the "makers of new horizons of value" from which the rest of society takes its bearings. Through Hayekian eyes, it is not market consumers that dictate the investments of capital, but capital that determines the consumer market—and beyond that "the deepest beliefs and aspirations" of the citizenry.¹³⁷

By increasing incentives for the rich, Hayek assures us, the resultant gains will eventually "become available to the rest." Indeed, all rational hope for "the reduction of present misery and poverty" rests on this strategy.¹³⁸ The rich, "by experimenting with new styles of living not yet accessible to the poor, perform a necessary service without which the advance of the poor would be very much slower"—ergo, the poor will always "profit materially" from the fact that others are rich.¹³⁹ In these passages the affinities with Mandeville leap from the page, while those with Hayek's other eighteenth-century heroes, Smith and Ferguson, are less apparent. *Prima facie*, Hayek's understanding of economic growth can appear in democratic and Scottish Enlightenment colors: growth as an index of social progress, a force that brings prosperity and welfare for all. Yet whereas Smith cherished the hope that over time capitalist growth would equalize incomes, the austere Austrian applauds its tendencies to income polarization, and to a chasm in wealth and power between elites and the mass. Where Ferguson fretted over the corrosive consequences of commerce and avarice for public virtue, Hayek extols the market system as the soil in which the civilizational virtues of trust, entrepreneurship, and innovation can flourish.

That soil, the "conditions for spontaneous progress," Hayek goes on to assert, is not universally present but is a blessing enjoyed by the West.¹⁴⁰ And here, too, on the global scale, progress arrives courtesy of trickle-down. The Western nations, judging

¹³⁵ Hayek, *Constitution of Liberty*, 374; Friedrich Hayek, "Lecture to the Memory of Alfred Nobel" (1974), at www.nobelprize.org/prizes/economic-sciences/1974/hayek/lecture.

¹³⁶ Ibled, "Optimistic Cruelty," 10.

¹³⁷ Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Donald Trump*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 2017).

¹³⁸ Hayek, *Constitution of Liberty*, 46.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 41–2.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

by their superior economic growth, have “evolved” more successfully than the rest—a testament to the virtues and prowess of their market order.¹⁴¹ Britain is a case in point. In its golden age, prior to democracy and imperial decline, luxury consumption by the wealthy enabled its domination of the world, to the benefit of all. It owed its hegemonic position to “its economically most advanced classes,”¹⁴² whose dominance, and Britain’s over its colonies, had illuminated the pathway to prosperity for all the world to see and learn. Every class of British society gained from the fact that the rich “had demanded products of a quality and taste unsurpassed elsewhere and Britain, in consequence, came to supply to the rest of the world.” British workers—before being led astray by social democracy—had “profited” from their membership of a nation that contained so many persons “richer than they”; their lead “over the workers in other countries was in part an effect of a similar lead of their own rich over the rich in other countries.”¹⁴³ As to the poorer nations, if they are capable of developing at all, they should be grateful to the West for having “pulled so far ahead” of them.¹⁴⁴ And because they benefit from the wealth of the West, any global redistribution would be fatally flawed, neglecting the chief lesson of development: “major inequalities” are the *sine qua non* for “the progress of all.”¹⁴⁵

Hayek’s account of Western dominance is both more liberal and more conservative than Mandeville’s. By framing questions of evolution and progress in a cultural register, with market civilization read as universal in potential even as it originated in, and in a sense is owned by, Western society with its superior traditions and mores, Hayek distances himself from the crude racism of biological superiority and colonial domination, albeit while maintaining race as an “ordering principle.”¹⁴⁶ Hayek emphasizes not simply the West’s superior knowledge and commercial acumen, but also, and unlike Mandeville, a moral superiority that stems from “the belief in property, honesty, and the family”—beliefs that, in turn, are rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition.¹⁴⁷ In short, there is ambiguity in the role that Hayek accords the West. His liberal universalism holds that the superior logic of market rationality will prevail worldwide; his Eurocentric conservatism holds that the West in general and the Judeo-Christian tradition in particular have played and must continue to play a special role in its evolution, and that, even as its institutions globalize, Western nations require vigilant defense against outsiders.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 41.

¹⁴² Ibid., 43.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 42–3.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 42.

¹⁴⁶ Lars Cornelissen, “Why Anti-neoliberalism Means Anti-racism,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, advance online (2024). See also Cornelissen, “Savage Economics: Race, Futurity, and Civilizational Hierarchy in Early Austrian Neoliberalism,” *Global Perspectives* 2/1 (2021), 236–67; Arun Kundnani, “The Racial Constitution of Neoliberalism,” *Race and Class* 63/1 (2021), 51–69; Jessica Whyte, *The Morals of the Market: Human Rights and the Rise of Neoliberalism* (London, 2019), 39.

