

Observed without Sympathy: Adam Smith on Inequality and Spectatorship

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Abstract: Responding to socioeconomic inequality and the decline of political participation, theorists of “audience democracy” emphasize citizens’ spectatorship of political leaders but neglect how citizens experience being watched themselves. I turn to Adam Smith’s arguments about the effects of inequality on spectatorship, highlighting his criticisms of the public’s disdain for people living in poverty. By comparing Smith’s arguments about misperceptions of people living in poverty to his discussions of an innocent man accused of a crime, I show how mistaken spectators demoralize even morally judicious individuals. I also expand on an example of unjust censure that Smith suggests but does not discuss in detail: the social shame directed at a survivor of rape. I conclude by using Smith’s insights to reflect on the social and interpersonal dynamics of surveillance that render contemporary welfare programs degrading for many participants and help transform socioeconomic inequality into political inequality.

A pregnant woman visits a public hospital for a prenatal exam. As a Medicaid recipient, a New York State statute requires her to “meet with a nurse/health educator, HIV counselor, nutritionist, social worker, and a financial officer” (Bridges 2011, 42). Before she can access prenatal care, she must “detail intensely personal and intimate facts about her life,” including experiences of sexual abuse or domestic violence (Bridges 2011, 58). Because she cannot afford private insurance or treatment at a private hospital or physician’s office, she has no choice but to cooperate (Bridges 2011, 64).

In the past two decades, political scientists have turned their attention toward the persistent rise of socioeconomic inequality and its consequences for democracy. Scholars have been puzzled by the failure of economic inequality to inspire political participation in democracies around the world (Solt 2008) and in the United States in particular, where the rise in income inequality has mostly been among middle- and higher-income people yet political participation has declined most rapidly among lower-income people (Soss and Jacobs 2009, 104). Representatives appear largely unresponsive to the policy preferences of most of their constituents, excepting the affluent (Bartels 2016, 263–68; Page and Gilens 2017, 68).

Democratic theorists have used “audience democracy” to describe the representative distance between politicians and constituents, emphasizing the public’s experience of a one-sided, theatrical spectatorship of their leaders who actually exercise power (Green 2010; Manin 1997, 223, 226; Urbinati 2014, 2019). With the ability of citizens to actually influence policymaking in doubt, Jeffrey Green proposes citizens possess democratic power as spectators whose “popular gaze” may influence political leaders (2010, 9). In response, Nadia Urbinati critically confronts the decline of political participation by characterizing the same experience of spectatorship as a disempowering “subjection” to politicians (2014, 226, 232). Urbinati builds on this approach in her study of populist movements, which she argues are facilitated by socioeconomic inequality (2019, 4, 174–76).

Yet the scene with which this article opens is left out of these models of audience democracy, despite being emblematic of how inequality shapes politics. Although Green seeks “to dignify the lives of everyday individuals,” his argument rests on the erroneous assumption that the people “observe the few without being observed in turn by them” (2010, 128–29). But everyday individuals are not merely either participating on the public stage or passively watching political

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spectacles unfold; they are also being observed and judged themselves. The electoral silence of “citizen-spectators” living in poverty has been traced to experiences of being observed by others. Privacy-invasive interactions with welfare bureaucrats, compounded by degrading social discourse about welfare claimants, shape participants’ perceptions of American government as likely to ignore their political expressions (Soss 1999, 2002). Programs that treat citizens as subjects deserving of surveillance particularly dampen voting and other forms of political and civic engagement (Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010, 221). Inegalitarian policies of surveillance can be traced to an underlying American moral culture that presumes people living in poverty lack adequate ethical abilities (Bridges 2017). While the state’s monopoly on the legitimate use of force is an important factor in forms of state surveillance, social prejudices and cultural discourse—driven by politicians, the media, and other members of the community—both undergird such programs and shape participants’ experiences of them as particularly degrading (Bridges 2017; Monahan 2017). Reflecting on how members of the public “audience” experience such scrutiny is essential to fully capture the breadth of inequality’s effects on contemporary democracy.

To better conceptualize the unique effects of inequality on experiences of being seen and judged by others, we can turn to the arguments of Adam Smith. Recent studies of Smith share the broader disciplinary interest in inequality. Though generally an advocate of commercial society, Smith is an incisive critic of the persistent problems of poverty and inequality (Rasmussen 2008, 73, 104–7). Scholars have highlighted Smith’s sympathy for people living in poverty in *Wealth of Nations* (WN, 1976; Fleischacker 2004, 207; McLean 2006, 90). He criticizes policies that favor those who live by profit (WN I.ix.p.10, 267), “oppress the poor” (Rothschild 1992, quoting *Lectures on Jurisprudence* [LJ], Smith 1978, 208]; see also Lieberman 2006; Rasmussen 2008; Schliesser 2017, 202–8), and restrict wages (Boucoyannis 2013; Martin 2015). Comparatively, Smith’s recommendations, such as his approach to taxes and the abolishment of primogeniture, would ameliorate inequality (Boucoyannis 2013; Fleischacker 2013; Niimura 2016). Unlike his contemporaries, he did not criticize poor relief policy in itself (Gilbert 1997, 286–87) but only its residency requirements instituted by the Law of Settlement for unjustly restricting the movement of poor people (Coats 1960, 49–50; Himmelfarb 1984, 61; Rasmussen 2008, 106; WN I.x.c.56–59, 156–57). In the process of making these economic recommendations, Smith challenges predominant cultural perspectives that justified social

hierarchy on the basis of the assumed moral or intellectual inferiority of people living in poverty (Fleischacker 2004, 2013, 2016; Himmelfarb 1984). For example, Smith refutes both empirical and normative aspects of the prevalent “doctrine of the utility of poverty,” which considered keeping workers’ wages low economically good for society and morally good for the workers themselves (Martin 2015, 561, 574–77; see also Baugh 1983). As Fleischacker writes, “Smith presents a remarkably dignified picture of the poor” (2004, 207).

