

Introduction to a Symposium on Jesse Norman's *Adam Smith: What He Thought, and Why it Matters*

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It is widely acknowledged that the project of 'a science of human nature' inaugurated by the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment had a profound influence on their contemporaries and successors in Britain, Europe and America. The claim that this influence was most marked in the development of the social sciences is a familiar one, and does indeed have a good historical basis. Adam Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society* played a significant role in the emergence of sociology and David Hume's essay 'That Politics may be reduced to a Science' was, as its title indicates, an early exercise in the scientific study of politics. But the most famous example is undoubtedly Adam Smith's *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. This lengthy work has regularly been heralded as a—if not *the*—founding text in the discipline of economics. Its status in this respect has been a mixed blessing, however. First, for a long time it resulted in the near total neglect of Smith's other major book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, acclaimed in its day as a highly innovative investigation in moral philosophy, and restored only in the last few decades to its rightful place amongst philosophical classics. Secondly, by being accorded iconic historical significance, Smith's *Wealth of Nations* has acquired almost biblical authority for the 'free market' enthusiasts in political and economic debates, and hence been frequently dismissed by their opponents. But thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, however influential Smith was at the birth of economics, the discipline has moved a long way from how he conceived his own inquiry, thus obscuring the *Wealth of Nations* potential as a corrective to modern technocratic conceptions of relevance.

A similar point can be made about other social sciences. In her classic 1945 study *Man and Society: the Scottish Inquiry of the Eighteenth Century*, Gladys Bryson made just this point. The Scottish moral philosophers did not think, as social scientists came to think, that empirical rigor requires neutrality with respect to social values and politi-

cal goals. On the contrary, the whole point of dispassionate empirical study, they thought, lay in enhancing humanity's ability to direct peoples and societies to better and more worthy ends. The baneful influence of nineteenth century Utilitarianism put paid to this ambition, and led economists to fasten on maximizing 'preference satisfaction' as the only legitimate goal of public policy.

Beginning, perhaps, with the publication in 1981 of Knud Haakossen's *The Science of the Legislator*, in a veritable flood of books and articles, philosophers and social theorists have returned to the relevance of Smith for the conduct of human affairs, and inspired by Amartya Sen, some economists have done so as well. Of course, having widened more and more over the years, the gap between academic inquiry and public policy debates cannot be bridged quickly or easily, not least because the cast of mind of 'the theorist' is rather different to that of 'the man (or woman) of affairs'.

This is what lends Jesse Norman's book special value and significance. He is, by his own description, a 'working politician', an elected member of the British Parliament who has held ministerial office in the area of public finance. At the same time, as his acclaimed biography of Edmund Burke demonstrates, he has proven academic credentials. He thus is especially well placed to bring sustained reflection on Adam Smith to bear on issues of contemporary public debate. A key part of doing so lies in making Smith's thought accessible to a readership that extends well beyond the world of scholarship. The style in which *Adam Smith: What He Thought, and Why it Matters* is written clearly does this. No less key, of course, is the ability to present Smith's thought accurately, and to draw plausible inferences from it. It is with a view to assessing the book on this second dimension that this symposium has been put together.

The symposium was initiated by Leslie Marsh, managing editor of *COSMOS + TAXIS*, who asked me to assemble some comments. I invited seven acknowledged experts.

They have all published extensively on Adam Smith, and everyone I wrote to accepted my invitation very willingly. I chose people I knew would share the ambition of drawing on Smith for the purposes of enriching public policy debates. But beyond this, no unity of thought or approach was either sought or suggested. They simply undertook to read the book, and write on whatever aspect interested them, and in whatever way they chose. This 'open' invitation has resulted in a collection of pieces that is full of interest. I am most grateful to everyone for accepting my invitation, and for submitting their contributions well within the time agreed.

A symposium such as this would not be complete without a reply from the author. The turbulent character of British politics over recent times makes the time Jesse Norman has set aside, and the care he has given to the task remarkable. He has my grateful thanks, as I am sure he also has of the editor and contributors.