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ARTICLE

ADAM SMITH, COLONIALISM, AND LIBERAL IMPERIALISM

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Abstract

Adam Smith had a longstanding interest in colonialism and more generally relations between Europe and the rest of the world. It was through engagement with these issues that he worked through some of the central elements of his thought. This paper examines both Smith's contexts and our own and argues that Smith's work provides an important resource for reflecting today on relations with distant and diverse others today. It identifies three aspects of Smith's thought that are particularly relevant: the political and economic costs of colonial ventures to the colonisers themselves, the question of whether and how imperialism had encouraged 'progress', and the question of how social and cultural differences should be understood and judged. The paper teases out Smith's sometimes uncertain arguments in these areas and suggests that they can contribute to our own reflections on the troubled practices of liberal imperialism.

Keywords: Adam Smith; colonialism; liberal imperialism; progress; cultural difference

JEL codes: B12; B31; F54; H10

Introduction

Canonical thinkers can have a peculiar fate. Their status as a canonical thinker is often thought to derive from the power and originality of their arguments and insights.[1] And once canonised, their names get invoked in all kinds of public, policy, and academic settings, and for all kinds of purposes, precisely because of the authority that they have as a canonical thinker. But along with this invocation often comes more and more distance from what these thinkers actually said or meant. And for Adam Smith at any rate, the endless modern debate about 'markets' has meant that he has often become a kind of totem—a representative icon that stands for a host of arguments that often have little to do with what Smith himself said or at the very least do considerable injustice to the depth and seriousness of his thinking.

On the tercentenary of his birth, we are still asking about how Adam Smith's thinking might be significant for us. I think that it can be. But I also think that we have to be careful and part of what it means for us to be careful about this is to try to be clear about what we, today, could reasonably expect to profitably take from Smith's capacious thinking.

One reason we might have for thinking Smith can still profitably talk to us and our concerns today is that what he said has the quality of a timeless truth—or if the T word is a bit much, we might still think there is some wisdom that provides an important insight into aspects of human behaviour or economic arrangements. It is certainly tempting to read him this way, a temptation perhaps encouraged by a particular view of the discipline of economics, to which the name Smith is often attached as one of the 'founders'.

[1]I use 'thought to' deliberately here as processes of canonisation are complex, sometimes contingent, and always political in various ways.

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There are, however, influential scholars of the history of political and economic thought that have been at pains to point out that there is a real question about what past thinkers might have to say to us, now and around here (for example, Skinner, 1969). The key insight of these scholars is that past thinkers were located in and responding to their own particular 'contexts'—that is they were responding to problems they saw around them, they were participating in the arguments that people around them were having, and they were using the concepts and languages of their time and place to contribute to these arguments. This kind of 'historicization' can help us to make sense of what these thinkers meant, but one of its implications is that these thinkers have less and less to say of any great relevance to us in our own context, with our own and rather different problems, arguments, concepts, and languages.

Furthermore, there are dangers in thinking that past thinkers can in any simple way talk meaningfully to us. There is a danger that if we try to make past thinkers talk to us, we will often seriously misunderstand them (Skinner, 1969). How much of a problem this is will depend upon how seriously we take the task of really 'understanding' these thinkers. But the example of Smith shows that there are dangers here. Reducing him to a caricature of a free-market fundamentalist, to justify some policy position or other, does an injustice to his thinking about commercial society, and it also means that we then ignore other aspects of his work that are potentially insightful for us. Second, there is a danger that failing to recognise that what past thinkers said does not and cannot helpfully apply to us today, means we are likely to go badly wrong if we do what we think their arguments imply. The kinds of political and sociological forces and problems Smith was grappling with were in important respects so different from ours that it is a political fantasy to imagine we can implement the kind of small-state liberalism some think he advocated, and it is potentially dangerous even to try.

Finally, there is a danger in giving past thinkers any special authority in our arguments because it can stop us from fully facing the task of doing our own thinking for ourselves. To claim that economic or political 'problems' have been 'solved' by a past thinker is not just to cede authority to someone who has no stake in what happens to us but is also to fail to recognise that the problems we face can only be worked through politically, amongst ourselves. At worst, the danger is that the invocation of past authorities just becomes a tired trope of politicians and social media 'activists', more concerned with self-righteous point-scoring than thinking seriously about what should be done.

