

ADAM SMITH AND COLONIALISM

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been a growing interest the relationship between liberalism and colonialism. Within this, the arguments of Adam Smith have been taken as illustrative of a line of anti-colonial liberal thought. While there is no single reading of Smith here, this article challenges the interpretation of Smith as a straightforwardly anti-colonial thinker. It argues that Smith's opposition to colonial rule derived largely from its impact on the metropole, rather than on its impact on the conquered and colonised; that Smith recognised that colonialism had brought 'improvement' in conquered territories, and that such progress might not have occurred without this intervention; and that Smith struggled to balance recognition of moral diversity with a universal moral framework and a commitment to a particular interpretation of progress through history. These arguments have a potentially wider significance as they point towards some of the issues at stake in liberal anti-colonial arguments more generally.

## KEYWORDS

Adam Smith, Anti-colonialism, Liberalism, Colonialism

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In recent years there has been a growing interest in the imperial or colonial aspects of the thought (and life) of some of the key thinkers in the western canon (Pitts 2010; Muthu 2012a for surveys. See also Armitage 2013; Tuck 1999). A central element of this has been a specific engagement with the relationship between liberalism, or at least those thinkers now thought to belong to the liberal canon, and colonialism. A number of liberal thinkers, Locke and J S Mill in particular, have been identified as providing key justifications for conquest and colonial rule, and both were involved in the practices of colonialism itself (for Locke see Tully 1993; Arneil 1996 and for Mill see Sullivan 1983; Jahn 2005; and Bell 2010. See also Parekh 1995 and Mehta 1999). Beyond the arguments of specific liberal thinkers, it has also been argued that the basic structures of liberal thought generate a colonial impulse (Hindess 2005; Jahn 2005; Williams 2008: chap 1). Liberalism's universalist aspirations, based on some account of human nature or what a properly exercised human reason would conclude, can clearly lead to justifications for conquest and colonial rule where practices and institutions fall short of these exacting standards. Liberal thought is replete with distinctions between 'civilised' and 'uncivilised' which not only provide the resources for judging other places to be inferior or lacking in some way, but also provide a clear hierarchy that at least suggests those at the top might be able to 'help' those at the bottom (Hindess 2005). For those who

would make these kinds of arguments, liberalism's colonial impulse is, as it were, wired into the basic structure of liberal thought (Mehta 1999).

One problem with the view that liberalism is in important respects colonial is that within what has become the liberal canon there are a number of important thinkers who argued against conquest and colonial rule, and in recent years this anti-colonial strand within liberal thought has received more attention (Muthu 2003; Pitts 2005). The existence of a body of anti-colonial liberal argument suggests, at the very least, that the relationship between liberalism and colonialism is complex. It indicates too that there is a good deal of diversity within what has become the 'liberal tradition', and that care needs to be taken when making arguments about the connections between liberalism and colonialism. It also raises the possibility that what connections exist between liberal thinkers and colonialism should be understood as contingent: not the product of the basic structures of liberal thought, but rather the product of 'the pressures and anxieties of certain historical moments', as Pitts argues (Pitts 2005: 4). In other words, that there is nothing inherent in liberal thought that leads to a colonial conclusion: 'no explanation that rests on some set of basic theoretical assumptions in the liberal tradition can possibly explain such flexibility on the question of empire' (Pitts 2005: 4). Cooper has suggested that one could just as easily argue that the urge to anti-imperialism is as internal to liberalism as the urge to imperialism (Cooper 2005: 413). Finally, and more substantially it raises the possibility that despite the connections that might exist between the work of individual liberal thinkers and colonial thought (and

practice), the broader liberal tradition might provide substantial theoretical resources for arguing against colonial practices, and perhaps their modern analogues.

A central figure in this debate and liberalism and colonialism has been Adam Smith (Rothschild 2012; Muthu 2008; Hobson 2012: 74-83). He has been taken by Jennifer Pitts in particular as an exemplar of the line of anti-colonial liberal thought that developed in the eighteenth century (Pitts 2005: chap 2; more generally see Muthu 2003). Pitts' argument is not just that Smith was critical of European conquest and colonial rule (see also Winch 1965). It is that Smith also demonstrated a 'non-judgmental approach to non-European societies'. While he did combine an account of human progress with a belief that, on balance, commercial society was an improvement over previous forms of society, he did not draw on this framework to support 'civilising European rule over other societies' (Pitts 2005: 25). This marks Smith out from many nineteenth century liberal thinkers who very often drew on the assumed superiority of European states to justify rule over less 'civilised' others (Mehta 1999; Pitts 2005 chap 7).

