

# MIDWESTERN LIBERAL: A SMITHIAN “RECLAIMING OF THE AMERICAN DREAM”

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## **Introduction**

At my first Philanthropic Enterprise colloquium in 2004, we explored the work of economist Kenneth Boulding. Lenore Ealy also invited us to read (if we hadn't already) Richard Cornuelle's *Reclaiming the American Dream*. The conversation never put Boulding and Cornuelle side by side, yet I was struck by several similarities: (1) the nature and timing of their respective efforts to integrate benefaction (what Cornuelle called the service motive) into economic theory (Boulding 1962, 1965; Cornuelle 1993 [1965]); (2) their tripartite conceptions of modern society: Boulding's exchange, threat, and integration systems (1963) and Cornuelle's commercial, governmental, and independent sectors (1993 [1965]); and (3) their shared desire to “find an alternative path to the good society other than those of the doctrinaire conservatives or the dogmatic liberals of the Cold War era” (Ealy 2002, 2; see also Cornuelle 1993 [1965], 3-19; Boulding 1981, 112).

As I revisit *Reclaiming* today, I am again struck by its parallels to Boulding's work but even more by its resonance with the moral philosophy of Adam Smith. Boulding was an avowed Smithian (Boulding 1957, 1968, 1969, 1971). His rich vision of human action and social cooperation drew jointly from the *Wealth of Nations* (1776 [1776]) and *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1790 [1790]) long before it was fashionable to do so. Cornuelle's links to Smith, by contrast, are palpable though inchoate. Cornuelle never cites Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, for example. Yet Cornuelle's 1993 Afterword frames *Reclaiming* as an attempt to establish “the rationality and moral legitimacy of . . . [the] voluntary social process” as Smith's *Wealth of Nations* had done for the market process (198), and his 1965 edition

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contains a memorable rebuke of Smith's "too-fervent disciples" for assuming that "the invisible hand can do all of society's work" (48). The latter statement ascribes to Smith a broad view of voluntary cooperation, beyond "commerce only," yet Cornuelle provides no rationale for this interpretation, nor any clues as to how Smith's ideas may have shaped Cornuelle's vision of the good society.

To probe the Smithian texture of Cornuelle's thought, I explore here a series of Smith-like concepts and themes in *Reclaiming the American Dream*. My motivating question is not historical or biographical. I am not asking, "Did Smith's concept of X lead to Cornuelle's concept of Y?" or "In his own mind, was Cornuelle more Smithian than Misesian?" Instead, I ask, "Where along the spectrum of classical liberal thinking *today* do Cornuelle's ideas have the greatest purchase?" This approach derives from Boulding's historiographical concept of the extended present, set forth in his magnificent essay "After Samuelson, Who Needs Adam Smith?" (1971). Boulding argues that Adam Smith's writings are part of the "extended present" of modern economics—living texts still capable of advancing the frontiers of contemporary thought. Richard Cornuelle's place in the extended present of modern liberal thought is richly documented by the contributions to the present volume. By reading *Reclaiming* through a Smithian lens, I aim to lend credence to my sense that Cornuelle's maverick brand of anarcho-communitarianism is more congenial to the recent works of James Buchanan (2005) and Deirdre McCloskey (2006)—two Midwestern liberals—than to the Hayekian or Misesian branches of Austrian economics with which his work is commonly identified.<sup>1</sup> In the course of defending this unorthodox claim, I hope to illuminate the breadth of Cornuelle's legacy in liberal social thought.

The Midwestern character of Cornuelle's approach is everywhere in *Reclaiming*: in its "counter-political" posture (1993 [1965], 178), its alternately pragmatic and prophetic tones, and in the catholic tenor of its liberalism. Unlike his teacher, Ludwig von Mises, and unlike the Friedrich Hayek of the early Mont Pèlerin period, Cornuelle did not cast himself as an intellectual leader or ideological warrior. He had little appetite for movement politics, especially after his frustrated encounter with the Nixon administration in the 1960s (1993 [1965], 194-97). His counter-political voice is audible in the book's title and narrative—a quest to reclaim not the anarcho-libertarian dream, or even the classical liberal dream, but the *American* dream—and in his steadfast attention to the problems and possibilities of ordinary citizens.

As a native Hoosier myself, I can attest that nothing is more Midwestern (or

Hoosier-like) than the desire to prove oneself through competition. So perhaps the most telling sign of Cornuelle's Midwestern-ness is the modest yet courageous character of his reclaiming. He demands nothing more for the independent sector than the opportunity to compete on equal terms with its historic rival: government. He does not blame the current weakness of the independent sector on socialist plots or propaganda. He accepts that a weak independent sector is an *uncompetitive* sector, and that persuasion—winning citizens' attention, confidence, and imaginative energies—is the only secure path to competitive success in the public arena.

