

MARK TWAIN'S LITTLE SOCIETIES OF EXCHANGE

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ABSTRACT: Samuel Clemens was an old-style liberal of the 19th century sort who believed in economic liberty and warned about the depredations of state power. The failure of many critics to understand the old liberal perspective may be part of the reason his political outlook is so widely misunderstood. His liberalism is woven into the fabric of his most famous works: *The Prince and the Pauper* and his series of stories involving Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn.

PART OF THE DIFFICULTY of understanding Mark Twain's political outlook is unique to our age. As often as you see him called a liberal, he is called a conservative, and sometimes both in the same breath. Critics puzzle about how one person could be champion of workers, owners, and the capitalist rich, while holding views that are anti-government on domestic matters, anti-slavery, and anti-war. They often conclude that his politics are incoherent. Sometimes this position has descended to the level of outright calumny,¹ even to the point that anyone who dares suggest that we have something to learn from Twain is considered guilty of an egregious violation of the canons of political correctness.

Part of the reason for the confusion has to do with the changed meaning of liberalism as an ideology and the incapacity of modern critics to understand its 19th-century implications.

The writer in question was born as Samuel Langhorne Clemens, in 1835, when the meaning of liberalism was less ambiguous. It meant to favor free enterprise and property rights, to oppose slavery, to be generally disposed toward free trade and cosmopolitanism, to favor technological progress, and possess a grave skepticism toward government management of anything.

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¹See the unrelentingly vicious study: *The Man Who Was Mark Twain*, by Guy Cardwell (Yale University Press, 1993)

By the time he died in 1910, liberalism was on the verge of completing a transformation. The Gilded Age of capitalist accumulation had come and gone, and inspired envy and ideological fanaticism all around. Liberalism's progressive outlook led to sympathy for socialism and government management, and, later, to the war economy as a means of imposing economic regimentation in absence of democratic consensus. A half century later, liberalism would have move full swing toward the very opposite of its 19th century meaning, while those who opposed government management and favored free enterprise were called conservatives.

It is for this reason that Twain's political is so frequently misunderstood, as the vast literature on his life and work easily demonstrates. Nearly alone in the Twain literature, Louis J. Budd's pioneering work *Mark Twain: Social Philosopher*² described his outlook as unambiguously liberal in the mold of the Manchester School of Cobden and Bright. "There is no good government at all & none possible," he quotes Clemens in summary of his creed.³

It is in the Budd book that we learn that that Clemens was a great champion of technological progress and commerce, never worked up enthusiasm for welfarist measures, for society in the "business age" is governed by "exact and constant" laws that should not be "interfered with for the accommodation of any individual or political or religious faction."⁴

The author of this study doesn't use the term classical liberalism. Instead he called Clemens's outlook a 19th-century, urban, middle class liberalism. Indeed, Budd himself regrets Twain's political and economic outlook. The author is even aghast that Twain acted as if "supply and demand was a fixed law rather than a debatable theory . . ."⁵

When the book was reviewed in the *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*⁶ Guy A. Cardwell wrote:

by present standards Mark Twain was more conservative then liberal. He believed strongly in laissez faire, thought personal political rights secondary to property rights, admired self-made plutocrats, and advocated a leadership to be composed of men of wealth and brains. Among his attitudes now more readily recognized as liberal were a faith in progress through technology and a hostility towards monarchy,

²Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962.

³Budd, p. 160.

⁴Budd, p. 160, letter from Aix-Les-Bains.

⁵Budd, p. 39.

⁶Vol. 18, No. 2 (Sept., 1963), pp. 197-200).

inherited aristocracy, the Roman Catholic church, and, in his later years, imperialism.

Of course this review was written 40 years ago, when liberals still had faith in technology. This too changed in time, so that now his faith in technology would probably be unclassifiable. His opposition to war would be similarly so, given how unpredictable antiwar feelings are among liberals and conservatives.

The party of liberalism that Clemens embrace no longer has a comfortable home in the current age. This problem has led to a general confusion about his outlook on matters of political economy, and thus is his outlook generally disregarded as fuzzy and confused.

