

# ADAM SMITH ON SAVAGES

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## Abstract

In Adam Smith's work, there is a tension between a positive appraisal of the savage's mental processes and morality and characterization of the first stage as a state of want and isolation to which the primitive society's failure to evolve toward following stages is ascribed. I illustrate how Smith's post-scepticism puts him in a position to better understand savages than most of his contemporaries and I reconstruct his view of the savage in terms of his theory of the human mind. I explore the tensions in the civilized society where the virtues of self-command are lost and those of humanity are widespread among groups different from those in power and where a pointless search for wealth dominates. Finally, I discuss a tension in Smith's view of the savage, namely between the savage as proto-philosopher and of the savage as proto-merchant.

## Résumé

Dans l'œuvre d'Adam Smith il y a une tension entre une appréciation positive des capacités intellectuelles et morales du sauvage et la caractérisation de la première étape de l'histoire humaine comme un état de besoin et d'isolement qui est la cause de l'incapacité de la société primitive d'évoluer vers les étapes suivantes. J'illustre comment le post-scepticisme de Smith le met en mesure de mieux comprendre les sauvages que la plupart de ses contemporains et j'essaie de dessiner une reconstruction de sa vision du sauvage sur la base de sa psychologie et théorie de la connaissance. J'explore les tensions qu'il découvre dans la société civilisée où les vertus de la maîtrise de soi sont affaiblies et celles de l'humanité sont cultivées parmi des groupes différents de ceux au pouvoir, parmi lesquels, au contraire, la recherche

insensée de la richesse et du pouvoir domine. Enfin, je discute la tension entre la vision smithienne du sauvage comme proto-philosophe et sa vue alternative du sauvage comme proto-marchand.

#### AN OVERVIEW

I argue that (i) even though Adam Smith's four stages theory has been criticized with good reasons as both vitiated by undue generalization from modern Europe to the first stage and made bottom-heavy by assumptions of modern *episteme*, yet, in his writings an alternative view emerges where the savage is not just crushed under the weight of want and isolation but is endowed with imagination and sympathy; (ii) his picture of the fourth stage is, far from a triumphal apology of Capitalism, a tragic diagnosis of an inner tension between ambition and greed and their unintended beneficial effects; (iii) the tensions in the picture are not just a report of tensions out there, but also depend on Smith's pre-comprehension of the phenomena he tries to account for; (iv) and yet, the tragic character of this picture is to be credited to his integrity;

I summarize peculiarities of Smith's peculiar outlook, post-empiricism, as well as its potentialities (sect 2). I then reconstruct his view of the development of language and science, suggesting that his theory of association of ideas and imagination provide a consistent account of both science and lore, yielding a comparatively less ethnocentric evaluation of the savage mind (sect. 3). I reconstruct his virtually twofold reconstruction of subsistence in the rude and early state, arguing that he tends to ascribe inability to evolve to want and isolation and describes his view of evolution as a necessary path but also that in several passages imagination and sympathy do play a role also for the savage (sect. 4). I compare Smith's view of the first stage with his diagnosis of commercial society arguing that his reconstruction is burdened by eighteenth-century ideology as well as by modern *episteme* and I conclude with an ambivalent appraisal of Smith's comparison between the polished man and the savage.

#### 1. THE BACKGROUND: THE NEW WORLD CONTROVERSY

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a controversy on the "New World" took place whose point was establishing whether the New World was better than the Old, with a healthier nature, closer to the *primaeval* condition, or instead a weaker one (Gerbi 1955), as well as whether native Americans lived in a state of *pura natura* – without the blessing of Grace but conforming to natural law – or instead in a "corrupted" condition. To try to make sense of such questions, it is as well to keep in mind that the New World was not just one more geographical area outside the Christian world but rather something difficult to locate within the received worldview.

An offshoot from the former controversy was the controversy about the status of "savages", that is, all American populations outside Mexico and Peru (Landucci 1972; Marouby 2004: 17-32). The questions were

whether they lived without Religion, Morality and Law. Two important landmarks in the discussion were Montaigne's sceptical-relativist view, according to which the savage and the civilized man are both conditioned by different circumstances and customs and everybody is everybody else's "savage", and Rousseau's dialectical view of the savage state and civilization, according to which the savage enjoys the missed blessing of a kind of *primaeva innocence*, something less than *virtue* that was expected to be brought about either by the social contract or by enlightened education. The views held by Rousseau – different from the nineteenth-century Anglo-Saxon myth of the *noble savage* – were one important starting point for Smith's elaboration. Let me recall that in the "Letter to the Edinburgh Review", young Smith translated three excerpts from Rousseau on savages (Smith 1756 13-15). Besides, in his library, many reports by travellers and missionaries were present, and his references prove that he was familiar also with the best item from such literature, Lafitau's *Moeurs des Sauvages Américains* (1734; cf. Marouby 2004, 110-17). I will illustrate in what follows how he takes advantage of his reading and how both sceptical awareness of our point of view's partiality and some Rousseauvian nostalgia for what has gone lost in the process of civilization do emerge here and there in his writings.

