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Demos before Democracy

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'Demos before Democracy: Ideas of Nation and Society in Adam Smith'

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Introduction

What does Adam Smith mean by 'nations' in his famous *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1981[1776], cf. Hont 2005: 123-5)? This is the initial question that provoked this article. More broadly however, the question is, what can an examination of Smith's ideas tell us about the formation of the modern idea of the nation, particularly in its capitalist, liberal and democratic form? This inquiry speaks to contemporary debates in the study of nationalism, about the nature and origins of modern nationalism. When and how did it emerge? It also supports the case for seeing Smith as a classical sociologist, by arguing that encompassing his theories of morality and economy is a conception of human social relations that has implications for how we conceive of society more generally, including its national forms. In short, I argue that Smith, especially through his idea that social order can be generated relatively spontaneously through everyday interaction, can be seen as laying important groundwork for our modern conception of the nation as a people with a collective capacity for self-government and rule, even while his ideas fall short of what we would now call 'democracy'.

The argument proceeds by first examining current debates over the concept of the nation and its implications for our understanding of the history of nationalism. The diverse senses attached to the term nation today reflect its

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formation as an indeterminate response to a general crisis of moral and political authority that came to a head in the American and French Revolutions.   The rest of the article turns to Smith's writings, arguing that these illustrate the general state of disruption of, and uncertainty about, authority in the eighteenth century. On the one hand they follow fairly conventional usage of the term nation, but on the other Smith's theories of human nature and sociability can be seen as laying groundwork for evolving liberal conceptions of the nation as a society of self-governing people. While Smith did not envision modern forms of democratic rule, his ideas provided support for those who eventually did, by arguing the widespread human capacity to regulate social behaviour without a strong centralized authority.

The concept of the nation now, and then:

The concept of the 'nation' in current theories of nationalism is polysemic and debated, and this is not simply a matter of academic disagreement about conceptualisation. It is because multiple meanings are built into the concept from its modern origins, particularly in the eighteenth century. Current disputes about whether to associate the term more with ethnicity or citizenship, culture or the state, are telling us something about the modern term and the historical context in which it took shape. Disagreements and ambiguities about how to conceptualise the nation occur along several lines. First, there are those who conceive of the nation as a historically deep form of identity, versus those who insist that it is a relatively recent, modern ideology.   Steven Grosby sees it as a 'territorial community of nativity' (2005: 7), a social form that can be traced back

to various premodern instances such as ancient Israel. Anthony Smith's (2004) 'ethnosymbolic' approach to the study of nationalism argues that modern nations normally have their roots in much longer standing communities of shared culture, territory and identity that he calls 'ethnies'. On the 'modernist' side of the argument, figures such as Ernest Gellner (1983) argue that nations are entirely modern formations brought about by the need for mobile and culturally integrated populations in industrial economies. John Breuilly (1996) places more emphasis on the modern state, and the dissolution of older corporate forms of identity, replaced by modern forms of national identity and civil society. As this already suggests, there is a tendency to conceive of nations as falling into two master types, 'ethnic' forms grounded in notions of culture, and 'civic' forms grounded in notions of citizenship (Brubaker 1992; Kohn 1967; Plamenatz 1976). One extreme expression of this tendency is a strict opposition between 'nationalism' and 'patriotism'. Thus Walker Connor insists that the nation 'is a group of people who feel that they are ancestrally related' (1994: 202) and nationalism is a manifestation of this feeling, which must be strictly distinguished from 'patriotism' as allegiance to the state. Writing in a more normative vein and drawing on the tradition of Machiavellian republicanism, Maurizio Viroli (1995) also makes a sharp separation here:

> The language of patriotism has been used over the centuries to strengthen or invoke love of the political institutions and the way of life that sustain the common liberty of a people, that is love of the republic; the language of nationalism was forged in late eighteenth-century Europe

to defend or reinforce the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic oneness and homogeneity of a people (1995: 1).

While most commentators, myself included, would recognise the distinction being made here, it is doubtful whether it can be rigorously maintained in the analysis of complex historical reality. It is the very messy multivalence of the ideas of nations and nationalism that we need to understand, without artificially cleaning things up.

I argue that the modern concept of the nation is best characterised not by ethnic and cultural narrowness, or intensity of civic commitment, but by striking indeterminacy or openness in regard to content.   In recent work both Jack Snyder (2000: 24, *passim*) and Michael Mann (2005: 55-69) have argued that it is precisely the ambiguity between 'ethnos' and 'demos' that helps us account for the dynamics of nationalism. While the means of defining the social group fundamentally differs, ethnic commonality on the one hand versus political membership on the other, both can and have provided bases for mobilising support for nationalist projects. And many cases actually show complex struggles between these tendencies. I follow Mann (2005: 3-4) in using 'demos' to signal not so much the long tradition of republican thought that Viroli invokes, but rather the general idea that comes into it own in the eighteenth century, that 'the people' should be self-governing and the ultimate source of the polity's legitimacy. Mann and Snyder emphasise that this leaves unanswered: who are the people, and how should they rule themselves? 'Ethnos', that is a tightly culturally defined unit, is one answer to this question, but not the only one. As

Michael Freeden (1998) has observed, one of the key traits of nationalism is its ideological promiscuity, linking variously with political ideologies (e.g. liberalism, socialism, fascism) and cultural traditions (e.g. religious, linguistic), which 'fill in' the content according to particular historical contexts, helping to answer the questions just posed. Thinking about it this way also helps us to comprehend the political workings of liberal-democratic forms of nation-state. The tolerance of ideological and cultural diversity, and institutionalisation of democratic procedures, enable and regulate the relatively open and perennially disputed nation. The democratic political process becomes, in effect, a routinised debate over 'who the people are', with political parties and factions making opposing bids to define the people in terms of left versus right, progressive versus conservative, secular versus religious, and so on.