Actually, the best way to dispel that impression is by reading Twain's own work. A look at some of his most popular fiction demonstrates that Budd is precisely right: he was a Manchesterite, a liberal of the old school, which, in today's terms, would probably cause him to be classified as a laissez-faire radical or libertarian. He clung to the Whiggism of his family and youth, felt a stronger draw toward Jefferson Davis than Lincoln (but famously deserted the Confederate Army), and championed hard money. He later supported Cleveland in the presidential election of 1884, in part for his support of the gold standard.

Along with this classical liberalism came a strong anti-war position, one which was rooted in opposition to Lockean-style love of liberty and opposition to government, not a Leninist-style analysis of the imperialism of finance capitalism (a fact much regretted by the Left). He was a member of the Anti-Imperialist League along with William Graham Sumner. "Talking of patriotism what humbug it is; it is a word that always commemorates a robbery." Further: "Patriotism is being carried to insane excess. I know men who do not love God because He is a foreigner."⁷ He was an opponent of the Spanish-American War, believed that Filipinos who were harassing US troops were only fighting for their independence, and might have been the only American who publicly defended the Boxers in China as good patriots.⁸

His general attitude toward political power can be summed up in his account of the transformation of Tom Canty in *The Prince and the Pauper* (1881). Tom was a pauper who finds himself required to act as a stand in for the prince following an identity mix up that began in a silly game of changing clothes. The entire story is meant to illustrate the essential artificiality of the caste system that distinguished the nobles from the peasants—a novel filled with bitter vitriol toward the state punishment system and overweening police power of the English state.

⁷Quoted in Budd, 182-83.

⁸Budd, 1983.

When Tom Canty comes to know the depredations of power from the inside, he is personally scandalized and sets about making humanitarian reforms. This is the part of Tom usually emphasized in the movie versions. But the original book adds an extra element of complexity, as if to illustrate the universal corruption that comes with power. The formerly sweet, charming, and humane Tom Canty undergoes a radical change once he has power at his disposal:

When we saw him last, royalty was just beginning to have a bright side for him. This bright side went on brightening more and more every day: in a very little while it was become almost all sunshine and delightfulness. He lost his fears; his misgivings faded out and died; his embarrassments departed, and gave place to an easy and confident bearing. He worked the whipping-boy mine to ever-increasing profit. He ordered my Lady Elizabeth and my Lady Jane Grey into his presence when he wanted to play or talk, and dismissed them when he was done with them, with the air of one familiarly accustomed to such performances. It no longer confused him to have these lofty personages kiss his hand at parting. He came to enjoy being conducted to bed in state at night, and dressed with intricate and solemn ceremony in the morning. It came to be a proud pleasure to march to dinner attended by a glittering procession of officers of state and gentlemen-at-arms; insomuch, indeed, that he doubled his guard of gentlemen-at-arms, and made them a hundred. He liked to hear the bugles sounding down the long corridors, and the distant voices responding, "Way for the King!"

He even learned to enjoy sitting in throned state in council, and seeming to be something more than the Lord Protector's mouthpiece. He liked to receive great ambassadors and their gorgeous trains, and listen to the affectionate messages they brought from illustrious monarchs who called him brother. . . . He enjoyed his splendid clothes, and ordered more: he found his four hundred servants too few for his proper grandeur, and trebled them. The adulation of salaaming courtiers came to be sweet music to his ears.

Later, as part of the coronation parade, we are told that "Tom Canty gazed abroad over the surging sea of eager faces, and his heart swelled with exultation; and he felt that the one thing worth living for in this world was to be a king, and a nation's idol."

Thus do we see a vivid case of illustration of the central theme of classical liberalism, that power corrupts. It even corrupts the reformer and those who intend to use their power on behalf of liberty, as indeed Tom Canty had during the early stages of his reign.

Another central theme of the old classical liberal school was its confidence in the ability of society to manage by itself and the futility of attempting to use the state apparatus as a mechanism for overriding the

preferences of individuals. This confidence in the ability of individuals to govern themselves stemmed from an understanding of the creative power of mutual exchange in the absence of the state and the violence against person and property that it unleashes.

