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**Review of Craig Smith, *Adam Smith*,  
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*Sergiu Bălan*

Adam Smith is one of those great thinkers with a peculiar posterity, whose works are very often cited but rarely thoroughly read, and whose words are quoted everywhere, but almost always misinterpreted. His impressive system of thinking has been too often reduced to a caricatural simplified version both by critics and today's scholars advancing their ideas by looking for illustrious predecessors. For instance, today Adam Smith has been mostly quoted for an idea from his second book, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), which is extremely often presented as an explicit and compelling apology for the thesis that human behaviour is always governed by selfishness and radical self-interest, and is the fundamental driving-force of market capitalism. Consequently, the argument in Smith's view is that if each individual consistently pursues his own selfish goals and interests, the concerted effect on society, as a whole, of all the actions of individuals will not be at all a destructive one, but on the contrary, it will be positive and desirable: the result is an increase in wealth and order, as if individual actions had somehow been coordinated in order to achieve a superior, general good. This is the well-known theory of the 'invisible hand' (Smith 2007, pp. 9, 10, 293).

Although Adam Smith spoke only once in his work about this 'invisible hand,' many contemporary economists and historians mistakenly believe that this idea was the essence of his thinking, and consequently argue that he was an explicit and fervent supporter of the conception according to which, behaviour governed by selfishness and self-interest is a positive and commendable fact as the combined

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action of all selfish individuals brings beneficial effects to society, even not planned or premeditated. This is especially true of neo-liberal theorists in social and political sciences, and especially of economists in the neo-classical tradition, where Adam Smith's ideas are revived and used to argue for the virtues of unrestrained competitive capitalism, and for the adoption of a peculiar perspective on the human being itself. This is an understanding of the man as *homo œconomicus*, the self-interested utility-maximizing individual, always wanting to increase his material gains and profit. This view was very suggestively voiced by George Stigler, one of the leading representatives of the so-called *Chicago School*, in the opening of his speech at the University of Glasgow in 1976, on the occasion of the bicentennial anniversary of the publication of *Wealth of Nations*, is quoted to have said: 'I bring you greetings from Adam Smith, who is alive and well and living in Chicago.' (Meek 1977, p. 3)

Fortunately, this is about to change, since more and more scholars argue for a better and deeper understanding of Adam Smith's ideas. Among them is Craig Smith, who is Adam Smith Senior Lecturer in Scottish Enlightenment at the University of Glasgow, and whose work is dedicated to Enlightenment philosophy and history in Scotland and Europe, and who published not only a plethora of articles and book chapters, but also two whole books on the work of his illustrious homonymous predecessor (Smith, C. 2006; 2020). His last book is an especially valuable long argument for an exhaustive and comprehensive interpretation of Adam Smith's work, mainly due to his arguments against seeing Adam Smith as the apologist of unrestrained free market, and the invitation to perceive the great thinker for who he really was, first and foremost a Scottish Enlightenment philosopher. After all, in the strictest sense of the word, although Adam Smith is credited as the Founding Father of economics, he cannot be referred to as an economist in the proper meaning of this term, as there was no such science at that time. Rather, it would be fair to say that he was, first and foremost, a moral philosopher and one of the scholars concerned with what at the time was called *political economy*, and as a professor at the University of Glasgow, he taught mainly courses in jurisprudence, ethics, rhetoric, and political economy.

Craig Smith suggests that Adam Smith can be viewed as a systematic philosopher and attempts nothing less than rebuilding his philosophical system from disparate parts, in the historical context of the time. With this purpose in mind, he begins with a biographical and historical introduction to 'Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment' (chapter 1), an outstanding period of intellectual achievement,

since the author believes that, given Smith's reclusive and private way of life, we can 'actually gain considerably more insight by examining the intellectual climate in which he lived' (p. 9) rather than by looking at his life. From Smith's teacher, Francis Hutcheson and another professor from Glasgow University, Adam Ferguson, to his successor, Thomas Reid and the more famous Isaac Newton, we are get acquainted with the most important figures of the period. Especially important is the man who is believed to be the one 'man who is the single most important influence on Adam Smith's thinking: David Hume' (p. 17). Even if it is too much to believe it, as some exegetes do, that Smith is 'the perfect Humean', we must acknowledge especially the influence exerted by Hume's most important book, *A Treatise on Human Nature* on Smith's conception on human mind and behaviour, and also on the nature of philosophical and scientific thought and methodology.

