

Adam Smith in the Anthropocene: matter, contingency, and the foundations of a critical social theory

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Social theory is in flux. Recent years have seen an increasing acknowledgement of the interconnectedness of a plurality of multi-scalar societal crises, foremost among which is the mounting ecological crisis, often discussed under the (sometimes contested) rubric of the Anthropocene. In the face of this acknowledgement, questions have been rightly asked about the fitness of our established forms of knowledge about human social existence to meet the urgent needs of the present. Proposals have ranged from more moderate, reformist demands for an increased interdisciplinary dialogue, especially between the social and natural sciences, through to calls for a radical conceptual reconfiguration of our understandings of the social. Whilst Karl Marx's work has been a significant object of discussion within these debates, to date, another central figure in the development of social theory, Adam Smith, has barely featured. Where Smith has been referenced, this is generally by critical political and environmental scholars drawing on the well-established popular image of him as an environmentally-illiterate and doctrinaire free-trade economist, the father of a proto-neoliberal form of political economy, and thus as perhaps the epitome of the kind of social thought to be overcome.

Over the past half-century, specialist scholarship on Smith has significantly revised the interpretation of Smith on which such common senses are based, instead seeking to recapture the complex and multifaceted character of this central figure, which located the political economic analysis for which he is today best known—though which remains widely misrepresented—within a systematic account of human law and government, morality, and the history and philosophy of science. Building on this, as well as ten years of my own research on the long-overlooked environmental dimension of his thought, I seek to bring Smith into conversation, for the first time, with current debates around the reformulation of social theory in the Anthropocene. In particular, against current perceptions of the significance of his work for the present moment, I make the case for Smith's work as embodying in fact precisely the kind of approach to social theory demanded by an age of socio-ecological upheaval. This combines three inter-related key elements: 1) a non-teleological developmentalism, which grounds the analysis of society on an account of evolving material relations between humans and the earth; 2) an integration of normative and descriptive analysis, which founds an account of moral and political judgment in a detailed sociological analysis; and 3) a radical reflexivity and openness to revision, premised on Smith's recognition that knowledge is always historically embedded, fallible, and subject to transformation through critical reflection and lived experience.

In this presentation I outline my plans for a monograph elaborating these arguments, intended as a contribution to a critical re-engagement with the legacies of Enlightenment thought and to the advancement of a vision of social theory that is attentive to historical contingency, material limits, and the continual revision of knowledge in response to the challenges of the Anthropocene.