Considering the contrast between Smith’s “picture of the poor” and the perspectives of his contemporaries, we should not be surprised to see inequality play a central role in his account of spectatorship. Although Smith’s model of moral judgment, the impartial spectator, embraces the moral equality of all people (1982 III.3.4, 137;¹ see also Anderson 2016; Fleischacker 2013), Smith recognizes that actual spectators more easily empathize with joy and wealth than with distress and poverty; consequently, we tend to “admire” the wealthy and “to despise, or at least, to neglect” the poor (I.iii.2.1–4, 50–54; I.iii.3.1–8, 61–66; see also Rasmussen 2016). Smith blames this social psychological phenomenon for the “corruption of our moral sentiments” (I.iii.3.1, 61). To use Rasmussen’s language, inequality “distorts” sympathy, exacerbating the plight of impoverished people by closing them off from the possibility of sympathetic attention (2016, 350–51).

However, when spectators do deign to look at people living in poverty, they may also mischaracterize them. We may note such misperceptions in the beliefs espoused by Smith’s contemporaries that he challenges in *Wealth of Nations*, but *Theory of Moral Sentiments* also offers numerous examples of spectators misperceiving people living in poverty. Smith’s portrayals of spectators’ responses to people living in poverty exemplify his broader recognition that moral spectatorship inherently entails problems of misperception and failures of sympathy (Schwarze and Scott 2015, 473). Contrary to Smith’s reputation as the progenitor of a liberal insensitivity to the problems of social coercion (Wolin 2004, 308), whose model of moral judgment is comparable to Michel Foucault’s theory of the disciplinary power of surveillance (Foucault 1977; see also Forman-Barzilai 2010; Peters 1995, 2010), Smith’s moral philosophy provides the basis for an account of the harms of obligatory public exposure that centers on how the mistaken judgments of spectators demoralize even the most morally

¹Unless otherwise noted, all references are to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, abbreviated as TMS (Smith 1982).

conscientious individuals. Socioeconomic inequality is a crucial factor determining spectators' misperceptions.

Smith's striking reference to "justifiable reasons for concealing" something from others (VII.iv.27, 337) invites us to consider his appreciation for the downsides of actual spectatorship, which we can see clearly in his discussions of the desire to conceal poverty (I.iii.2.1, 50) and of spectators' misperceptions of people living in poverty (I.iii.3.1–4, 61–63; V.2.3, 201). I examine Smith's account of the consequences of "unmerited reproach" to understand the psychological experience of the person subject to spectators' misperceptions (III.2.11–32, 119–31). The impartial spectator can serve as a source of self-respect to counteract the mistaken views of the public (Brown 1997, 701; Marshall 1986, 189; Schliesser 2016, 40–42; 2017, 136–48). But Smith also argues that undeserved social rebuke can demoralize even the morally resolute because it is impossible to be certain of what one is capable of doing (III.2.14–15, 121–22). Although economic inequality is the most explicit cause of a desire to conceal in anticipation of the misperceptions of spectators, I extend Smith's approach using an example he suggests but does not discuss in detail: the social shame directed at a rape survivor (VII.iv.13, 332). In doing so, I show how Smith's insights about the moral problems posed by spectatorship can apply to various forms of social censure as well as relatively secluded, interpersonal interactions, providing a basis for comparing his arguments with contemporary politics.

I conclude by using the Smithian approach to spectatorship to incorporate people's experiences of being seen and judged by others into the contemporary concept of audience democracy. I use Smith's insights to reflect on the demoralizing experiences of invasions of privacy reported by welfare participants. Because his insights regarding the harms involved in obligatory forms of public exposure are not dependent on the threat of state coercion per se, they illuminate the moral and social dynamics that shape contemporary experiences of non-state as well as state surveillance. Degrading social discourse and privacy-invasive interactions subject people living in poverty to unjust censure and contribute to the transformation of socioeconomic inequality into political inequality that characterizes contemporary audience democracy.

How the Limits of Sympathy Lead to "Justifiable Reasons for Concealing"

Smith opens *TMS* with an observation that man cannot be purely selfish because the "happiness of others"

feels "necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it but the pleasure of seeing it" (I.i.1.1, 9). However, by the final part of the book, our interest in each other's happiness becomes a desire "to feel how each other is affected, to penetrate into each other's bosoms, and to observe the sentiments and affections which really subsist there" (VII.iv.28, 337). Smith warns that this desire can be so strong "that it often degenerates into a troublesome and impertinent curiosity to pry into those secrets of our neighbours, which they have very justifiable reasons for concealing" (VII.iv.28, 337). Our desire for others to share themselves with us can extend far beyond what they want to reveal. We seem to exercise a kind of coercion when we "pry into those secrets" of others. What may serve as the "justifiable reasons for concealing" something about our lives?