### ***The Loose Screw***

By the late 1950s, Cornuelle had become troubled by what he felt was "a screw loose in the libertarian rationale" for a free society. His focus on the libertarian *rationale* is noteworthy, as it suggests a rhetorical problem: a failure to persuade. The loose screw, as Cornuelle perceived it, was the tendency of mainline libertarians to elevate individual liberty (individual property rights in particular) above all other humane values, notwithstanding the plights of free individuals who lack the means to address basic economic, educational, or health problems. He could no longer abide the "haunting, morally intolerable midnight choices between liberty and community" (Cornuelle 1993, 175) that inevitably arose from Hobbesian, commerce-only theories of voluntary cooperation. To repair the loose screw, Cornuelle sought to recast the classical liberal case for free markets and limited government by incorporating a robust theory and ethic of community (1993 [1965], 1991, 1992).

Cornuelle's critique of Cold War libertarianism pointed out a troubling gap in the social thought of Hayek, Ronald Coase, Milton Friedman, and other classical liberal economists whose "two worlds" view of commercial society—markets (macro-cosmos) and family (micro-cosmos)—granted little if any conceptual space to civic institutions and processes. The civic vacuum in standard models of economy and society was contributing, he feared, to a "systematic, irrational disconnection of ordinary people from the business of the society, a radical constriction of the definition of the citizens' role" (1996, 11). Like his *doppelgänger* Boulding, Cornuelle by the early 1960s had put his finger on a fundamental weakness in Progressive economic theory writ large: the common view of the economy (putatively inspired by Smith's invisible-hand theory) as a loveless, amoral machine wherein social cooperation could and should be secured by wholly impersonal means (Leonard 2009).

To illustrate Cornuelle's insight, consider a standard microeconomic model of "perfect competition" (Mankiw 2007, 289-307). Each agent exists in an ethical vacuum. Each individual interacts with a faceless, generic Other ('the market') but exerts no influence upon anyone in particular. Ethical responsibility vanishes as the number of market participants approaches infinity.

In "free market" (Stiglerian) versions of this story, prices summarize the choices and circumstances of all traders. By choosing optimal production and consumption levels in response to these efficient signals, individuals maximize their contributions to others. In "interventionist" (Samuelsonian) versions, market imperfections such as externalities or monopoly power cause individual and social optima to diverge, but government actions (such as antitrust regulations or Pigouvian taxes and subsidies) bring prices to efficient levels, enabling the economy to achieve maximum social cooperation (Mankiw 2007, 203-222, 311-371). Either way, the roles of neighbor and citizen are supplanted by an impersonal economic or political process in which the moral sentiments of sympathy, solidarity, and benevolence play no necessary role.

Cornuelle returns to this point repeatedly in *Reclaiming*, citing numerous ways in which citizens' expectations and experiences of public life are diminished by conventional markets-and-government images of commercial society. For example, he notes,

People now talk only of the public and the private sectors. . . .  
Businessmen speak of America as a free-enterprise system . . . but free enterprise isn't an all-purpose social system. . . . We [also] speak of America as a democracy or republic. But to describe America as a democracy implies that voting represents a citizen's total responsibility (1993 [1965], 28).

A man who only works and votes and pays his taxes is scarcely a whole man. . . . Now, increasingly, we can only help our fellow man through middlemen, through remote political institutions. Lacking a direct outlet for our hunger to help others, to add the full dimension of meaning to our lives, we are frustrated and incomplete (62).

Most arrestingly of all, Cornuelle recounts the reflections of a veteran social worker, who says, "The average American today has no twinge of conscience when he passes the sick man on the road . . . He knows he has paid the Good Samaritan to come along after him and take care of this rather unpleasant social obligation" (137).

### ***Smithian Elements in Reclaiming***

The America of Cornuelle's *Reclaiming* is a free and humane society, "free in the sense that every man [is] his own supervisor and the architect of his own ambitions" and also "a humane and responsible society in which helping hands [reach] out to people in honest distress, in which common needs were met freely and fully" (1993 [1965], 21). The Tocquevillean hues are unmistakable. The "vision of voluntary community" he urged fellow liberals to integrate into their social theory (Cornuelle 1991, 4) was not an Aristotelian *oikos* but a decentralized, polycentric order. He saw 'community,' like 'market,' as a term historically associated with localized, face-to-face interaction "based on the concentration of responsibility and authority" (1996, 32) but ripe for reclaiming as a species of emergent order—an order that emerges in the process of voluntary association, as "people come together to accomplish things that are important to them and succeed" (11, 32).