This theme is returned to again and again in the course of the narrative in both *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *Huckleberry Finn*, two great American novels in which the state is conspicuous for its sheer absence. Indeed, this is part of the great charm and enduring power of these two novels: they describe the affairs of a society that is in evolution apart from the state. The state has only one role in the novels and it is entirely negative: it makes and enforces the fugitive slave laws. It is this fact alone that turns Huckleberry and Jim into outlaws fleeing down the Mississippi to find freedom.

What critics have called the mere sentimentalism of the close relationship between the slave Jim, Tom, and Huck, can be more readily understood as an archetype of the kind of social relations that emerge in the condition of freedom. Their relationship is not characterized by one of conflict, as people on the left and right might have it, but rather on humane and mutual respect for each other as individual human beings. This was Clemens's essentially liberal vision of the capacity that people have for developing friendships apart from the coercion of the state.

More clarity on Twain's outlook toward can be gained from a scene early in *Tom Sawyer*, a case of mutually beneficial exchange in which subjective value is the overriding principle:

Tom and Huck are exchanging banter about their possessions.

Tom says to Huck:

"Say — what's that?"

"Nothing but a tick."

"Where'd you get him?"

"Out in the woods."

"What'll you take for him?"

"I don't know. I don't want to sell him."

"All right. It's a mighty small tick, anyway."

"Oh, anybody can run a tick down that don't belong to them. I'm satisfied with it. It's a good enough tick for me."

"Sho, there's ticks a plenty. I could have a thousand of 'em if I wanted to."

"Well, why don't you? Becuz you know mighty well you can't. This is a pretty early tick, I reckon. It's the first one I've seen this year."

“Say, Huck—I’ll give you my tooth for him.”

“Less see it.”

Tom got out a bit of paper and carefully unrolled it. Huckleberry viewed it wistfully. The temptation was very strong. At last he said:

“Is it genuwyne?”

Tom lifted his lip and showed the vacancy.

“Well, all right,” said Huckleberry, “it’s a trade.”

Tom enclosed the tick in the percussion-cap box that had lately been the pinchbug’s prison, and the boys separated, each feeling wealthier than before.

Here is a clear illustration of the principle of mutually beneficial exchange, presented in the most reduced form, with the objects in question virtually no value from the point of view of others, and commanding no market price. But through a subtle change in the outlook of each boy, each realizes that he would be somehow better off after the exchange than before. The tick-for-tooth trade might seem like an irrelevant exchange in terms of the macroeconomy but the principles that drive it and consummate it are the very ones that bring about society itself. “The exchange relation is the fundamental social relation,” writes Mises. “Interpersonal exchange of goods and services weaves the bond which unites men into society.”⁹

The same subjectivism and cognizance of the gains from trade is at the heart of the story involving the manual labor of fence painting that takes place at the beginning of *Tom Sawyer*. Tom bamboozles a series of kids to do his work for him, on the grounds that it is not really work at all but rather a high calling that he is proud to undertake. Once his friends observe that Tom is enjoying his painting, they decide that they too would like to paint. He refuses pending payment for the chance to do so. Tom then trades the opportunity to paint a fence for a variety of goods: an apple, a kite, a dead rat and “string to swing it with,” and more. These items may seem to be worthless at one level, but to their owners, they are highly valuable.

More of a puzzle, the work that they purchase with these goods is subjectively seen as less valuable than they what they trade for it. This would seem to violate neoclassical dictums concerning the disutility of labor. Tom persuades them otherwise. He persuades them that the joy

⁹*Human Action*, Ludwig von Mises (Mises Institute, 2000), p. 194.

of immediate gratification of a job well done more than compensates for the disutility associated with the task. As Rothbard writes:

In the expenditure of any hour of labor, therefore, man weighs the disutility of the labor involved (including the leisure forgone plus any dissatisfaction stemming from the work itself) against the utility of the contribution he will make in that hour to the production of desired goods (including future goods and any pleasure in the work itself), i.e., *with the value of his marginal product*. . . . A man will expend his labor as long as the marginal utility of the return exceeds the marginal disutility of the labor effort. A man will stop work when the marginal disutility of labor is greater than the marginal utility of the increased goods provided by the effort.¹⁰

The boys did experience disutility from this negative-wage work, but this was outweighed by the desire for the prestige associated with doing the work, clearly a subjective note. And so we read in *Tom Sawyer* that as each boy became tired of the hard job, there was another worker there to take his place.