What all these dangers point to is the tricky task of finding a bridge between the past and the present that allows us to read past thinkers in ways that might be helpful for our present concerns while at the same time doing as much justice as we can to what they actually said and being conscious that past thinkers can only ever be resources for our thinking, not a substitute for it. I think there is a way of doing this. Showing this is the case has involved, for me anyway, addressing some quite knotty questions (Williams, 2020, pp. 20–30). For now, I hope that what follows is a demonstration of how to think with past thinkers.

Colonialism and Adam Smith

Although the issues around colonialism and imperialism are not necessarily the first ones that come to mind when we think of Adam Smith, they are central to his work, which is unsurprising given his context, and to some extent his life. Smith had a longstanding interest in the colonial affairs of his day, particularly relations with Britain's North American colonies (Winch, 1965, chap 2, 1978, chap 7). He acted as an advisor to successive British governments on policy towards the American colonies and he wrote a memorandum for the government on the American War of Independence (Smith, 1977, pp. 377–85). Smith also lived through a period when European imperial expansion sharpened the intellectual as well as political questions raised by growing knowledge of distant and diverse societies and cultures, and his work demonstrates a kind of global imaginary encompassing (as a good Enlightenment thinker) geography, 'natural history', and quasi-anthropological knowledge of other people and customs, often combined with a prodigious historical knowledge (or at least knowledge of historical texts). And it was through this material that Smith worked out some of the central parts of his thought, including issues

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around progress, including the idea of stages, as well as his moral theory. Finally, Smith's extensive connections with the University of Glasgow as a student (1737–1740) and then a teacher (1751–1764) exposed him to the material realities of colonial and mercantile trade. The vast wealth derived especially from tobacco and sugar trading shaped both the physical city as well as its economic, cultural, and social fabric (Devine, 1990; Mullen, 2022; more generally Hamilton, 2010).

Getting a clear handle on Smith's arguments about colonialism is not straightforward (Palen, 2014; more generally Brown, 1997; Hill, 2012).[2] One commentator put it colourfully when he said that when Smith touched on issues relating to imperialism, he 'was somewhat like the man who … mounted his horse and rode off in different directions' (Hill 2012, p. 308). This has led to all kinds of different interpretations, and what people have wanted to read into Smith's arguments about colonialism and related matters has often depended on the broader context and particular political purpose of the interpreter. Richard Cobden, for example, saw Smith as one of the originators of a free-trade anti-imperialism, and he replicated some of Smith's key criticisms of the mercantilist trade practices associated with colonialism (Cobden 1835, pp. 29–30). But during the crisis of British imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and in the context of a political backlash against Cobdenite trade policies, Smith had come to be seen by many as an advocate of at least some form of empire, largely as a result of his arguments about the desirability of an imperial federation as a solution to the problem of relations between Britain and her dominions (Palen, 2014; see also Nicolson, 1909).

In the contemporary period when there are increasing anxieties about the colonial or imperial implications of 'western' or 'enlightenment' thought, Smith's works have been interrogated in new ways. Jennifer Pitts, for example, sees Smith as an exemplar of a line of anticolonial liberal thought that developed during the eighteenth century (Pitts, 2005, chap 5; see also Muthu, 2008 and Rothschild, 2012). At the same time, postcolonial critiques have stressed the cultural judgments and hierarchies found in his works, as well as the Eurocentric and imperial implications of his understanding of progress (Blaney and Inayatullah, 2009, chap 2). To take one more example, Donald Winch's *Adam Smith's Politics* had as one of its objectives to critique the interpretation of Smith as a proponent of laissez-faire economic policies. Winch was certainly right that this was a caricature of Smith's arguments, but the political significance of this critical project in the context of late 1970s Britain is obvious (Winch, 1978).[3]

Our contexts

Such context-shaped interpretation is hard to avoid and it is sensible to be upfront about the contexts that shape the reading of Smith below. There are at least two aspects of our contemporary context that seem particularly pertinent to Smith's engagements with colonialism and European imperialism. First, politically as well as culturally, questions about the costs and benefits, the justifications for, as well as the injustices and often violent cruelties of European colonial and imperial adventures, seem to be of particular contemporary concern. This is the case within the academy where 'post-colonial' and 'de-colonial' frameworks have become increasingly central to many disciplines. But it is also outside the academy where the question of what to make of the (European) colonial past has animated all kinds of campaigns and protests. In our context, then, the question of how we should think about colonialism has taken on a new significance, as have a series of related matters to do with the moral, cultural, or epistemological superiority of the 'West', and what reparations might be due to those who lived under colonial rule.