Smith wrote that the "life of a savage, when we take a distant view of it, seems to be a life either of profound indolence, or of great and astonishing adventures; and both these qualities serve to render it *agreeable to the imagination*" (Smith 1756, 12; my emphasis). He is aware of apparent reasons for such a romantic view but he wants to apply to it his critical approach, detecting mechanisms of human imagination at work behind sets of beliefs. After Popkin's work on the history of scepticism (Popkin 2003), and Schneewind's one on modern ethics (Schneewind 1998), the decisive role of neo-Phyrronianism in the development of modern philosophy has become more evident. Hume was "the first post-sceptical philosopher of the early modern period" who worked out "a philosophical position that is at the same time fundamentally sceptical and fundamentally constructive" (Norton 1993, 1) by establishing a protective belt against sceptical doubt, that is, arguing that doubt is justified on principle but irrelevant in practice. The reason is that it is true that belief is all we have, but this implies that we have at least something. In more detail, Hume's strategy vis-à-vis scepticism is based on the distinction between dogmatic scepticism and *true scepticism*, which can doubt of its doubts, and between subjects going beyond our cognitive faculties and subjects where at least *moral reasoning* is possible.

I would add that Smith is not so much Hume's follower as his critical fellow-traveller. His theory of human nature is not so much a copy of Hume's "science of human nature" but just a more modest list of principles. His leading idea is that we never meet human nature in a void, we never saw Adam in the Garden of Eden. This amounts to saying that human nature reveals itself as much in commercial society as in the age of hunters, and those revealed at different times and places are just different traits of one human nature. Such open-ended status of hypotheses on human nature – I would add – is implied by his own criticism of Cartesianism (Cremaschi 2000: 73-83).

To sum up, Smith faced already existing literature on savages and he worked on its basis while reinterpreting the data reported from his point of view. This included, on the hand, his version of *true scepticism* and, on the other, a view of the progress of humankind he inherited from Turgot, the four stages theory (Meek 1971).

## 2. SAVAGES AND PHILOSOPHERS

### *Language and inventions of imagination*

To start with, let us examine the *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*. The reason is that these are what is left of one of the two works he left unaccomplished, the philosophical history of the arts and sciences, whose *Leitmotiv* should have been precisely the conjectural history of the “progress” of humankind showing how an invariable human nature yields different mental constructs when facing different life conditions.

The conjectural history of language is based on the assumption that language has arisen out of the same fixed principles of human nature whose effects we observe everywhere, even though no individual language is the one dictated by human nature. Thus, any quest for a “perfect language” would be pointless and language as such is neither “natural” nor “artificial”. Language is born out of a natural tendency of the imagination to associate things with words. In “Considerations concerning the first formation of languages” he advances the conjecture that savages started associating certain sounds with certain situations, and later on with objects or actions, as a way of making their wants intelligible to each other. Thus, language is based on the association of things and sounds. According to this conjecture, proper names came first; then savages began “to bestow the same name by which they had been accustomed to express the similar object they were first acquainted with” (Smith 1761 1). Languages evolved as a result of small changes, and their evolution led to both increasing complexity in some aspects and more simplification in others, since the “expression of every particular event, became [...] more intricate and complex, but the whole system of the language became more coherent” (Smith 1761 30). Here, the same principles are at work as in any other human activity. For example, all “machines are generally, when first invented, extremely complex in their principles, and there is often a particular principle of motion for every particular movement which is intended they should perform [...] the machine becomes gradually more and more simple, and produces its effects with fewer wheels, and fewer principles of motion” (Smith 1761 41).

The same principles account for the origins and evolution of the primitive’s worldview illustrated in “The principles which lead and direct philosophical enquiries”. This is dictated by naïve anthropomorphism that tends to soothe wonder caused by unexpected events by feigning “invisible beings”, acting like human beings use to act, behind them.

Man, the only designing power with which they were acquainted, never acts but either to stop, or to alter the course, which natural events would take, if left to themselves. Those other intelligent beings [...] were naturally supposed to

act in the same manner; not to employ themselves in supporting the ordinary course of things, which went on of its own accord, but to stop, to thwart, and to disturb it (Smith 1795a 48)

Now, some of the irregularities of nature are perfectly beautiful and agreeable and thus, “from the same impotence of mind, would be beheld with love and complacency, and even with transports of gratitude; for whatever is the cause of pleasure naturally excites our gratitude” (Smith 1795a 48-9). And thus, the polytheistic worldview was complemented with an ascription to invisible beings of moral qualities consistent with our sentiments. Human beings

are naturally led to ascribe to those mysterious beings [...] all their own sentiments and passions [...] They could not fail, therefore, to ascribe to those beings, for the excellence of whose nature they still conceived the highest admiration, those sentiments and qualities which are the great ornaments of humanity [...] and the gods were universally represented and believed to be the rewarders of humanity and mercy, and the avengers of perfidy and injustice (Smith 1759 III.i.v.4)

