SCIENCE PICTURE TRADITION

REVIEW

The interest that never lies

By Carl Rudbeck

Once too long, long ago, the good man would be virtuous, a word that now feels more than legally old-fashioned, not to say ridiculous.

It was a long time since I heard a man praised for his virtue and never in any newspaper have I seen rankings of the most virtuous among people. And attributing some "virtue signaling" is rarely meant as praise. However, it boasts of lists of who are the most powerful and richest.

But for almost 2,000 years, virtue was high in the course of moral guard. The moral was founded in Greek philosophy, mainly then Aristotle, and in Christian religion. A man would be good, moderate, generous, generous, pious, compassionate, forgiving and well a lot of other things as well. In the good, complete man, these virtues were forever imprinted in her soul or mind; there was nothing that an oblong fate could deprive her of; There was a supreme good - *sumum bonum* - but the real and ultimate goals and meaning of life lay on the other side of the grave, the eternal life. Christianity was, once again, abusing an already often abused word, the moral paradigm.

Sure, there are still wreckage remains of that world. We bring them up on solemn occasions when we want to show ourselves to the moral rigid line, but basically this ancient moral universe has gone down to in practice, in real life, replaced by another morality. This new morality is no longer centered on ancient virtues, but on more solid and secular values - or what one should now call them. In any case, it is David Wootton's *Power, Pleasure , and Profit* , which is as thought-provoking as an entertaining book. Wootton often writes with a twinkle in the eye.

Behind this moral revolution, many nowadays were probably forgotten names, but also some of the West's most significant and influential thinkers. Wootton, a professor at the University of York, specifically highlights three of them: Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes and Adam Smith; but also a number of lesser known ones. Characteristic is that he cites at least the anglofona texts in original version, just as they were written and spelled in the 17th and 18th centuries. The result is a kind of philosophical *Verfremdungse effect* that anchors them in their own time and makes them more distant from our own; Hobbes was a 17th century man, not our contemporary.

At the beginning of his book, the author describes his project: after Machiavelli and Hobbes "the moral philosophy - as the project had been understood so far - became impossible. In the world after Hobbes, what was sometimes called virtue was just a set of strategies to promote pleasure, enjoyment, and self-interest. Wootton shows what it means to live "after the virtue".

He is not the first to designate Machiavelli as the author of modern political science or at least to the author of modern realism. Machiavelli can be read in many ways (the books about him come in a never-ending stream), but most commentators agree that it is about power: how the prince or in some cases the people grants it, retains or loses it. Should a prince strive to be feared or loved? In the long run, it may be better to be loved by the people, but what Machiavelli didn't want to know about was half-life. Once a prince had conquered power, he faced a choice of how he would treat the defeated, the losers. He could either try to win their sympathy and trust, or he could kill them. The first was usually preferred,

What the Prince absolutely did not have to do was that so a little half heartedly oppress and oppress the former rulers. It would give them the opportunity to forge rubbish to take a gruesome revenge at the appropriate time. As a few others, our Florentine friend was aware that political happiness is coming and going. Power was something volatile that always had to be defended and, preferably, always be aggravated because otherwise the risk was imminent that it would be lost. In this way, it was a never-satisfied appetite because it was always threatened and could always be extended.

Without embarking on the academic getingbo that the right interpretation of Machiavelli now constitutes, Wootton examines how he was read and applied in the 16th century by, among others, Edmund Spenser, who in literary circles is best known as the author of the epic *The Fairie Queene* , but who was also an arduous administrator of Ireland. Wootton's Spenser sounds like a precursor to Stalin, Mao, and other genocides: "Spencer's vision of what must follow is awful: the result of Irish resistance will be widespread famine, a huge number of dead and finally unconditional surrender."