Twain writes as follows:

Tom said to himself that it was not such a hollow world, after all. He had discovered a great law of human action, without knowing it—namely, that in order to make a man or a boy covet a thing, it is only necessary to make the thing difficult to attain. If he had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book, he would now have comprehended that Work consists of whatever a body is *obliged* to do, and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do. And this would help him to understand why constructing artificial flowers or performing on a tread-mill is work, while rolling ten-pins or climbing Mont Blanc is only amusement.

This concept of “play” as a consumable good also finds a mention in Rothbard. “Those activities which are engaged in *purely* for their own sake are not labor but are pure *play*, consumers’ goods in themselves. Play, as a consumers’ good, is subject to the law of marginal utility as are all goods, and the time spent in play will be balanced against the utility to be derived from other obtainable goods.”¹¹

Thus do we see how the economics of *Tom Sawyer* is infused with a sense of the subjective as the determining factor in the decision to trade and work or play. This subjectivism is at the heart of the economic theory that drives the narrative.

¹⁰*Man, Economy, and State* (Mises Institute, 2004). p. 42.

¹¹*Man, Economy, and State*, p. 42.

An overriding problem that emerged with all this trading among the kids was that it had to be in barter form. What was needed was a medium of exchange, some item that would be universally desirable, divisible, durable, and finally exchangeable for a consumer good. A monetary economy quickly develops that suits the need. The final consumer good was a bound Bible worth about 40 cents at the time, to be given away at the school to the student who was most adept at memorizing bible verses.

For each verse learned, a student would get a ticket. The bible could be purchased through ten yellow tickets. One yellow ticket was equal to ten red tickets. One red ticket was worth ten blue tickets. A student could earn a blue ticket by memorizing two verses. Thus was the final consumer good of the Bible priced as 2,000 memorize verses. The downside to this system was that it was planned: the fixed and only way to acquire tickets was through the performance of single service of memorizing the Bible versus. Tom and his friends quickly found a way around it. To be sure, not even the final consumer good was enough. As the narrator says: “Tom’s mental stomach had never really hungered for one of those prizes, but unquestionably his entire being had for many a day longed for the glory and the eclat that came with it.”

Tom asked a friend: “Say, Billy, got a yaller ticket?”

“Yes.”

“What’ll you take for her?”

“What’ll you give?”

“Piece of lickrish and a fish-hook.”

“Less see ‘em.”

Tom exhibited. They were satisfactory, and the property changed hands. Then Tom traded a couple of white alleys for three red tickets, and some small trifle or other for a couple of blue ones. He waylaid other boys as they came, and went on buying tickets of various colors ten or fifteen minutes longer.

Eventually Tom enters the church and comes forward with 9 yellow tickets, 9 red tickets, and 10 blue ones—and thus was he eligible for a Bible and all the status that came with earning one. The other boys immediately realized that the basis of Tom’s fortune was his initial trafficking in whitewashing privileges, and they were bitter and filled with envy. These were, however, *ex post* feelings that do not impact at all on their *ex ante* sense of having benefited from the exchanges. In the end, however, Tom was found out when he was unable to answer a simple Bible question that was asked of him.

This embarrassing failure did not de-monetize the tickets, however, even if they were somewhat devalued. A few scenes later, the reader is witness to another mutually beneficial change.

“Hello, Huckleberry!” says Tom.

“Hello yourself, and see how you like it.”

“What’s that you got?”

“Dead cat.”

“Lemme see him, Huck. My, he’s pretty stiff. Where’d you get him?”

“Bought him off’n a boy.”

“What did you give?”

“I give a blue ticket and a bladder that I got at the slaughter-house.”

“Where’d you get the blue ticket?”

“Bought it off’n Ben Rogers two weeks ago for a hoop-stick.”

“Say—what is dead cats good for, Huck?”

“Good for? Cure warts with.”

“No! Is that so? I know something that’s better.”

“I bet you don’t. What is it?”

“Why, spunk-water.”

“Spunk-water! I wouldn’t give a dern for spunk-water.”