Polytheism embodies a crude moral view and it is also intellectually naive, affording no more than imaginary entities behind any unexpected phenomenon, for example, behind thunder and lightning, “the invisible hand of Jupiter” (Smith 1795a III.2). Smith is even more critical of later philosophical monotheism which he believes to be both epistemologically unwarranted and morally inconsistent. The Stoics, starting with dogmatic certainty to know the real connecting chains of nature, ended up with the paradox that moral judgment consists in identification with God’s view, one for which everything, including virtue and vice, is equally necessary, and necessary and desirable consequences are carried by both. Thus, they identified virtue with apathy, and simply accepted evil instead of fighting it. In a word, humankind at its early stage didn’t perform any worse than at later stages, both intellectually and morally. The primitive mind, at least, filled the gaps our imagination feels in the succession of phenomena, which is precisely what the modern mind goes on doing even while producing such masterworks as Newtonian natural philosophy (Smith 1795a IV.76). The “Principles” indicate three passions as the sources of “philosophical inquiries”: wonder, excited by the new and singular, surprise, aroused by the unexpected, and admiration, caused by the great and beautiful. Since wonder and surprise are unpleasant, their elimination brings the mind back into a state of ease, associated with admiration. The latter is provoked by the discovery of resemblances between things as well as by the occurrence of expected successions of phenomena. All activities of the mind aim at producing pleasant states and avoiding unpleasant ones (Smith 1795a II.6-7). Classification through which the mind arranges phenomena is based on a search for resemblances (Smith 1795a II.7). “Philosophical” inquiries are originated by two kinds of wonder: when we are unable to detect in a phenomenon any resemblance with already familiar ones or a customary sequence is interrupted (Smith 1795a IV.8), and when phenomena cause wonder by contradicting the succession of phenomena our

imagination expects to meet (Smith 1795a II.8). In this case, our imagination feels something like a “gap” between two phenomena. Yet, it can fill it by the fiction of an invisible chain of events connecting the phenomena. Theories are precisely “invisible chains” or “imaginary machines” built behind the scenes of the world-theatre (Smith 1795a IV.1-4). Yet, there are cases for which no such explanation has been reached. In those cases “even the vague hypotheses of Des Cartes, and the yet more indeterminate notions of Aristotle” (Smith 1795a IV.19) can give the phenomena some coherence.

One parallel remark may be recalled here concerning leisure and arts. “Among savage nations, the great body of the people have frequently great intervals of leisure, and they have scarce any other amusement” (Smith 1795b II.1) than music and dancing. No nation is so uncivilized as to be ignorant of these practices and it seems “even to be amongst the most barbarous nations that the use and practice of them are both most frequent and most universal” (Smith 1795b II.1).

#### *Virtues of self-command and virtues of humanity*

Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is the only part of the original project for his oeuvre which he did carry out in the original shape. Note that *The Wealth of Nations* was a side-alley he took after abandoning the project of history and theory of government and legislation and that the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* are lecture notes which he never felt fit for publication. Note also that the moral work embodies a new critical approach to morality – not unlike Kant – which makes room for descriptive relativism while avoiding any rash shift to prescriptive relativism. In this context, the opposition between the morality of the “rude and early stage” and that of polished nations plays a crucial role.

Morality has always been there in the history of humankind. It has no deeper or more objective foundation than language, law, and money, but results too from *natural* developments from original qualities of human nature. All the rules of “Morality, when traced to their foundation, turn out to be some principles of Common Sense which every one assents to” (Smith 1983 i.133). They consist of sets of rules, either rudimentary or rather unified and connected – occasionally even *too much* simplified and connected. That is, in

every age and country of the world men must have attended to the characters, designs, and actions of one another, and many reputable rules and maxims for the conduct of human life, must have been laid down and approved of by common consent. As soon as writing came into fashion, wise men, or those who fancied themselves such, would naturally endeavour to increase the number of those established and respected maxims (Smith 1776 V.i.f.25).

In chapter II of part V of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, “Of the Influence of Custom and Fashion upon Moral Sentiments”, he draws a general distinction between morality in civilized nations and among savages. Note that it is an assertion not of unconstrained relativism, like Montaigne, but rather of the existence of two tendencies always at work arising from unchanging human nature, one of which prevails

under different conditions. Among civilized nations, “the virtues which are founded upon humanity are more cultivated than those which are founded upon self-denial and the command of the passions” (Smith 1759 V.2.8); among savages, self-command tends to be the sovereign virtue. The savage’s

passions, how furious and violent soever, are never permitted to disturb the serenity of his countenance or the composure of his conduct and behaviour. The savages in North America, we are told, assume upon all occasions the greatest indifference, and would think themselves degraded if they should ever appear in any respect to be overcome, either by love, or grief, or resentment (Smith 1759 V.2.20).

The reason is that, even though human nature is constant and universal, under the pressure of changing circumstances, different customs establish themselves. In the nations of hunters, every savage

undergoes a sort of Spartan discipline, and by the necessity of his situation is inured to every sort of hardship. He is in continual danger: he is often exposed to the greatest extremities of hunger, and frequently dies of pure want. His circumstances not only habituate him to every sort of distress, but teach him to give way to none of the passions which that distress is apt to excite (Smith 1759 V.2.20).