Spenser advocated relocation of the indigenous people. It should be forced to change its names, its clothes, its hairstyles, habits and languages. Such cruelty, it realized Spenser, was horrific in the short perspective, but in that longer it would result in an orderly, peaceful and prosperous society, or as he himself expressed it without irony: "sweet civility". No wonder the Irish question has been an open wound for so long. Thus, inducing famine and displacing whole peoples with violence is not a new idea, and it can obviously be advocated by finely-formed humanists.

Also when it comes to Hobbes disputes they learned. That he violated the old morality that was founded in ancient and Christian virtues is irrefutable, but was he an egoist who only thought of himself? How to correctly interpret Hobbes depends a little on what work you quote, but if you search beyond the most famous, ie: *Leviathan* , and to *De corpore politico , Or, The Elements of Law , Moral and Politick* from 1652, one finds at least one claim that dispels many doubts in this matter "by necessity of nature, every man doth insert all his voluntary actions into some good unto himself". Man always acts on the basis of self-interest, increasing one's own well-being is always included as a motive.

It is told that Hobbes, at the sight of a poor and miserable aging, gave this an alms. It has to be considered a pious and Gudi's pleasant deed? Not at all. It hurt me to see the old man's miserable state, Hobbes said, "My alms give him some comfort but it also makes me feel better at ease." As I said, self-interest never lies in this new moral world. But if nothing is done, we will soon end up in everyone's war against everyone - in the natural state where life in Hobbes famous words is *solitary , poor , nasty , brutish , and short*. In that world no one or at least very few people want to live, and thus we must give up some of our empowerment and hand it over to a ruler whose primary task is to ensure that we can live in reasonably safe and secure ways.

Machiavelli and Hobbes have been given the picture of power and pleasure. Adam Smith holds the same position when it comes to profit, profit and wealth. Here too, the picture is split because Smith is the author of two great works. The first - *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* - from 1759 seems to argue for compassion and because it was a Christian's duty to help the poor and the sick, while in his second and later great work *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) appears to assume that humans have only selfish profit motives for their actions. Smith describes here, so many mean, the economic man who goes out to the marketplace every morning to maximize his profit.

The invisible hand made sure that the market always worked optimally; it corrected itself. The state never had to intervene because if it did, it would only aggravate the situation.

In Wootton's many controversial and rigorous reading, Smith was so blinded by the large and indisputable merits of the free market and the ability to spread prosperity to new groups that he could not or would not realize its shortcomings. When hunger hit the starving masses, Smith wanted to let the invisible hand, not state interventions, solve the problems. Sooner or later it might have done so, but the question is just how many people are starving to death before this hand intervenes. Smith does not want to realize that famine usually occurs, then as now, not because of lack of food but because poor people do not have the money to buy food. If Smith had wanted at this point and advocated state intervention in the free market mechanisms, he would have undermined the "providential scheme which undepins the whole argument of the Wealth of Nations.

Wootton's study culminates in the American Declaration of Independence, which lists a number of allegedly obvious truths and, in particular in this context, the right to *the pursuit of happiness*, the right to strive for happiness. Human happiness - but now on this side of the grave - became the highest goal and meaning of life. We have come a long way away from the Christian beyond thought and reached the Enlightenment. Both the scientific revolution, which Wootton has devoted to an earlier book, and the devastating wars of religion had driven religion to retreat. The incipient commercial society previously undermined not only Christians but also aristocratic values and replaced them with power, pleasure, and wealth that everyone can strive for without boundaries. You can never get too much power, too much pleasure or become too rich. Consequently, we are never really satisfied in this new enlightened world.

Certainly one can object to Wootton getting harder. There was plenty of greedy and pleasurable during antiquity, and even in our time there are virtuous people who sacrifice their own happiness and well-being to help others. Yet, it is easy to agree with the author when he summarizes his book's 386 pages and describes how the virtues have been pushed away for the pursuit of power, pleasure and wealth. We can never finally satisfy that hunt. Or, as Wootton paraphrases Mick Jaggers and Keith Richards the formulation of our deepest moral truth; *We can't get any satisfaction* .