This peculiar, open-ended form of the modern demos as just defined has particular origins in eighteenth century Europe and the trans-Atlantic societies generated by imperialism. Particularly in Britain and France, the European superpowers of the day, there was an extensive 'crisis of authority', going on (Colley 1992: 147-55; Dupré 2004: 112-52). 'Crisis' is and overused and overburdened word, and 'widespread destabilisation' or 'ongoing reconfiguration of authority' might be more precise. The key point is that this is the century on which the shift from the authority of 'kings to people' pivots (Bendix 1978). The Reformation had already weakened and fragmented centralised religious authority, generating a multiplicity of churches and sects claiming divine authority. The growing strength of commercial classes challenged more traditional landed forms of aristocratic authority, creating

struggles for power and influence between the crown, aristocrats, merchants, the court and the commons. The *de facto* autonomy and self-governance of far flung colonial populations further problematised the validity of power at the centre, whether of the monarch or of parliament. And the rise of 'public opinion' and the formation of new kinds of intellectuals further destablised established forms of authority (Habermas 1974; La Volpa 1992; Wuthnow 1989: 180-227).

In the British context this process became manifest in debates between different factions within the aristocracy, and the circles of *literati* that revolved around them. The 'Court' party, consisting of Whigs allied with the ruling party and the first prime minister Robert Walpole (1721-42), stood for modernisation, commerce, the extension of court patronage, and public spending to support imperial expansion and war. The 'Country' party represented Old Whigs and Tories allied with landed aristocracy and committed to a tradition of civic humanist thought, revolving particularly around the figure of Viscount Bolingbroke. This group drew on traditions of republican thought to argue for the revival of elite virtue in the face of political and commercial corruption (Gallagher 1998: 5-14; Pocock 2003: 462-7; Winch 1978: 28-45). The picture of an intra-aristocratic ideological conflict is of course complicated by intermarriage among rising mercantile elites and established aristocratic families, and the voices of less clearly aligned intellectuals. Nonetheless, the general uncertainty about how to anchor authority in this period is particularly evident in this partial polarisation of political opinion.

At the same time that the nature of political authority and where it lies was under debate, a new, proto-social scientific conception of human social relations was taking shape, particularly in the hands of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers such as David Hume and Adam Smith. Fusing traditions of natural jurisprudence that sought to base notions of rights on conceptions of human nature, with a more empirical, natural scientific way of looking at human society, inspired by figures such as Issac Newton and Francis Bacon, we see the beginnings of modern sociology and concepts of society forming alongside these debates about how to reground political authority (Berry 1997: 52-54; Muller 1993: 48-54). This development provided yet another alternative to the problem, an idea of how social order was possible without authority, at least not as normally understood. To put it another way, the authority of nature is called to stand in, at least in part, for the faltering authority of traditional elites.

In a wider geopolitical frame, the American and French Revolutions were pivotal manifestations of the crisis of traditional monarchical authority, as over-extended and under-funded empires lost control of populations either in colonies or at home. But while revolutionary arguments were variously advanced in terms of the rights of 'the people', 'citizens', 'patriots', and 'nations' (Hont 2005: 474-92; Leersen 2006: 71-102), who exactly these people were, and how they would govern themselves, was disputed and unclear. Ultimately addressing the question was less a matter of forging a unified identity, and more one of *ad hoc* development of political systems for managing, more or less, contending identities. In the early United States, mistrusted political factionalism gradually stabalised into a competitive party system, with strong

federalism and regional identities and interests preserved. In France

factionalism led to internecine violence, and a cycling through forms of empire,

monarchy and republic across the nineteenth century. The central point here is

that the nation, as self-governing demos, arrived on the historical stage as a

practical problem for both these countries, without there being a clear answer to

questions of common identity for these groups. And in this process, questions of

collective identity and political authority became indisoluably linked. Especially

in these historically leading cases, national identity was not a driving force of

events, but a problem, permanently instituted, to be answered from then on.

One of the more influential statements in recent nationalism theory about the

evolution of the term 'nation' has been Liah Greenfeld's 'zigzag model' of

development (1992: 5-9). She argues that from the medieval period

conventional meanings have shifted as usage has passed through a series of new

situations that have altered meanings by degrees. Thus she sees a development,

from the medieval Latin *natio* as indicating any 'group of foreigners' through

senses as 'a community of opinion' associated with student groups in medieval

universities, as an 'elite group' of representatives on Church councils, as a

'sovereign people' in the case of the English population, and finally generalised to

any such 'unique people' in the world. The problem with portraying lexical

change in this manner is that it treats words as individual species evolving in one

course. In fact the process is much messier than this. Words acquire and shed

clusters of meanings and associations through changing usage, sometimes

acquiring total sets of uses and meanings that do not exactly cohere into a

unified meaning. I think 'nation' is better understood in this way. It's current

array of meanings, both in everyday and more academic and theoretical language, reflect an ambiguity that is built into it. 'Nation' gets invoked as an object of patriotism and of sentimental attachment, as a civic ideal and a cultural heritage, as an innovative political project and as a defensive ethnic redoubt. I now try to show Adam Smith's unintended contribution to this ambiguous heritage.