The circumstances in which he lives are not such as to encourage him to exercise sympathy for his fellow beings for, before we can “feel much for others, we must in some measure be at ease ourselves. If our own misery pinches us very severely, we have no leisure to attend to that of our neighbour” (Smith 1759 V.2.20; cf. Marouby 2004, 219-20). Thus, the savage, “whatever be the nature of his distress, expects no sympathy from those about him, and disdains, upon that account, to expose himself, by allowing the least weakness to escape him” (Smith 1759 V.2.20). When he “is made prisoner of war, and receives, as is usual, the sentence of death from his conquerors, he hears it without expressing any emotion, and afterwards submits to the most dreadful torments, without ever bemoaning himself” (Smith 1759 V.2.20). Even the “weakness of love [...] is regarded among savages as the most unpardonable effeminacy” (Smith 1759 V.2.20).

Such a prevalence of self-command, neither a debased condition nor an ideal to admire, is one end in a spectrum of possibilities. In a sense, the Stoic philosophy, as admirable for its consistency as it is implausible for the paradoxes to which it leads, is an option for the same end of the spectrum. Smith notes that the

savage is said to prepare himself from his earliest youth for this dreadful end. He composes, for this purpose, what they call the song of death, a song which he is to sing when he has fallen into the hands of his enemies, and is expiring under the tortures which they inflict upon him. It consists of insults upon his tormentors, and expresses the highest contempt of death and pain (Smith 1759 V.2.20).

What the Stoic philosophy affords is not so different. In fact,

the philosophers of all the different sects very justly represented virtue; that is, wise, just, firm, and temperate conduct; not only as the most probable, but as the certain and infallible road to happiness even in this life [...] They endeavoured, therefore, to show that happiness was either altogether, or at least in a great measure, independent of fortune; the Stoics, that it was so altogether [...] though it should fail of success (Smith 1759 VII.2.32)

Far from being an admirer of the Stoics, Smith argues that their ethics ends with a paradox, namely, it fixes the most impartial and demanding criteria for moral judgement but completely extinguishes moral motivation (Smith 1759 I.ii.3.4).

But also the morality of humanity of polished nations carries another, no less devastating paradox. "In general, the style of manners which takes place in any nation, may commonly upon the whole be said to be that which is most suitable to its situation" (Smith 1759 V.2.23) and, while the exercise of sympathy which is occasioned by communal life encourages the cultivation of some virtues, yet, it brings about a kind of corruption of character which is rooted unfortunately precisely in sympathy. Accordingly, this "heroic and unconquerable firmness, which the custom and education of his country demand of every savage, is not required of those who are brought up to live in civilized societies" (Smith 1759 V.2.20) for it is the character "most suitable to the circumstances of a savage", while sensibility is the character most suitable "to those of one who lives in a very civilized society. Even here, therefore, we cannot complain that the moral sentiments of men are very grossly perverted" (Smith 1759 V.2.23). Here, life is safer, property is protected and industry is encouraged. These circumstances yield growth of opulence so that, first, the meanest manual labourer is better provided than the King of savages and, second, commerce carries some moral improvement, as far as it encourages such virtues as "probity and punctuality" (Smith 1978 [B] 326). Yet, commercial society is also the enemy of virtues of a different kind since the minds of manual labourers are "contracted and rendered incapable of elevation", their education is neglected and any martial spirit is extinguished (Smith 1978 [B] 328-33; cf. Cremaschi 2010: 30-1). Thus, neither the state of the savage nor that of those living in a polished society may be declared to be superior, for the "hardiness demanded of savages diminishes their humanity; and, perhaps, the delicate sensibility required in civilized nations sometimes destroys the masculine firmness of the character" (Smith 1759 V.2.20).

Let us read, now, Hume's following consideration:

I am apt to suspect the negroes [...] to be naturally inferior to the whites. There scarcely ever was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences (Hume 1741: 86 fn).

Why did Smith succeed in avoiding such distasteful remarks? One answer might be that he was more prudent than his friend because he was, in general, less prone to trust common sense such as it is and had a strategy in mind according to which common sense, the only ground for our beliefs, is not as refractory to correction as Hume believed. The fact is that there are several constraints common sense undergoes, and these provide a way to self-correction. Reasons, why Smith managed to stick to a neither relativist nor ethnocentric view of the savage-civilized relationship, are probably that (i) he assumed human nature to be unchanging; (ii) but he did not claim that we may know it in full; and thus he buffered himself from the risk of identifying it with traits we are accustomed to; (iii) he equated both the savage's and the philosopher's mental constructs to nothing else than inventions of the imagination, granting those of philosophers just more complexity and/or more connectedness.

And yet, Smith oscillates between the admission of equal value to the savage's way of thinking and feeling and a reminder that the latter "is in continual danger: he is often exposed to the greatest extremities of hunger, and frequently dies of pure want" (Smith 1759 V.2.9) and that all savages "are too much occupied with their wants and necessities, to give much attention to those of another person" (Smith 1759 V.2.9; cf. Marouby 2004: 173-218). There are a couple of contradictions hidden here. First, isolation would correspond to Rousseau's first stage, the one of the lonely savage without a tribe and a family, not to Smith's nations of hunters living in groups of a few families. Under these conditions, the savage would develop a high degree of sympathy, in the technical sense of "exchange of situations", with other members of his group, the same as is developed in the communal life of the village; and besides, with a morality centred on self-command, also exchange of situations with strangers and enemies should be basic, in so far as the point of bravery and contempt for death lies in winning respect and admiration from both fellow warriors and enemies. I have quoted Smith indulging in describing the Indian's death-song compared with the Stoic philosophy while suggesting that both the Stoic and the Indian warrior are at one extreme pole in a spectrum. Curiously enough, they cultivate either sympathy with the Universe or sympathy with nobody at all but such extreme alternatives tend to identify with each other.