Second, many people are still living with the terrible consequences of the set of interventions undertaken by Western states in the 1990s and 2000s. The interventionism that gripped Western states

[2]The difficulty of pinning Smith down is compounded by the fact that he never published a planned volume on politics and government, by the fact that he had most of his papers burned after his death, and by the fact that recourse to biographical information to resolve interpretative disputes is difficult (Harkin, 2005; Phillipson, 2010, p. 406).

[3]The 'context' of Winch's own engagement is given in chap 1. The political significance of his argument is illustrated by the founding in 1977 of the Adam Smith Institute, a pro-free market think tank with close ties to the Thatcher government.

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in the 2000s has often been described as a form of 'liberal imperialism'. This label is useful enough, capturing as it does some of the legitimating rhetoric that accompanied these interventions, as well as the ill-fated state-building activities that followed. The overconfidence that accompanied these interventions has ebbed away, but whatever else we might ask about these interventions, they surely do raise important questions about how 'liberal states' ought to relate to nonliberal others, if only because these relationships have sometimes been appallingly destructive.

It is in this 'context' that Smith's extensive and as I hope to show subtle and sometimes frustrating engagements with colonialism and European imperialism are of some importance. Not because he 'solves' the problems we are wrestling with, and still less because he provides some convenient canonical name to throw around in our increasingly fractious cultural politics, but because following the contours and uncertainties of Smith's arguments can help us to think a bit better about these kinds of questions.

Adam Smith on colonialism

I want to identify three areas where what Smith said is important for the way in which our thinking goes, or at least has tended to go, on issues related to intervention, the possibilities of liberal imperialism, and more generally the ways in which liberal or European thought dealt with distant and diverse societies.

Costs

In chapter VII of the *Wealth of Nations*, 'Of Colonies', Smith engaged in a sustained critique of European colonialism. His conclusion was startlingly clear: '… Great Britain should voluntarily give up all authority over her colonies and leave them to elect their own magistrates, to enact their laws, and to make peace and war as they might think proper' (Smith 1976, p. 616). The thrust of his arguments centred around the costs to the colonial powers of their imperial ventures. The colonies, he said, had 'been a cause rather of weakness than of strength to their respective mother countries': 'Britain derives nothing but loss from the dominion which she assumes over her colonies' (Smith, 1976, pp. 593, 616). Part of the reason for this was that colonies did not provide for their own military protection and thus were a drain on the resources of the colonising states (Smith, 1976, p. 593). More importantly, and famously, Smith argued that the economic benefits that were derived from the control of colonial trade were an illusion (Smith, 1976, pp. 606–14). Monopoly of the colonial trade was 'always and necessarily hurtful'. Compared to a policy of free trade, exclusive trade diminished the availability of goods and increased prices.

This raised the question of why, if colonialism and monopoly trade were so costly, they were pursued at all. Smith's first answer was to point to human folly, and the 'absurd confidence which almost all men have in their own good fortune', that propelled colonial ventures in the face of the 'judgment of sober reason and experience' (Smith, 1976, pp. 562–3). Second, he said that emancipation of the colonies would be 'mortifying to the pride of every nation' (Smith, 1976, p. 617; See also Hill, 2009; Wyatt-Walter, 1996).