One aim of this paper is challenge the interpretation of Smith as a straightforward anti-colonial writer. It does not argue that Smith was in fact in favour of colonialism. He was not. It does argue, however, that Smith's discussions of conquest and colonial rule demonstrate a number of distinct ambivalences. These central around three areas: First, the basis of his opposition

to colonial rule; second, the extent to which conquest and colonialism could bring progress in the colonies; and third, the kinds of judgements Smith made about 'backward' societies and the basis of these judgements. To put the argument very briefly, Smith's opposition to colonial rule derived largely from its impact on the metropole, rather than on its impact on the conquered and colonised. Smith privileged the instantiation of liberal practices and institutions domestically over the cruelties inflicted on distant others. Second, Smith recognised that colonialism had brought 'improvement' in conquered territories, and that such progress might not have occurred without this intervention. Third, the reading of Smith as non-judgemental about other cultures hinges on an account of the basis upon which Smith made (or thought it was possible to make) judgements about other cultures. And here Smith struggles to balance recognition of moral diversity with a universal moral framework and a commitment to a particular interpretation of progress through history. As the next section discusses, it is foolish to suggest that there is only one clear reading of Smith on these matters. Nonetheless it is possible to call into question the reading of Smith as a straightforwardly anti-colonial thinker.

Despite the historical and textual character of this debate about Smith, it has at least two more general implications. First, it has some contemporary resonance as arguments about liberalism and colonialism have been animated by recent anxieties accompanying the more unilateralist, confrontational and interventionist character of US/'western' foreign relations, particularly after 2001 (Pitts 2010: 212; Muthu 2012b: 3). There has been a heated debate within

International Relations about what a number of commentators have called a 'liberal empire' and the extent to which the United States (and perhaps the concert of western powers more generally) can be viewed as animated by a specifically liberal set of concerns, such as free-trade and human rights, that drive a more expansionist and interventionist foreign policy (Purdy 2003; Bishai 2004; Mabee 2004; Kiely 2005; Ayoob and Zierler 2005; Ikenberry 2006). There have also been calls to explicitly articulate a 'new liberal imperialism' to deal with the problems confronting western states that emerge from the developing world (Cooper 2002; Ignatieff 2003. For a discussion see Morefield 2008). There has also been increasing attention paid to the 'liberal' character of specific western actions in post-conflict and developing countries (Paris 1997; Paris 2002; Williams 2008). Liberalism is a complex tradition of thought and the motivations and contingencies that surround these forms of interventions are complex too. Nonetheless, a critical engagement with these issues requires that we explore the kinds of resources liberal thought might have for arguing against colonial/imperial/interventionist practices, and the extent to which it is complicit in them even, if certain aspects of these practices can be criticised.

Second, an exploration of the ambivalences about colonialism that we find in Smith provides material for beginning to think about what is at stake more broadly in liberal anti-colonial arguments. First, other thinkers such as Kant and Bentham, as well as French Enlightenment thinkers such as Diderot, have all been seen as providing resources for arguing against colonialism (for Kant and Diderot see Muthu 2003; for Bentham see Pitts 2005 chap 4 and Cain 2011). The



issue here is whether the kinds of ambivalences about colonialism we find in Smith are also to be found in the work of these other thinkers. This kind of exploration would help flesh out more fully the possibilities and limits of anti-colonial liberal arguments. Second, beyond the similarities and differences with other anti-colonial thinkers, an examination of Smith's ambivalences suggests a number of important issues. The first is the extent to which opposition to colonialism is contingent on the achievement of liberalism domestically. In other words, is the central concern of anti-colonial liberal arguments the achievement (or protection) of liberalism domestically, rather than concern with the impact of colonialism on colonised others? Second, the extent to which a commitment to the idea of 'progress' necessarily means that some kind of consideration must be given to the possibility that this might be encouraged by colonial rule, even if one could be deeply critical of the particular way it was practised. Finally, there is an important issue about the extent to which anti-colonial liberal arguments can really be non-judgemental about other cultures and societies. The issue here is not just that commitments to 'progress' or certain universal values make such judgements possible, it is that being really non-judgemental might call into question that very universalism that underpins so much of liberal thought. To put Parekh's statement as a question: does liberalism really have the resources to condemn the colonial enterprise, rather than simply its excesses? (Parekh 1997: 174)

### Interpreting Smith

Engaging with Smith's arguments in the context of the more general set of debates about liberalism and colonialism means confronting two problems with the interpretation of Smith's work. The first is generic. The work of Adam Smith continues to bear a vast and diverse set of interpretations (for one survey see Brown 1997; Hill 2012: 307). In the first place, Smith's works cut across the boundaries of several modern academic disciplines – economics, political theory, history, law, sociology and philosophy to name just some, and each of these has approached Smith with its own set of questions and priorities (Brown 1997). Second, interpretations of Smith differ according to the different kinds of interpretative strategies employed (Brown 1997: 282-286). Smith's economics, for example, can be approached by asking about its' consistency with contemporary economic theory (Samuelson 1977). Or it can be approached in a more historicist way by locating his arguments within eighteenth century debates about the rise of commercial society (Winch 1978). But even these historicist accounts have differed in terms of the particular contexts and debates identified as ones through which we should appreciate Smith's own arguments (Hont 2005; A Skinner 1995; Pocock 1985). Smith is not unique here, of course; but issues relating to Smith's corpus and style have also driven the variety of interpretations. The so-called 'Adam Smith Problem' (the relationship or coherence between the *Wealth of Nations* and *Theory of Moral Sentiments*) has been largely superseded as a frame for approaching Smith's work (Dickey 1986). But the relationship between these two works still generates an important set of debates, as does the relationship between both these works and the essays collected in *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres* and *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (Dwyer 2005; Hanley 2009; Fitzgibbons 1995). In addition, the