To sum up, Smith is less ethnocentric than most contemporaries. In several passages, he declares that the savage not only shares the same human nature with the philosopher, but also that his mental constructs are not worse than those of the philosopher and, albeit rudimentary, in some cases they labour under a lesser burden of contradictions than those of Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes. And yet, as I discuss in the following, other passages do contradict such a comparatively positive appreciation. So far, Smith describes a dialectics in the process of civilization where both the primitive and the polished morality are grounded in exchange of situations and the savage cares for honour, that is, recognition, conquered with bravery, the same goal for which the poor man's son strives by different means, namely conspicuous wealth. And yet, as I discuss in the following, in other passages he tells us a different story, that of a savage isolated and under the constant pressure of want, and thus unable to cultivate sentiments.

### 3. SAVAGES AND MERCHANTS

#### *Unchanging human nature*

Among Smith's "lasting contributions" there were "conjectural histories" of the origins and evolution of various institutions; these were carried out by introducing plausible conjectures to fill the gaps between facts for which some evidence is available (Stewart 1795, II.56; cf. Marouby 2004: 33-47). The four stages theory is the main contribution of this kind, based on the idea that changing conditions in the production of subsistence determine political institutions, forms of social life, and diverging developments in human character. That is, human nature is assumed to be constant even though customs and characters are variable. Their variability is neither the effect of random change nor the result of the creative activity of human imagination yielding different myths, magic, kinship structures, purity codes but just the result of reactions by an invariable human nature to changing conditions of life (Meek 1971). Different institutions are assumed to develop depending on what is made possible by existing conditions for survival; for example, hunters cannot live in groups greater than a few dozen individuals and are bound to carry a nomadic life just because they depend on the game for subsistence. And also, in different conditions of life different characters develop, for example, savages cannot allegedly develop as much "sympathy" as civilized men due to constant isolation and extreme want.

This approach understands human nature in a way somewhat different from both the Scholastic and the sceptical approach for which it is *either* invariable, cognizable, endowed with an in-built teleology and able to provide a basis for normativity *or* inaccessible and variable but providing a basis for normativity, that is, the claim that everybody is justified in following the dictates of human nature that is a variable nature. Smith had learned from Hume that "there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations and ages, and that human nature remains still the same, in its principles and operations" (Hume 1746 VII.7), and yet, he adds that human nature is not fully accessible to us; Hume's "abstract science of human nature" seems to him still to depend on the Cartesian dream; no such science can be worked out systematically unless we could observe Man in a void. What we can do is instead, at most, conjecturing that human characters observed at different times and places derive from some original qualities of human nature whose descriptions we may formulate as plausible hypotheses.

Thus, the "disposition to barter is by no means founded upon different genius and talents. It is doubtful if there be any such difference at all; at least it is far less than we are aware of. Genius is more the effect of the division of labour than the latter is of it" (Smith 1978 [B] 220), or the "difference of natural talents in different men [...] is not upon many occasions so much the cause, as the effect of the diffusion of labour. What is changing is the degree of development of "characters" among different human beings. They are similar at birth but may come to differ from each other because of different occupations, and this is the

reason why “among savages there is there is always the greatest uniformity of characters” (Smith 1978 [B] 221).

The difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much “from nature, as from habit, custom, and education” (Smith 1776 I.ii.4). Philosophers indeed come from the most different social groups and what makes of a man a philosopher is the education he receives and the leisure he enjoys that puts him in a position to observe every kind of phenomena and activities while not being actively engaged in any of them. This is made possible by the division of labour taking place in commercial society that makes so that “the most dissimilar geniuses are of use to one another; the different produces of their respective talents, by the general disposition to truck, barter, and exchange, being brought, as it were, into a common stock, where every man may purchase whatever part of the produce of other men's talents he has occasion for” (Smith 1776 I.iii.5). And yet, the difference between the savage and the philosopher does not overlap with the difference between the savage and men from “polished” societies. Commercial society is not a society of philosophers and its members are not – as nineteenth-century ethnography, let me mention Edward Tylor, used to assume – “rational” beings as opposed to “irrational” savages.

#### *The disposition to truck and barter and the division of labour among savages*

The “disposition to barter” does not originate from “different genius and talents”. It originates instead from the action of basic principles, such as “that principle to persuade which so much prevails in human nature” (Smith 1978 [B] 221), or the “naturall inclination every one has to persuade” because of which “every one is practising oratory on others thro the whole of his life. – You are uneasy whenever one differs from you, and endeavour to persuade him to be of your mind” (Smith 1978 [A] vi.56). He adds, later on, that, whether

this propensity be one of those original principles in human nature, of which no further account can be given; or whether, as it seems more probable, it be the necessary consequence of the faculties of reason and speech, it belongs not to the present subject to enquire. It is common to all men, and to be found in no other race of animals, which seem to know neither this nor any other species of contracts (Smith 1776 II.ii.2).