Third, and more specifically, Smith focussed on the connections between monopoly trade and the corruption of politics and government in the colonial metropole. According to Smith, British commercial and colonial policy had been conducted for the benefit of 'rich and powerful' interests at the expense of the interests of the country as a whole (Smith, 1976, p. 644). A primary concern here for Smith was the large trading companies (Muthu, 2008). These joint-stock companies persistently lobbied for 'exclusive privilege' (Smith, 1976, p. 741). These privileges did not prevent, and probably contributed to, 'folly, negligence, and profusion … in the management of their affairs' (Smith, 1976, p. 745). Time and again in the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith complains about the influence of these companies on British commercial and colonial policy (see Smith, 1976, pp. 453, 453, 465, 469, 494).

> Of the greater part of the regulations concerning the colony trade, the merchants who carry it on, it must be observed, have been the principal advisors. We must not wonder, therefore, if, in the greater part of them, their interest has been more considered than either that of the colony or that of the mother country (Smith, 1976, p. 584).

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'This monopoly has so much increased the number of some particular tribes of them', he added, 'that, like an overgrown standing army, they have become formidable to the government, and upon many occasions intimidate the legislature' (Smith, 1976, p. 471). In addition, the 'governing part' of European nations benefitted themselves from the monopoly trade because it enabled them to dispose of 'many places of trust and profit' (Smith, 1976, p. 617).

Smith also, at least in some places, acknowledged the costs of colonialism borne by the colonised. In discussing colonisation in the Americas, he said that 'folly and injustice seem to have been the principles which presided over and directed the first project of establishing those colonies'. The 'folly' he said was 'hunting after gold and silver'. The 'injustice' was 'coveting the possession of a country whose harmless natives, far from having even injured the people of Europe, had received the first adventurers with every mark of kindness and hospitality' (Smith, 1976, p. 588). Smith was particularly scathing in his attack on the arbitrary and self-interested 'governments' established by the English and Dutch East India companies (Muthu, 2008; Smith, 1976, pp. 635–41). He suggested that the policies pursued by the English East India Company had contributed to famine in Bengal, and he detailed the abuses perpetrated by the Dutch East Indian Company in the Spice Islands (Smith, 1976, pp. 527, 636). He concluded that 'such exclusive companies … are a nuisance in every respect … and destructive to those who have the misfortune to fall under their government' (Smith, 1976, p. 641). Finally, Smith drew attention to the links between colonialism and slavery: '… we are not to imagine the temper of Christian religion is necessarily contrary to slavery. The masters in our colonies are Christians, and yet slavery is allowed amongst them' (Smith, 1978, p. 191). He claimed that it was the 'love of domination and authority' that Smith thought common to all men which allowed the great cruelties and injustices associated with slavery to continue in the colonies (Pack, 1996; Smith, 1978, pp. 178–93).

It is not then that Smith only talked about the costs borne by the populations of the European states in his arguments against colonialism. Smith was well aware of, and no doubt sympathetic too, the costs borne by the natives and the settlers themselves. The balance of the evidence, however, indicates that it was the impact of colonialism on domestic economic policy and political practices that really concerned him. Viewed in the wider compass of his overall project, it seems clear that Smith thought that colonial ventures and their associated economic practices were an obstacle to political and economic reform within the colonial states.

Progress

Smith, then, was highly attuned to the political and economic costs of European colonial ventures. At the same time, however, Smith thought that colonialism, and more generally European expansion either had created, or had the potential to create, substantial benefits. Smith's view about European expansion was not quite so negative as might be assumed from the discussion so far.

Towards the end of the chapter 'Of Colonies,' there is a revealing passage. It starts with the often-quoted remark that the 'discovery of America, and that of a passage to the East Indies by the Cape of Good Hope, are the two greatest and most important events recorded in the history of mankind'. They 'united the most distant parts of the world', thus enabling them to 'relieve one another's wants, to increase one another's enjoyments, and to encourage one another's industries' (Smith, 1976, p. 626). In other words, viewed on a grand scale, European expansion was a powerful force for economic development.

Even viewed on a smaller scale, Smith was convinced that European colonialism could be beneficial:

> the colony of a civilised nation that takes possession, either of a waste country or of one so thinly inhabited, that the natives easily give way to the new settlers, advances more rapidly to wealth and greatness than any other human society.