publication of two sets of student notes as the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* created a further rounds of interpretations, especially about the account of politics that might underpin the *Wealth of Nations* (Winch 1978, Fitzgibbons 1995). Finally, there have been debates about the significance of the revisions added to *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, particularly those of 1790 which saw the addition of a whole new section which it has been suggested sits uneasily with some of the other arguments found in that book (Raphael and Macfie 1976: 15-20; Hanley 2009). Finally, the diverse interpretations of Smith are also related to his style. As Macfie put it in commentating on *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, there is often an ‘agonizing spread of meaning, at times almost amounting to self-contradiction, in some of the strategic ideas, such as nature, liberty and a benevolent deity’ (Macfie 1967: 58). Another earlier commentator put it more succinctly when he said that Smith’s opinions reminded him of ‘the man ... who mounted his horse and rode off in opposite directions’ (quoted in Hill 2012). While Smith’s writing is generally accessible, the presentation of his arguments is often distinctly roundabout and sometimes downright inconclusive. Finally, recourse to facts about Smith’s life to resolve interpretative disputes is difficult, as even a recent biographer has conceded that we know very little about significant portions of his life (Phillipson 2010: 4-6).

Faced with this, one survey of some of the then existing secondary literature (it is much more substantial now) concluded by arguing that faced with the multiplicity of interpretations and interpretive contexts, ‘the search for any single, unique harmony and unity for Smith’s *oeuvre* becomes increasingly

problematic' (Brown 1997: 302; see also Shapiro 1993). Much the same is also true for some of the key concepts and arguments within his work, including those relating to his arguments about colonialism, where many of the issues involved cut across several of his major works (as we shall see). One implication of this is that any interpretation of Smith is likely to be contested and unstable. The view taken here, however, is not only that we have to accept some of the uncertainties and ambivalences we find in Smith, but that these might themselves be instructive: We cannot claim that there is one single consistent interpretation of Smith's writings about colonialism, but we might be able to explore why we find ambivalences in Smith on this issue and examine how these point towards some of the broader issues involved in anti-colonial liberal arguments.

This immediately raises the issue of whether it is legitimate at all to consider Smith in the context of 'liberal' arguments about colonialism. While it has been in many contexts entirely commonplace to consider Smith as part of the broader liberal canon, this was famously challenged by Winch, drawing on the work of Pocock on the importance of republican arguments in eighteenth century thought, and the methodological arguments of John Dunn and Quentin Skinner (Winch 1978 chap 2; Pocock 1975; Dunn 1968; and Skinner 1969). Winch argues that Smith is not simply a bridge between Locke and Mill, and that Smith is not a theorist of 'liberal capitalism' – the theoretical voice of a new capitalist class supposedly celebrating the virtues of unfettered markets (Winch 1978 chap 1). More generally there is the issue of whether it is anachronistic to talk of

Smith in the context of liberal arguments about colonialism. Several points can be made here. First, a number of commentators have argued that Smith can in fact profitably be understood as a 'liberal', as one would expect given the diversity of interpretations of Smith's work (see Harpham 1984; and Letwin 1988 for example). Second, and following Pitts, it is possible to argue that while agreeing that Smith would not have self-identified as a 'liberal', there are enough 'family resemblance's to suggest that he can be understood within the broad, overlapping strands of what has become the 'liberal tradition' (Pitts 2005: 3).<sup>2</sup> None of this means we should not pay attention to the specificities of Smith's thought and context, and indeed some of the important differences between his thought and that of, say Locke (one of which is the centrality of a theory of 'progress') but especially if we are concerned to explore more generally what resources the liberal tradition might have, then Smith's arguments have a broader significance to the extent that they provides resources for debating colonial conquest and rule.

### Smith's Opposition to Colonialism

In surveying the relationship between liberal thinkers and colonialism, Parekh accepted that there were some liberal thinkers who did not approve of colonialism (he mentions Bentham, Voltaire and Diderot – but not Smith). But, he argued, 'they disapproved of colonialism not on moral or cultural grounds, but because it was deemed to be too expensive, unprofitable, inconsistent with

the principle of free-trade, or uneconomic on the long run' (Parekh 1987: 186). Whether something similar is true of Smith is important. If the primary grounds for objecting to colonialism was its impact on economic and political processes in the metropole, rather than its impact on the colonised or an ethical argument about its basic illegitimacy, it suggests that even for anti-colonial thinkers such as Smith, opposition to colonialism was contingent (contingent that is on its impact on the metropole) rather than derived from some set of more substantial moral commitments.

Smith took a very keen interest in the colonial affairs of his day (Winch 1965, chap 2; 1978, chap 7). He advised the government on tax policy in the American colonies, a good number of his collected correspondence is taken up with discussions of America, the American Revolution, and British colonial policy, and he wrote a memorandum for the British Government on the War of Independence (*Corr*: 196, 271 and 377-385 for example).<sup>3</sup> His reputation as an anti-colonial thinker, however, rests on chapter VII of the *Wealth of Nations*, 'Of Colonies'. In this chapter he surveys the history of European colonisation in the Americas and engages in a sustained critique of the theory and practice of colonialism. His conclusion is 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' (*WoN*: 616).