¹⁴⁷ Hayek, 1985, quoted in Gilles Christoph, “Is There Such a Thing as a Self-Sufficient Market? Neoliberal Thought and the Cultural Foundations of Capitalism,” *École normale supérieure de Lyon*, October 1985.

¹⁴⁸ This ambiguity opens Hayek to critique from his right flank, as it implicitly sanctions the usurpation by non-Western peoples of the West’s leadership role—and ultimately, given that market success

Conclusion

This article has offered a countergenealogy of Hayek's debt to Mandeville. By reading them side by side and parsing their respective positions, we see methodological and ideological continuities at work. Hayek's exegesis of Mandeville, we suggested, is not without flaws. Though he accurately identifies a thesis on spontaneous order in Mandeville, his exposition of the Dutchman's account of human evolution takes its tangled threads and renders them systematic, with the contradictions and paradoxes ironed out. His emphasis on the *orderliness* of Mandevillian spontaneous order occludes the role of force and expropriation, and other elements that in Mandeville are sketchy or even "perverse."¹⁴⁹

Nor should the political and philosophical kinship of the two thinkers be overstated. Arguably, Mandeville was more cynical about human nature, notoriously when dismissing altruism as merely egotism in fancy dress. He was more critical of bourgeois order than his Austrian admirer. And Hayek's philosophy, to adapt Corey Robin's term, is more Nietzschean in its concern with how money in a capitalist economy channels the *will to power* of entrepreneurs and other elite members.¹⁵⁰ Such wrinkles notwithstanding, when we read their work together the common commitment to a distinctively Whig brand of political ideology leaps out.¹⁵¹ Mandeville contributed to Whiggish economic and political ideas in multiple areas: an instrumental and utilitarian understanding of the natural world, trickle-down economics, and an extolling of greed and inequality as the necessary motivators of progress. He offered a Whiggish redesign of the fortifications of capitalist hierarchy, through the moral rehabilitation of avarice and a growth ideology structured around an apologetics of luxury consumption. On all these points, Hayek is more directly the successor of Mandeville than, say, of Smith or Ferguson.

More important for Hayek's appreciation is that in linking social evolution to the ideology of *doux commerce*, Mandeville was able to depict the bourgeoisie, broadly conceived, as the driving force not merely of economic advance but also of humanity's evolution from savagery to civilization. Market trade, thus understood, is not simply an economic mechanism but a civilizational achievement, one that is indispensable to the historic and future progress of morality, technology, and Western superiority. This racialized narrative, with History limned as a triumphant elite-steered march to Western civilization, and not his sporadic racist remarks about particular social groups, represents Mandeville's contribution to what later, in the hands of Hayek and others,

enables geopolitical domination, the potential for its subjugation. Kenneth Minogue, for one, finds wanting the emphasis, in Hayek's criteria of civilizational success, upon efficiency and productivity. His concern was that collectivist Asian "state societies" may come to outperform the West on these counts. See Sean Irving, "Competitiveness, Civilizationism, and the Anglosphere: Kenneth Minogue's Place in Conservative Thought," *Modern Intellectual History* 21/2 (2024), 469–88, at 481.

¹⁴⁹ Brown, "How Savages Came into the World," 480, 491.

¹⁵⁰ Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*.

¹⁵¹ Here, I deploy "political ideology" in Freeden's sense of a patterned and recurring set of ideas and values that structures the terrain of sociopolitical discourse. Michael Freeden, "The Morphological Analysis of Ideology," in Michael Freeden and Marc Stears, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Political Ideologies* (Oxford, 2013), 115–37.

gained definition as the neoliberal branch of the “New Racism.”¹⁵² By this I mean that Mandeville subscribed to a methodological egalitarianism apropos human nature even as he portrayed cultural differences among groups as if they were set in stone and presenting the resulting inequalities as if they were natural and God-given.¹⁵³

I use the word “natural” here advisedly, for Mandeville’s and Hayek’s racism relates directly to their characterization of humans and animals. Their methodological egalitarianism in respect of human nature connects in both thinkers to slippages in their portrayals of “savage” humans and animals. Savages are wild and governed by passions and instincts; they are creatures presumed distinct from, and yet in their failure to suppress their instincts very close to, the other animals—indeed, they are beneath the robins and crayfish on Hayek’s evolutionary ladder. In such ways, Mandeville’s and Hayek’s philosophies of nature and human evolution are umbilically connected to their ideologies of class and race.

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¹⁵² Martin Barker, *The New Racism: Conservatives and the Ideology of the Tribe* (London, 1981). Barker’s focus is on Hume, but the argument applies equally well to Mandeville and Hayek.

¹⁵³ Eric Schliesser, “Mandeville as Proto-feminist” (2016), at <https://digressionsnimpresions.typepad.com/digressionsnimpresions/2016/04/mandeville-as-feminist.html>.

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