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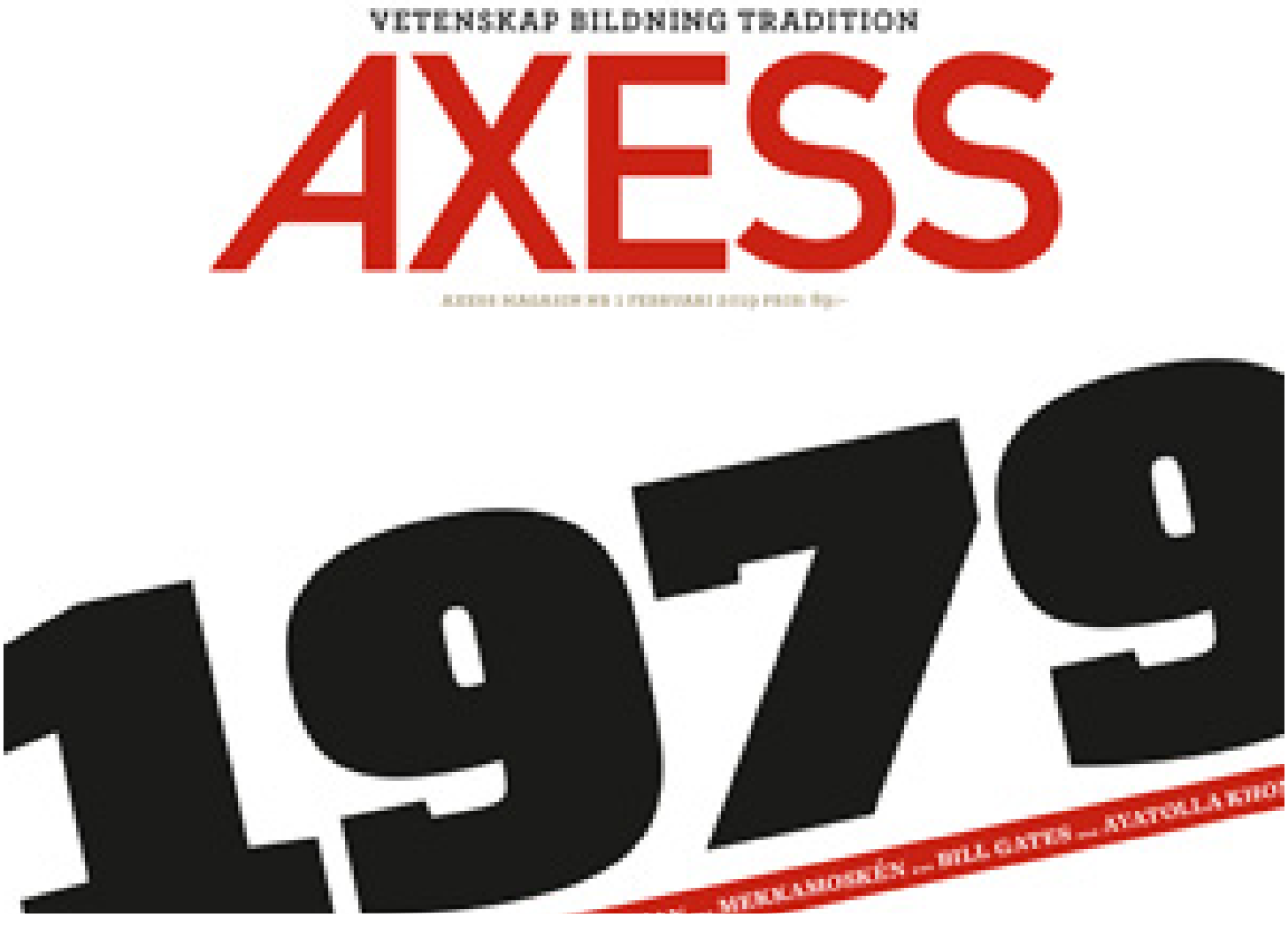