The nation for Smith—a wealth of meanings:

My interest in Smith, and how he used the term nation, is in how this illustrates what was going on in this period. I am not looking for the roots of any specific current conception or theory in his writings, but rather at how those writings reflect the conceptual flux that was underway during Smith's lifetime, especially the latter eighteenth century. It seems to me there are various aspects of Smith's writings that illustrate my point.

Any committed modernist theorist of nationalism must confront the fact that the word was certainly in common use well before the rise of industrial capitalism and the bureaucratic state. The eleventh edition of Nathan Bailey's *Universal Etymological Dictionary* (1745) defines a nation simply as 'a people; also a country' (online: image 575). Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* of 1755 indicates 'a people distinguished from another people, generally by their language, origin[al], or government' (online: image 191). These broad senses are perfectly familiar today. Smith's usage is in keeping with these definitions, generally referring to culturally and historically defined peoples, often at contrasting levels of

technological and economic development, and with their own governments capable of setting 'policies'.[i] Thus the English, the Scots, the French, the Dutch, the Poles, were routinely referred to as 'nations'. However, living under a common government does not imply that the government gets its authority or legitimacy directly from the people it governs. Nation at this point often gets used in similar ways to 'race' and 'species', marking a social group or type recognisable due to external cultural signs, but not a political entity or agent as such. Our current concept of the 'nation-state' was already taking shape in the form of monarchical absolutism of the period (Hont 2005: 456-63), and some uses of the word 'nation' in Smith's writings suggest in fact a shorthand for the state (or 'sovereign' or 'commonwealth') as a political actor, e.g. 'the policy of some nations has given extraordinary encouragement to the industry of the country' (1981: 11; Introduction, 7).[ii] But although linked in common usage, the relationship between the 'nation' and the 'state' was not what it is today, in a world now shaped by over two hundred years of democratisation.

Nonetheless, there were other things going on in Smith's ideas, beyond conventional usage of the word 'nation', that do point toward our current, peculiarly legitimacy–linked, yet content-loose conception of the nation, particularly as it has formed as part of the tradition of liberal thought. It is these aspects that I want to explore in the rest of this article. I explore Smith's ideas along three lines: (1) his way of imagining the scope and efficacy of affective ties and their relationship to propinquity; (2) what he had to say about contemporary elites and their capacities for leadership; and (3), the idea of natural, self-generating order in both the realms of morals and markets. His

treatment of each of these has implications for the way the liberal democratic nation-state would increasingly be imagined in the coming century.

The scope of affective ties

In various ways, modern nationalism has been understood as a matter of affective ties binding the members of the nation to one another. In 1882 Ernest Renan claimed the nation was composed of two things: 'the common possession of a rich legacy of memories' and 'actual consent, the desire to live together' (1996: 52). Benedict Anderson describes nations as 'imagined communities' that are 'always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship' (1991: 7). And Bernard Yack has recently defined nations as a kind of 'community … a group of people who imagine themselves connected to each other as objects of special concern and loyalty by something that they share' (2012: 68).   There is wide agreement, even among those who emphasise the modernity of nations, about their underpinnings in human sentiments.

What Smith had to say about social bonds of sentiment is interesting in this light. One of his last writings was the new Part VI, 'Of the Character of Virtue' (1984: 212-64), added to the sixth edition of the TMS in 1790 (see Hanley 2009). Part VI can be seen as an attempt to provide readers with a clearer summary of his analysis of morality and its dynamics than was offered in earlier editions. His approach is strikingly sociological. In it he offers a kind of 'methodological individualism'[iii] in which the basic building block of social analysis is the individual and their capacity to prudently regulate their own actions in ways that

maintain good relations with their fellows. He then moves on to discuss social propinquity, arguing that people naturally develop stronger ties of sympathy and identification with those closest to them, with whom they most frequently interact, such as through family ties or livelihoods, noting for instance that pastoral societies tend to intensify kinship ties, while commercial society tends to weaken ties in this dimension (1984: 222-3; VI.ii.1.12). He proceeds to explicitly discuss our wider social bonds with our 'societies', 'nations', 'countries' (1984: 227-31; VI.ii.2.1-11):

> The state or sovereignty in which we have been born and educated, and under the protection of which we continue to live, is, in ordinary cases, the greatest society upon whose happiness or misery, our good or bad conduct can have much influence. It is accordingly, by nature, most strongly recommended to us. Not only we ourselves, but all the objects of our kindest affections, our children, our parents, our relations, our friends, our benefactors, all those whom we naturally love and revere the most, are commonly comprehended within it; and their prosperity and safety depend in some measure on its prosperity and safety. It is by nature, therefore, endeared to us, not only by our selfish, but by all our private benevolent affections (1984: 227; VI.ii.2.2).