For the 2014 scholar of Adam Smith's thought, there is also a Scottish Enlightenment thread—or four—running through the fabric of Cornuelle's argument, namely:

1. there are genuinely needy people who deserve our attention and help;
2. the human animal is animated by multiple virtues, not just ordinary prudence;
3. in a good society, individuals secure "the cooperation and assistance of great multitudes" via commercial and noncommercial forms of reciprocity (i.e., exchange, broadly defined); and
4. the transition to a better society should be achieved through persuasion, not coercion.

Each of these threads warrants closer examination.

### ***There are genuinely needy people who deserve our attention and help.***

Surveying the American landscape in the early 1960s, Cornuelle offers a compelling list of public problems "so large and complex that only government . . . seems big enough to handle them" (1993 [1965], 23):

Chronic unemployment infects Appalachia. We face a large and growing problem of juvenile delinquency. Thousands of people willing and able to work can't find the jobs to match their skills. We discriminate against Negroes, thereby conditioning them to expect little of themselves. Our schools need more classrooms and more teachers. Many of our rivers are sewers. We need more parks, the lungs of our citified society. We need to restore the rotting cores of our

towns and cities. Helpless, lonely people stare at walls in dreary rooming houses and look through dirty windows upon a society that will pay them to rot in silence but won't take time to find a place for them. Traffic chokes our highways. Commuters feel the railroads dying under them. Too often we see dreadful pap on television. We walk the city streets at night in fear (23-24).

Cornuelle details his efforts, via United Student Aid Funds, Inc., to “guarantee loans to students whose needs were beyond the reach of the market” (186; see also 80-89). The premise of USA Funds was that the neediest college students often faced real credit constraints, as commercial banks could not justify no-collateral loans to low-income individuals and families. While urging judicious assessments of “need,” lest the independent sector squander its mission and resources by “passing out middle-class welfare in the name of charity” (133), Cornuelle insists that we are surrounded by fellow citizens in need of assistance beyond what self-help and commerce can reasonably provide. For these individuals, the best remedy is not liberty alone but liberty and community (175).

Cornuelle's call to civic action echoes Smith's discussion of “the order in which individuals are recommended to our care and attention” in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (2009 [1790], 258-268; Forman-Barzilai 2011). Smith acknowledges that beneficence is not a strict duty that can be “extorted by force” (95), but he argues that the reach and efficacy of beneficence are limited only by our moral imaginations (268). For example, the typical scale and scope of voluntary contributions to disaster relief (Wight and Hicks 2005) affirm Smith's observation that “our benevolent attention and good offices” are drawn to persons experiencing extraordinary poverty, misery, or ill fortune (266). But Smith and Cornuelle do not limit their visions of voluntary benefaction to extraordinary moments of disaster or crisis. Both contend that beneficent actions flow from an individual's identification with others—the civilizing capacity Smith defines as sympathy (Boulding 1981, 4; 1962, 239-240). Beneficence is performative—imagining and enacting a particular sense of self vis-à-vis others, such as when “the decision maker elects to do something, not because of the effects the decision will have in the future but because of what he ‘is’ here and now, how he perceives his own identity,” as Boulding writes (1970, 132). “Saints and martyrs of all faiths, religious and secular” offer extreme examples, Boulding notes, but the majority of beneficent actions arise in the “quiet heroism” of daily life, “in jobs, in marriage, in child rearing, . . . without which a good deal of the economy might well fall apart” (134).

In Smithian fashion, Cornuelle regards complex social problems such as those listed above as coordination failures rather than personal failings. He cites coordination failures in the commercial sector (as in the dearth of loans available to the neediest college students) and particularly in the independent sector. Lamenting the lack of effective outlets for public-spirited beneficence (1993 [1965], 152), Cornuelle insists that civic inaction "doesn't mean people don't care"; it means they "don't know how to put their concern to work" (62). He even extends the premise of coordination failure to the government sector, suggesting that in the absence of a viable independent sector, congressional leaders often "have no real choice" in the types of solutions they elect to pursue (76).

***The human animal is animated by multiple virtues, not just ordinary prudence.***

Smith defines ordinary prudence as "directed merely to the care of the health, of the fortune, and of the rank and reputation of the individual" (2009 [1790], 254). "The prudent man," Smith writes, "is not willing to subject himself to any responsibility which his duty does not impose upon him" (254). Smith defines superior prudence, in contrast, as wise and judicious conduct directed to ends that include the welfare of persons and projects beyond one's personal sphere. Such prudence combines ordinary self-interest with "many greater and more splendid virtues, with valor, with extensive and strong benevolence, with a sacred regard for the rules of justice, and all these supported by a proper degree of self-command" (254).