A central claim in Smith's argument against colonialism was that the colonies 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' (*WoN*: 593, 616). This was so for two reasons. First, the colonies could not provide for their own protection and were thus a drain on the resources of the colonising states: 'in the different wars in which the mother countries have been engaged, the defence of their colonies has generally occasioned a very considerable distraction of the military force of those countries' (*WoN*: 593). Second, and famously, he argued that the supposed economic benefits that derive from control of colonial trade were an illusion. Smith's arguments here are familiar. He was arguing against the monopoly trade that dominated economic relations between European states and their American colonies (*WoN*: 606-614). Compared to a policy of free trade, exclusive trade diminished the availability of goods and increased prices.

These arguments obviously raised the question of why, then, colonial rule continued. Smith provided two answers to this. First, he said that emancipation of the colonies would be 'mortifying to the pride of every nation' (*WoN*: 617. See Wyatt-Walter 1996 and Hill 2009 for a discussion of this). His second argument was that the granting of independence and the abandonment of monopoly trade would be 'contrary to the private interests of the governing part of it [European nations], who would thereby be deprived of the disposal of many places of trust and profit, of many opportunities of acquiring wealth and distinction'. (*WoN*: 617). This is at the heart of Smith's critique. Colonialism and the monopoly trade

associated with it were in the interests of a few who used their power to enact a series of rules that were against the interests of the majority:

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 greater part of them, their interest has been more considered than either that of the colony or that of the mother country (*WoN*: 584).

The granting of independence and the securing of free trade would be 'more advantageous to the great body of the people, though less so the merchants' (*WoN*: 617). Smith then was significantly concerned with the effects of monopoly trade both in economic and political terms. It was economically detrimental and it encouraged patronage and rent-seeking. Smith recast the colonial relationship in ways that pitted the interests of a few (political elites and monopoly traders) against the interests of the country as a whole (and this is one of the important differences between Smith and Locke, for example). The fact that the chapter 'Of Colonies' in *The Wealth of Nations* is sandwiched between two other chapters that form the central part of his attack on mercantilism ('Of Treaties of Commerce' and 'Conclusion of the Mercantile System') strongly suggests that this provides a key basis for his attack on colonialism. '...[O]ne of the principle effects of these discoveries [of the Americas] has been to raise the mercantile system to a degree of splendor and glory which it otherwise could not have attained' (*WoN*: 627; see also Hill 2006).



Smith did refer to 'injustices' and 'cruelties' inflicted on the 'natives' by European powers. In discussing colonisation in the Americas he says 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 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' (*WoN*: 588). Elsewhere he argues that the economic restrictions occasioned by monopoly trade are also 'unjust' – 'a manifest violation of the most sacred rights of mankind', and 'impertinent badges of slavery imposed upon them, without any sufficient reason, by the groundless jealousy of the merchants and manufacturers of the mother country' (*WoN*: 582). Smith was particularly scathing in his attack on the arbitrary and self-interested 'government' established by English and Dutch East India companies (*WoN*: 635-41. See also Muthu 2008). He concluded that 'such exclusive companies ... are a nuisance in every respect ... and destructive to those which have the misfortune to fall under their government' (*WoN*: 641).

Despite these comments, however, the balance of the textual evidence, however, indicates that the impact of colonialism on domestic economic policy and political practices were of more central concern for Smith than the injustices associated with it. This view is reinforced if we look at the overall critical strategy of the *Wealth of Nations* which was to argue for the desirability of economic reform *within* European states, especially Britain. This was tempered

by a recognition of the limits of programmes of radical reform, but his emphasis on the 'science of the legislator', was precisely an attempt to think seriously about how such reform ought to proceed (Winch, 1983. For Smith's scepticism about the 'man of system' see *TMS*: 233-40). We have no reason to doubt that Smith had genuine sympathy for the fate of conquered peoples, but it is clear that his primary objection to colonial rule was its impact on the metropole. In addition, as will be discussed below, despite his observations about the 'cruelties' inflicted in the 'native', it is far from clear that Smith made (or indeed could make) a significant moral argument against colonialism.

### Progress in the Colonies

When we turn to the arguments Smith made about the impact of colonialism on the colonies themselves we find considerable ambivalence that suggests even though it might occasion cruelty, it might also bring certain benefits. Smith makes a crucial distinction between the impact of continued colonial rule on settler colonies, and the overall impact of conquest and settlement on previously unconquered territories. Early in the chapter 'Of Colonies', Smith makes a distinction between Britain's colonies and those of other European states, where he suggests that because the British colonies have 'more liberty to manage their own affairs' they have experienced 'greater prosperity' (*WoN*: 527). But in general he viewed colonial rule and monopoly trade as a barrier to improvement: 'the government of an exclusive company of merchants is,

perhaps, the worst of all governments ... whatsoever' as it leads to 'languid and slow' progress (*WoN*: 570). The view Smith takes here is that left to their own devices the colonies would have experienced greater levels of progress.

