

“Liberal” as a Political Adjective (in English), 1769–1824

By Daniel B. Klein*

Abstract

The data from text digitization show that “liberal” acquired a sustained political signification for the first time around 1769: the liberal policy principles of Adam Smith and his associates. The bodies of evidence include: (1) the non-occurrence in English prior to 1769 (with a few exceptions); (2) the blossoming from 1769 of “liberal plan,” “liberal system,” “liberal principles,” “liberal policy,” *etc.*; (3) the occurrence beginning in the 1770s of political uses of “liberal” in Parliament; (4) the occurrence of the same in the *Edinburgh Review*, 1802–1824. The political adjective *liberal* came alive around 1769 and was sustained straight up to when the political nouns *liberalism* and *liberal* start up in the 1820s. The data from French, German, Italian, and Spanish confirm that Britain was the first to get to a political sense of “liberal.” Key authors are sampled.

JEL Codes: B12, A13, A12

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1. Introduction

Going back to 1823, at least, and ever since, there have been writers maintaining that “liberal” as a political identifier started on the Continent and was imported into Britain after about 1820. Among those who have said that Britain imported the term “liberal” in a political sense from the Continent are Helena Rosenblatt (2018, 42, even though recognizing the earlier English political adjective 31–40), Duncan Bell (2014, 693), David M. Craig (2012, 469, 481 ff.), Daisy Hay (2008, 310, 312), R. R. Palmer and Joel Colton (2007, 428), Jörn Leonhard (2004), J. Salwyn Shapiro (1958, 9), Auguste Nefftzer (1883), James Fitzjames Stephen (1862), and an anonymous writer in the Tory journal *Blackwood’s* in 1823, who wrote about identifying as a liberal: “Any thing so excessively illiberal could not have had its first conception in the English brain, although, like all foreign follies, it was eagerly adopted when imported” (Anonymous 1823, 110).

This article disagrees with these authors. It likewise casts doubt on those who suggest, as does J. G. A. Pocock (2003, 579), that in the 18th century there was “no system of doctrine corresponding to [the] later use” of the adjective *liberal*.

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When we talk about “liberal” as a political identifier, we are talking about the noun *liberalism*, the noun *liberal* (as in “he’s a liberal”), and the adjective *liberal* (as in “liberal policy”). George Smith wrote: “The term ‘liberalism’ appears to have originated in France in the early 1800s, when it was used to describe the individualistic ideology of Benjamin Constant, Madame de Staël and other critics of Napoleon” (2013, 14). Searches at the Google Books Ngram Viewer show a first sprouting in 1796 of “*libéralisme*” in French (link) and in 1807 of “*liberalismo*” in Spanish (link).

As for English, Figure 1 shows that the political nouns started up around 1820:

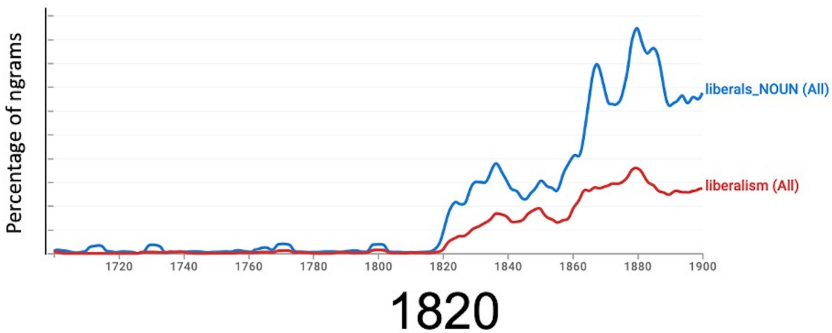


Figure 1: The nouns “liberalism” and “liberals”, 1700–1900

Source: Google Ngram Viewer (link).

Those nouns, however, stemmed from the political adjective *liberal*, which gets its sustained start in 1769. Some people have suggested that liberalism did not exist before the nouns were used. But to maintain, on that basis, that liberalism did not exist before 1820 would imply that conservatism did not exist before 1830, nor abolitionism before 1830, nor protectionism before 1860, nor racism or sexism before 1930. As Shakespeare pointed out, roses smell sweet irrespective of what we call them. Roses existed before English speakers used “rose.”

In *The Constitution of Liberty*, Hayek remarked on the origination of a political signification of “liberal”:

It is often suggested that the term “liberal” derives from the early nineteenth-century Spanish party of the *liberales*. I am more inclined to believe that it derives from the use of the term by Adam Smith in such passages as *W.o.N.*, II, 41: “the liberal system of free exportation and free importation” and p. 216: “allowing every man to pursue his own interest his own way, upon the liberal plan of equality, liberty, and justice” (Hayek 1960, 530 n13).

Also, in a “Liberalism” encyclopedia entry, Hayek wrote that “[t]he adjective ‘liberal’ gradually assumed its political connotation during the later part of the eighteenth century” (1978 [1973], 124). There too Hayek quoted Smith’s “liberal plan” (120).

Over the many decades during which the importation thesis enjoyed a consensus, Hayek’s view had little hope of overturning that consensus. Before the digitization

of millions of texts, mounting a case for Hayek’s view would mean spending years gathering a few score quotations. A few score tedious quotations, cherry picked by one of those Hayek votaries with an axe to grind, from the vast uncharted forests of innumerable texts, could not get far. Such *curiosa* could easily be ignored and dismissed.

But, around 2012, the data came readily to hand, thanks to the Google Books Ngram Viewer. Big data is often a big bust. But my utilization of data is simple and straightforward. There are no hidden assumptions of the sort that often attend “big data” claims. There are no complicated models behind my results. In fact, there are no models at all. The data clearly show origination and sustainment. They also show who got there first.

Basically, Hayek was right. The adjective “liberal” first took a political meaning in Smith’s time, and that meaning was sustained ever after, and exported from Britain to the Continent. Others have said similarly. George Smith (2013, 14) wrote: “Although ‘liberalism’ was apparently not used by eighteenth-century writers, they did use the adjective ‘liberal’ to qualify nouns such as ‘policies,’ ‘measures,’ and ‘sentiments’ to mean ‘pro-freedom’ and ‘tolerant,’” and George Smith then quotes “liberal plan” and other samples from Adam Smith. John Gray (1995, xi) notes that “the system of thought of classical liberalism had been raised up, above all in the period of the Scottish Enlightenment, when Adam Smith referred to ‘the liberal plan of equality, liberty and justice’.” Indeed, in 1928 Elie Halévy quoted Smith’s “liberal plan of equality, liberty and justice” (97), wrote of Adam Smith giving “[t]hese liberal ideas...a definite and classical form” (106) and proving that “the liberal régime was the most favourable to commercial prosperity” (195). Hence, Halévy suggests that Smith espoused a “liberal” policy view. The present article builds considerably on earlier products by me (notably Klein 2014a, 2014b, 2022).