Partly, this is because of the plentiful availability of land. But it is also because,

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> the colonists carry out with them a knowledge of agriculture and of other useful arts, superior to what can grow up of its own accord in the course of many centuries among savage and barbarous nations. They carry out with them too the habit of subordination, some notion of regular government … of the system of laws which support it, and of a regular administration of justice (Smith, 1976, pp. 564, 565, 567).

In other words, while colonial rule of settler or plantation colonies generally led to slower progress than would be the case if these had been released from mercantilist trading practices, this was a situation that nonetheless created far more progress than would have been possible without any form of colonialism at all:

> Before the conquest of the Spaniards there were not cattle fit for draught, either in Mexico or Peru … The plough was unknown among them. They were ignorant of the use of iron. They had no coined money, nor any established instrument of commerce of any kind … in this condition it seems impossible, that either of those empires could have been so improved or so well cultivated as at present … In spite of the cruel destruction of the natives which followed the conquest, these two great empires are, probably, more populous now than they ever were before: and the people are surely very different; for we must acknowledge, I apprehend, that the Spanish creoles are in many respects superior to the antient [sic] Indians (Smith, 1976, pp. 568–9).

These quotes suggest that while Smith thought that European colonialism was costly and cruel, he also recognised the overall project of conquest and colonial rule had helped produce certain goods (wealth, improvement, and cultivation) that might not have been realised if these places had remained unconquered.

The more complex picture of Smith's view about European colonialism that emerges here can be understood within the tensions and ambivalences that characterise his more general account of the course of 'progress' in different places. Smith is famously reported as having said that, 'little else is requisite to carry a state to the highest degree of opulence from the lowest barbarism, but peace, easy taxes, and a tolerable administration of justice; all the rest being brought about by the natural course of things' (Winch, 1978, p. 4). And one of Smith's most famous well-known arguments was that there were mechanisms generating 'progress' that operated (if given the chance) 'naturally', most famously the so-called 'invisible hand'. Underpinning this was a series of much grander philosophical, and in my view, theological commitments (Haakonssen, 1981). Smith's belief in the naturalness of 'progress' derived from the belief that there was some point or purpose to human existence that could be expected to manifest itself in the unfolding of a human history that was underwritten by a benevolent God. Here, then, progress was produced by certain natural laws that were the product of God's plan for mankind (Alvey, 2004; Fitzgibbons, 1995; Hill, 2001). The 'natural inclinations' of persons drive progress—the 'propensity in human nature' to 'truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another' (Smith, 1976, p. 25).

The view that 'progress' operates naturally, if not obstructed, has of course been an important part of Smith's enduring significance in contemporary debates. But when Smith employed a wider geographical compass things looked a bit different (Salter, 1992). There were parts of the world that seem to have experienced no progress at all:

> all the inland parts of Africa, and all that part of Asia which lies any considerable way north of the Euxine and Caspian seas …. Seem in all ages of the world to have been in the same barbarous and uncivilised state in which we find them at present (Smith, 1976, p. 36).

Here, Smith stressed the contingencies of geographical location (distance from seas and navigable rivers) as an important condition for progress. Smith also argued that some societies get 'stuck' at a certain stage. He said that,

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> There are two great nations who have been merely shepherds as far back as we can trace them and still are so without the least of agriculture … that is the whole body of Tartars and 2ndly of the Arabians (Smith, 1978, p. 213).

Here too, Smith suggested that one reason for this was the 'nature of their country, which is dry and raised above the sea' (Smith 1978, p. 220). The example of China also showed that the 'progress' could be stalled. He said that while China had not gone 'backwards' it had, 'even long before this time, acquired that full complement of riches which the nature of its laws and institutions permits it to acquire' (Smith, 1976, p. 89; see also Harvey, 2012, chap 2). Here, it seems that 'laws' and 'institutions' played a significant role in progress through the stages. Finally, there are also certain cyclical elements in Smith's thought. The collapse of Ancient Greek and Roman societies suggested that the achievements of 'civilisation' may not be permanent, and there are hints that Smith saw the collapse of these societies as partly the result of their very great achievements: as commerce grows in significance, so 'the great body of the people becomes altogether unwarlike', while the wealth of the state 'provokes the invasion of all their neighbours' (Smith, 1976, p. 697; see also p. 693).