“You wouldn’t, wouldn’t you? D’you ever try it?”

What follows is a long discussion of wart-curing methods, which ends with Huck having been persuaded of the merit of spunk-water. But what matters here is that the tickets continue to serve as a medium of exchange. This monetary economy that had developed among the boys emerged in the absence of any kind of formal social pact or state involvement. It was the result of human action rooted in subjective evaluations leading to a complex of exchanges—an micro-version of the same process that takes place in the larger economy, where monetary entrepreneurs discover the most highly valued good with monetary properties to serve as a medium of exchange.

The experience of Tom with his attempt to accumulate wealth foreshadows the treasure hunt that leads to a harrowing crime story, the tracing of a treasure, and a near death experience for Tom that ends with both Tom and Huck becoming very wealthy at a young age. Readers of the books are struck by the fact that the nothing about their new-found wealth changes anything about the boys.

They do not spend the money or even have much of a consciousness of how the money might elevate their material position. Indeed, Huck gives up his money in *Huckleberry*: “I don’t want it at all—nor the six thousand, nuther. I want you to take it; I want to give it to you—the six thousand and all.”

And so in this action, *Huckleberry* underscores a feature of the American entrepreneurial mind, as the author understands it. Those who have the right mix of passion, creativity, and drive can become enormously wealthy but the wealth alone is not the final goal but rather a means to further accomplishment, whether in the commercial sector or in charitable work. In Tom and Huck’s case, they acquired their treasure, but found that possessing was far less interesting than discovery.

What drives their search for treasure is not materialism but the pursuit of an ideal, an entrepreneurial push for discovery, adventure, and personal satisfaction. In setting up the story in this way, the author is offering a perspective on the commercial culture of a society of entrepreneurial freedom: it is driven not so much by the demand for material reward but by the desire for discovery and achievement, with the money serving as a measure of success rather than the end itself.

The unusual treatment of wealth in the Tom Sawyer story foreshadowed events of the Gilded Age when large scale capitalist enterprise created vast wealth and give rise to a class of entrepreneurs who came to realize that they had more money at their disposal than the European royalty of old. But simultaneous to this was the rise of large-scale professional philanthropy made possible by enormous gifts of this wealth. Like Huck Finn, the so-called Robber Barons found their treasure but also gave vast sums of it away.

Another profit-making venture makes an appearance in *Tom Sawyer Abroad*, but in this case, the state intervenes to prevent Tom, Huck, and Jim from carrying out their dream. Oddly, Tom, Huck, and Jim find themselves floating in a traveling balloon over the Sahara Desert. Following a sandstorm, they wonder what they will do with all the sand that had built up in the basket where they lived.

Jim had the idea first: “Mars Tom, can’t we tote it back home en sell it?”

Tom says: “Well, the minute people knows it’s genuwyne sand from the genuwyne Desert of Sahara, they’ll just be in a perfect state of mind to git hold of some of it to keep on the what-not in a vial with a label on it for a curiosity. All we got to do is to put it up in vials and float around all over the United States and peddle them out at ten cents apiece. We’ve got all of ten thousand dollars’ worth of sand in this boat. . . . And we can keep on coming back and fetching sand, and coming

back and fetching more sand, and just keep it a-going till we've carted this whole Desert over there and sold it out; and there ain't ever going to be any opposition, either, because we'll take out a patent."

Tom's excitement died out suddenly.

"Boys, it won't work; we got to give it up."

"Why, Tom?"

"On account of the duties."

Jim and Huck ask what he is talking about. Tom explains that a duty "is a tax."

Whenever you strike a frontier—that's the border of a country, you know—you find a custom-house there, and the gov'ment officers comes and rummages among your things and charges a big tax, which they call a duty because it's their duty to bust you if they can, and if you don't pay the duty they'll hog your sand. They call it confiscating, but that don't deceive nobody, it's just hogging, and that's all it is. Now if we try to carry this sand home the way we're pointed now, we got to climb fences till we git tired—just frontier after frontier—Egypt, Arabia, Hindostan, and so on, and they'll all whack on a duty, and so you see, easy enough, we CAN'T go THAT road . . . we're shut off the other way, too. If we go back the way we've come, there's the New York custom-house, and that is worse than all of them others put together, on account of the kind of cargo we've got.