I do not wish to overstate matters. First, Hayek’s passage above suggests that Smith christened his policy views “liberal” quite single-handedly. Although Smith looms large in the christening, he did not do it single-handedly, and he was not the very first. More importantly, the conclusions from the data do not deny that the nouns *liberalism* and *liberal* came to mean more than, or things in addition to, Smith’s “liberal plan” or “liberal principles.” “Liberalism” was quickly somewhat *polysemous*, and over time it grew more so, and especially after 1890 or so, when it begins to take on a meaning directly at odds with Smithian liberalism (the “New Liberalism”).

Hayek says in his “Liberalism” encyclopedia entry that Smith’s outlook continued as one strand of liberalism. A second strand during the 19th century was associated with “the Continental tradition.” Hayek says that “liberal” had on the Continent a stronger connotation of rationalism and constructivism than in Britain (Hayek [1973] 1978, 120). Also, what often occupied the highest place on the Continent was “the demand for the self-determination of each group concerning its form of government” (120). Britain was an island. Many of its writers, from about Hume’s time, worked with the assumption of a stable polity—an assumption that island geography helped to make apt. Continental politics, however, were less stable, and Continental polities more undulating. To have “the science of a legislator” you first need a legislature.

Those points from Hayek about different early liberalisms strike me as valuable, even if I doubt some smaller points in Hayek's "Liberalism" encyclopedia entry. I suspect that liberals throughout most of the 19th century, such as Benjamin Constant, F. P. G. Guizot, and Alexis de Tocqueville, all of whom Hayek mentions (126), generally shared Smith's precepts and judgments on "the science of a legislator," and that is why they were called liberals.

As Hayek indicates (130), in Great Britain it was not until the last decades of the 19th century that subversion of the Smithian spine begins to be pursued by one vein of "liberals." Today, in the United States and Canada, "liberal" is applied to the parties more inclined toward the governmentalization of social affairs and more opposed to Smith's idea of "allowing every man to pursue his own interest his own way" (see Klein 2021b). Hayek wrote in 1973: "[T]he name 'liberal' is coming to be used, even in Europe, as has for some time been true of the USA, as a name for essentially socialist aspirations, because, in the words of J. A. Schumpeter, 'as a supreme but unintended compliment, the enemies of the system of private enterprise have thought it wise to appropriate the label'" ([1973] 1978, 132).

Here I focus on the span 1769 to 1824. That is roughly the span during which the political adjective *liberal* was alive and the political nouns (*liberalism* and *liberal*), in English, were yet to hatch. The year 1769 is when William Robertson published *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V*, and "liberal" was sustained ever after. As for the year that ends my focus—1824—it brings us into the start of the time when the nouns had hatched. It is also the year that John Ramsay McCulloch published an entry on political economy in *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Also, I used 1824 as a stopping point for a textual investigation of the *Edinburgh Review*.

Deirdre McCloskey justly stresses to me that data are good, but know your data. We have to *read* the texts to see how the words are used. It is incumbent on me, says McCloskey, to confirm that, for example, "liberal principles" signifies what I suppose it to signify. McCloskey is right, of course. In the next section I present figures based on data, most of which were generated by the Google Books Ngram Viewer (link). After that, I reflect on the semantic stepping from the pre-political senses of "liberal" to a political sense. I then proceed to attempt to satisfy McCloskey, sampling David Hume, William Robertson, Adam Ferguson, and Adam Smith; I also give a few words to Edmund Burke, Dugald Stewart, McCulloch's piece from 1824, and America.

2. Data and Figures

What Figure 2 shows is nothing less than an extraordinary, momentous semantic blossoming. That blossoming is what this article is about. To check that people didn't just start throwing "liberal" into their 2gram collocations, Will Fleming made the analysis in Figure 3. It shows, for example, that whereas "liberal policy" had been zero percent of all "liberal [noun]" expressions before 1770, in decades after 1770 it was between 1.5 and 3 percent of all such expressions.

Figure 3 shows that the political expressions of "liberal" gained enormously (relative to prior to 1770) among all "liberal [noun]" expressions. Further investigation,

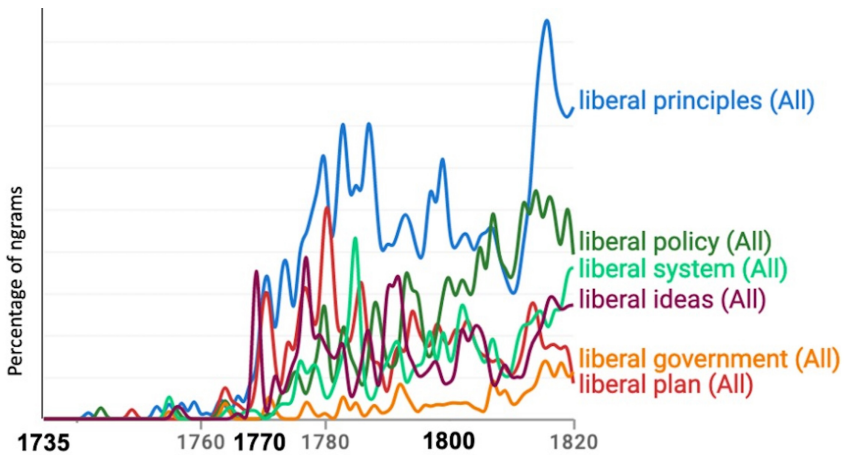


Figure 2: “liberal policy,” “liberal principles,” “liberal ideas,” “liberal plan,” “liberal system,” “liberal government,” 1735–1820
Source: Google Books NGram Viewer ([link](https://books.google.com/ngrams/)).

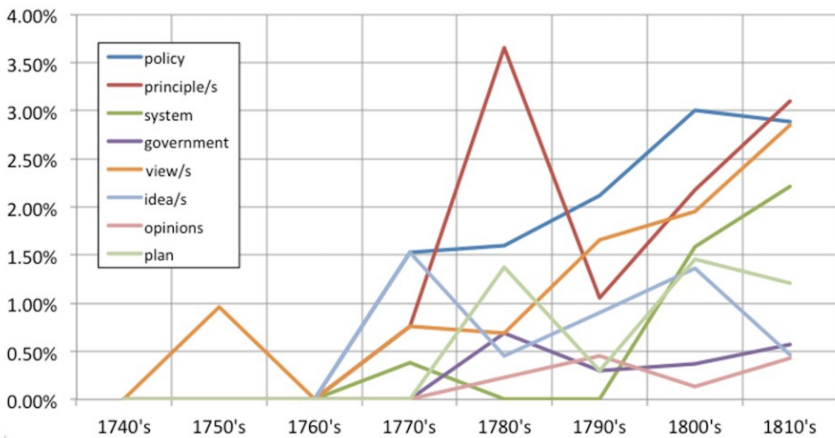


Figure 3: Percentage of political collocating nouns of top 100 collocating nouns, by decade
Source: Made for the author by Will Fleming.

described in a footnote, confirms that a political “liberal” did not gain sustained life prior to 1769.¹

¹ Will Fleming also did a textual analysis (not shown here) of the collocating nouns in 2grams “liberal [noun]” 1738–1769. The analysis showed that *none* of the top 20 nouns were political. Over 50 percent were “art(s)” and “science(s).” The next largest nouns (each with a percentage of the total of the top 20 descending from 6 percent to 3 percent) were “hand,” “rewarder,”

To yet further confirm that there wasn’t much before 1769, and from a source other than Google Books, in 2014 Ben Bursae and I looked at all the text of authors at Liberty Fund’s Online Library of Liberty in the categories “Renaissance and Reformation,” “Early Modern,” and “18th Century.”² Many of the texts are translations, but I think “liberal” would carry over from Latin and European languages. The investigation confirms that, other than a couple of suggestive instances, to be remarked on below, there is almost no sign of attaching a political meaning to “liberal” before 1769. The 73 authors are listed in Figure 4, listed in the order corresponding to the Excel file sourced below the image.