Answering this question requires recourse to the implications Smith draws from his original claim regarding the pleasure we derive in seeing each other: Spectators feel greater pleasure in "seeing" the good fortune and joy of others, whereas they feel reluctant to enter into feelings of remorse or misery (I.ii.1.9, 46, including Smith's footnote). Consequently, Smith argues, "we make parade of our riches, and conceal our poverty" (I.iii.2.1, 50). Although Smith focuses on poverty as an experience we seek to conceal from others, he describes the demeaning nature of the public exposure of our suffering in more general terms: "Nothing is so mortifying as to be obliged to expose our distress to the view of the public, and to feel, that though our situation is open to the eyes of all mankind, no mortal conceives for us the half of what we suffer" (I.iii.2.1, 50). Smith indicates that, due to the limits of spectators' imaginations and their reluctance to enter into feelings of remorse or misery, it is in our most miserable and vulnerable moments that being "obliged to expose" our suffering to others is likely to compound our pain, rather than alleviate it. We anticipate, perhaps correctly, that no spectator could fully comprehend our suffering even if we were to be fully open and expressive about it. It is precisely in unfortunate circumstances when we may most desire the balm of fellow feeling that we may also wish for privacy in anticipation of spectators' failures to empathize with us.

Nevertheless, Smith explicitly connects the dread of public exposure to the effects of socioeconomic inequality on spectatorship. Smith uses the "mortifying" nature of obligatory public exposure to build his argument that material satisfaction or the dream of a leisurely lifestyle is not enough to explain people's toil; instead, we are deeply motivated by a desire "to be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation" (I.iii.2.1, 50). We strive to improve our

socioeconomic status to acquire the sympathetic attention of spectators. Smith highlights the uniquely painful anonymity that people living in poverty experience, being ignored by the rest of the community, and, therefore, closed off from even the possibility of mutual sympathy (I.iii.2.1, 51; see also Rasmussen 2016, 350–51). However, Smith later suggests a bright side to life in obscurity in his claim of the “ease of body and peace of mind” of “the beggar, who suns himself by the side of the highway” (IV.i.10, 185). Alternatively, when spectators do deign to look at people in poverty, Smith only depicts them as responding in hostile ways. As Smith writes, “if the extremity of [the poor person’s] distress forces” others “to look at him, it is only to spurn so disagreeable an object from among them” (I.iii.2.1, 51). Not only do spectators fail to relate to a person’s poverty, but they also resent how seeing the person disturbs their own pleasant lives (Marshall 1986, 185). A person living in poverty may be likely to be observed only without sympathy, facing public disdain and rejection. Perhaps this is no clearer than when Smith suggests a person would rather appear in front of a group of people bloodied and injured than looking impoverished, for the former would “interest their pity,” whereas the latter “would provoke their laughter” (I.iii.2.9, 60). Spectators not only ignore or fail to adequately imagine or empathize with the difficulties of poverty, but they also treat it as deserving of mockery and antipathy.² Sensitive to the visibility of poverty, Smith defines “necessaries” to include whatever “custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order to be without,” such as specific kinds of shirts or shoes (*WN* V.ii.k.3, 869–70; see also Boucoyannis 2013; Rothschild and Sen 2006; Sen 1983). However, in addition to noting the emotional effects of inequality on spectatorship, Smith is concerned with its adverse moral consequences.

How Inequality Shapes Scrutiny

Smith’s social psychological account of inequality’s effects on spectatorship has an incisive critical edge. In one

²In fact, Smith suggests social inequality even hinders the typical spectator’s ability to properly empathize with the bodily pain of others: “All the innocent blood that was shed in the civil wars, provoked less indignation than the death of Charles I. A stranger to human nature, who saw the indifference of men about the misery of their inferiors, and the regret and indignation which they feel for the misfortunes and sufferings of those above them would be apt to imagine, that pain must be more agonizing, and the convulsions of death more terrible to persons of higher rank, than to those of meaner stations” (I.iii.2.2, 52).

of his final additions to his work, Smith writes that “the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments” is “the disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and the powerful, and to despise, or, at least, to neglect persons of poor and mean condition” (I.iii.3.1, 61).

Because the wealthy person’s happiness and enjoyment of the public’s “respect and admiration” are more evident to the eyes of most spectators than the happiness of the truly wise and virtuous, people are likely to model themselves after the wealthy instead of the virtuous (I.iii.3.2, 62; see also I.iii.2.1–3, 50–52). “In a great assembly,” Smith argues, the wealthy man of social distinction “is the person upon whom all direct their eyes; it is upon him that their passions seem all to wait with expectation, in order to receive that movement and direction which he shall impress upon them” (I.iii.2.1, 51). Consequently, enjoying an audience, and experiencing that audience as a source of pleasure and power, is a benefit asymmetrically conferred onto the socioeconomically advantaged (see also Marshall 1986, 186–87). Though Smith ultimately accepts the public’s easy admiration of the wealthy as conducive to political stability (VI.ii.1.20, 226; see also Rasmussen 2016, 344, 347), he notes the problems it poses with respect to holding rulers accountable (I.iii.2.3, 53) and criticizes it as a major source of moral corruption.

Contrary to pervasive cultural perceptions of the wealthy as the “truly virtuous” and people living in poverty as morally inferior, which justified social hierarchy in Smith’s time (Fleischacker 2004, 206–7), Smith situates moral decay as trickling down from the higher social ranks. The hierarchies and social maneuvering that characterize the social circles of people in “superior stations” incentivize “flattery” and “falsehood” (I.iii.3.6, 63). Furthermore, because neither their enjoyment of sympathetic attention nor their material well-being depends on a good moral reputation, wealthy people feel free to indulge in vice (I.iii.3.1–6, 61–63). In fact, Smith argues that the wealthy consider the liberty to behave immorally “without censure or reproach, as one of the privileges which belong to their station” (*WN* V.i.g.10, 794). At the same time, Smith suggests the material interdependency, equal relations, and importance of a good reputation among those in the “middling and inferior stations” encourage them to be honest (I.iii.3.5, 63). However, seeing how others admire the wealthy, and desiring the sympathetic attention that spectators give them, many members of the middle and lower social ranks are apt to emulate them. Since “even their vices and follies are fashionable,” this admiring imitation spreads moral corruption

throughout the community (I.iii.3.7, 64; Rasmussen 2016, 348–49).