Cornuelle likewise rejects the notion that human beings are capable of nothing more than ordinary prudence. Such a "stripped-down concept of mankind" is, in his view, descriptively false and prescriptively dangerous (1993 [1965], 55). He seeks instead "a more realistic view of what men are like": an account of "human action beyond egoism" that recognizes our "genuine desire to serve others" (57). Cornuelle regards the service motive as a human universal—"as powerful as the desire for profit or power" and present "to some degree in almost everyone"—albeit "in many alloys, since human motives are always mixed" (61). His emphasis on the inherently personal nature of this "service motive" (a desire to serve others *directly*) further parallels Smith's concept of beneficence (2009 [1790], 95-99).

Cornuelle therefore assumes, like Smith, that every citizen is capable of acquiring the habits of "superior prudence" through experiences of active beneficence. The formative power of efficacious, public-spirited action—building

bonds of “habitual sympathy,” promoting social learning, expanding our humane capacities—is a mainstay of Smith’s moral philosophy. For his part, Cornuelle (echoing Tocqueville) postulates a uniquely American propensity for superior prudence, owing to the special demands and opportunities of the American frontier: “Without built-in class lines or tired traditions to say who is responsible for what, the public business became everybody’s urgent business” (1993 [1965], 23). Cornuelle’s American self, like the Smithian self of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is a person capable of extending care and beneficence beyond the personal or familial sphere.

**In a good society, individuals secure “the cooperation and assistance of great multitudes” via commercial and noncommercial forms of reciprocity (i.e., exchange, broadly defined).**

In *Healing America* (1983), Cornuelle famously writes, “In the end, a good society is not so much the result of grand designs and bold decisions, but of millions upon millions of small caring acts, repeated day after day, until direct mutual action becomes second nature and to see a problem is to begin to wonder how best to act on it. And, if someday America succeeds in reviving its sense of community, we will surely wonder in retrospect how we ever thought we could sustain a good society without individual effort” (196).

Cornuelle’s America is not just a commercial economy but a commercial *society*—a world in which individuals’ ethical and economic lives are not confined to family, commerce, and taxes, and where individual freedom is secured via institutional pluralism along three dimensions: “the two better understood dimensions of pluralism—political democracy and free markets—. . . [and] pluralism’s third, least familiar, form: independent action on public problems” (1993 [1965], 180). Buchanan expresses a similar idea when he describes the classical liberal good society as “not laissez faire without qualifying adjectives” but as an extended “nexus of reciprocity . . . generalized to include all mutual agreements up to and including the political” (Buchanan 2005, 84 and 78).

On this point, Cornuelle is arguably more Smithian than Smith himself. Cornuelle’s integration of commercial and independent cooperation offers a synthesis of impersonal and personal benefaction of a sort Smith himself never provided. Smith only intimates the contours of a “great society” governed by the processes of ethical and economic development outlined in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*, whereas Cornuelle describes concretely a

commercial society in which cooperation and assistance are "reciprocally afforded from love, from gratitude, from friendship, and esteem" (Smith 2009 [1790], 103-4) *and* from commercial exchange. The crux of Cornuelle's vision is his faith in independent action as a self-renewing process—a process whose byproducts include new desires and resources (including new knowledge of one's own humane capabilities) with which to engage in further acts of voluntary association. Like Smith, Cornuelle treats ethical proximity (the degree to which one is willing to assume responsibility for assisting others) not as a monotonic function of genetic or physical proximity but as an *emergent* property of human interaction, a result whose characteristics cannot be deduced from the properties of its constituent elements (Lewis 2011). To paraphrase Buchanan (1982), Cornuelle's good society is a Smithian world where "the order in which individuals are recommended to our care and attention" (a.k.a. the hierarchy of our moral connections to others) is an order defined and continually redefined in the process of its emergence.

***Transition to a better society should be achieved through persuasion, not coercion.***

Cornuelle worried about the tacit faith some libertarians placed in social engineering as a means of social transformation. He writes, "I began to understand that whereas libertarians had come to believe that good societies could be legislated (or, at least, their statist counterpart could be de-legislated), in fact they have to be built—that in the end the only practical way to make a modern state less large was to starve it of responsibility" (1993 [1965], 176). Cornuelle decided to "pursue the libertarian vision" in a Smithian way—spurred by the recognition that citizens were the audience that mattered most, and that "libertarians, whether they liked it or not or even whether they understood it or not, were involved not in an argument, but in a practical competition for results" (175).