Boétie	Cumberland	Pascal	Thomas Gordon
Calvin	Descartes	Penn	Helvétius
Erasmus	Filmer	Petty	Hutcheson
Huss	Fletcher	Pufendorf	Kames
Luther	Galileo Galilei	John Robinson	Abbé de Mably
Machiavelli	Grotius	Shakespeare	Mandeville
Montaigne	Harrington	Sidney	Montesquieu
Thomas More	Heineccius	Spinoza	Pope
Savonarola	Hobbes	Thomasius	Reid
Zwingli	Hooker	Tyrrell	Rousseau
Althusius	Locke	Welwod	Shaftesbury
Francis Bacon	Marlowe	Addison	Trenchard
Barbon	Milton	J.S. Bach	Turnbull
Bayle	Molesworth	Barbeyrac	Vattel
Carmichael	Molyneux	Burlamaqui	Voltaire
William Clarke	Nedham	Cantillon	Hume
Coke	Newton	Condillac	
Pieter de la Court	North	Fordyce	
Culverwell	Overton	Franklin	

Figure 4: 73 authors who, apart from Hume, basically never use “liberal” in a political sense before 1769

Source: The Excel File. (Thanks to Ben Bursae.)

British officialdom starts talking “liberal” in the Smithian fashion in the 1770s. For example, King George III endorsed “liberal principles” in relation to trade with Ireland, in a speech (5 December 1782), addressed to the Commons, opening a session of Parliament. He added: “I would recommend to you a revision of our whole trading

“kind,” “air,” “endowments,” “mind,” “way,” and “encouragement.” In the decades after 1770, however, several of the political nouns do crack the top 20, corresponding to Figure 3 above.

² Ben Bursae and I did the investigation in 2014, and I have not revised the Excel file since then. (The Excel file is here.) I believe that Liberty Fund has since added texts, even titles they had published before 2014, to the Online library of Liberty. Those added subsequently are not accounted for in our Excel sheet. For example, I see at the time I write this, in 2023, that the Excel sheet from 2014 does not record the copious (pre-political) “liberal” in writings by George Turnbull; I suppose that those texts, though published before 2014, simply were not online when Bursae and I did the systematic investigation.

system, upon the same comprehensive principles, with a view to its utmost possible extension.” Todd Peckarsky and I coded all of the “liberal” and “illiberal” talk in 36 volumes of *The Parliamentary History of England* to the year 1803. Again, the timing fits perfectly (the vertical axis is the absolute number of occurrences of “liberal”/“illiberal”).

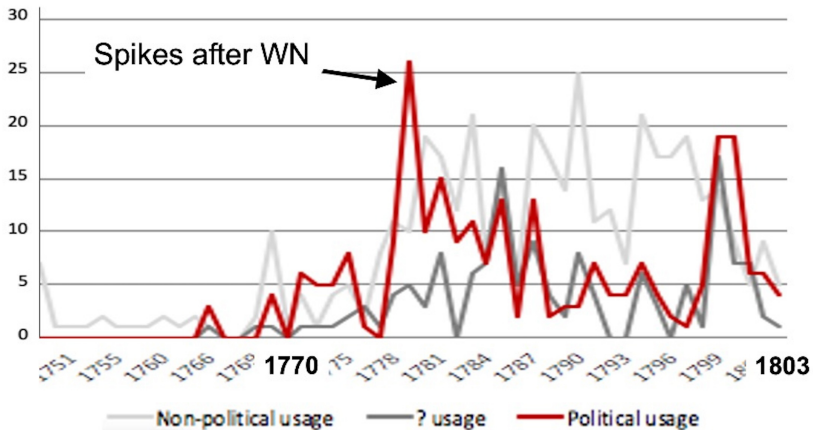


Figure 5: Ngram: “liberal” in British parliamentary debate, 1750–1803
Source: The Excel File. (Thanks to Todd Peckarsky.)

The Google Books Ngram Viewer also has French, Italian, Spanish, and German, and it is plain that Britain exported the “liberal” political expressions to the Continent. The expressions in English, “liberal policy,” *etc.*, came to the French, Italian, Spanish, and German, but some 25 years after they had already started up in English. In Figure 6, the panels are small but 1790 is marked clearly in each. To see the details better, click links in *Sources*, below the image. The Smithian connections to take-up in these countries, as well as Sweden, are of great interest but beyond the compass of this article.

Returning to Britain, let us next consider *The Edinburgh Review*, which started up in 1802. Halévy (1928, 301) called it “the great liberal review.” G. O. Trevelyan (1876) wrote of the journal’s eminence as of 1824: “That famous periodical, which for three-and-twenty-years had shared in and promoted the rising fortunes of the Liberal cause, had now attained its height—a height unequalled before or since—of political, social, and literary power” (116). With help, I coded “liberal” occurrences. Figure 6 shows two series. The lesser is the unambiguously political “liberal” and the greater adds in occurrences marked as perhaps political, showing a steady stream of Smithian “liberal.”

The data series that have been shown establish that the adjective *liberal* in a political sense came on strong starting in 1769 and was sustained right up to when the noun *liberalism* starts up. The data shown above are consistent with the idea that such “liberal” talk was especially robust from about 1776 through the 1780s and then cooled

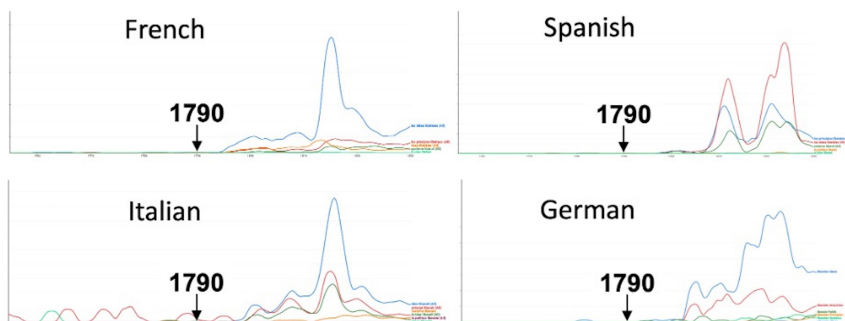


Figure 6: French, Italian, Spanish, and German for “liberal” expressions, 1755–1830
Source: French [here](#); Italian [here](#); Spanish [here](#); German [here](#).