By rooting immorality in the higher social ranks rather than in the lower, Smith implicitly criticizes alternative cultural perceptions that morally justified social hierarchy. Throughout his writings, he sets himself apart from typical spectators who judge the people living in poverty more negatively. Consider, for example, Smith's criticisms of "superficial minds" in the chapter "On the Influence of Custom and Fashion upon Moral Sentiments" (V.2.3, 201). Although the aforementioned chapter on moral corruption was a late addition to the book, Smith echoes arguments he had already published in this chapter. Here, Smith argues that fashion renders not only the vices of the wealthy "agreeable," but also the "virtues of the inferior people" "mean and disagreeable." Thus, when it comes to morally evaluating the wealthy and the poor, spectators' judgments appear to be the inverted images of the impartial spectator's judgments. According to Smith, actual spectators of "superficial minds" snub many evident virtues of the poor, such as "their parsimonious frugality, painful industry, and rigid adherence to the rules." In fact, Smith argues spectators "suppose" people living in poverty to instead have "many great vices ... such as an abject, cowardly, ill-natured, lying, pilfering disposition" (V.2.3, 201). Actual spectators project on people living in poverty tendencies toward dishonesty, cowardice, and thievery. With these arguments in mind, Smith's additional chapter on moral corruption appears as a critique of the "superficial minds" who follow the influence of "fashion" in assuming the moral superiority of wealthy people and moral inferiority of people living in poverty. By criticizing the behavior of the wealthy and asserting the honesty of the members of other social ranks, Smith seeks to correct the vision of less meticulous spectators.

Smith's additional portrayals of spectators' misperceptions of people living in poverty remain consistent with his earlier claims that people tend to ignore their virtues and may attribute vice to them. For example, Smith writes a poor person's "single transgression of the rules of temperance and propriety is commonly more resented" than the "constant" violations of the wealthy (I.iii.3.4, 63). However, Smith underscores the public's misperception more strongly when he notes spectators despise people living in poverty irrespective of their actual moral innocence. As Smith puts it, "we see frequently the vices and follies of the powerful much less despised than the poverty and weakness of the innocent" (I.iii.3.2, 62). The mere lowly socioeconomic status of an innocent individual is sufficient to inspire spectators' aversion. People do not simply ignore those living in

poverty but actively consider them deserving of disdain. Society's disproportionate resentment of people living in poverty seems to contribute to the problem of moral corruption.

By rooting moral corruption in the behavior of the wealthy, Smith builds on his argument that those who assume the worst of people living in poverty are "superficial minds" (V.2.3, 201). To be observed without fellow-feeling could be enough to inspire the concealment of poverty. But synthesizing Smith's many treatments of spectatorship of the poor suggests that the person living in poverty also faces a broader public audience that may see him or her worthy of contempt or even attribute to them traits of immorality, untrustworthiness, and blameworthiness, ignoring or rejecting their actual virtues. As a result, the experiences of people living in poverty when facing spectators' disdain can be seen as exemplifying a broader phenomenon: the "undeserved loss of reputation," which Smith calls "certainly the greatest" "of all the external misfortunes which can affect an innocent man immediately and directly" (III.3.19, 144–45).

How an "Undeserved Loss of Reputation" Feeds Self-Doubt

Smith expresses concern for how spectators' misperceptions of people living in poverty can corrupt a community's moral sentiments. Nevertheless, it might seem reasonable to conclude that the irony and critical detachment throughout Smith's account of the human desire for attention suggests he altogether rejects the desire as only a concern of the vain and simply calls for readers to emulate the wise by committing to pleasing their inner impartial spectators instead (Brown 1997, 698, 701, citing *TMS* I.iii.2.1, 50).

On the contrary, Smith suggests it is sensible for people to be concerned about their reputations, which are essential for earning the trust of others, particularly for young men and women "who neither can nor ought" to have confidence that false accusations will not affect them (III.3.19, 144–45). Only older people who have already established their moral reputations can afford to be so indifferent to the judgments of others.

But Smith introduces a deeper problem: the very innocence of a person and her devotion to being morally conscientious can actually render her all the more disturbed by unmerited censure and blame. Smith is puzzled by the conundrum that only "the weakest and most worthless of mankind" enjoy undeserved praise, whereas "by a strange inconsistency, false ignominy is

often capable of mortifying those who appear the most resolute and determined" (VII.ii.4.10, 311). It is very rare for people to be so self-assured as to be unaffected by "unjust censure" (VII.ii.4.10, 311). Instead, it is precisely in the face of mistaken actual spectators that even the most morally judicious individuals struggle to see themselves through the eyes of the impartial spectator.

Although the above passage is present in all editions of his work, elsewhere Smith struggles with the puzzle that unjust social censure disturbs even the most morally conscientious people throughout revisions. In editions 2–5, Smith claims that only the "weak, the vain, and the frivolous" "may be mortified by the most groundless censure" from others because they lack the habits of seeing through the eyes of the impartial spectator (III.2, editor's footnote 1, 130). This suggests, as Brown claims, that the impartial spectator is a reliable resource against unjust social censure. However, in his final 1790 revisions, Smith explicitly reverses this claim. He removes these passages and expands III.2 by arguing that only "the most frivolous and superficial" enjoy unearned praise and "unmerited reproach, however, is frequently capable of mortifying very severely even men of more than ordinary constancy" (III.2.11, 119). To illustrate the consequences of unjust censure, he adds two vivid passages about an innocent man accused of a crime (III.2.11–13, 119; III.2.32, 131). He argues that innocent people are often more fervently disturbed by social censure than the truly guilty.³ Rather than being a straightforward resource of self-confidence, a commitment to sound moral judgment can actually exacerbate the distress caused by mistaken spectators.