Smith's account of the causes of the progress of civilisation is more complex than in sometimes thought. But it does help make sense of his ambivalent arguments about the benefits of colonialism, for there will be some places under some conditions that cannot be expected to 'progress' of their own accord, and in those places European expansion could be 'beneficial', for humanity at large, if not exactly for the inhabitants.

Morality and cultural difference

The final aspect of Smith's arguments that relate to colonialism concerns the vexed issue of moral judgments about diverse others. It is important to say at the outset Smith did not argue that conquest and colonial rule were justified because other societies were 'backward' or had 'abhorrent' moral practices or were unchristian. In other words, Smith did not endorse what became one of the standard justifications for European colonialism.

Smith certainly did make what we might now take to be disparaging judgments about other societies. He described America before Columbus as 'a country quite covered with wood, uncultivated, and inhabited only by tribes of naked and miserable savages' (Blaney and Inayatullah, 2009, chap 2; Smith, 1976, p. 559). In a discussion about Africa, he said that 'many an African King' is the 'absolute master in the loves and liberties of ten thousand naked savages' (Smith, 1976, p. 24). He says in the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* that 'In Africa we find the most horrid disorders, their discipline not being severe enough' (Smith, 1978, p. 443).

In addition, Smith argued that the commercial society was not just superior to the 'barbarous' society in material terms but also in terms of morals and manners; as commerce and manufactures increased so 'the common people have better wages … and as a consequence of this, a general probity of manners takes place thro' the whole country (Smith, 1978, p. 487). Manners come to a 'greater degree of refinement', both with respect to persons and effects and especially in terms of the 'delicacy which attends the sentiment of love' (Smith, 1978, pp. 439, 548). The 'probity and punctuality' that accompany commerce are 'almost unknown' in a 'rude and barbarous country' (Smith, 1978, pp. 538–9).

Commercial society was also understood by Smith to be superior in terms of the progress of science and reason. In his essay 'History of Astronomy', Smith developed his understanding of the progress of science in contrast to the forms of reasoning characteristic of barbarous societies. He said that savages are 'guided altogether by wild nature and passion' and 'have little curiosity to find out those hidden chains of events' (Smith, 1980, p. 48). He said that 'cowardice and pusillanimity' are 'natural to man in his uncivilised state' and that it is only material progress that allows societies to overcome 'the lowest and most pusillanimous superstition' (Smith, 1980, pp. 48, 50).

At other times, Smith seems less judgmental. In discussing the variety of judgements about beauty that characterise different societies, Smith not only accepted that other societies had their own standards

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of judgement but he also said that Europeans are apt to overlook how their own standards have often occasioned 'distortions and disease' in the much the same way as those of more barbarous nations (Smith, 1975, p. 199). He sometimes discussed the character of 'savages and barbarians' in ways that verge on admiration. In *Theory of Moral Sentiments,* he says that savage men are characterised by a 'heroic and unconquerable firmness' (Cremaschi, 2017; Smith, 1975, pp. 205–8). One might say that Smith here was repeating the kinds of familiar attitudes, prejudices, and language of many of his Enlightenment peers (Pitts, 2005, p. 34). But there is more at stake than this.

One important consideration in assessing the kinds of judgments Smith made about other places relates to how the evident diversity of human customs, mores, and moral codes was to be explained. Famously Smith said:

> the different situations of different ages and countries are apt … to give different characters to the generality of those who live in them and their sentiments concerning the particular degree of each quality, that is either blamable [sic] or praise-worthy, vary, according to that degree which is usual in their own country and in their own times' (Smith, 1975, p. 204).

Seen in this light, the relatively 'less-developed' moral sense in rude nations was not the result of a failure of reason or any innate individual or collective traits but the result of the particular circumstances that characterised different places: the 'heroic and unconquerable firmness' of the savage is the result of the 'necessity of his situation' (Smith, 1975, p. 203). The savage's values and practices are not only explicable, but they may even be rational responses to their environment (Smith, 1975, p. 209). In his discussion of infanticide, for example, Smith said that it is 'more pardonable' among the 'rudest and lowest state of society' because

> the extreme indigence of savage is often such that he himself is frequently exposed to the greatest extremity of hunger, he often dies of pure want, and it is frequently impossible for him to support both himself and his child. We cannot wonder, therefore, that in this case, he should abandon it (Smith, 1975, p. 210).