Figure 7: Ngrams: Edinburgh Review, political “liberal,” 1802–1824
Source: The Excel File. (Thanks to Shanelka Payoe and Eric Hammer.)

somewhat during revolutionary France, for liberal ideas and “liberal” talk might have been associated with political innovation and radicalism. Controversy over domestic reforms was, perhaps, simply chilled. But it is not as though “liberal” talk dried up and had to await some renewal from Continental influences. Rather, “liberal” talk *did* continue, just not with the same robustness. There was sustinment straight through the period from 1769 to the 1820s, when the “liberal” nouns had gotten started.

3. On the Stepping from the Pre-Political to the Political

It seems clear to me that in Scotland in mid 18th century there was a nest of thinkers who saw, developed, and advanced a political outlook in need of a name. That the outlook christened “liberal” was destined to have that particular name is not so clear. But “liberal” was indeed what emerged. I do not suppose that these thinkers fancied that their outlook was something that they had birthed. I use “christening” not for its birth-ing connotation but for its *naming* connotation.

It is tantalizing to imagine that members of the Scottish nest discussed what name to select. When we name a child or a boat, we formulate alternative options and weigh the options. What alternatives might have been considered? I do not know of direct evidence, however, of any such explicit, coordinated discussion of that kind. Still, Robertson, Smith, and others did consciously select the adjective *liberal*; they started to use that adjective in a novel way, thus christening their outlook “liberal.” It was a semantic decision. Each writer may have made the decision in the solitude of his study, but it was a decision. Furthermore, the christening itself was rather striking. As I argue below, Smith’s use of “liberal” is especially striking. The blossom of Figure 2 indicates that others were also struck by the liberal christening.

For centuries the adjective *liberal* had long denoted the aspects of liberality. The adjective *liberal* meant generous, munificent, indulgent, as in “with a liberal hand,” or open-minded, tolerant, free from bias or bigotry, and generally befitting a free man, as in “liberal arts” and “liberal sciences,”—meanings that were *not* political.

Thus, a major question confronts us: Why “liberal”? Why would that word be taken up for a policy orientation toward allowing every man to pursue his own interest his own way? Speaking somewhat loosely, what led the Scots to produce discourse that constitutes a bridge from liberality to liberalism? That question is addressed by Erik Matson (2022) in his article, “What’s Liberal about Adam Smith’s ‘Liberal Plan’?” In the remainder of this section, I riff on Matson’s masterful treatment of the question.

Matson’s answer to the question has two veins. One is theological or metaphorical: Allowing every man to pursue his own interest his own way, keeping government small and limited, is what best actualizes the liberality, the munificence, of nature or its providential author, producing “liberal wages,” a “liberal and generous” sustenance or supply (WNIV.vii.b.2, IV.ix); liberal policy cooperates (metaphorically) with God’s liberal hand.

The second vein in Matson’s answer is that the pre-political “liberal” connotes a loose hand, a looseness of the rein, a permissiveness or tolerance, which corresponds to the affirmation of the ordinary life of ordinary people, an affirmation strong among enlightened Scots. Allowing every man to pursue his own interest his own way reflects liberality in the allower, for it accords dignity to the man who is so allowed. These two veins are developed also in a short article (Matson 2023). I concur fully with Matson’s answers but add a couple of points that may be understood as elaboration in the second vein.

First, something that Matson does not highlight is that “liberal” may have been selected for a liberty-centered political outlook in part because “liberal” and “liberty”

share the morpheme *liber*. That holds potentiality for infusing “liberal” with a strong link to liberty. Also, there are cognitive, cognate, and etymological connections between the two words. Consider the following by George Turnbull, another Scot, from his 1742 work *Observations upon Liberal Education, in All Its Branches*: “The whole business therefore of *liberal* education, and it is called *liberal* for that very reason, is to cherish into proper vigour the love of *liberty*, and yet guard it against degenerating into the vice which borders upon it, wilfulness or stubbornness” (Turnbull 1742, 40, italics added).

However rich and deep the connections between the two words may or may not have been over the centuries leading up to the liberal christening, the christeners might have sensed that the sheer resemblance between the two words held great potential, going forward, to infuse the word *liberal* with enhanced suggestion of liberty.

A second point has to do with interpreting how liberal policy might be seen, in a quite concrete way, as instantiation of liberality. Consider a passage by Robert Molesworth first published in 1721.³ “We are convinced, that the greater Number of Workmen of one Trade there is in any Town, the more does that Town thrive.” Next, he rebukes towns that, under the Act of Settlement, “will not admit of Strangers but upon too hard Terms.” Such English towns “fall to visible Decay, whilst new Villages not incorporated, or *more liberal of their Privileges*, grow up in their stead” ([1721] 2011, 183, italics added). Thus, town governors granted “privileges” more generously. The “privileges” here corresponded to liberty to live within the town. In this fashion, what liberality confers or distributes is an augmentation of liberty.

The notion of rulers or governors liberally granting liberty to the governed comes more naturally to people of a regal or aristocratic age, who have a sober sense of governor and governed. The governor is not like one’s neighbor, but rather is a special sort of player, the jural superior.⁴ Liberality, like benevolence, can have a superior-to-inferior flavor, like parent-to-child.⁵ The governor condescends liberally to be (Smithian) liberal. That is not to say that liberalism itself is condescending: The Smithian liberal does not arrogate to himself any superiority apart from the universal and reciprocal (and hence egalitarian) sort that inheres in making any sort of contested judgment (as when we disagree about the quality of a movie, say). Rather, the Smithian political liberal expresses a judgment as to what sort of actions a jural superior is to take. Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* is such an expression. Terming those actions “liberal” may connote that in taking the recommended actions the jural superior exhibits liberality. This way of seeing it fits the notion that the christeners wrote to persuade aristocrats to embrace liberal principles: The christeners offered a political outlook with a name that paid a compliment to aristocrats and magistrates who embraced Smithian-liberal policy principles. A Smithian aristocrat would be doubly liberal.

³ The Molesworth text I quote first appeared in 1721 in “The Translator Preface,” which was Molesworth’s preface to his translation of François Hotman’s *Franco-Gallia*, and which is found on pp. 171–190 of Molesworth (2011). That preface, however, formed the basis of a pamphlet, *Principles of a Real Whig*, published 1775.

⁴ On jural superiority, see Diesel (2020) and Diesel and Klein (2021).

⁵ On the idea of benevolence as an attitude of a superior toward an inferior, see Heineccius ([1741] 2008, 66).