Smith also turns to the experiences of women with respect to the importance of a chaste reputation to illustrate the conundrum that even people of sound judgment are "mortified" by groundless censure. Smith describes the effects of rumors of promiscuity for two different women: "A woman of gallantry laughs even at the well-founded surmises which are circulated concerning her conduct. The worst founded surmise of the same kind is a mortal stab to an innocent virgin" (III.2.13, 121). Even though the second woman knows she is chaste, the extent to which she is committed to chastity and concerned about having a chaste reputation renders her all the more deeply disturbed by even the least substantiated rumors.

Only after having compared the "woman of gallantry" and the "innocent virgin" does Smith resolve

³This is not to suggest that Smith fails to sympathize with the shame felt by the truly "blameworthy" (see II.ii.2.3, 84–85, and Marshall 1986, 181–82).

the conundrum that "unmerited reproach" horrifies even "men of the soundest and best judgment" (III.2.14, 121).⁴ His answer: Although such a man can know "perfectly" what he has actually done, "scarce any man can know perfectly what he himself is capable of doing" (III.2.15, 122). A kind of inner self-doubt thrives off the suspicions of others and troubles the mind of even the most morally judicious individual.

Understanding the self-doubt that can subsist alongside even a well-developed impartial spectator is crucial to grappling with Smith's account of the psychological turmoil of the innocent man accused of a crime he did not commit. Yes, the innocent man feels "violent resentment" against the mistaken judges of his conduct, which he fails to satisfy (Schwarze and Scott 2015, 473). However, mistaken judgments of actual spectators also influence how the innocent man sees himself and the strength of the impartial spectator to whom he ought to appeal for consolation.

Smith examines the psychological experience of the innocent man facing unjust censure in two passages, bookending his discussion of "unmerited reproach" (III.2.11, 119; III.2.32, 131). In both, faced with the harsh judgment of others, the innocent person begins to doubt and shame himself. For others to believe he may have committed such a crime betrays that they at least think "so meanly of his character as to suppose him to be capable of being guilty." Despite his own knowledge of his innocence, "the very imputation seems often, even in his own imagination, to throw a shadow of disgrace and dishonor upon his own character" (III.2.11, 119). Being surrounded by the mistaken judgments of others is enough to obscure even his own self-image.

When society decides the innocent individual is worthy of blame, mistaken actual spectators can overwhelm his impartial spectator and he doubts his own character. Smith's later discussion of this unique form of anxious suffering is particularly moving:

We scarce dare to absolve ourselves, when all our brethren appear loudly to condemn us. The supposed impartial spectator of our conduct seems to give his opinion in our favour with fear and hesitation; when that of all the real spectators, when that of all those with whose eyes and from whose station he endeavors to consider it, is

⁴The particularly destabilizing effects of undeserved censure on the innocent are similar to Smith's association of the "piacular" (the "fallacious sense of guilt" felt by those who accidentally or involuntarily harm another person) with the "man of humanity" and the "real lover of truth" (Schliesser 2017, citing *TMS* II.iii.3.4, 107, and VII.iv.30, 338).

unanimously and violently against us. In such cases, this demigod within the breast appears, like the demigods of the poets, though partly of immortal, yet partly too of mortal extraction. When his judgments are steadily and firmly directed by the sense of praise-worthiness and blame-worthiness, he seems to act suitably to his divine extraction: But when he suffers himself to be astonished and confounded by the judgments of ignorant and weak man, he discovers his connexion with mortality, and appears to act suitably, rather to the human, than to the divine, part of his origin. (III.2.32, 131)

The innocent man's faith in his ability to accurately evaluate himself is only so strong. While moral sentiments and a developed "impartial spectator" allow him to understand what is truly worthy of blame or praise, he cannot so easily disregard the reactions of actual spectators. Even though he knows he did not perform the act of which he has been accused, he must confront the fact that others consider him to be "capable" of such a violation, and that is enough to induce him to doubt his own character (III.2.11, 119). Smith does not suggest that the mistaken spectators actually weaken our ability to make moral judgments; rather, mistaken spectators weaken the impartial spectator's capacity to serve as a counteracting source of self-confidence.

When Smith later discusses the value of surrounding oneself with strangers rather than friends, he proposes, "The propriety of our moral sentiments is never so apt to be corrupted, as when the indulgent and the partial spectator is at hand, while the indifferent and impartial one is at a great distance" (III.3.41, 154). Considering the case of the innocent man, Smith's claim appears in a different light—the partial and flawed judgments of real spectators that wrongly censure the individual can also alienate his impartial spectator. In this instance, actual spectators' desire to publicly denounce and shame the perceived criminal causes undesired emotional distress and has a counterproductive effect on the moral fortitude of innocent people. When the innocent man attempts to call forth his impartial spectator by taking on the perspectives of real spectators, his sense of his character and identity falter and fade. Smith intimates that God may be the only reliably sympathetic spectator; even the impartial spectator may fail. Smith suggests that religious faith that justice will be served at the end of his life provides the only reliable source of comfort to the wrongly judged individual (III.2.12, 120–21; III.2.32, 131–32; Schwarze and Scott 2015, 473–75). Even in the most extreme case, when a falsely convicted man faces execution, his dread

of the undesired loss of reputation that will outlive him seems more powerful than the fear of violent death itself (III.2.12, 119–20).