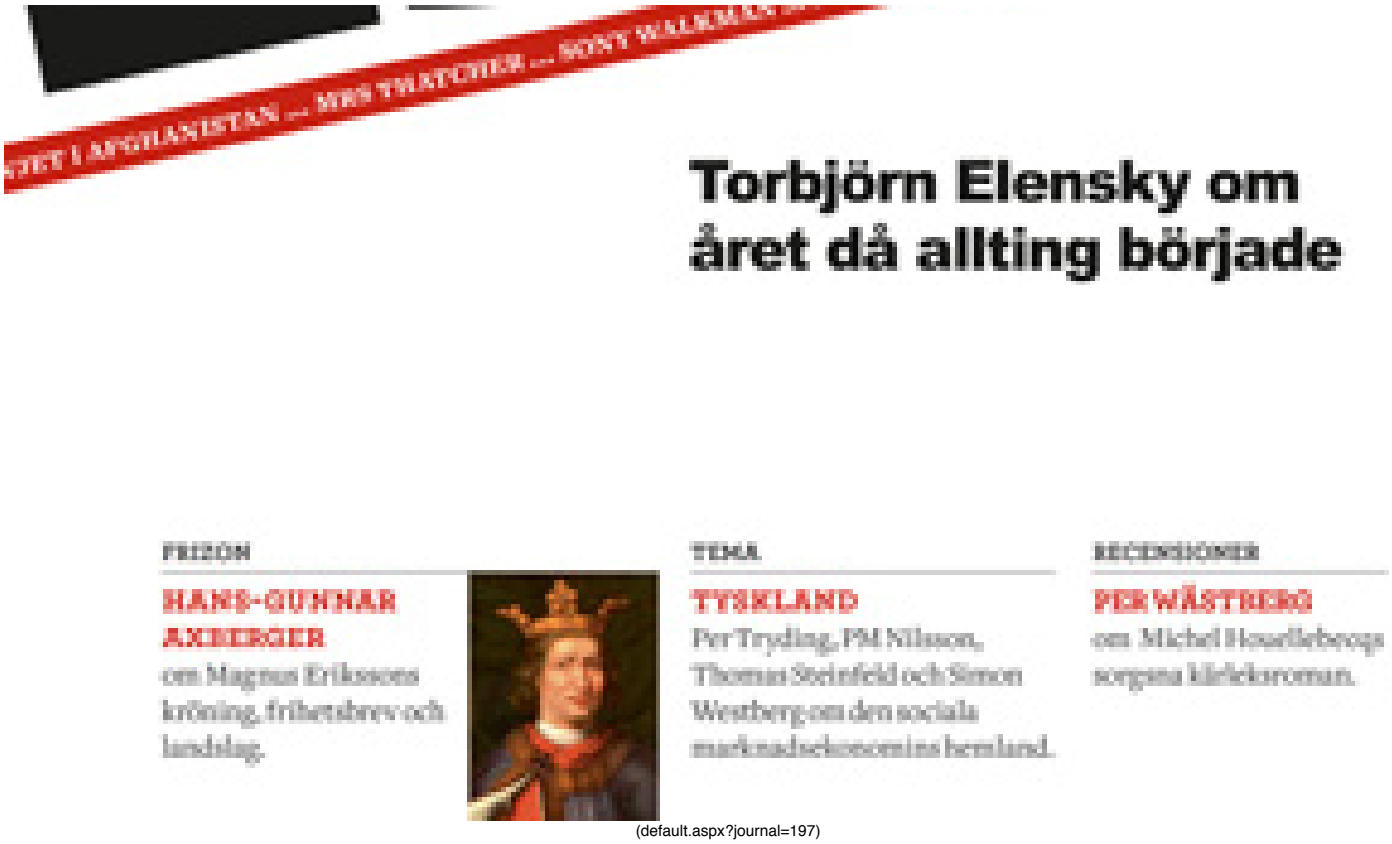

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