The notion of liberalism as liberality comes less naturally to people of a democratic age, for such people often have, as Alexis de Tocqueville explained, incoherent notions about government; they imagine away the reality of the governor and the governed, as though government were a voluntary association among jural equals. And if those democratic people also happen to maintain Lockean notions of their basic rights—the terms and conditions of the supposed social contract—then they will hardly see the according of liberty as an expression of liberality. People of a Lockean mindset are more apt to insist on a high degree of liberty as a matter of common decency, if not plain justice or living up to terms and conditions of a supposed contract. Lockeans declare, “Don’t Tread on Me.” Refraining from treading is hardly regarded as an expression of liberality. Liberty is a natural or constitutional right (or both), not a privilege granted to jural inferiors by jural superiors. Perhaps these points help us understand why, throughout the era of the original political liberalism in Europe and elsewhere, Americans never much used “liberal.” And, perhaps, that *lack* of usage made America, in the 20th century, an easier mark for the new sense of “liberal.”

4. Some Critical Texts

Again, Deirdre McCloskey rightly insists that we must know our data. Multiple volumes could be produced gathering and analyzing the “liberal” talk during the period under investigation here. To test our interpretations, I highlight some writings of significant authors.

4.1 David Hume

The blossoming shown in Figure 2 starts in 1769, and Hume lived to 1776, so one might wonder whether he participated in the blossoming. In fact, he did not. Indeed, from 1769 to the end of his life, Hume did not produce new works for publication. His letters (all years) show but one possible use, in 1767, of “liberal” in a political sense (Hume 1932, II, 171).

But perhaps Hume wrote lines prior to 1769 that suggested something to the liberal christeners. There are two passages to note, both from the *History of England*.⁶ In Volume 5, published in 1754, Hume speaks of the scene in the early 1600s:

On the continent, where the necessity of discipline had begotten standing armies, the princes commonly established an unlimited authority, and overpowered, by force or intrigue, the liberties of the people. In England, *the love of freedom, which, unless checked, flourishes extremely in all liberal natures*, acquired new force, and was regulated by more enlarged views, suitably to that cultivated understanding, which became, every day, more common, among men of birth and education... The severe though popular, government of Elizabeth had confined this rising spirit within very narrow bounds: But when a new and a foreign family succeeded to the throne, and a prince [James I] less dreaded and less beloved; symptoms immediately appeared of *a more free and independent genius in the nation* (Hume [1754] 1983, 5, 18, italics added).

Thus, Hume suggests that someone of a liberal nature tends to love freedom.

⁶ Incidentally, there is a delightful “liberality” remark in Volume 3, 310.

Next, in Volume 1, published in 1762, discussing reforms by Alfred the Great in the 9th century, Hume speaks first of the prior oppressive systems of decennary and frankpledges, which were “well calculated to reduce that fierce and licentious people under the salutary restraint of law and government.” Hume then praises reforms made by Alfred: “But Alfred took care to temper these rigours by other institutions favourable to the freedom of the citizens; and nothing could be more popular and *liberal* than his *plan* for the administration of justice” (Hume [1762] I, 77, italics added).

It would be extravagant to suppose that this “liberal...plan” precipitated Smith’s “liberal plan,” but Hume is linking the fostering of “institutions favourable to the freedom of the citizens” to “liberal” and “plan.”

4.2 Adam Ferguson

My treatment of Ferguson is limited to his *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, published in 1767; I have not sifted his other writings.

That work is a warning about moral and political corruption; it makes ample use of “liberal” in non-political senses, but several suggest a political meaning. The book is portentous and foreboding. Through most of the book it seems that Ferguson aims his warning against commerce, luxury, and the dissipation of communitarian spirit. However, the closing portion of the book emphasizes, like the Turnbull quotation given above, the liberal mind and liberty. In the end, one gets the feeling that the most becoming use of one’s own is to be vigilant against despotism; so a political meaning emerges as the highest or noblest instantiation of the non-political meanings of “liberal.” In the final two paragraphs of the book, Ferguson seems to say that foiling the political fatalism that abandons the cause and spirit of liberty is the highest instantiation of a liberal mind. The following quotations (all italics mine) are but samples of a number of noteworthy “liberal” moments in the text:

When we suppose government to have bestowed *a degree of tranquillity* which we sometimes hope to reap from it, as the best of its fruits, and public affairs to proceed, in the several departments of legislation and execution, *with the least possible interruption to commerce and lucrative arts...* [Whereas] such a state, like that of China, by throwing affairs into separate offices, where conduct consists in detail, and in the observance of forms, by *superseding all the exertions of a great or a liberal mind*, is more akin to despotism than we are apt to imagine (Ferguson 1767, 414).

Liberty is a right which every individual must be ready to vindicate for himself, and which he who pretends to bestow as a favour, has by that very act in reality denied. Even political establishments, though they appear to be independent of the will and arbitration of men, cannot be relied on for the preservation of freedom; they may nourish, but should not supersede that firm and resolute spirit, with which the *liberal* mind is always prepared to resist indignities, and to refer its safety to itself (*ibid.*, 408).

Men are qualified to receive this blessing [that is, liberty], only in proportion as they are made to apprehend their own rights...and are willing to prefer the engagements of a *liberal* mind to the enjoyment of sloth, or the delusive hopes of a safety purchased by submission and fear (*ibid.*, 409).

4.3 William Robertson

My treatment of Robertson is limited to the three volumes, all published in 1769, of his *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V*. Almost all of the political “liberal” moments in the work come from the first volume of the work, called “A View of the Progress of Society in Europe, from the Subversion of the Roman Empire to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century.” The entire first volume, then, interprets 1,000 years, just up to Charles V, who in 1516 became king of Spain and subsequently Holy Roman Emperor. Out of feudalism, Robertson explains, commercial and trading centers developed and, with them, “liberal” ideas. This volume, reported a person who attended Smith’s lectures in Edinburgh circa 1750–51 (CAS, 192n2), drew on those lectures, but by no means do I mean to suggest that Smith’s Edinburgh lectures influenced Robertson’s use of “liberal.”

Jeffrey Smitten has written a biography of Robertson. He explains that Robertson started writing *Charles V* in 1760, and that in 1765 Robertson said in a letter that he had completed it; but what he completed would turn out to be the second and third volumes (Smitten 2017, 150). Robertson decided in late 1765 to write the additional volume that became the “View.” The entire manuscript was completed in 1768 (Ib. 152). One might hypothesize that the decision to use “liberal” in a political sense was made especially after 1765, for in Robertson’s three-volume work it appears many times in the “View” volume, and scarcely at all in the two volumes written before the end of 1765.