We can productively compare the hostile misperceptions of people living in poverty to the false accusations that torment the innocent man, even if Smith does not do so explicitly. To the extent that real spectators fail to accurately judge people living in poverty on the basis of their actual moral practices, they subject them to unearned feelings of shame. Receiving the contempt of others, regardless of one's own moral actions, presents a serious challenge to the impartial spectator, even for people who are particularly morally conscientious. Smith recommends that most people, at least those who do not have the benefit of years of good reputation, care about what others think of them. Nevertheless, the mistaken judgments of others can demoralize even a well-developed impartial spectator.

How Other Forms of Distress Inspire a Desire to Conceal

Although Smith explicitly refers to a desire to conceal poverty, the general nature of his claim about the "mortifying" character of obligatory public exposure suggests that there may be other kinds of suffering that we seek to conceal from others (I.iii.2.1, 50). By extending Smith's arguments to an example that he suggests but does not discuss in detail, the social shame directed at a rape survivor (VII.iv.13, 332), I provide a foundation for how we might respectfully apply his insights beyond his text. In doing so, I also show that Smith considered how problems of moral spectatorship can occur in private, interpersonal interactions.

Smith returns to the notion of concealment by relating the Catholic institution of confession to a general psychological desire to privately confide in another when a person feels as though he or she has acted wrongly. Smith suggests that the desire for a sympathetic confidante arises out of the anxiety and fear that comes with not only "the consciousness" but "even the suspicion" "of having done wrong" (VII.iv.17, 333). While Smith does not criticize the desire to seek private confidantes, he criticizes the judgments of casuists who have used confessions to design precise moral rules and have failed to properly incorporate context when evaluating behavior (VII.ii.i.22, 227–28; VII.iv.12, 330–32; VI.iv.33–34, 339–40; see also Forman-Barzilai 2010, 58, 227; Minowitz 1993, 216, 220–21). Consequently, Smith's discussion of casuistry and the Catholic institution of

confession on which it is based further underscores the fallibility of spectators' judgments and the ways in which unjust social censure can exacerbate the suffering of the innocent.

To criticize the casuists' judgments, Smith offers striking examples of people who, despite being innocent according to the standards of jurisprudence, are apt to dread undeserved public blame and desire private consolation: a man coerced by a "highwayman, by the fear of death" into promising to return to give him some amount of money, whom he compares to a rape survivor (VII.iv.9–14, 330–33). Whereas jurisprudence clearly dictates that a coerced promise is invalid to begin with, casuists such as Augustine and Jean La Placette argue that the man should be censured for breaking his promise anyway (VII.iv.10, 331). Smith compares the case of the coerced promise to how a powerful concern for chastity attributes dishonor to a survivor of sexual violence. Smith argues that sexual promiscuity offends moral sentiments so much that "no circumstances, no solicitation can excuse it; no sorrow, no repentance atone for it" (VII.iv.13, 332). He specifies, "We are so nice in this respect that even a rape dishonours, and the innocence of the mind cannot, in our imagination, wash out the pollution of the body" (VII.iv.13, 332). In this manner, Smith implies that survivors of rape, a crime Smith later appears to refer to as "the most unpardonable injury" that a person can do to one another, may not be able to rely on most members of society to empathize with them or to soothe their misery, which may include undeserved feelings of shame (VII.iv.21, 335).

Smith's analogy is brief, but it provides a basis for reflecting on how we might extend his insights beyond his text. While socioeconomic inequality is the most explicit factor that differentiates people's experiences of public scrutiny in Smith's account, the example of the rape survivor offers another example of undeserved reputational harm that is particularly relevant in contemporary discussions of privacy and poverty. By reading Smith's analogy in light of some of his other writings, we can see how his model of spectatorship can be applied to various experiences of social judgments and demoralizing public exposure.

Importantly, Smith's discussion of the censure of rape victims is descriptive; he highlights the tendency of the human "imagination" to attach "the idea of shame" to all "violations of chastity in the fair sex," even rape, without offering a clear normative evaluation of that tendency (VII.iv.13, 332). However, when Smith describes the different kinds of harm that the rape survivor suffers in *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, he lists "a breach of the liberty of the woman and a great injury to her" and "injury

done to her reputation," for which capital punishment "alone seems to be a sufficient compensation" (*LJ*, ii.131, 120–121). If Smith took the notion of the "piacular" from Livy (Schliesser 2017, 122–23, 131, citing *TMS* II.iii.3.5, 107), he may have also had in mind Livy's account of the rape of Lucretia and her subsequent suicide. Despite Roman soldiers pleading that "it is the mind that errs, not the body" and "where there is no intent, there is no blame," Lucretia commits suicide (Livy, 2006, *The History of Rome*, 1:58, 81). But while Augustine criticizes Lucretia for yielding to her concern for her earthly reputation by committing the sin of suicide (2003, Book I, chap. 19, 30–31), Smith calls "victims" of suicide "the proper objects, not of censure but of commiseration" (VII.ii.1.34 and n. 36, 287; see also Hawley 2019, 710).

Although casuists debate whether to condemn the man who breaks a promise made under coercion, jurisprudence makes it clear that "to extort the promise was a crime, which deserved the highest punishment, and to extort the performance would only be adding a new crime to the former" (VII.iv.10, 330). Extending Smith's original comparison to the instance of rape, jurisprudence ought to be clear that the survivor is innocent and should not be condemned as a violator of chastity, despite mankind's tendency to do so. Similarly, just as "no man ... who had gone through an adventure of this kind would be fond of telling the story" of how he insincerely made a promise under the threat of death (VII.iv.13, 333), no woman would be fond of telling her story. Despite her innocence, she may feel shame that inspires a desire for private consolation to work through undeserved suspicions of "having done wrong," which would be exacerbated by public exposure (VII.iv.17, 333).