In the second chapter, 'Science and system', the author introduces the main thesis of the book: if we want to have a comprehensive and correct understanding of his entire work, Adam Smith must be seen as a systematic philosopher. Consequently, the systematic unity of his thinking can be reconstructed only if we start from his methodology: 'Overall, Smith is a remarkably consistent thinker. The various elements of his system seem to fit together reasonably neatly' and 'this is largely due to his adoption of a single underlying method of inquiry that unites his views in such apparently diverse areas as rhetoric and economics.' (p. 21) As it is argued in the book, Smith believed that any philosopher concerned with the ideal of achieving in the knowledge of man the same success that had been just achieved by Newton in the science of nature (as he himself was), we should make use of a certain version of scientific methodology, of Humean and Lockean inspiration.

According to Craig Smith, in order to fully understand Smith's perspective on human knowledge and the fundamentals of his methodology, we should turn our attention to one of his less famous books, namely, *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*. This is the last of Smith's books, published posthumously in 1795, which includes essays on the history of art, science and literature written early in his career and revised subsequently. Here, we can see how he had been influenced by Hume's ideas about experience as the source of human knowledge of the world and of the laws of nature. More interestingly, in this book we can discover that, for Smith, the motivation behind our search for knowledge lies not the Baconian utilitarian reason, but our emotions: 'our scientific method is an extension of an emotionally driven need to understand the world. Science has its origins in our emotions; more specifically, it arises from three particular emotions: "Wonder, Surprise and

Admiration". (p. 23) We feel wonder when we encounter a previously unknown phenomenon; we are surprised by what is new, or by what is old but presents itself in a new form, and we feel admiration for the explanation that makes the unfamiliar become intelligible. According to Smith, the first elaborate explanations of natural phenomena were religious, but then, in a Hegelian twist, he argues that, when the right mental and social conditions are met, scientific thinking comes to replace superstition, and a new class of philosophers arise, their task being to investigate nature in order to find its patterns and laws. The ultimate goal is that of building a systematic knowledge of the laws of nature, so we find again a principle similar to Hegel's ideas, namely that knowledge must be systematic. There are two basic principles required to build a system of knowledge: (i) the system of knowledge must be complete, without any gaps (completeness) and (ii) it must be as simple as possible (explanatory simplicity).

These principles of philosophy of nature are somehow adapted to the knowledge of social subjects, of human action. Smith was also convinced that his historical method, known as 'conjectural', 'theoretical' or 'natural' history, was therefore a scientific approach: 'theoretical history is a form of scientific explanation that provides a plausible account of the operation of some particular phenomenon by using the known to account for the unknown' (p. 34). He used this method to account for the diversity of human social organizations and for their change over time. The result is the theory of the evolution of human society in four stages, based on the main means of securing subsistence: hunting, shepherding, agriculture, commerce (p. 36). This theory, rather surprisingly, anticipates later theories of social evolution from speculative philosophy of history (Hegel, Comte, Spengler, Toynbee) and anthropology (Morgan, Tylor, Frazer). Nevertheless, its importance is not purely historical since Smith attempted to use conjectural history in order to reject the contractualist doctrine and to account for social change.

The next chapters of the book comprise successful attempts to prove Craig Smith's contention, that 'Smith remains committed to the main principles of the method' outlined in the studies published in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (p. 32). We see how the method is put to work for such subjects as 'Morality and sympathy' (ch. 3), 'Justice and virtue' (ch. 4), 'Jurisprudence' (ch. 5), 'The Nature of wealth' (ch. 6), and 'Government and the market' (ch. 7). So, we have in front of us a reconstruction of Adam Smith's philosophical system structured in a few disciplines: moral philosophy, philosophy of right, philosophy of economy, political philosophy. The last chapter is dedicated to Smith's 'Legacy and influence' (ch. 8) and consists of an

exhaustive view on the main controversies generated by his ideas and their various interpretations, from their beginning to our times.

In conclusion, it can be said without a shadow of a doubt that, after reading Craig Smith's book, anyone will be easily convinced, as it was the author's intention to prove that 'there is more to Smith than the caricature of the "father of economics"' (p. 177), and Adam Smith really is a systematic and profound thinker, with notable contributions to various disciplines, and whose works deserve to be read and known, despite the centuries that have passed since their publication.

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