It seems to me that Robertson’s work constitutes the bud of the “liberal” blossoming seen in Figure 2. Robertson, the man, an avowed Whig in politics, was indefatigable, and, as of 1769, was or had been a minister and a leading member of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, the principal of the University of Edinburgh, historiographer royal for Scotland, an active member of the Select Society, and an intimate associate of the literati of Edinburgh. He became the highest paid Scottish author of the age, and came to be regarded as one of the most illustrious historians of the age, along with Hume and Edward Gibbon.⁷ As for the three-volume work we focus on here, Dugald Stewart wrote that there had never been a book “expected with more general impatience” (1802, 74–75), and the work indeed immediately had a great success. “By the end of the century, *Charles V* had become one of the most widely circulated historical works of its time” (Smitten 2017, 157). Stewart (88, 93) singled out the first volume as especially valuable among all of Robertson’s works.

The following “liberal” quotations are presented in the order in which they appear in that volume (all italics are mine):

⁷ Richard Sher writes: “It is certainly true that the highest-paid Scottish author of the age, William Robertson, sold his copyrights in advance of publication for handsome sums. After receiving £600 for his two-volume *History of Scotland* in 1759, Robertson was paid more than £1,000 per quarto volume for his next three histories: £4,000 (including £500 for the second edition) for his three-volume *History of the Reign of Charles V*, £2,667 for his two-volume *History of America*, and £1,111 for his one-volume *Historical Disquisition concerning the Knowledge which the Ancients Had of India*.” (2006, 214).

The revival of the knowledge and study of the Roman law, co-operated with the causes which I have mentioned, in introducing more just and *liberal ideas* concerning the nature of government, and the administration of justice (Robertson 1769, I: 65).

[That page's edge note for the paragraph just quoted says: "The revival of the Roman law contributes more *liberal ideas* concerning justice and order."]

While improvements so important with respect to the state of society, and the administration of justice, gradually made progress in Europe, sentiments more *liberal* and generous had begun to animate the nobles. These were inspired by the spirit of Chivalry... (*ibid.*, 69).

[That page's edge note for the paragraph just quoted says: "The spirit of chivalry introduces more *liberal* sentiments, and more generous manners."]

Society and manners must be considerably improved, and many provisions must be made for public order and personal security, before a *liberal* intercourse can take place between different nations (*ibid.*, 77).

At the same time, the different pretenders to the crown, being obliged to court the barons who adhered to them, and on whole support they depended for the success of their claims, they augmented their privileges by *liberal* concessions... (*ibid.*, 137).

[T]here were certain peculiarities in their [Castile's and Aragon's] political constitutions which distinguish them from those of any other country in Europe. The regal prerogative, extremely limited in every feudal kingdom, was circumscribed, in Spain, within such narrow bounds, as reduced the power of the sovereign almost to nothing. The privileges of the nobility were vast in proportion, and extended so far, as to border on absolute independance. The immunities of the cities were great, they possessed considerable influence in the Cortes or supreme assemblies of the nations, and they aspired at obtaining more... These were accompanied at some times with more *liberal* sentiments concerning the rights of the people, at other times with more elevated notions concerning the privileges of the nobles, than were common in other nations (*ibid.*, 148–9).

When the manners of the European nations became more gentles and their ideas more *liberal*, slaves who married without their master's consent, were subjected only to a fine (*ibid.*, 229).

[Robertson quotes a writ of Philip V of France, and then remarks:] I shall allow these to be only the formal words of a publick and legal stile, but the ideas are singular, and much more *liberal and enlarged* than one could expect in that age. A popular monarch of Great Britain could hardly address himself to parliament, in terms more favourable to public liberty (*ibid.*, 266).

[Robertson speaks of a statue in France in 1355 concerning "the mode of levying taxes...; the coining of money; ... the redress of the grievance of purveyance; concerning the regular administration of justice" and continues:] [T]he measures which they proposed as the most popular and acceptable, plainly prove that the spirit of liberty had spread wonderfully, and that the ideas which then prevailed in France concerning government were extremely *liberal* (*ibid.*, 267).

The Hanseatic league is the most powerful commercial confederacy known in history... Anderson has mentioned the chief facts with respect to their commercial progress, the extent of the privileges which they obtained in different countries, their successful wars with several monarchs, as well as the spirit and zeal with which they contended for those liberties and rights without which it is impossible to carry on commerce to advantage. The vigorous efforts of a society attentive only to commercial objects, could not fail of diffusing over Europe new and more *liberal* ideas concerning justice and order wherever they fettled (*ibid.*, 336).

The Aragonese were no less solicitous to secure the personal rights of individuals, than to maintain the freedom of the constitution and the spirit of their statutes with respect to both was equally *liberal* (*ibid.*, 346).

As noted, the next two volumes of Robertson’s 1769 work dig into the history of the time of Charles V. Each contains a notable moment. In the second volume, Robertson says that the existence of a great number of cities is a circumstance “which contributes more than any other to mitigate the rigour of feudal institutions, and to introduce a more *liberal* and equal form of government” (II, 159). In the third volume, he associated “freedom of religious inquiry” and “toleration” with “*liberal* and enlarged sentiments” (III, 337). Karen O’Brien writes: “Robertson’s historical *oeuvre*, although diverse in subject matter and theoretical apparatus, is unified by this lucid, liberal, cosmopolitan vision” (1997, 74).

4.4 Adam Smith

Smith’s participation in the blossoming shown in Figure 2 is ample, rich, and very impactful. The liberal christening was kicked off by Robertson, but Smith’s role in the christening is more historic, not only because Smith is more historic, but because of what Smith does with the adjective *liberal*. Four aspects of Smith’s role can be enumerated: (1) Smith advances a more definite, more jurisprudential, meaning of liberty, which has been disambiguated from other meanings as “mere-liberty” (Klein and Matson 2020); (2) he associates “liberal” more strongly with mere-liberty; (3) he signals more clearly that “liberal” is his choice for the name of the outlook he espouses, that is, he more clearly signals a naming, a christening; (4) he provides an enormous elaboration of the liberal policy outlook, namely *The Wealth of Nations*.

Here I show some key passages. All occurrences of “liberal,” thus including “liberality,” “illiberal,” *etc.*, have been captured in an Excel file available online (link). Altogether there are 93 occurrences. Each occurrence is coded for one of four meanings of “liberal.” Three are non-political (and indeed related). The fourth meaning is a political meaning, of whatever kind.

Of the 93 occurrences, 16 have been coded as political. Of those 16, 12 are in the *Wealth of Nations* (WN). There are zero in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (LRBL) and *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (EPS). As for the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (LJ), there are two coded as political, both about Rome having been “more free and liberal in conferring” voting rights or the general rights of citizenship (LJ v.90). As for *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS), there is but one that we have coded political, perhaps doubtfully: Smith uses the expression “the liberal expression of more enlarged and enlightened mind” (TMS VI.ii.2.3) to describe Scipio Nasica’s practice of concluding all of his speeches, in direct antithesis to Cato the elder, by saying that “Carthage ought not to be destroyed.”