Smith describes an ethical leader as a person willing to "content himself with moderating what he often cannot annihilate without great violence": "When he cannot conquer the rooted prejudices of people by reason and persuasion, he will not attempt to subdue them by force. . . . When he cannot establish the best system of laws, he will endeavor to establish the best that the people can bear" (2009 [1790], 275). The ethical leader may advance a vision of a better society but will not insist on "establishing all at once, and in spite of all opposition, every thing which that idea may seem to require" and will not "erect his own judgment into the supreme standard of right and wrong" (276).

Similarly, Cornuelle's aim was to *induce* the dismantling of the welfare state by giving citizens more reasons and opportunities to value nongovernmental alternatives. Like Buchanan's "constitutional citizens" (1991, 2005) or the Midwestern citizens envisioned by McCloskey (individuals who habitually "[place] duties ahead of rights" in a manner that "comes naturally to a burgher of Delft or to a citizen of Rapid City" (2006, 499-500), Cornuelle's Midwestern-cum-American self is distinctly susceptible to preaching (Buchanan 2005, 36, 38). Hence Cornuelle's constant imploring of his readers to dream bigger and do better—knowing that without such preaching and prodding, his vision of the American dream will never be realized.

Pitching his plea to fellow citizens rather than fellow intellectuals, Cornuelle's rhetorical stance was Smithian in the largest sense—tethered to an abiding empathy for the everyman. He takes seriously the everyman's dilemmas and frustrations (1993 [1965], 10, 25, 73) and never suggests a top-down "starve the beast" or "smash the state" strategy that would command the masses to accommodate themselves to his agenda rather than the other way around (Smith 2009 [1790], 276). Indeed, Cornuelle seems to identify with the imagined position of the American citizen who says, "We have preferences, but no stubborn prejudices. We are a pragmatic people. We would rather get things done without government, but we often compromise" (1993 [1965], 73). Like Smith's ethical leader, Cornuelle is committed to letting the people decide what mix of government and independent sectors they prefer. He advocates not an independent-sector monopoly over government but genuine, ongoing competition between the two sectors.

### ***Cornuelle's Legacies***

Richard Cornuelle has bequeathed us two intellectual legacies. In the realm of intellectual history, *Reclaiming the American Dream* and later works establish Cornuelle as a prescient and constructive critic of Cold War liberalism. The significance of Cornuelle's intervention has become more apparent in recent years as leading liberal thinkers have begun to reflect on the intellectual lacunae of Cold War anti-socialism. Buchanan, for instance, though seemingly unaware of Cornuelle's work, emphasizes that "post-Marxist classical liberals" often neglected "the communitarian elements in a well-functioning social order informed by liberal value norms" (2005, 78) and tended to think teleologically about market orders, as if "the market" were "an automatically universalizable emergent culture

ready to work its wonders only if the requisite legal order is put in place" (83). Cornuelle's *Reclaiming*, although "a hopeful book" (1993 [1965], xxxv), resists the romantic presumption that voluntary action (commercial and noncommercial) "will work wonders once all politicized controls are removed" (Buchanan 2005, 79). He clearly harbors no such illusions about the commercial sector, and he is painfully aware of the supply-side constraints limiting the current provision of independent services (1993 [1965], 160).

Cornuelle's work also remains fresh and generative today as a catalyst for forging conceptual alternatives to the welfare state and analytical alternatives to the personal/impersonal dichotomy—the division of social life into ethically distinct worlds of communal *Gemeinschaft* and commercial *Gesellschaft*—that has dominated mainstream economic and social thought since the late nineteenth century. This schism is associated with the view, commonly traced to Adam Smith, that individuals serve others most effectively when their actions are guided by impersonal price signals rather than by the personal wants and needs of fellow citizens (Hayek 1978). The vast body of Smith scholarship that has emerged over the past two to three decades raises many questions about the Smithian provenance of this dichotomy. Moreover, the raft of new work across the human sciences detailing the plurality of motives and norms that shape human action and facilitate social learning, and the varied institutional forms through which voluntary cooperation occurs, signifies the currency of Cornuelle's work for new generations of thinkers beyond what he ever could have imagined. Indeed, the behavioral and institutional core of Cornuelle's work is more germane to the leading edges of post-Progressive political economy today than it was in 1965 when, with characteristic modesty and wit, he confessed to being "astonished at how many other people are earnestly exploring the same unmapped region" and likened himself to "someone who struggled to climb the highest mountain, and, arriving, blundered into a Sunday school picnic" (1993 [1965], 52-53).

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> McCloskey uses "Midwestern" as a synonym for "virtuous," e.g., "the Midwestern bourgeois" (2006, 1).

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