Thus Smith suggests that state societies represent one of the key contexts for, and maximal boundaries of, our natural sympathies. And this is presented as an insuperable aspect of social order. Very far from suggesting a world of individual atoms artificially bounded by constraining states, he suggest that 'nations' and their states map onto the underlying principles of propinquity and

sympathy, providing a certain intractable aspect of social structure. He is very alive to the dangers that this poses, in terms of prejudices and rivalries between nations, and the constraints this places on our capacity for more global, cosmopolitan identification:

> We do not love our country merely as a part of the great society of mankind: we love it for its own sake, and independently of any such consideration. That wisdom which contrived the system of human affections, as well as that of every other part of nature, seems to have judged that the interest of the great society of mankind would be best promoted by directing the principal attention of each individual to that particular portion of it, which was most within the sphere both of his abilities and of his understanding (1984: 229; VI.ii.2.4).

He then qualifies this image of national society by observing that all such societies are internally divided 'into many different orders and societies', what we would today call classes, interest groups, corporate bodies, and so on. He describes these as being in an uneasy balance of power, asserting that shifts in this balance of power can be a basic trigger of wider social change. He distinguishes here between the 'public spirited', who attempt to contribute to positive social change (i.e. 'the reformer'), and the 'man of system', his term for the committed ideologue (i.e. 'the radical') that seeks root and branch social transformation according to an ideal plan. He is unambiguous about his preference for the former and distrust of the latter. The final section, 'Of Self Command' (1984: 237-62; VI.iii), offers a sketch of the ideal person as one with an exceptional ability to know and regulate their own passions, thus able to

negotiate the rough waters of the social world Smith has described, and achieve inner peace and happiness, as well as humanly possible.

It has recently been pointed out that Smith adapted this 'concentric circle' model of human propinquity and the weakening ties of sympathy from the Stoic concept of *oikeiösis*, a generalizing of moral obligation by degrees, out from the self to the rest of humanity (Forman-Barzilai 2000: 395; Hill 2010). But whereas the Stoics sought to argue that virtue required the person to overcome their narrow horizons through the power of reason, to develop a universal magnanimity, Smith inverted the argument, using the model to show the natural limits of human sympathy, which in turn becomes an argument for the beneficent effects of an alternative basis of social relations—self-interested yet mutually beneficial exchange through the market (I will return to this point below).   This raises the fraught issue of how exactly to position Smith within intellectual traditions of civic humanism, republicanism, and natural law inherited from Cicero and the Stoics, which are too complex to enter into here[iv]. However, we can at least recognise an enduring problematic about how to morally and legally relate individuals to humanity, that runs from the natural law theories of Cicero and the Roman lawyers, through Smith's TMS, on up to current debates about necessity and justifiability of the nation-state (Calhoun 2007; MacCormick 1999; Miller 2004) in the face of cosmopolitan critiques (Habermas 1996; Kaldor 2004; Lichtenberg 1999).

Elites and leadership

The relationship of elites and political leaders to national publics is central to the
conception of the modern nation-state. While there were premodern forms of
popular mobilization (often religious), with the spread of literacy, modern forms
of communication, and the idea of democracy, it becomes incumbent upon elites
to communicate in solidaristic ways with newly evolving 'masses'. This is clearly
evident in diverse national movements for statehood, whether through
unification or secession, since the nineteenth century (Brass 1991; Hechter
2000; Hroch 2000; Snyder 2000).   But even those states that inherited a relative
unity of territory and culture from the period of absolutist consolidation (e.g.
Britain, France, Spain) required a new language of the relationship of elites to
masses. The British North American colonies that would become the US, and
France, were at the forefront of developing this new language in the eighteenth
century, whereas in Britain this discourse emerged more gradually, in contention
with arguments for the preservation of more traditional forms of authority and
leadership. It also needs to be remembered that notions of democracy in the late
eighteenth century, and what it entailed, were much less fixed than they are for
many of us today, with our highly routinised forms of regular elections and party
systems. Many of the key intellectuals and political actors in the American
Revolution, such as John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Jefferson,
envisioned a kind of 'natural aristocracy' of merit replacing de-legitimised
aristocracies of inheritance, but looked on at the formation of factionalised,
interest group politics in the decades after the revolution with dismay. They saw

it as the degeneration of their ideals into a grubby, low-minded contest for power (Wood 2009: Ch 6; Jaume 2008: 267-72).

It is interesting to consider Smith in this light, because he is routinely disparaging and deflationary in his treatment of traditional authorities. As Evensky observed, social criticism, directed at particular agents and institutions, was an important part of Smith's agenda (1987, 1989; cf. Gallagher 1998). This is evident first in the frequently unflattering portrayals of the two traditional pillars of authority, the monarch, court and aristocracy on the one hand, and the church and clergy on the other. In WN the baronial class is portrayed as bargaining away feudal powers and authority in the pursuit of conspicuous consumption (e.g. 1981: 418-9; III.iv.10), and invidiously compared to the industrious, small-holding agricultural improver and small manufacturers. Smith pursues this line of criticism to the apex of the social hierarchy, condemning the profligate and 'spendthrift' ways of 'kings and ministers' compared with the good sense of everyday people unable to live beyond their means: 'Let them look after their own expense, and they may safely trust private people with theirs. If their own extravagance does not ruin the state, that of their subjects never will' (Smith 1981: 346; II.iii.36).