When he turned to the *overall* impact of European conquest and colonisation in the Americas, however, Smith took a different position. He says that, 'the colony of a civilised nation which 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 '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' (*WoN*: 564-5, 567).

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 (*WofN*: 568-9).

In many other thinkers these quotes would be taken as evidence for a general approval of the colonial project. But while Smith did not approve of some of the practices of colonialism they demonstrate the ambivalences of his anti-colonial arguments. They suggest that Smith could judge colonisation to be in many respects highly problematic, while at the same time recognizing that the overall project of colonisation had brought benefits (wealth, improvement, cultivation) that might not otherwise have been realized.

Smith's specific arguments about conquest and colonial rule can be located in the wider context of his arguments about 'progress'. This is a complex area, as it touches on some of the debates about how Smith understood progress through historical 'stages', the extent of Smith's materialism, and the scope he gives for the 'science of the legislator' in shaping economic outcomes. In a recent argument, John Hobson has suggested that while Smith might be a 'Eurocentric' thinker, he was 'anti-paternalist' (Hobson: 2012: 74-83). Smith's stadial account of history certainly understood previous stages in the development of human society (the Age of Hunters, the Age of Shepherds, and the Age of Agriculture) through the lens of, and in comparison with the Age of Commerce, but, Hobson argues, he nonetheless allowed that non-European societies 'could *spontaneously* auto-generate ... and that modern capitalism is immanent within the make up of *all* societies' (Hobson 2012: 82, emphasis in original. For Smith's discussion see especially *LJ*: 14-37 and 404-37). If this were right colonialism

would not be necessary for societies to traverse through the four stages, and while colonialism may speed up this process (or indeed warp it), societies would progress without direct external intervention. As Smith is famously reported as having said: '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: 4).

Exactly why the 'progress of opulence' is natural and thus immanent is, as usual with Smith, a matter of debate. At times Smith seems to argue that it was the product of natural laws, themselves the product of God's plan for mankind (Hill 2001; Fitzgibbons 1995. See also Alvey 2004). As Hill argues, Smith made a careful distinction between the role of God as 'first cause', and the 'efficient cause' to be found in the actions of men (Hill 2001: 7-11). He thus operated with a form of teleological explanation (for an alternative view see Haakonssen 1981; Kleer 2000). It was, however, the actions of people (as efficient causes) that actually generated historical change. As people's aims and desires were themselves the product of God's design, so they could be expected to act in ways that furthered God's 'original purpose' for mankind (*TMS*: 166; Hill 2001: 11-12). This original purpose is the 'happiness of mankind', understood to mean material prosperity (*WoN*: 96; *TMS*: 166). Even those who reject the significance of Smith's theological teleology have accepted that it is the 'natural inclinations' of persons that drive progress. In other words, progress is 'natural' in at least some sense.

Beyond this, things get more complex (for a review see Salter 1992). There are at least two issues at stake here. The first is the extent to which Smith deploys a kind of economic determinism to explain progress through the stages, or, alternatively, the extent to which he allows room for the 'science of the legislator' to shape economic and social outcomes (Meek 1977; Haakonssen 1981; Winch 1978; Winch 1983; Skinner 1993). On the former account, it is, for example, the pressures of population growth that lead to the adoption of new economic practices that in turn generate new institutional and political arrangements (*LJ*: 15). On the later view, Smith takes a much more variegated view of the factors that shape economic and social outcomes, including 'politics' and 'institutions'. What is more it seems clear from the *Wealth of Nations* that he thinks there is a significant need for institutional reform in modern commercial society if the full potential of commercial society is to be realised (even if, again, he was suspicious of the 'man of system'); in other words simply letting material factors shape outcomes might not be enough, at least not in commercial society (Winch 1978). The second issue is to do with the extent of contingency in Smith's explanations for 'progress' in economic and institutional arrangements. In his discussion of several examples, such as the rise of property laws (and thus government), the rise of popular participation in Rome, and the ending of slavery in Europe, Smith demonstrated an awareness of the complexity of the processes involved, and certainly the unintended consequences of usually self-interested actions (Pitts 2005: 29, 30-31; Winch 1978: 78). Trying to summarise this, Pitts argues that for Smith, 'development through the four stages is at once

a natural process and one pervaded with contingency and the unpredicted consequences of myriad individual actions' (Pitts 2005: 32).

Both the issue of the extent to Smith's materialism and the role of contingency, bear on the question of progress in societies in the absence of colonial intervention. While there is a sense in which Smith argued progress was 'natural', he also says at various points that it might not happen at all, and even if it could happen, it could take a very long time. First, as noted above, Smith says that progress under colonisation has been in some areas 'superior to what can grow up of its own accord in the course of many centuries among savage and barbarous nations'. This suggests that even if progress is immanent it can lay dormant for a long time. There are even parts of the world that seem to have experienced no progress: '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' (*WoN*: 36). Here Smith stresses the contingencies of geographical location (distance from seas and navigable rivers) as an important condition for progress. There can be little 'progress' expected in these places unless something happens to connect them up to trading routes. At the very least this casts doubt on the idea that *all* societies have the capacity for spontaneous auto-generation. Second, the example of China shows that 'progress' can be 'stalled' by the emergence of certain institutions and political practices, in China's case particularly laws preventing foreign trade (*WoN*: 90). He says that while China has 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' (*WON*: 89; generally see Harvey 2012: chap 2). Here it seems that it is 'laws' and 'institutions' that play the most significant role, or at least that they can override 'natural progress. Third, the more complexities and contingencies that are introduced to explain particular sets of changes in laws and institutions, the more it seems that such changes might not have happened at all.