Although Smith's discussions fall far short of a critique of chastity as a moral virtue,⁵ the rape survivor emerges as a striking example of an innocent person who risks suffering from an undeserved loss of reputation in the eyes of the public. Furthermore, practices like private confession can replicate the problems posed by broad, public exposure. Having shown how Smith's insights can

⁵For example, Smith also laments the "loose notions of chastity" that accompanied wealthy Roman women's easy access to divorce (*LJ* iii.12, 145). However, he goes on to argue that men's political power is to blame for oppressive laws regarding women's fidelity that grant more license to men (iii.13, 146; iii.16, 147). He seems to praise more equitable laws initially introduced by clergy that also granted women access to divorce in instances of the husband's infidelity or "great cruelty," which Smith noted would "be the most common case" (iii.13–14, 146). For discussions of gender in Smith's work, see Rendall (1987), Clark (1993), Kuiper (2003, 2006), Nyland (2003), Nerozzi and Nuti (2011), and Harkin (2013).

illuminate a curious detail in his own writing, I conclude by using his approach to spectatorship to reflect on contemporary experiences of people living in poverty that shape democratic politics.

How Smithian Spectatorship Illuminates Contemporary Inequality

To return to the issues with which this article opens, Smith's approach to spectatorship is a perceptive moral resource for the present era defined by experiences of watching and being watched that strengthen social hierarchy. Green's (2010) contemporary democratic ideal, premised on the citizenry's asymmetrical spectatorship of those competing for political offices, threatens to entrench the political status of the citizen as spectator as an irremediable inevitability rather than a product of socioeconomic inequality and experiences of surveillance (Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010; Soss 1999, 2002).

In contrast, a Smithian approach to spectatorship offers three major advantages for illuminating how socioeconomic inequality shapes a political community. First, by concluding that unequal sympathetic spectatorship fortifies political hierarchy, rather than causing instability, Smith is a suitable philosophical resource for the contemporary puzzle that rising inequality has yet to provoke major redistributive political change (Condon and Wichowsky 2020; Shapiro 2002; Soss and Jacobs 2009), especially compared with other well-known critics of inequality such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx (Rasmussen 2016, 347). Smith draws our attention to how spectatorship may contribute to, rather than challenge, political inequality.

Second, Smith's multi-ended approach to spectatorship incorporates the people's experiences of being observed and judged by spectators. His approach captures the interactive nature of spectatorship whereby what we see shapes how we anticipate and experience being seen by others. Conversely, how we experience being observed and judged by others shapes how we see our community and our position within it.

Third, Smith's approach complements contemporary research that examines how surveillance dampens political participation by highlighting the moral dimension of the processes through which surveillance disempowers individuals. For example, his criticism of unequal sympathetic spectatorship as a source of moral corruption provides a normative basis for evaluating the demor-

alizing experiences that welfare participants have shared with scholars.

Applying the Smithian approach to spectatorship to contemporary accounts of welfare participation highlights how broader social processes of stereotyping and stigma interact with the interpersonal dynamics of case-worker relationships to render welfare experiences demoralizing for many participants. Using Smith's insights, I examine how modern forms of surveillance constitute failures of moral spectatorship, degrade people, and contribute to the transformation of socioeconomic inequality into political inequality.

First, the ways in which Americans scrutinize poor people in what Bridges calls the "moral construction of poverty" (2017, 37) resemble the English approaches to poverty that Smith counters (Fleischacker 2004, 2016; Himmelfarb 1984; Martin 2015). Of course, contemporary American discourse differs in important ways, particularly regarding the representation of members of racial minorities living in poverty (Gilens 1999; Bridges 2017, 32–34, 51–55; Soss and Weaver 2016). For example, consider the racialized "controlling image" of the "welfare queen" (Collins 2009, 76–77, 86).⁶ Politicians, often members of the elite, who, according to Smith, enjoy eager and sympathetic audiences (I.iii.2.1, 51), take advantage of social stigmas and prejudices and perpetuate racialized stereotypes about people living in poverty, such as generalizations of mothers participating in welfare as selfish, untrustworthy exploiters of the government (Bridges 2011, 211–20; Collins 2009, 86–88; Soss, Fording, and Schramm 2011, 33–36).⁷ American mischaracterizations of welfare claimants as dishonest recall Smith's description of an "abject, cowardly, ill-natured, lying, pilfering disposition" that "superficial minds" attribute to people living in poverty (V.2.3, 201).

People living in poverty observe and may internalize such socially pervasive assumptions. Remember Smith's account of seeing other spectators despise "the poverty and weakness of the innocent" more than the actual "vices and follies of the powerful" (I.iii.3.2, 62). Welfare claimants feel humiliated watching mass media coverage of electoral rhetoric, recalling "turning off the television because they did not want their children to hear what was being said about them" (Soss 1999, 368). Like the

⁶For an analysis of surveillance and racial formation that refers to the cultural influence of other controlling images, see Browne (2015).