Among people living in a civilized society, life is spent in the exercise of the power of persuasion, and thus “a ready method of bargaining with each other must undoubtedly be obtained” (Smith 1978 [B] 222). Apparently simple acts, such as barter or purchase, are in fact the result of a complex process: “The offering of a shilling, which appears to us to have so plain and simple a meaning, is, in reality, offering an argument to persuade one to do so and so as it is for his interest” (Smith 1978 [A] vi.56).

In the *Early Draft* and the *Lectures*, Smith muses about the development of the division of labour in the rude and early state, where a savage may realize that he is more gifted for manufacturing arrows than

others and may gradually become an arrow-maker, making a living by exchanging arrows with game. He writes:

*A savage who supports himself by hunting, having made some more arrows than he had occasion for, gives them in a present to some of his companions, who in return give him some of the venison they have caught; and he at last finding that by making arrows and giving them to his neighbour, as he happens to make them better than ordinary, he can get more venison than by his own hunting, he lays it aside unless it be for his diversion, and becomes an arrow-maker (Smith 1978 [A] vi. 46-47).*

Smith seems to underscore the problem – it is to keep in mind, yet, that the passage comes from unpublished lecture notes – that the possibility that a savage may become an arrow-maker contradicts everything he says on the first stage elsewhere about the impossibility of any development of the division of labour due the limited size of the market among a population living in groups of twenty or thirty families. A problem is the alleged necessity and proved the impossibility of the growth of population. In the 1762-3 report, he presents the four stages theory through a mental experiment. We are asked to imagine what will happen if “10 or 12 persons of different sexes settled in an uninhabited island” (Smith 1798, [B] 27) and, after gathering, hunting and fishing and then taming animals, we are asked to suppose that “when a society becomes numerous they would find a difficulty in supporting themselves by herds and flocks”, heading to the conclusion that “they would naturally turn themselves to the cultivation of land” (Smith 1798, [B] 30). This passage – which has no precise counterpart either in the 1766 version of the Lectures or in *The Wealth of Nations* – remarkably mentions population, a topic Smith elsewhere tends to leave aside but drops it without answering the question it unavoidably carries: how could population grow in the first stage. In this stage the savage is assumed to live in groups not exceeding a few dozen persons and, as mentioned, the market’s dimensions could never reach the required size. Indeed, the very absence of any division of labour is the main blessing the savage, compared with the manual labourer, is granted. Even worse, the growth of population which is assumed to make the shift to other ways of subsistence necessary, is assumed elsewhere to be impossible in the rude and early state because of the savage’s “extreme indigence” that is often such “that he himself is frequently exposed to the greatest extremity of hunger, he often dies of pure want, and it is frequently impossible for him to support both himself and the child” (Smith 1759 V.2.15) and, from “mere want”, savages think themselves reduced “to the necessity sometimes of directly destroying, and sometimes of abandoning their infants [...] to perish with hunger, or to be devoured by wild beasts” (Smith 1776 I.i.4).

### *The origins of money*

Also Smith's conjectural history of money is relevant to our purpose, firstly because, not unlike the history of language, it depicts one more process where progressive simplification goes with growing complexity, and secondly because the institution of money is supposed to have grown over the more basic propensities to barter and to persuade. Smith worked out an account of the origins of money through an exercise similar to the one carried out about language and other institutions. Money took shape, by way of unintended results, out of a transformation of the practice of barter. At the root of such a practice and its ensuing transformations there are a few basic tendencies of human nature, namely:

- i) a desire to persuade, that is what originates exchange as such;
- ii) a natural tendency to associate signs with phenomena, the same lying at the root of language;
- iii) a natural tendency to simplify;
- iv) one characteristic of human nature, prudence, that prompts hoarding, or creation of a reserve of some useful commodity to be exchanged with others when needed, and which, when combined with others, yields effects different from those originally envisaged.

Money is a simplified expression of those processes through which human beings who, unlike animals that "cannot, as it were, bring them into the common stock and exchange their productions" (Smith 1978 [B] 221), are endowed instead with the tendency to persuade, which is a *uniform* principle of human nature in all times and places, can assist each other.

To sum up: the evolution from the first to the fourth stage follows a fixed path, carrying both losses and gains. Among these, there is the development of the virtues of humanity even though a loss in the virtues of self-command has been a real loss. Also, a loss of equality would be compensated, as I discuss in the following, by an almost Rawlsian criterion of the better condition of the worst off. Thus, the history of humankind would have been, at a first glance, a game with wins and losses, and yet, Smith's reconstruction labours under several tensions.