Teasing out the overall character of Smith's moral theory is tricky, and the debate has rumbled on since the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* was first published. Part of the difficulty is that Smith seems to be working in two registers or with two 'voices'. In a more sociological register, he was trying to explain how it was that people came to have a moral sense. This was in some sense an empirical question, and we can see this concern in the title and in the arguments of *Theory of Moral Sentiments.* It was not a theory of morality, but of how people come to think and act morally. Some commentators have focussed on this and argued that Smith's stress on explaining moral judgments, and his stress on the social nature of such judgements, mean we should read him as sceptic about the possibility of developing objective moral rules, or even as a kind of 'relativist' (Campbell, 1971; Fleischacker, 2011; Golemboski, 2018; Griswold, 1999). Certainly, this was one response to the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* when it was first published.[4]

Alongside this, however, is another more universal register that connects up with his understanding of natural law and his Deistic commitments (Fleischacker, 1999; Haakonssen, 1996). On this view, while it might be that case that what our 'natural sense of justice would dictate' is nowhere fully manifested, such a sense of 'natural justice' is implied by the existence of Deity with a benevolent plan for mankind. On this view, moral progress consists of the gradual manifestation of what this natural sense of justice would dictate.

[4]Thomas Reid was one contemporary who made such a claim. He said 'It is evident that the *ultimate* Measure & Standard of Right and Wrong in human Conduct according to this System of Sympathy, is not any fixed Judgment *grounded upon Truth* or upon the dictates of a well informed Conscience but the variable opinions and passions of Men' (Stewart-Robertson and Norton, 1984).

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One of the participants in this debate has argued that 'Smith is more sympathetic to the concerns of anthropologists than most philosophers have been but still tries to uphold the possibility of moral judgements that transcend cultural contexts', although 'the tensions between these aspects of his thought are not easy to resolve' (Fleischacker, 2011, p. 11).

Smith and colonialism: then and now

What we see in Smith's arguments about colonialism and related matters are then a series of revealing ambivalences and tensions. Smith articulated some important and powerful critiques of European colonialism and its associated practices. Smith certainly recognised the injustices and cruelties that accompanied European conquest and colonial rule, but the primary grounds for his objections to continued European colonialism were the economic and political costs to European states themselves. In this sense, Smith's project was to undermine some of the standard justifications for colonialism as a necessary part of economic and political reform within European states. Only when people stopped thinking the monopoly control of colonial trade was economically beneficial and only when the power of the vested interests that controlled this trade was broken would European states be able to enact more generally beneficial trade policies. At the same time, however, Smith's overriding concern with progress led him to argue that European expansion and colonialism had been in some important respects beneficial, both for mankind as a whole and for the course of progress in conquered and colonised places. Finally, Smith did, sometimes, make disparaging judgments about other places, and his account of progress clearly did position other places in important respects inferior to European societies. But his moral theory holds out the possibility of a more respectful account of diverse cultural practices (by accounting for such practices as a result of material circumstances of different societies), although such an account can lead to the kinds of philosophical difficulties associated with the idea of moral relativism.

To return to our contexts, it seems to me that Smith has a number of important things to tell us. The first is the stress of the costs the colonisers bear. Asking about what costs the colonisers bear, how these might be reduced, and what alternative courses of action and forms of relationship are possible ought to be important questions for imperial states. This kind of argument can seem distasteful to (some) modern ears because of its eurocentrism—it is the costs the European states bear that are really important—and because of the way it downplays the moral status of the 'dreadful misfortunes' suffered by the natives. But while both of these are true, a focus on the very real practical and political costs of imperial ventures provides a very important antidote to the moral righteousness that can accompany forms of liberal imperialism.