The occupants of society's dominant religious institutions are portrayed in a similarly unflattering manner, subject to the same economic logic of conspicuous consumption:

> The gradual improvements of arts, manufactures, and commerce, the
> same causes which destroyed the power of the great barons, destroyed in
> the same manner, through the greater part of Europe, the whole temporal

power of the clergy. In the produce of arts, manufactures and commerce, the clergy, like the great barons, found something for which they could exchange their rude produce, and thereby discovered the means of spending their whole revenues upon their own persons, without giving any considerable share of them to other people. Their charity became gradually less extensive, their hospitality less numerous, and by degrees dwindled away altogether ... The inferior ranks of people no longer looked upon that order, as they had done before, as the comforters of their distress, and the relievers of their indigence. On the contrary, they were provoked and disgusted by the vanity, luxury, and expense of the richer clergy, who appeared to spend upon their own pleasures what had always before been regarded as the patrimony of the poor (Smith 1981: 803-804; V.i.g.25).

This passage exemplifies Smith's attitude of disdain towards traditional authorities. In sum, Smith made it clear that the majesty and authority of aristocracy and the clergy had worn thin, as these groups had allowed their power to serve their narrow self-interest. Clergies neglect their parishioners and become distracted by luxuries. Monarchs spend beyond their means on war and pomp. Aristocrats chase vainly after baubles, inadvertently stimulating economic growth and undermining their authority in the process. As is well-known, newer power-holders, the large merchants, did not fare any better in Smith's hands. They are viewed sceptically as inclined towards collusion to distort markets and competition, and protect narrow self-interest, not as new candidates for social authority (1981: 267; I.xi.p.10).

In corresponding fashion, Smith's treatment of ordinary, non-elite people, often seems designed to elevate them in comparison. Discussing the human capacity to form 'divisions of labour' by agreement, he observes that compared to the qualitative differences in abilities between breeds of dogs, the differences between a 'philosopher' and a 'street porter' are minimal (1981: 28-30; I.ii.4-5). Although he believes that 'the common people cannot, in any civilised society, be so well instructed as people of some rank and fortune' (1981: 785; V.i.f.54), nonetheless his entire discussion of the possibilities of a system of publically funded education, rests on the premise that a great deal of ordinary human potential is wasted by narrow confinement to manual occupations (1981: 758-814; V.i.f-g). In TMS, contemplating the workings of conscience that lead us to humble our feelings of self-love and remember to value others, he observes that:

> Neither is this sentiment confined to men of extraordinary magnanimity and virtue. It is deeply impressed upon every tolerably good soldier, who feels that he would become the scorn of his companions if he could be supposed capable of shrinking from danger, or of hesitating either to expose or throw away his life when the good of the service required it (Smith 1984: 138; III.3.5).

Generosity of spirit is not an elite trait—it is normal. I will say more about his understanding of the nature of moral order in the next section. Here the main point is that there is an ambiguous attitude in Smith, on the one hand accepting the necessity of social hierarchy, while on the other disparaging the occupants of traditional positions of authority, and all the while asserting the general moral and practical abilities of human beings in general.

Smith seems to have seen no clear alternative to traditional forms of aristocratic social hierarchy. He pragmatically accepts that supporting the opulence and dignity of a sovereign monarch, as an object of high esteem, is one of the normal public expenses that must be met (1981: 814; V.i.h.1-3). He believed that good fortune, wealth and power were natural objects of respect, and that this propensity was the insuperable source of 'the distinction of ranks'. As he put it in the TMS:

> Nature has wisely judged that the distinction of ranks, the peace and order of society, would rest more securely on the plain and palpable difference of birth and fortune, than upon the invisible and often uncertain difference of wisdom and virtue. The undistinguishing eyes of the great mob of mankind can well enough perceive the former: it is with great difficulty that the nice discernment of the wise and the virtuous can sometimes distinguish the latter (1984: 226; VI.ii.I.20).

Although notions of 'merit' have perhaps supplanted 'birth', admiration for wealth and power (and celebrity), continues to be a driving force in society today, vindicating Smith's assessment, at least in part. Nicholas Phillipson's (2011) recent biography of Smith suggests that given this position, Smith's hope was to reform, through his writings and teaching, a new generation of the aristocracy/gentry, in the new ways and demands of commercial society, including the crucial need for renewed industry and leadership on the part of this social stratum. He had an assessment of the direction of social change, and the need for patterns of social leadership to adapt, even if this did not take the form deliberate political transformation. So, in a limited sense, I am arguing that

Smith can be viewed as an early 'nation-builder', or 'rebuilder', concerned with the quality of both the 'builders' (the elites) and the 'building materials' (the people).