Coming to a final conclusion on these matters is difficult because Smith's work combined a variety analytical approaches that do not always sit easily with one another. Smith's combined a commitment to and an understanding of progress as in some sense 'natural, that attempted to make sense of the differences between 'commercial' and other societies. At the same time he also saw progress as contingent and complex and to some degree determined by institutional factors. This generates at least ambivalence about the possible impact of colonial conquest and rule on unconquered territories. It certainly seems that there is room for an interpretation of Smith that sees him as recognising the overall benefits in terms of progress that colonialism might bring, even if the actual practices associated with it prevented colonies from realising their full economic potential. It is also possible to cast doubt on the idea that Smith saw progress a possibility for all societies, and he certainly thought that progress could be stalled or warped. It is important to stress that Smith did not jump from this to an argument in favour of colonialism, but it does complicate our understanding of Smith as an anti-colonial thinker.



## Judgements

The third element of Smith's work that bears on his reputation as an anti-colonial thinker are the kinds of judgements he made about other societies. It is important to note at the outset that whatever we make of the complex issues involved in this, Smith did not argue that colonialism was justified because other societies were 'backward' or had abhorrent moral practices. Nonetheless, his status as an anti-colonial thinker rests in part on a reading of Smith that stresses his non-judgemental attitude towards other societies (Pitts 2005: 34-40). As with Smith's account of progress there are difficulties in coming to a final clear assessment of this.

In the first place Smith certainly did make disparaging judgments about 'backward societies'. He described America before Columbus as 'a country quite covered with wood, uncultivated, and inhabited only by tribes of naked and miserable savages' (*WoN*: 559). In discussing Africa he says that 'many an African King' is the 'absolute master in the loves and liberties of ten thousand naked savages' (*WoN*: 24). This is in the context of his argument that even the poorest person in commercial society is much better off than the richest African. He says in *Lectures on Jurisprudence* that 'In Africa we find the most horrid disorders, their discipline not being severe enough' (*LJ*: 443). In his quite extensive discussion of polygamy, Smith concludes that 'with regard to the wives

it produces the greatest misery ...The children also ... lead but a wretched life ... with regard to the man himself ... he is racked by the most tormenting jealousy ... It is detrimental also to population, and besides is very hurtful to the liberty of the people' (*LJ*: 159). Witness too his comments about the inferiority of the 'antient indians' noted above. One might say that Smith here was repeating the kinds of familiar attitudes, prejudices and language of many of his Enlightenment peers (although not all – Herder for example) (generally see Harvey 2012). Pitts suggests that at least some of the time Smith used terms such as 'savage' and 'barbarous' in an analytical rather than simply judgemental way (Pitts 2005: 34). The significance of Smith's judgements about 'savage' societies, however, transcends the question of whether Smith's use of this kind of language is defensible. Three issues are particularly important: First, the extent to which the stadial theory was also understood by Smith as a hierarchy; second, the basis of the judgements Smith made about other places and cultural practices; and finally, and most controversial of all, the kind of moral theory Smith developed and how this moral theory was or could be applied to judgements about other places and to judgements about colonialism itself.

There seems little doubt that Smith understood movement through the stages as 'progress'. And on the reading of Smith that stresses the theological underpinnings of this theory, not only was this stage an improvement in terms of material comfort, but was the instantiation of God's original plan for mankind (*TMS*: 166. See also Hill 2001; and Veblen 1948: 258). In addition, Smith's stadial account had the effect of positioning the 'rude' nations of America as a

representative of the earlier stages of European history (Blaney and Inayatullah 2010: chap 2). In doing so this denied these societies any kind of equal claim as they simply represented something that had been superseded by more advanced societies (Hobson 2012: 81). As is by now well known, Smith was in many places critical of aspects of commercial society. He was concerned about the impact commerce had on social and patriotic virtues and on the condition of labouring classes (Winch 1978: chap 5). He was highly critical of some of the laws and much of the actual practice of economic policy in Britain and its impact on domestic politics as part of his 'attack on the whole commercial system of Great Britain (*Corr*: 250). In other words, he did not straightforwardly evidence the kind of triumphalism that characterised nineteenth century advocates of European colonialism (see Pitts 2005: chaps 5, 6 and 7). In this line he was perhaps more typical of Enlightenment thinkers who's critical project was often directed at European politics and society itself (Muthu 2003; Harvey 2012). Smith did argue in places, however, that commercial society was not just superior in material terms, but also in moral terms and in terms of the progress of science and reason. 'In some countries, the rudeness and barbarism of the people hinder the natural sentiments of justice from arriving at that accuracy and precision which, in more civilised nations, they naturally attain to. Their laws are, like their manners, gross and rude and undistinguishing' (*TMS*: 341). Smith is careful to state that 'in no country do the decisions of positive law coincide exactly, in every case, with the rules which the natural sense of justice would dictate', but even if commercial society was morally deficient in some cases, it was morally superior to 'rude' and 'barbarous' societies in the sense of being more morally 'developed'. It was also superior in other ways. In 'History of

Astronomy', Smith says that savages are 'guided altogether by wild nature and passion', and 'have little curiosity to find out those hidden chains of events' (*EPS*: 48). It is only material progress that allows societies to overcome 'the lowest and most pusillanimous superstition' (*EPS*: 49).