Second, Smith's recognition of the role human folly plays in colonial ventures, as well as the 'absurd confidence' that people have in the face of the 'judgment of sober reason and experience', can stand as a salutary warning to those tempted not just by gold and silver but also those tempted to use colonialism as a vehicle for a civilising mission. So too Smith's warnings about the 'man of system':

> The man of system … is apt to be very wise in his own conceit … He seems to imagine that he can arrange the different members of a great society with as much ease as the hand arranges the different pieces upon a chess-board. … but … in the great chess-board of human society, every single piece has a principle of motion of its own, altogether different from that which the legislature might chuse to impress upon it. If those two principles coincide and act in the same direction, the game of human society will go on easily and harmoniously…. If they are opposite or different, the game will go on miserably, and the society must be at all times in the highest degree of disorder' (Smith, 1975, pp. 243–4)

The kind of moderate political and sociological realism Smith demonstrates is an important contribution to our thinking today about the problems and possibilities of liberal imperialism and provides an important counter-point to the hubris that has often accompanied forms of liberal imperialism.

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Third, Smith's complex arguments also underline the importance of the idea of 'progress' as well as its attendant ambiguities and tensions. What we can glean from Smith, I think, is the central question of what can be expected to happen in distant places without colonialism. To the extent that some form of progress towards prosperity, progress, and more generally 'civilisation' can be expected without colonialism, it makes it much easier to argue against colonialism. But when there are uncertainties or ambiguities about this, or where in fact there are good reasons to think that progress towards these goods will not take place 'naturally', it becomes much more difficult to outright condemn colonialism. If there are 'liberal' goods, or perhaps more generally if there are ways of life that are 'better' than others (and Smith certainly thought that there were), and if no progress towards them can reasonably be expected without external intervention, then it is hard to see how those committed to these goods, or to the view that some ways of life are better than others, can avoid thinking about the role that more 'civilised' societies can make to the achievement of these goods or ways of life in other places. It might be judged that the domestic costs outweigh any possible movement towards liberal goods in other places or that colonialism would not in fact assist in the achievement of these goods (perhaps because of human folly or overconfidence); but unless the ideas of goods or of ways of life as being better are abandoned the question of the potential contribution of external intervention cannot be easily avoided. In that sense, as Alan Ryan has argued, liberalism is intrinsically imperialist (Ryan, 2012, p. 5). This helps explain why liberal imperialism has been so attractive to many and partly explains the messianic rhetoric that often accompanies it. But it is also the case that it is quite hard for those committed to forms of liberalism to completely unthink this. Smith shows us our own dilemmas, and at the very least he helps us to see how liberal thinking often leads to sometimes disastrous outcomes.

The final issue relates to the question of diversity and the connection between an explanation for cultural pluralism and the grounds for judgments about plural others. Smith was only sometimes judgmental about diverse others, and more importantly, he explained diversity as the result of particular circumstances of different people. This seems sociologically sensible, and it is also culturally charitable, as well as being in some important ways egalitarian—people in different societies respond in perfectly explicable ways to the circumstances they find themselves in (just as do people in European societies). But it also raises the problem evidenced by Smith's own moral theorising: how to explain diversity while holding on to some fulcrum of judgment that transcends a particular time and place. For Smith, 'progress', both material and in terms of morals and manners, often did provide such a fulcrum, ultimately guaranteed by a benevolent deity; and when it was used by Smith in this way it evidently does operate to cast 'rude nations' as less advanced than civilised ones (although Smith also thought that European societies themselves were deficient in important ways). But to the extent that universal moral frameworks and/or visions of progress are avoided, another dilemma appears because a more culturally tolerant approach risks falling into a kind of relativism that undermines some of the universalist claims that have tended to characterise many forms of liberal thinking. At the very least Smith points us to the dilemmas that arise for liberal thinking when it comes to judging other places. And while it is hard for liberals not to judge other places according to their own standards, abandoning the possibility of such judgements has to be thought through very carefully.

Conclusion

Smith remains an extremely rich source for reflections on colonialism and liberal imperialism. This is not because Smith was 'right' about all of this, but because by following the contours of his thinking, in all its ambivalence and ambiguity, we are led to the heart of matters that are relevant for our thinking today. In the end, we have to do our thinking for ourselves, but paying attention to Smith can help that thinking go a little better. And that may be the very best we can hope for.

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