Morals, markets and natural order

In an audacious analysis, Susan E. Gallagher has argued that Smith ultimately 'rejected authority itself … seeing no way to attach political authority to genuine superiority, he let go of government as the determining factor of social life' (1998: 98). For the reasons just given, I think this is overstated. Her more general point however, that Smith's conception of the self-regulating capacities of a commercial economy tended to obviate the need for strong political leadership, is correct. Central to Smith's approach is to counter-pose the natural order of society in general, to the often narrow and distorting agendas of political and economic elites. Where elites are inadequate, society can pick up the slack. While Smith was no revolutionary, the implications of this perspective for those who were can be seen by consulting the writings of Thomas Paine. For Paine, the challenge that the new republican democracies of the US and France posed for traditional rule in Britain, was precisely that of the natural authority of 'society' over that of 'government'. A passage in *The Rights of Man, Part II* (1792) strongly echoes Smith's ideas[v]:

> A great part of that order which reigns among mankind is not the effect of government. It had its origins in the principle of society and the natural constitution of man. It existed prior to government, and would exist if the

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> formality of government was abolished. The mutual dependence and
> reciprocal interest which man has in man, and all the parts of a civilized
> community upon each other, create that great chain of connection which
> holds it together. … the laws which common usage ordains have a greater
> influence than the laws of government. In fine, society performs for itself
> almost everything which is ascribed to government (1989[1792]: 155).

Paine subscribed to a notion of the 'social contract' that Smith, like Hume, would have rejected, believing that government was normally founded on usurpation or conquest. But for Paine the point of this metaphor was not that rulers got their authority from a collective act of consent, but rather, as in the quote above, that government as such emerges out of the common needs of members of society, and this is a view that concords with the Scots (see Hume, 'Of the Original Contract', 1985: 468; on Smith cf. Winch 1978: 51-3).

Smith's approach to this self-ordering capacity of society that Paine celebrates is evident in both the TMS and the WN. A point that is often overlooked here, is that it was not just in the economy, but in society as a whole, that Smith identified a natural self-regulating order. Both moral order and economic order emerge more or less naturally, from the ground up, for Smith.   This is what Hayek came to call 'spontaneous order' (2012[1973]: Ch 2; cf. Hamowy 1987), the possibility that relatively stable order can arise out of human interactions without any central guiding authority. Discussing the Scottish Enlightenment, Christopher Berry (1997: 52-4) has suggested the label 'Baconianism' to describe the pervasive scientific and utilitarian spirit of the time, particularly inspired by Francis Bacon's programmatic writing on the benefits of science. To

guide action in the world one must understand how it operates, according to its own principles. By adding this more naturalistic perspective, the TMS and the WN answered how social order could emerge in both the moral and economic spheres, without a clear locus of direction and command from above. This in turn suggests the possibilities and limits of deliberate intervention in these processes. Crucial to the present line of argument, modern ideas of the nation as a self-governing people were emerging at the same time that thinkers such as Smith were displacing, or at least supplementing, traditional notions of social authority with this idea of natural order.

There is of course a long-standing debate about the compatibility of a youthful Smith of the TMS focused on morality generated by natural sympathy, with an older Smith of WN revealing the inner logic of self-interest—the supposed 'Adam Smith Problem' (Haakonssen and Winch 2006; Raphael and Macfie 1984: 20-25; Teichgraeber 1981). I agree with those who argue that this is not a real problem. The fact that Smith was still revising TMS long after the publication of WN in 1776 without rejecting its initial premises is a strong indication that he saw no fundamental contradiction between the two books. Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson (2008: Ch 2, see especially pp. 39-44) have recently argued that Smith's work can be viewed as unified by a general theory of 'recognition' and a 'rhetoric of persuasion'. They argue that pursuit of the praise, admiration, and high opinion of others is at the centre of both accounts, of morality and markets. As others have argued (e.g. Heilbroner 1986: 58) the role of 'sympathy' in TMS is as a general condition, the natural ability and propensity of persons to participate in the feelings of others. But this in itself is not sufficient to generate

moral order. It is the desire for approval, and to avoid disapproval, that sets things in motion, as behaviours mutually adjust, and sometimes conflict, toward this end. This is what gets stable systems of moral rules of conduct established. The same dynamic underlies Smith's economic theory. To satisfy our wants and needs we must agree to diverge in our specialisations, and persuade others to exchange with us. An appeal to the self-interest of others is still an appeal for their approval of what we offer, and that of course works both ways. And very often we want the things we want for vanity's sake, because of how they will affect the opinions of others about us. Thus the search for recognition and approval pervades society, including the economy. Sympathy and self-interest play their parts, but the central dynamic lies in how this natural concern for the regard of others directs human behaviour. So not only is there not an 'Adam Smith Problem', but both works have very similar analytic strategies, the central thrust of which is to show that there are natural tendencies towards mutually beneficial sociability among humans, that can be cultivated and encouraged if the appropriate 'light-touch' approach is taken.

Another aspect of Smith's reconfiguration of authority in TMS is his treatment of the concept of God. In the deistic language of the day, his is a rather naturalised God, signaled by such terms as 'the great Director of the Universe' (Smith 1984: 236; VI.ii.3.4) and 'The all-wise Author of Nature' (Smith 1984: 128; III.2.31). Smith was keen to argue that there are general rules of morality that are essential for the good order of society, and in some respects seems to anchor these in 'human nature', and in other respects, in the 'laws of the Deity':

But upon the tolerable observance of these duties, depends the very

existence of human society, which would crumble into nothing if mankind

were not generally impressed with a reverence for those important rules

of conduct.