⁷In contrast, a study of San Diego County welfare fraud cases showed that most people who committed fraud did so unknowingly, misinformed by caseworkers about rules or unaware of a partner's hidden income, or to take basic care of their children (Swan *et al.* 2008, 141–43).

false accusations that enflame the self-doubt of Smith's innocent man, society's suspicions about the moral character of people in poverty provoke feelings of shame regardless of the actual moral characters of individuals who feel judged by such discourse. After all, contrary to the popular image of the dishonest "welfare queen," many individuals turn to welfare to better take care of loved ones or better contribute time and labor to their communities (Soss 2002, 44–47). Many people use public assistance to supplement low-wage, no-benefit jobs to access education that they hope will help them overcome poverty (Soss 2002, 46–57). Thus, stigmatizing generalizations not only demoralize people living in poverty but also obscure admirable moral qualities, or, to use Smith's vocabulary, virtues.

Second, public assistance programs often rely on interpersonal interactions that can be compared to the Catholic confessions at the heart of Smith's critique of casuistry. In doing so, I evoke Foucault's arguments regarding the diffusion of the knowledge–power dynamics of Catholic confession throughout a myriad of activities within modern Western society, such as education and medicine (Foucault 1978, 58–63). Recall the vignette with which this article opens. To give birth to a healthy baby, a woman living in poverty has little choice but to seek Medicaid coverage. But in many states, such coverage is contingent on answering deeply personal questions about sexual history, including experiences of abuse. These questions suggest to the pregnant woman that her capacity to be a good mother is somehow contingent on her answers (Bridges 2017, 111–13). Many welfare claimants cite social power dynamics, including abusive and violent relationships, as inspiring their decisions to seek public assistance in the first place (Soss 2002, 33, 188). However, when people are required to answer similar questions from caseworkers, they come away "feeling exposed and, in many cases, degraded" (Soss 2002, 106). In fact, a third of welfare claimants cite "explicit statements" from workers that stereotype and morally censure them (Soss 2002, 110). For example, Hope, otherwise embarrassed by the prospect of claiming welfare, decided to apply to escape an abusive husband. She faced a caseworker who blamed her for her own rape, accusing her of habits of promiscuity and dependency (Soss 2002, 34–35, 111). Here, we might remember Smith's gestures toward the social tendency to connect chastity to moral character, even in cases of coercion, and the feelings of shame associated with the disclosure of such experiences, which are also documented in contemporary psychology (Lee, Scragg, and Turner 2001, 452). Although many people decide that they are less wary of the coercive state power backing public assistance pro-

grams than of the individuals harming them in their personal lives, obligatory questions subject them to not only exposing suffering without receiving sympathy but also the demeaning feeling of being morally censured. Despite taking place in secluded spaces, caseworker interactions can inflict undeserved blame on innocent people deserving of sympathy, particularly under the influence of moralized stereotypes about sexuality and people living in poverty.

When participants do not feel so demoralized, it can be because they have felt empowered to express who they are and the circumstances in which they struggle, avoiding the degrading feeling of being reduced to stereotypes in the eyes of caseworkers (Soss 2002, 111). Compassion from street-level bureaucrats may help, but it is an unreliable solution to a systemic problem.

To some extent, individuals can rely on their own sense of self to resist the effects of unjust social judgments, but, according to Smith, it is precisely in the face of hostile actual spectators that we struggle to see through the eyes of our inner impartial spectator. Presumed by state and private spectators to be prone to immoral and criminal behavior, people are subject to undeserved feelings of blame and shame that can harm their sense of self. To live under incessant suspicion of wrongdoing and immorality is to embody Smith's innocent man. Survivors of sexual violence and other forms of abuse living in poverty face not only the pain of being stereotyped by a society that looks down on the poor but also feelings of being blamed for the injustices they suffer from the hands of others. As Smith helps us see, when revealing deeply personal and potentially traumatic experiences, an individual can feel shame and uncertainty despite deserving compassion. Politically constructed social discourse and invasive interrogations exacerbate the likelihood that people feel harms of public exposure, including undeserved censure. Such judgments, whether diffused through predominant social discourses about poverty, welfare participation, and sexual violence, or explicitly articulated in particular interactions, subject innocent people to the pain of undeserved blame. Feeling demoralized cannot be assumed to be a reflection of inner moral character, as Smith argues, for even a well-developed impartial spectator can falter in the face of mistaken spectators.

Conclusion

It is particularly provocative that despite being associated with twentieth-century neoliberalism (Clarke

2005), which has been blamed for unequal surveillance practices that target the “economically or politically disenfranchised” (Monahan 2010, 99–100), Smith criticizes social dynamics that shape the unjust scrutiny of people living in poverty and undergird political inequality. Contemporary scholarship documents how degrading experiences of surveillance discourage individuals from numerous forms of political participation because it communicates to them that they are members of a class of citizens that the government is likely to ignore, rendering participation futile (Soss 1999, 374–76). Smith’s account shows that the historical legacy of how socioeconomic inequality shapes spectatorial judgment precedes the rise of modern technological systems of surveillance. His approach also highlights the morally pernicious consequences of surveillance.

In contemporary audience democracy, citizen-spectators may be subject to gazes more scrutinizing than those experienced by the more politically and socioeconomically powerful. As we consider the challenges to liberal democracy in the twenty-first century, it is not enough to reconceptualize politics along the lines of a theatrical divide between spectators who watch and sometimes vote and elected representatives who act on the public stage. Instead, we must consider the ways in which all people face audiences of spectators and how these experiences of public exposure shape democracy at large. Smith’s philosophy cannot explain or evaluate the entirety of the American welfare system or contemporary systems of surveillance, state-backed or otherwise. However, to the extent that we can trace policies and practices to assumptions that people living in poverty are morally inferior, we wrestle with the problems of unequal sympathetic spectatorship at the heart of Smith’s moral philosophy.

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