"Why?"

"Well, they can't raise Sahara sand in America, of course, and when they can't raise a thing there, the duty is fourteen hundred thousand per cent on it if you try to fetch it in from where they do raise it."

Huck says: "There ain't no sense in that, Tom Sawyer."

Jim says: "Mars Tom, do dey jam dat duty onto everything we can't raise in America, en don't make no 'stinction 'twix' anything?"

"Yes, that's what they do."

"Mars Tom, ain't de blessin' o' de Lord de mos' valuable thing dey is?"

"Yes, it is."

Jim then goes out to point out that the blessing of the Lord might be considered an untaxed import from Heaven. If the government makes no distinctions among imports, wouldn't the government tax a

blessing? And if it doesn't do so, and there is equality before the law, why should the state tax any imports at all? Tom has no answer to this point.

The narrator comments: “[Tom] tried to wiggle out by saying they had FORGOT to put on that tax, but they'd be sure to remember about it, next session of Congress, and then they'd put it on, but that was a poor lame come-off, and he knowed it. He said there warn't nothing foreign that warn't taxed but just that one, and so they couldn't be consistent without taxing it, and to be consistent was the first law of politics. So he stuck to it that they'd left it out unintentional and would be certain to do their best to fix it before they got caught and laughed at.”

This passage is a rare intrusion of the state into books that are so beloved and compelling precisely because they concern themselves with unmanaged human action on a small scale, and readers are invited to share in the mystery and beauty of micro-civilizations that result from the casual engagement of people. It is because Twain focused on this social phenomena and understood its underlying dynamic so well that he is considered such a great American novelist, for he celebrated the human capacity for mutual exchange and understood that order results from liberty and that violent power can only create distortion.

Neither did his work create an image of a utopia that would exist in absence of power. There is criminality, clan violence, cruelty, and bigotry—all features of human nature that are not eradicated with a state but only centralized, organized, and legitimized.

But his work does posit the essential job of developing civilization toward an ideal is to be undertaken by private individuals in their social and economic lives, and not by some mythical institution called the state or an ideology that contradict the practical experience of people in their communities. A good example comes from his explanation of the how the Mississippi came to be discovered in the fullest sense, not merely observed but seen as something economically useful.

Here is Twain from *Life on the Mississippi*:

After De Soto glimpsed the river, a fraction short of a quarter of a century elapsed, and then Shakespeare was born; lived a trifle more than half a century, then died; and when he had been in his grave considerably more than half a century, the *second* white man saw the Mississippi. . . . The mere mysteriousness of the matter ought to have fired curiosity and compelled exploration; but this did not occur. Apparently nobody happened to want such a river, nobody needed it, nobody was curious about it; so, for a century and a half the Mississippi remained out of the market and undisturbed. When De Soto found it, he was not hunting for a river, and had no present occasion for one; consequently he did not value it or even take any particular notice of it. But at last La Salle the Frenchman conceived the idea

of seeking out that river and exploring it. It always happens that when a man seizes upon a neglected and important idea, people inflamed with the same notion crop up all around. It happened so in this instance. Naturally the question suggests itself, Why did these people want the river now when nobody had wanted it in the five preceding generations? Apparently it was because at this late day they thought they had discovered a way to make it useful.¹²

Here we have the essence of the Austrian idea of entrepreneurship: it is not merely finding a technology or resource. Rather, it concerns viewing a possible economic use of that resource given existing economic realities and making a judgment about the future employment of those resources to serve human ends. It is in this area that the market excels, and the state so completely fails.

As Clemens himself once wrote:

The mania for giving the Government power to meddle with the private affairs of cities or citizens is likely to cause endless trouble...and there is great danger that our people will lose that independence of thought and action which is the cause of much of our greatness, and sink into the helplessness of the Frenchman or German who expects his government to feed him when hungry, clothe him when naked . . . and, in time, to regulate every act of humanity from the cradle to the tomb, including the manner in which he may seek future admission to paradise.¹³

¹²*Life on the Mississippi* (Boston: James Osgood and Company, 1883), pp. 30-31.

¹³Twain's letter to *Enterprise*