This reverence is still further enhanced by an opinion which is first

impressed by nature, and afterwards confirmed by reasoning and

philosophy, that those important rules of morality are the commands and

laws of the Deity, who will finally reward the obedient, and punish the

transgressors of their duty (Smith 1984: 163; III.5.2-3).

Careful inspection here shows that Smith is not so much asserting the reality of

the deity, as the reality of beliefs in the deity. It is difficult to be sure exactly

what Smith's beliefs were in regard to the existence of God. This touches a

perplexing issue that Phillipson (2011) addresses, in regard to Smith's

reluctance to carry out, or be associated with, one of his good friend David

Hume's last wishes, to have his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* published

posthumously. Phillipson figures that Smith was close to sharing Hume's

disbelief in God, though not Hume's propensity for irreligion. Thus it seems that

Smith was simply squeamish, placing his own public reputation above the wishes

of his friend. However I suspect, admittedly speculatively, that Smith was very

conscious of trying to effect a general change in public understanding of

morality, *and authority*, and that whatever his own beliefs, doubted that his

elevation of the natural bases of human morality, could withstand the

simultaneous removal of divine sanction. In classic Protestant-cum-deist

fashion, he was writing-out the 'middelmen', the church, clergy, and their

authority, to create an enhanced space for self-command, bolstered by 'the Author of Nature.'[vi]

To continue the argument in the same direction, Smith's moral philosophy and political economy converge in relocating the mainsprings of social order in human nature, not divine will or traditional rights to rule. In his hands authority and wisdom become naturalised, democratised, and vernacularised. The idea of the 'impartial spectator' is a prime example. This notion of conscience, while perhaps having some divine underpinnings, is presented very much as a psychological mechanism grounded in human nature (anticipating the later arguments about self and identity made by G. H. Mead 1967[1934]). As Smith puts it:

> When I endeavor to examine my own conduct, when I endeavor to pass sentence on it, and either to approve or condemn it, it is evident that, in all such cases, I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct is examined into and judged of (Smith 1984: 113).

And this general capacity that we all have, to see ourselves through the eyes of a generalised other, although it is more developed in some people, is seen as sufficient to serve a fundamental regulating function for human social interaction.

> Every man is, no doubt, by nature, first and principally recommended to his own care; and as he is fitter to take care of himself, than of any other person, it is fit and right that it should be so … If he would act so as that

the impartial spectator may enter into the principles of his conduct, which

is what of all things he has the greatest desire to do, he must upon this, as

upon all other occasions, humble the arrogance of his self-love, and bring

it down to something other men can go along with (Smith 1984: 82-83)

The key message here is that we have a natural if imperfect capacity for self-governance, which can be cultivated (and lightly guided by government, particularly in its administration of justice). If there is a God, his practical agent on Earth is the impartial spectator, who in many instances is fitter to govern than other human rulers. It is the perspective of the impartial spectator, which a few can obtain with exceptional breadth and humanity, but most can adopt to some degree, that enables people to regulate their social and moral conduct.

As we have seen, the WN correspondingly shows how the pursuit of status and respect through 'conspicuous consumption' unintentionally promotes economic growth and the dispersal of power away from the traditional ruling elites. Guided by the reliable administration of justice and protection of private property, and forms of needed social investment from the state that are unlikely to be taken on by private actors, the population as a whole can work to mutual benefit, while individuals primarily concern themselves with their own personal interest (1981: Book V). Thus the problems of moral myopia and parochialism, the limited scope of human sympathy intrinsic to human nature, are not insurmountable if certain 'rules of the game' are laid down and observed, and certain inherent principles of social organisation maximised.

In this context I would argue that we should take the WN at its word. It has a lot to say about the functioning of markets, but it is the idea of the 'division of labour' that is at the heart and starting point of Smith's analysis. We are so familiar with this idea now that it is easy to overlook the work it is doing in WN, not simply as a recipe for efficient production and economic growth, but as an analysis of human nature and the limits and potentials of human sociability. Smith traces the origins of the division of labour to an original propensity to 'truck, barter and exchange one thing for another' (1981: 25; I.ii.1). In the following pages there is a recurring contrast between humans and animals (dogs in particular) the point of which is that animals only appear to coordinate their actions by agreement, for instance when hunting together, whereas for humans, doing so is basic to their nature. Although it contains the famous passage about the 'butcher, the brewer, or the baker' and how we 'address ourselves not to their humanity, but to their self-love' (1981: 27; I.ii.2), the main thrust of the chapter is that we are insufficient as individuals to meet our own needs beyond the basics, but that fortunately we are so constituted that we are inclined to 'scratch each other's backs', to negotiate ways to specialise and exchange to mutual advantage.