At other times Smith seems to move away from the judgemental attitude this argument would imply (Pitts 2005: 47-52). In discussing the variety of judgements about beauty that characterise different societies, he not only accepted that other societies have their own standards of judgement, but also says 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 (*TMS*: 199). He sometimes discusses the character of 'savages and barbarians' in ways that verge on admiration (although in 'History of Philosophy', he says that 'cowardice and pusillanimity' are 'natural to man in his uncivilised state' (*EPS*: 49)). In *Theory of Moral Sentiments* he says that savage men are characterised by a 'heroic and unconquerable firmness' (205-208). The significance of this is more than that Smith was repeating the 'noble savage' line (but see Meek 1976; see also Harvey 2012). Generally Smith tried to explain the different moral codes that characterise different societies. Famously he 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' (*TMS*: 204).

In this mode, the relatively less developed moral senses in rude nations are not the result of a failure of reason, but the result of the particular circumstances that characterise different places: the 'heroic and unconquerable firmness' of the savage is the result of the 'necessity of his situation' (*TMS*: 203). The savage's values and practices are not only explicable, but they may even be reasonable in that they are rational responses to their environment (*TMS*: 209). In his discussion of infanticide, he says that it is 'more pardonable' among the 'rudest and lowest state of society' because 'the extreme indigence of a savage is often such that 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' (*TMS*: 210. But see Blaney and Inayatullah 2010: chap 7). At the same time, Smith argued that it is only in these extreme kinds of cases that it can be excused as in general infanticide is a 'horrible practice and a 'dreadful violation of humanity' (*TMS*: 210-11).

Teasing out the overall character of Smith's moral theory is clearly difficult, as the diversity of interpretations they have been given suggests. Some have wanted to argue that Smith's stress on explaining moral judgments and his stress on the social nature of such judgements mean we should read him as a sceptic about the possibility of developing objective moral rules, or even as a kind of 'relativist' (Griswold 1999; Campbell 1971). For a recent discussion see

Fleischacker 2011). Others have stressed the universal elements of his arguments, linking them up with the natural law tradition and with Kant (Haakonssen 1996; Fleischacker 1999). One of the participants in this debate has recently 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', but that 'the tensions between these aspects of his thought are not easy to resolve' (Fleishacker 2011: 20; see also Pitts 2005: 43). But both sides of this tension bear on Smith's anti-colonial arguments. Where Smith does evidence more universal claims he certainly does judge civilised societies to be morally more advanced than others. And in this line of thought he rather more closely replicates other liberal thinkers who have been more forthright in their advocacy of colonialism (see Mehta 1999 and Parekh 1995). On the other hand a more socially constituted system of morals leaves little *moral* scope for condemning colonialism, even if there might be lots of other reasons for arguing against it, except in so far as it is understood to be wrong by the particular community engaging in it. Knowing that such moral attitudes are social constructed might provide hope for those who wish to change such practices (by finding strategies to change social attitudes) but it does not amount to a very powerful condemnation of the practice itself.

Smith, Liberalism and Colonialism

So far we have tried to show that while Smith argued European states should abandon their colonies he also demonstrated a series of ambivalences that cast doubt on the idea that Smith was a straightforward anti-colonial thinker. While he argued against continued colonial rule this was largely because of its impact on European states. He did think that it might bring improvement in unconquered territories and there is some reason to think that he did not think '*all societies and peoples would traverse the different stages of development of their own accord*' (Hobson 2012: 82, emphasis in original). And not only did he make moral judgements about other places and societies, but on at least one reading of his moral theory he could not make a coherent moral argument against colonialism and conquest.

The ambivalences we find in Smith are of potentially wider significance. First, they invite exploration of whether other anti-colonial thinkers within the 'liberal tradition' expressed similar forms of ambivalence. This is a more substantial task than can be undertaken here, but some initial observations suggest that they might. In Bentham, for example, we see the same primacy of concern with the impact of colonialism on European societies. The subtitle of 'Emancipate your Colonies' makes Bentham's concerns clear: 'Shewing the Uselessness and Mischievousness of distant dependences to a European state'. He did argue that it would be hypocritical of France to maintain her colonies given the principles upon which the revolutionary state was being founded, but he also made it clear that it was the consequences for France that really animated him: 'think not, that because I mentioned them [the colonies] first, it is for their sake in the first place