Prior to 1769, Smith’s discourse displays no significant political “liberal” moments. The first significant occurrence comes in a lengthy and much-noted letter Smith wrote to William Cullen, dated 20 September 1774, about proposed rule changes that would have narrowed the granting of medical degrees. I gather that some sort of legal privileges attached to being granted a license by Scotland’s Royal College of Physicians, a

granting that seems to have required a university medical degree. Thus, the narrowing of medical degrees would have meant a narrowing of licensed physicians. Smith adamantly opposes the proposed confinement, making arguments characteristic of free-market economists against occupational licensing. Smith speaks of “liberal principles”:

That in every profession the fortune of every individual should depend as much as possible upon his merit, and as little as possible upon his privilege, is certainly for the interest of the public. It is even for the interest of every particular profession, which can never so effectually support the general merit and real honour of the greater part of those who exercise it, as by resting on such *liberal principles*. Those principles are even most effectual for procuring them all the employment which the country can afford (CAS, 143, p. 178, italics added).

Now we turn to the *Wealth of Nations* (WN), where a political meaning of “liberal” is plainly advanced. We must disagree with Emma Rothschild and Amartya Sen when they write: “The word ‘liberal,’ for Smith, had little to do with political positions. The liberal was the generous, or the ample: Smith speaks repeatedly of ‘the liberal reward of labor’” (2006, 344). It is true that a majority of the “liberal” moments in WN are not political, but that does not nullify those that are political, many of unmistakable importance. Rothschild and Sen write as though “liberal” must have been monosemous for Smith. Polysemy is something that Smith embraced as a natural fact and relished as a way to create puzzles and contrarities, provoke thought, and enlarge our thinking.

I proceed front to back, taking up moments as they occur in WN, though not strictly, treating the 12 moments of political “liberal” in WN. Again, all italicization is mine.

We have noted the idea of liberalism as liberality with liberty. The first moment, coming in Book III, is along those lines. Amidst the narration of how burghers “became really free in our present sense of the word Freedom” (WN III.iii.5)—the capitalization being highly unusual in Smith’s published works—Smith tells how the sovereign, allied with the burghers against “the oppression of the great lords” (WN III.iii.8), granted the burghs various powers to self-government, self-defense, and self-taxation (paying an annual lump sum to the crown). Smith then writes: “The princes who lived upon the worst terms with their barons, seem accordingly to have been the most *liberal* in grants of this kind to their burghs” (WN III.iii.9). A perhaps similar sort of “liberal,” also coded as political, comes later, where Smith writes of the English parliament being “rendered sufficiently *liberal* in their grants for supporting the civil and military establishments...of their own country” (WN IV.vii.c.69).

Now we come to an important moment of Smith’s part in the liberal christening. Here are the first 166 words of the paragraph:

Were all nations to follow the *liberal* system of free exportation and free importation, the different states into which a great continent was divided would so far resemble the different provinces of a great empire. As among the different provinces of a great empire the freedom of the inland trade appears, both from reason and experience, not only the best palliative of a dearth, but the most effectual preventative of a famine; so would the freedom of the exportation and importation trade be among the different states into which a great continent was divided. The larger the continent, the easier the communication through all the different parts of it, both by land and by water, the less would any one particular part of it ever be exposed to either of these calamities, the scarcity of any one country being more likely to be relieved by the plenty of

some other. But very few countries have entirely adopted this *liberal* system. The freedom of the corn trade [...] (WN IV.v.b.39).

I suggest that Smith here signals the christening. First, there is the repetition of “liberal system.” Second, there is the definite article “the” and then demonstrative adjective “this” in “*this* liberal system.” It is hard not to see that Smith, here, *names* the system. And that system is clearly along the lines of allowing every man to pursue his own interest his own way. The remainder of the paragraph makes clear the mere-liberty sense of liberty that Smith is operating with, as he says that to restrict this liberty is “evidently to sacrifice the ordinary laws of justice to an idea of publick utility.” Such intervention, he goes on to say, “ought to be exercised only, which can be pardoned only in cases of the most urgent necessity” (WN IV.v.b.39).

Next, there are five “liberal” occurrences that are essentially about a mother country, in degrees, allowing the people of her colonies to pursue their own interest their own way, as opposed to monopolistic tendencies to restrict their trade:

Under so *liberal* a policy the colonies are enabled both to sell their own produce and to buy the goods of Europe at a reasonable price (WN IV.vii.b.24).

The *liberality* of England, however, towards the trade of her colonies has been confined chiefly to what concerns the market for their produce, either in its rude state, or in what may be called the very first stage of manufacture (WN IV.vii.b.40).

With regard to the importation of goods from Europe, England has likewise dealt more *liberally* with her colonies than any other nation (WN IV.vii.b.46).

But though the policy of Great Britain with regard to the trade of her colonies has been dictated by the same mercantile spirit as that of other nations, it has, however, upon the whole, been less *illiberal* and oppressive than that of any of them (WN IV.vii.b.50).

The best of them all, that of England, is only somewhat less *illiberal* and oppressive than that of any of the rest (WN IV.vii.b.63).

Next we come to the most important moment, where we find “allowing every man to pursue his own interest his own way, upon the liberal plan of equality, liberty and justice.”

Mr. Colbert, the famous minister of Lewis XIV... had unfortunately embraced all the prejudices of the mercantile system, in its nature and essence **a system of restraint and regulation**, and such as could scarce fail to be agreeable to a laborious and plodding man of business, who had been accustomed **to regulate the different departments of publick offices**, and to establish the necessary checks and controuls for confining each to its proper sphere. The industry and commerce of a great country he endeavoured to **regulate upon the same model as the departments of a publick office**; and instead of allowing every man to pursue his own interest his own way, upon the *liberal* plan of equality, liberty and justice, he bestowed upon certain branches of industry **extraordinary privileges, while he laid others under as extraordinary restraints** (WN IV.ix.3, my italics and boldface).

About the passage, five things are noteworthy: (1) Smith is plainly comparing two directly contrasting approaches or outlooks toward public policy; (2) the contrast is between a *dirigiste*, organizational approach of “restraints” and “privileges,” marked in boldface, and allowing every man to pursue his own interest his own way; (3) having set out the two contrasting outlooks, Smith signals plainly that the name he endorses

for the latter is “liberal,” and again uses the definite article “the,” “the liberal plan;” (4) the words “allowing every man to pursue his own interest his own way” are echoed in Smith’s famous paragraph about the system of natural liberty, the penultimate paragraph of Book IV, there saying “left perfectly free to pursue his own interest his own way,” making clear that “liberal plan” and “system of natural liberty” are of a piece; (5) in writing “liberal plan of equality, liberty and justice,” Smith connects liberal and liberty, which here is plainly mere-liberty, as indeed the word *liberty* is in pretty much all its WN occurrences of a political nature (as opposed to, say, “leave him at liberty to divert himself with his play-fellows,” WN I.i.8). Incidentally, it is interesting to ponder whether “upon the liberal plan” modifies “to pursue,” “allowing,” or both.

