



Editorial to the Special Issue “The Immortal Adam Smith”

Heinz D. Kurz¹

Published online: 8 January 2025

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2024

There can be little doubt that Adam Smith is one of the most important social scientists of all times. There can also be little doubt that he shares the destiny of other major authors of being misunderstood, misrepresented and even abused for ideological purposes. The tercentenary of his birth in June 1723 provided a welcome opportunity to try to set the record straight by revisiting several of Smith’s ideas and doctrines. The need to correct misapprehensions of the messages of the sung heroes of our profession is, of course, no new phenomenon. Adam Smith himself spent a fair amount of energy and time on this task and justified the occasionally excruciating activity with reference to a proverb: If the rod is bent too much one way, in order to make it straight you must bend it as much the other (see WN IV.ix.4). This is what is being attempted also in this special issue dedicated to Smith’s works. The authors hope to succeed somewhat in refuting widespread views about Smith that cannot be sustained, especially the view that according to Smith nothing but selfishness is needed in order to obtain socially beneficial outcomes.

The special issue has altogether six papers. The paper by Richard Sturn deals with Smith’s remarkably rich and highly sophisticated account of human agency and clarifies the Scotsman’s view of knowledge and agency in political economy, conceived as the “science of the legislator”. The attention focuses on Smith’s “pragmatic pluralism” and the role of science—its fecundity, limitations and open-endedness— in governing modern, complex socioeconomic systems.

In his paper, Manfred Holler confronts Smith’s “two models of man”, coming from the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* and *The Wealth of Nations*. These models, he argues, are incongruous, which points to a conflict between market solutions and Smith’s concept of “sympathy”. Holler develops his argument against the background of modern theories of justice and fairness and Polanyi’s view of the rise of the market economy.

✉ Heinz D. Kurz
heinz.kurz@uni-graz.at

¹ Emeritus Professor of Economics, Department of Economics, Fellow of the Graz Schumpeter Centre, University of Graz, RESOWI Centre 4F, Graz 8010, Austria

The following two papers discuss major influences Smith was exposed to. The paper by Mark Knell recalls Smith's profound understanding of Sir Isaac Newton's philosophy and his method of analysis and shows how this is reflected in *The Wealth of Nations*. While Smith admired Newton, he agreed with the mathematician Robert Simson that Newton's mechanics did not represent an ultimate truth but constituted an "imaginary machine", and that any such machine could be improved upon. Christian Gehrke then emphasizes the remarkable impact Physiocratic ideas had on Smith's theory of value and distribution, some for better, others for worse. These shaped his material-based concept of costs—physical real cost—and prepared the way to David Ricardo's "corn-ratio theory of profits", with the competitive rate of profits being equal to the ratio of the surplus product of corn and the capital, denominated in corn.

The next two papers deal with Smith's impact on major social scientists. The paper by Jonathan F. Cogliano and Duncan K. Foley provides a detailed account of how, methodologically and theoretically, Marx benefited from Smith, adopting some of his views, not without adapting them to his purposes. This applies in particular to the "long period method" of the classical authors in the theory of value and distribution. However, there are also significant differences between the two authors especially as regards the transitory character of the capitalist mode of production and the desirability of an alternative social order. Heinz D. Kurz then argues that Smith was an evolutionary social theorist *ante litteram*, influenced by the natural history of the Comte de Buffon, a precursor of Darwin. He compares Smith's evolutionism with that of Marx and Joseph Schumpeter. While Smith saw factors at work that spoke in favour of a process of civilization towards "equality, liberty and justice", he identified several hazards that could retard, stop and even reverse this process. To ward off the dangers, he insisted, the "wisdom of the state" was badly needed.

I am most grateful to *Homo Oeconomicus* and especially its new managing editor, Jean-François Laslier, for his interest in publishing this special issue, the contributors for their very fine work and smooth cooperation and the referees for their valuable comments and suggestions, which greatly enhanced the overall quality of the papers. Now it is up to the readers to decide whether it was worth the effort.

31 October, 2024

Heinz D. Kurz

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship or publication of this article.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.