that I wish to see them free. No. It is the mischief you do to yourselves by maintain this unnatural domination' that is his primary concern. And the mischiefs he identified were very similar to those identified by Smith, as was his explanation for why colonialism was maintained (Bentham 1838: 411-2; Bentham 1995: 52). Kant too was deeply ambivalent about the overall impact of colonialism, despite some of his scathing criticisms of it (Kant 1991a: 106, 107; Kant 1991d 89, 154-5, 159). His famous remark about Tahiti in a review of Herder's *Ideas on the Philosophy of History of Mankind* clearly hints at this:

does he [Herder] mean that, if the happy inhabitants of Tahiti never visited by more civilised nations, were destined to live in their peaceful indolence for thousands of centuries it would be possible to give a satisfactory answer to the question of why they should exist at all, and of whether it would not have been just as good if this island had been occupied by happy sheep and cattle as by happy human beings who merely enjoy themselves? (Kant 1991b: 219-20).

In other words, simply being, even being happy, is not enough (Sikka 2007). As McCarthy says, for Kant, 'nature's purpose in history is not human happiness but human development' (McCarthy 2009: 61). In *Idea for a Universal History*, Kant argues that 'we may hope that what strikes us in the actions of individuals as confused and fortuitous may be recognised, in the history of the entire species, as a steadily advancing but slow *development of man's original capacities*' (Kant 1991c: 41). Universal history generates ambivalence over the effects of colonialism because the activities that have 'engendered the reality of a community of nations on earth, but also the issue of justice at this cosmopolitan



level are almost all related to European colonialism' (Muthu 2003: 190; see also Tully 2008: 145-8). While visiting and conquering foreign lands was the occasion for a great deal of injustice and cruelty, it had also 'opened trade routes between the Old World and the New, and it had been these routes as Kant himself had argued, which were the only possible means to create the truly cosmopolitan world order, and only such an order would be able, finally, to put an end to all human conflict' (Pagden 1998: 62; Tully 2008: 146).

The point here is not that Bentham and Kant were similar to Smith. Certain parallels have been identified, but much more work would be needed to flesh out the similarities and some of the very important differences between these anti-colonial thinkers (Cain 2011; for more general parallels between Smith and Kant see Fleishacker 1999). Nor is the point that these thinkers were simply inconsistent when it came to the issue of colonialism. And it is certainly not to argue that these thinkers were somehow 'really' or 'secretly' in favour of colonialism. Rather the significance of this is that the ambivalences we find in Smith (and others) point in the direction of some of the more general issues involved in anti-colonial arguments from within the liberal tradition. A significant part of Smith's objection to colonialism was its impact on domestic political and economic processes and institutions. This raises the question of whether colonialism could be argued against if its deleterious impact on domestic politics and economy could be overcome. This was certainly hypothetical when it came to Smith who stressed precisely the way colonialism reinforced harmful domestic practices. It became important in later liberal

arguments in favour of colonialism, however, when the Reform Act and the slow triumph of ideas of free-trade contributed to redressing the balance, as it were, between the domestic political and economic costs of colonialism, and the possibility that it might help the march of progress (Pitts 14-19). The significance of this is given added weight by the fact that Smith certainly did think the overall project of colonialism had brought progress where little otherwise could have been expected, and by the thought that Smith's moral system struggled to develop a principled case against colonial rule. Where Smith does articulate a more universal moral schema it operates to judge 'rude' nations as less morally advanced than civilised ones, and his stadial theory does much the same in material terms.

This points towards a more profound issue that sits at the heart of liberal arguments about colonialism. To the extent that liberal thinkers employ a universal moral framework and/or visions of progress, these almost always work to cast 'rude nations' as less advanced than civilised ones (Parekh 1994). Even if one wanted to maintain that European states themselves were not an instantiation of such visions, it is hard to see how engagement with the possibility that the achievement of universal moral frameworks or progress might be furthered by colonial (or colonial-type) projects could be avoided. It might still be concluded that such projects should not be engaged in, but the basis of such conclusions are likely to be contingent rather than moral or cultural, as Parekh suggested (Parekh 1997: 174). To the extent that liberal thinkers avoid universal moral frameworks and/or visions of progress they face

a new dilemma. It might be hard to argue coherently against colonialism (as a breach of some universal moral code), and a more substantially 'social' moral framework that might underpin a more culturally tolerant approach risks undermining some of the traditional universalist claims of liberal theory. An examination of Smith's arguments about colonialism then, has significance beyond the history of international political thought. Smith was an anti-colonial liberal, but it is also possible to see that he was only ambivalently anti-colonial. And the limits of Smith's anti-colonialism expose some of the profound questions facing any liberal critics of empire in either its traditional or more contemporary versions.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Robbie Shilliam for very helpful comments on an earlier version of this.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed as scholarship on Smith and Locke has moved on a great deal since Winch's book one is struck by the parallels between Locke and Smith. See, for example, Winch 1978: 38, 52, 65, 68, among others.

<sup>3</sup> References to Smith's works will use an abbreviation: WoN: (Wealth of Nations); TMS: (The Theory of Moral Sentiments); LJ (lectures on Jurisprudence), EPS (Essays on Philosophical Subjects); Corr (Correspondence). All references refer to (Smith 1976-1983).

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