Finally, and starting up directly after the “liberal plan” paragraph, Smith takes up a system of economic thought which he says was authored by “Mr. Quesnai” (WN IV.ix.27), and twice compliments that system as “liberal”:

According to this *liberal* and generous system, therefore, the most advantageous method in which a landed nation can raise up artificers, manufacturers and merchants of its own, is to grant the most perfect freedom of trade to the artificers, manufacturers and merchants of all other nations (WN IV.ix.24).

This system, however, with all its imperfections is, perhaps, the nearest approximation to the truth that has yet been published upon the subject of political oeconomy... [A]nd in representing perfect liberty as the only effectual expedient for rendering this annual reproduction the greatest possible, its doctrine seems to be in every respect as just as it is generous and *liberal* (WN IV.ix.38).

In Smith’s correspondence, there are two letters that Smith received shortly after the publication of WN on March 9, 1776. In one, of an unspecified day in April, Joseph Black compliments Smith for WN’s “comprehensive System composed with such just and *liberal* Sentiments” (CAS, 152, p. 190). And William Robertson wrote to Smith (8 April 1776), congratulating him and saying that “if the English are capable of extending their ideas beyond the narrow and *illiberal* arrangements introduced by the mercantile supporters...your Book will occasion a total change in several important articles both in police and finance” (CAS, 153, p. 192).

4.5 Briefly on Burke, Stewart, McCulloch 1824, and America

Of material extending from “the liberal Doctor Smith” (Crumpe [1793] 1795, 361) up to 1824, I touch on a few sources.

Edmund Burke: Burke joined in on the political “liberal” semantic practice. Elsewhere (Klein 2021a, 868), I have highlighted several moments (and there are more), including using “liberal” to modify the nouns *government* and *system*.

Dugald Stewart: Stewart ([1793] 1980) seems to have been intent on promoting the political meaning of “liberal.” In his famous *Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, LL.D.* (ALW) in EPS, he uses “liberal” with the nouns *views*, *policy*, *principles* (twice), and *system*, and clearly adumbrates that the spine of such liberalism is mere-liberty (ALW 3III.2, IV.10, IV.18, IV nG, IV.24, nI). In his position as professor at Edinburgh 1785–1808, and beyond, he was enormously influential on many of the rising

generation, not least editors and writers at the *Edinburgh Review*. I highlight but one of the many moments. He says something along the lines of J. G. A. Pocock’s statement (1983, 249) that “[t]he child of jurisprudence is liberalism.” Stewart wrote that “the systems of *natural jurisprudence* compiled by Grotius and his successors” “furnished...the parent stock on which were grafted the first rudiments of pure ethics and of liberal politics taught in modern times” (1854, 26; cf. 183, 171).

John Ramsay McCulloch’s 1824 piece: McCulloch, whom Joseph Dorfman ([1825] 1966, 6) termed “the economist” of the *Edinburgh Review* (for 20 years beginning 1818), published a lengthy, influential entry on political economy for *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and it seems intent on promoting “liberal” as the name for the mere-liberty policy precept. McCulloch says that Sir Dudley North “is a most intelligent and *consistent* advocate of the great principles of commercial freedom... He is throughout sound and liberal” (226). “Liberal” is used to modify the noun *system* (five times), *doctrines* (twice), *opinions*, and *notions*. “Dr Smith’s work must be placed in the foremost rank of those that have done most to liberalise, enlighten, and enrich mankind” (233). McCulloch’s 1824 piece, itself an expansion of an 1822 article in *The Scotsman*, was included in all of McCulloch’s editions of the *Wealth of Nations*. McCulloch expanded his 1824 article into *Principles of Political Economy, with a Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the Science*, an influential text first published in 1825 and going through many editions, and retaining throughout the copious use of ‘liberal’ in the Smithian sense.

America: Overton Taylor (1960) explained that, prior to the 20th century, political “liberal” never caught on in America: “[T]he words ‘liberal’ and ‘liberalism’ were not in constant, general use in American political life in the nineteenth century. No major American political party or faction or movement ever called itself ‘liberal’ or its program ‘liberalism’” (429–30). But the political “liberal” semantic was not *wholly* absent. George Washington wrote to Marquis de Lafayette (15 August 1786): “The period is not very remote when the benefits of a liberal and free commerce will, pretty generally, succeed to the devastations and horrors of war.” Noah Webster said that education may instill “the principles of virtue and of liberty and inspire them with just and liberal ideas of government and with an inviolable attachment to their own country” (1790). Similar “liberal” passage from Samuel Cooper, Ezra Stiles, Joseph Lathrop, and Reverend David Ramsay are provided by Helena Rosenblatt (2018, 36–7). Also noteworthy is Reverend John McVickar. His *Outlines of Political Economy* ([1825] 1966) reproduced McCulloch’s (1824) piece on political economy along with McVickar’s copious commentary in footnotes. In those footnotes he abundantly promotes “liberal.” I share two snippets:

[A]s individuals best know their own interest, national prosperity is best consulted by allowing them to follow it. This forms what is termed the *liberal* system (McVickar [1825] 1966, 90n, his italics).

Between these opposing opinions the Editor [McVickar] does not hesitate to profess himself attached to the liberal system (*ibid.*)⁸.

⁸ Despite this declaration, McVickar’s laissez-faire had limits; see 90–1, 98, and 38–9 of McVickar’s banking pamphlet, separately paginated in McVickar [1825] 1966; Dorfman [1825] 1966.

Still, a political “liberal” does not find much usage in 19th-century America. The comments made earlier, about democratic and Lockean sensibilities having been more pronounced in America, might be pertinent in explaining the difference. Relatedly, perhaps much of American political discourse sported, shallowly and naively, or insinuated, a presumption of liberty—at the federal level, at least—such that Smithian liberalism was not expressly made a matter to contend over at the federal level (tariffs being in large measure for revenue, as opposed to protectionism). Perhaps it mattered that America was a plurality of states, each retaining an independent partial sovereignty. Finally, while the cause of independence drew on mere-liberty, once independence was won, the brute fact of slavery would vex any intellectual foray that continued the arc that Stewart said ran from natural jurisprudence to liberal politics, as abolitionism would be the plain and direct implication. Slavery, then, might have made it difficult for a liberal politics to maintain the temperance and prudence of the liberalism we associate with Smith and Burke.

5. Concluding Remarks

I argue that originally liberalism is centered on taming, even domesticating state power. And that “liberal” in this sense acquired its original meaning in Adam Smith.

Eric Schliesser (2023)

The digitalization of text powerfully illuminates the evolution of particular semantic practices, such as those involving “liberal.” The period 1769–1824 is now much more clearly understood. Clarity can be brought to “liberal” semantics going forward.

I encourage the reader to visit the Google Books Ngram Viewer ([link](#)) and generate two figures:

1. Click “Case-insensitive” (to make the search case-insensitive), set the starting year to 1870 and the ending year to 1940, and in the phrases box type “old liberalism, new liberalism” (without the quotation marks), and click search.
2. Set the starting year to 1848 and the ending year to 2022, and in the phrases box type “liberal revolutions of 1848” (without the quotation marks), and click search.

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