#### 4. TWO VIEWS OF THE RUDE AND EARLY STAGE

Commercial society is the result of a process starting with the rude and early state and following a pre-established path. It is not the endpoint of a triumphal march. There a bright side in this society where every man lives of exchange, thus becoming, to a point, a merchant (Smith 1776 I.iv.1), namely the facts that generalized exchange has laid the basis for independence and equality and that the condition of the worst off is better than that of the best off in a nation of hunters. The philosopher's stone making such alchemic process possible is the discovery, flying in the face of "vulgar prejudice", of the obvious truth that high salaries and low prices "on the basis of *experience* turn out to be perfectly *compatible*" (Smith 1937 12), and indeed the high price of labour "should be considered as that which constitutes the essence of public

opulence" (Smith 1937 12). There is, yet, also a dark side. First, there are ambivalent moral effects, for example, what is gained in terms of "humanity" is lost in terms of "self-command"; secondly, there are also utterly negative moral effects, for example, only those in "the middling stations of life" who enjoy the assets of education and practical experience may be encouraged in developing the virtues of humanity but not those in the upper stations, worst of all merchants and master-manufacturers who develop an "exclusive corporation spirit", "an interest to deceive and even to oppress the publick" (Smith 1776 IV.ii.21); and there is also the bodily and mental mutilation affecting manual workers, as an effect of a condition that makes them "as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human character to become" (Smith 1776 V.i.f.50; cf. Cremaschi 2010: 31). And yet, greed is a source of dangers to be constantly kept under control, but it cannot be eradicated as such since it is the spring of the civilization process. Oddly enough, while the economic work offers a remarkable analysis of social and moral costs of economic development, it is the moral work where greed is granted a justification. The invisible-hand passage where the poor man's son's ambition is described in its origins and effects and finally declared senseless, by a sudden U-turn ends with an apology of the social function of ambition (Smith 1759 IV.1.10), a source of unhappiness for the individual but the spring of the progress of opulence and, thus, of civilization (Marouby 2004: 205-6).

Smith has it clear in mind that, in commercial society, a growth of personal freedom has been made possible by the same reasons that have made so that the republican ideal cherished by Rousseau has gone forever. This awareness is the basis for his "sceptical Whiggism", a political doctrine for citizens of a "polished society" aware of the partial, unstable and, to a point, tragic character of its achievements.

There is, yet, more than one source of "potential tension" (Marouby 2004: 31), not just in the subject-matter of Smith's theory but also in the theory itself, and here a few parallels emerge between the fourth and the first stage. The first tension is between the alienation of the savage and alienation of the manual worker. In barbarous societies of hunters, shepherds, and even of husbandmen "the varied occupations of every man oblige every man to exert his capacity and to invent expedients for removing difficulties which are continually occurring. Invention is kept alive" (Smith 1776 V.i.f.51); this is the reason why savages seem sometimes to have been spared the kind of alienation manual workers endure but, in other passages, they seem to be in the same state of poverty and want as manual workers.

The second is between extreme want and comparative ease in the life of the savage. In some passages, it seems that even though human beings are exposed to a more severe condition of want than animals, since they can hardly survive without at least a few minimal contrivances, like savages living in mild climates who need "oil and grease to anoint and soften their skins", yet such contrivances "can be supplied without great difficulty in some tolerable manner and by the industry of each individual" (Smith 1978 [A] vi.13), and in general "the necessities of man are not so great but that they can be supplied by the unassisted labour of

the individual” (Smith 1979 [A] 207), and thus savages “have frequently great intervals of leisure” (Smith 1795b II.1). Note that here he is echoing Lafitau when declaring that American Indians

*se font un honneur de leur oisiveté [...] si l'on excepte certaines petites choses qui ne leur demandent pas beaucoup de temps, moins encore de sujettion et d'application, il sont presque toûjours les bras croisez, ne faisant autre chose que tenir des assemblées, chanter, manger, jouer, dormir et ne rien faire* (Lafitau 1724, 2: 2).

On the other hand, most of the time savages are assumed never to escape extreme poverty, one where everybody can produce, “by continually working”, just “what is necessary for his daily subsistence” (1978 [B] 286). The questions are left unexplored – waiting for Marshall Sahlins’s definition of the stone age as an age of affluence – of the definition of poverty in the first and the fourth stage, that is, the questions on what scale is the meanest labourer’s and the king of savages’ comparative wealth to be measured and whether the *quantity* of material goods available is by itself an accurate measure of affluence (Marouby 2004: 162-3). Note that the story about the king of savages, less provided with material goods than the meanest labourer, was written by the same author who wrote a memorable piece of sarcasm against the Mercantile system fostering “the *incredible augmentation of the pots and pans* of the country” (Smith 1776 IV.i.19). What is most disturbing in Smith’s account is that difficulties are more than once explained away by minimizing counterevidence; for example, gathering-hunting societies are reduced to societies of hunters since the “pulling of a wild fruit can hardly be called an employment” (Smith 1978 [B] 27); and also Lafitau’s report that American Indians ignore herding while practising agriculture is made irrelevant by a hasty comment. Lafitau had written that agriculture is the main activity of Indian women and corn provided the Indians’ staple food, in the shape of what was called *onnontara* in the Iroquois’ language, renamed, once transferred to the Alps, with the Latin word *polenta* (Lafitau 1724, 2: 83-6). This is how he describes Indian agriculture:

*Les femmes des Sauvages [...] travaillent les champs [...] Le grain qu’elles sèment, c’est le Maïs. Le Maïs [...] est la nourriture commune de tous les Sauvages sédentaires, depuis le fond du Brésil jusques aux extrémitéz du Canada [...] Toutes les femmes du village s’unissent ensemble pur le gros travail [...] elles passent d’un champ à l’autre s’aidant ainsi toutes mutuellement* (Lafitau 1724 : 63-68).