Smith can be read as using the image of the division of labour to undergird the entire argument of the WN. He begins in Book I, Chapter 1, with the simple and familiar example of the pin factory, and the obvious boost to production that the division of labour provides there. In this instance, the division is embedded in a producing organisation, as much a matter of command from above as of free negotiation. But in the next two chapters the principle is extended and

historicised, to argue the origins of more complex divisions of labour in village life, as craft specialists exchange wares and services, and separate societies located around major rivers (e.g. the Nile) and inland oceans (e.g. the Mediterranean) begin to develop inter-societal trade. As the WN proceeds, although the term becomes more implicit, the underlying image continues. So the argument in Book III, that in the European case, growth of cities and demands of urban and elite consumption drive rural agricultural development, instantiates the division at yet a larger scale between town and country. And the critique of the 'mercantile system' of political economy in Book IV in effect argues that the zero-sum competition between states to monopolise precious metals and prosperous trades is self-defeating. Mercantile rivalry should be replaced with an international division of labour, through principles of free trade. The core trajectory of the WN's argument is that the division of labour is a fundamental expression of human sociability, that it has led to growing 'opulence' within the established nations of the time (especially in Western Europe), and that it has the potential to increase peace and prosperity among nations, if allowed to develop and function through international trade. There are many problems ultimately implied here, such as the sustainability of endless economic growth, and the capacity of divisions of labour to take extremely hierarchical and unequal forms. My key point is simply that this concept is central to Smith's argument about how small-scale social negotiations and exchanges can articulate into ever-larger self-regulating systems, in which the people, in effect, appear to govern themselves, as Paine would wish.

In all these arguments we can see the formation of a familiarly modern conception of 'society' as a reality *sui generis*, as a system with its own emergent rules and order, not created from above, and also more than 'the sum of its parts' (cf. Foucault 2000). It is standard in teaching sociology these days to warn students not to simply equate 'society' with the 'nation-state'. This is known as the error of 'methodological nationalism' (Chernilo 2006; Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2002). This is salutary advice. And it is true that there are multiple forms and dimensions of society, many of which cut across state boundaries (international elites, labour migrants, transnational social movements, and so on). But our tendency towards confusion is there for real historical reasons. Because, as evident in the writings of Smith, our modern conceptions of the nation, and of society, took shape around the same time, as the older political order of monarchs, patrimonialism and patronage, was giving way to a new, still forming conception of self-governing, self-legitimating peoples, that were at the same time societies governed by principles of natural order. Our transformed conceptions of 'nation' and 'society' were born out of the same general milieu, which involved the reconfiguration, and difficult democratisation, of authority. Although Smith did not foresee or advocate the elaborate institutionalised forms of mass democracy that would eventually develop in the era of nationalism, I claim that his way of thinking about society sowed seeds that eventually served that end.

Conclusion

The literature on Smith has expanded greatly in recent years, and benefited from

calls to understand his work in terms of debates prevalent in his own day,

without treating it as simply the lineal antecedent to current economic theories

(Winch 1978; Teichgraeber 1987). Much has been gained by trying to

understand Smith's work as a whole, and in its original context. (e.g. Hont and

Ignatieff 1983; Muller 1993). It might seem at first that by using Smith to shed

light on current debates about the concept of the nation, I am returning to this

earlier error of anachronism. But my argument is not that current notions of the

nation found in nationalism studies are somehow validated by identifying

antecedents in Smith's work. Instead I claim that the indeterminacy of the nation

concept today reflects its origins in the eighteenth century formation of modern

nation-states with chronically underspecified peoples as the source of their

legitimacy and authority. Smith's writings, from within this historical shift,

provide a view into what was happening then, a view that is relevant for

understanding the conception we have inherited. As the Enlightenment Scots

maintained, to know the nature of something and to know its origins, are

mutually implicated endeavours (Berry 1997: Ch3). I have been exploring the

modern discourse of nations by examining an aspect of its origins.

Notes:

[i] The opening three-page 'Plan and Introduction of the Work' provides several
different instances of characteristic usage (1981: 10-12).

[ii] I will, observe the following citation conventions. Where significant, original
publication dates will be indicated at first citation. I will abbreviate *The Theory
of Moral Sentiments* (TMS) and *The Wealth of Nations* (WN). For text citations of

Smith I provide the Harvard reference followed by the standard book/chapter/paragraph format used in Smith scholarship.

[iii] I do not use this term in the truncated sense sometimes associated with rational choice theory and economistic arguments, in which human action is reduced to self-interested motivations. Instead I intend it in the way Weber used it. Like Smith, Weber regarded action as, by definition, socially oriented. But he regarded the human individual as the paradigmatic locus of rational and meaningful social action, out of which more complex forms aggregate. This did not commit him to a form of social analysis that reduces to the motives and actions of individuals (Weber 1978: 13-14; cf. Swedberg 2005: 165-6).

[iv] Useful pointers to some of the relevant literature can be found at: Muller 1993: 247-50, 253-55; and Berry 1997: 192-3).

[v] Paine mentions WN approvingly in *The Rights of Man, Part I* published in 1791 (1989: 85), and it seem likely that he would have been familiar with TMS as well.

[vi] I acknowledge that there are standing disagreements about how to interpret Smith's religious language. Some have regarded his idea of the 'invisible hand' as indicating an enduring notion of 'providence' from the Protestant tradition (e.g. Muller 1993: 103-110), while others see it more as simply a holdover from theology that makes little explanatory contribution to Smith' ideas (e.g. Berry 1997: 46-7). I am inclined to agree with Berry.

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