

## INTRODUCTION TO SYMPOSIUM: SMITH AT 300

BY  
PEDRO GARCIA DUARTE  
AND  
JIMENA HURTADO 

“I have not the least doubt of it for you have made it of bread and butter instead of tea,” said Mr. Damer when Adam Smith, whom he was visiting that morning, declared “it was the worst tea he had ever met with” (Rae 1895, p. 238). The year 2023 marks the 300th anniversary of Smith, this absent-minded and introverted thinker, who enjoyed long solitary walks by the seaside more than anything else, was a fervent admirer of Voltaire, and became a familiar figure for those who saw him walk every morning to work at the Custom House in Edinburgh, absorbed in conversation with himself “with a bunch of flowers in his left hand, and his cane, held by the middle, borne on his right shoulder” (Rae 1895, pp. 329–330). A loyal friend and poor correspondent, Smith left an indelible mark during his life as a remarkable thinker and author of renowned books, which would, as Adam Ferguson wrote to him in April 1776, “form the opinions, and I hope to govern at least the coming generations” (Smith 1987, hereinafter *Corr.*, p. 193).

His life could be seen as uneventful. He did not travel much, except for his sojourn in France as the tutor of the Duke of Buccleuch, which ended tragically with the death of the duke’s younger brother. He spent most of his life in Scotland and was away only to study at Oxford University, where he spent six years and seemed to have been deeply bored and was picked on for being Scottish, and to London, where he spent time writing and overseeing the editions of his books. He had a simple life, fond of his family, his friends, and his books. And, at the same time, his life was extraordinary. He met with some of the most brilliant minds of his time, including most of the *encyclopédistes*, was David Hume’s closest friend, advisor to his ancient pupil the Duke of Buccleuch all along his life and especially during the debacle of the credit crisis in Scotland in 1772, and witnessed and commented upon the independence of the former British colonies. Everything he saw and read provided him with evidence and motivation for his work.

---

Pedro Garcia Duarte, Senior Research Fellow, INSPER Institute of Education and Research Jimena Hurtado, Professor, Economics Department, Universidad de los Andes. Pedro Duarte thanks CNPq (306584/2019-0) for financial support, Email: [jhet.editor@historyofeconomics.org](mailto:jhet.editor@historyofeconomics.org)

ISSN 1053-8372 print; ISSN 1469-9656 online/23/02000179-181 © The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the History of Economics Society  
doi:10.1017/S1053837222000773

His insightfulness and clarity, his way of exploring issues in unprecedented ways, of showing the positive and negative aspects of human behavior, social interactions, and commercial society, made him an exceptional thinker and a permanent source of inspiration.

Over the centuries, Adam Smith has been considered father of economics, defender of markets, advocate of individual freedom, and promoter of bourgeois virtues and values. More recently he has also been portrayed as a proponent of egalitarianism and State regulation, with more attention given to his work on social and moral psychology, rhetoric, and esthetics. He has also been questioned as a central figure of capitalism and laissez-faire and as part of a colonial and oppressive system.

Our interpretation and understanding of Smith have certainly changed. From the infamous “Das Adam Smith Problem” in the mid-nineteenth century to George Stigler’s (1971, p. 265) praise of the *Wealth of Nations* as “a stupendous palace erected upon the granite of self-interest,” since 1976 we have rediscovered the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, overcome the alleged opposition between self-love and sympathy, and come to appreciate Smith’s views on the emergence of communities of values and beliefs; on “general rules of conduct” and justice; and on politics, esthetics, and rhetoric. A more complex Smith, beyond economics, is part of what we have seen in the last fifty years. New, controversial, and opposite interpretations of his works show that Adam Smith’s thought is still very much alive. “Smith at 300” is *Journal of the History of Economic Thought’s* (*JHET*) way of celebrating this deeply human thinker. Mary Morgan, with her usual kindness and generosity, suggested the format of this celebration to us, and we eagerly accepted it.

We invited well-known Smith scholars and had an open call for contributions to participate in this celebration. We asked people to write short pieces telling us what their favorite quote from Adam Smith was and why. We were fortunate enough to receive an unexpectedly high number of responses. We were unfortunate enough to have to choose among the contributions we received. We thank all those who allowed us to read why Smith was important to them. The Smith we are left with after reading these pieces is a tremendously inspiring and contemporary author. This Smith celebration opens the June 2023 issue of *JHET*, which is entirely dedicated to Adam Smith: we have in addition five regular articles on Smith, and two letters to the editor related to a previous paper on Smith published in *JHET*. The issue closes, as usual, with four book reviews.

The contributions to the “Smith at 300” symposium that are published here range from Smith’s most famous quotes, like the exchange with the butcher, the brewer, and the baker in the *Wealth of Nations*, or Smith’s opening remarks in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* about the sympathetic nature of human beings, to some less known, as Smith’s “violent fit of laziness” in a letter to his mother. Besides offering a personal take on each quote, our contributors give a sense of recent literature and the directions Smith scholarship is taking. All and each of these contributions shows how Smith is a valuable source of ideas and a worthy interlocutor to appraise social, political, and economic phenomena today. Smith crosses disciplinary boundaries as his work crosses centuries. He is a familiar figure of Western modern thought; it is as if we have followed his instructions to his publisher, and now call him “simply Adam Smith without any addition either before or behind” (*Corr.*, p. 122).

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

## REFERENCES

- Rae, John. 1895. *Life of Adam Smith*. London: Macmillan.
- Smith, Adam. 1987. *The Correspondence of Adam Smith*. Edited by Ernest Campbell Mossel and Ian Simpson Ross. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.
- Stigler, George. 1971. "Smith's Travels on the Ship of State." *History of Political Economy* 3 (2): 265–276.