Smith comments that “a few stalks of Indian corn” planted by their women “at the back of their huts [...] can hardly be called agriculture” (Smith 1978 [A] i.29).

The third tension is between the *isolated* and the *sympathetic* savage. The savage is said, in several passages, to be incapable of sympathy because of isolation and want. But the morality of self-command

turns around honour, and the desire of recognition seems to be the basic drive at the root of the savage's behaviour, no less than of "polished" men (Harkin 2005: 437-41; Marouby 2004: 219-20). Also, the story about lack of humanity contrasts with the only detailed illustration of an example provided by Smith of customs admitting of infanticide as a matter of course; the example is provided by China (Smith 1776 I.viii.24), a society he would classify, if not at the fourth stage, at least between the third and the fourth.

The fourth tension is between *affirmation* and *denial* of the division of labour among savages; gathering as an activity providing subsistence along with hunting is not ignored by Smith, agriculture besides hunting as an activity and corn flour besides meat as staple-food among American Indians are also not ignored by simply minimized by an unjustified comment. Thus, as Marouby (2004: 172) notes, what is for Smith constantly the basic example of "humankind at its founding stage", namely, the Iroquois described by Lafitau, are all the time both the *privileged example* and an *exception*.

To sum up, there is in Smith's writings a constant tension between economic imperialism dictated by the four stages theory and a sympathetic attitude displayed when addressing the savage's morality, institutions, and communal life. Marouby (2004: 177-8) and Marchionatti (2008: 35-42; 2012: 530-1, 539) have been right in denouncing this tension while singling out as its source a pan-economic ideology and also – as far as the former is concerned – a deeper one, namely the modern *episteme* (Marouby 2004: 87-8).

And yet a proviso is in order here, that is, both commentators have drawn on passages from both published and unpublished materials as if they had the same kind of authority, but the essays were a draft of a never-accomplished philosophical history of the arts and sciences about whose "solidity" Smith held serious doubts, and the lectures just contained materials for a planned history and theory of law and government that Smith never felt able to work out. Half a century ago, a French universally ignored commentator pointed at a possible source of Smith's discontent with his epistemology, namely the feeling of a tension between a conception of truth as correspondence and one of truth as coherence, which he felt to be both indispensable but felt unable to reconcile (Moscovici 1956: 10). Arguably, a similar discontent kept him from completing his political work (Cremaschi 1989: 102-5), at least partly depending on "the difficulties and contradictions Smith struggled with in his thinking about history, specifically the challenge posed by the savage to a progress model of history" (Harkin2005: 433), that is, on a tension between the four stages pattern and all the data he felt unable to force into this theoretical cage.

## CONCLUSIONS

(1) Adam Smith did not believe in the historical existence of a state of nature nor did he accept its use as a source of normative standards; he did believe that the age of hunters is still found in America and that what we may learn about hunters from observation is not too far from what a mental experiment would teach us

about human beings in a condition like the rude and early state and, besides, that the hunters' character is not too far from that of polished nations and differences depend on circumstances.

(2) Smith's views may be best understood when read as those of a post-sceptical thinker who concedes almost everything the sceptic contends for and thus is ready to admit that everybody is the other's "savage" and indeed *we* are the American Indians' "savages", but then proceeds to prove that there are opinions stronger than others, among them that changing modes of subsistence do carry with them different conditions of life and that some of them – those under which the meanest labourer is better off than under different conditions – may be declared to be better.

(3) Sympathy, or exchange of situations, is a basic mechanism in social interaction powered by traits of human nature we may assume to be constant; the savage – he claims – lacks sympathy because his circumstances inhibit its development, and yet – he admits elsewhere – his character too is moulded by an exchange of situations, which strengthens – in his case – the virtues of self-command; the savage, no less than the poor man's son, even though he wants to be admired more for courage than for wealth, is always looking for recognition.

(4) The fourth stage carries a mixed blessing, the bright side being provided by the better condition of the worst-off and the dark side by the merchants' spirit of monopoly.

(5) The bright side, yet, is unfairly overemphasized in so far as, first, the comparison between the manual worker and the king of the savages is carried out in terms of physical goods ignoring what Amartya Sen has called the problem of transformation of goods into functionings and capabilities and, second, the hidden assumption – flying in the face of available evidence – emerges at crucial points that the first stage is a condition of perennial want.

(6) In the light of Smith's diagnosis of a dilemma of civilization, to the savage an ambivalent status is acknowledged; but, besides those discovered in the phenomena observed, additional tensions are added by the observer's pre-comprehension; the crucial point is a reluctance to admit that also the four stages pattern is, not unlike the Newtonian system, less a fixed path existing in the thing in itself than just one more invention of the imagination.

(7) The most important part in every book is the one that has been left unwritten. Such an Austrian aphorism might also fit a Scottish author's oeuvre (Harkin 2005: 430). The circumstance that Smith left both his political and his epistemological works unfinished has something to do with deeper factors than just the "indolence of old age", for example, tensions he may have felt in both fields which he felt unable to soften. And the fact that he left materials for his political work unpublished testifies to the conundrums generated by the set of assumptions he shared – the pan-economic ideology and the modern *episteme* – no less than to his intellectual integrity.

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