

British Foreign Policy and Critical Scholarship:

The Legacy of Adam Smith

by David Wearing

PhD Student - Political Science

University College, London

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to argue that critical studies of British foreign policy can be situated within the mainstream of our intellectual heritage, and therefore deserve an important place within scholarly activity today. I will begin by setting out how the critical-left interpretation of political economy may be applied to current British foreign policy. Noting the apparent influence of centres of socio-economic power over policymaking, and the evident public opposition to significant elements of current policy, I suggest that British foreign policy presents a fruitful area of research for scholars concerned that governments in liberal democracies may be disproportionately influenced by certain interests at the expense of the general interest or the popular will. I will then look back to the thinkers of the Enlightenment, noting that challenging and critiquing power was a major element of this defining movement within our intellectual tradition. In particular, I will examine the work of Adam Smith and his critique of Britain's foreign and economic policies in the eighteenth century, as set out in his famous work, "The Wealth of Nations". Smith's theoretical treatise on economics went hand-in-hand with a political critique of the way in which influential vested interests had been able to distort public policy to suit their own ends, a critique rooted in an explicit sense of injustice. I will argue that Smith's focus on the question of just outcomes and his analytical emphasis on the role of power, influence and sectional interests in politics, are elements of his work that critical scholars of today's British foreign policy can draw upon. I will conclude with a few brief remarks on how such a research agenda might be taken forward.

The political economy of British foreign policy: a critical interpretation

Critical scholars and the broader international left take as their primary focus the disparity of political power between different socio-economic sections of society, and emphasise in particular the political dominance of the wealthiest classes. This can be summed up, crudely but with some effectiveness, in the statement of the American social philosopher John Dewey that “politics is the shadow cast on society by big business” (cited in Chomsky:2004). In a more sophisticated formulation, Eric Herring identifies “the highly networked but heterogeneous political and corporate elite which holds concentrations of power and money in Britain and beyond” as the dominant social force (Herring:2006:105). The ethical concern driving this focus on elite power is that policymaking is being diverted to serve certain influential sectors at the expense of the broader interests of society, thus violating core democratic principles.

Starting from this basis, a critical interpretation of the political economy of British foreign policy would therefore run as follows (also described in Wearing.b:2009). Though Britain is a liberal democratic society, the way in which power is distributed within and around that society results in a foreign policy whose de facto purpose is to attend primarily to the interests of Herring’s “highly networked but heterogeneous political and corporate elite”, rather than to reflect the will and the interests of the voting public. Whether consciously or as a natural outcome of the socio-political landscape, policymakers tend to prioritise the interests of those best placed to influence the government. It is for this

reason that Britain has supported since 1945 the US-led maintenance of a global system which is seen as amenable to British commercial interests, endeavouring to maximise both Britain's position within that system, and the political and economic advantages that are perceived to be gained from it, by those elites. (For an elaboration of this argument in an historical context, see Wearing.a:2009.)

This critical view highlights various examples of how influence is brought to bear on the policymaking process by multifarious sources of power. The means of influence are not limited to the reasonably obvious ones, such as corporate lobbying, donations to political campaigns, or the corporate ownership of the press and the effect this has on the framing of political discourse (on the last of these see, for example, Mullen:2009). While such forms of influence are important, it would be too simplistic to paint a picture of the state merely acting as an obedient servant to its corporate masters. Rather, as Herring's phrase suggests, elite interests are intertwined across the state-corporate divide, rendering that divide rather less solid than it may at first appear.

One element of this is the fact that Britain's comparatively low levels of social mobility lead to positions of power in both the public and the private sectors being filled disproportionately by people from privileged backgrounds (Wintour:2009; Scott:1991). Boundaries also blur in terms of the movement of individuals between the two realms, with notable examples in the sphere of foreign policy. Oil companies, banks and construction firms temporarily second employees to many British embassies, whilst continuing to pay their salaries (Sampson:2004:135). The Guardian reported in 2007 that "the chief lobbyist of Britain's biggest arms company [BAE] was given an official security pass allowing

him to wander freely around the Ministry of Defence” (Evans & Leigh:2007). This extraordinary degree of access reportedly continues up to the very highest levels of government. The former foreign secretary Robin Cook wrote that BAE’s chairman “appeared to have the key to the garden door to Number Ten”. It seems reasonable to infer some connection between this and Cook’s statement that “certainly I never once knew Number Ten to come up with any decision that would be incommodating to British Aerospace” (cited in Sampson:2004:161,287).

The ability of the United States to influence the foreign policy of Great Britain probably requires less illustration. (For a good critical discussion of the alliance, see Curtis:2003:101-119.) Examples of the ways in which this power manifests itself range from the extent to which British intelligence is reliant on the American security services (Sampson:2004:149) to the reliance on US management and technology for the maintenance of Britain’s nuclear capability, the effect of which dependency in such a key strategic area is, in the words of former Prime Minister Harold Macmillan’s Permanent Secretary, Sir Robert Scott, to “put us in America’s pocket” (Plesch:2006). The power wielded by the United States in the world’s economic forums, on the United Nations Security Council and in NATO, need not be discussed here for the general point to be made.

It is in the context of these influences that a critical interpretation of British foreign policy would place the notable public opposition that the government has faced on core policy choices in recent years. Polls have shown majority opposition to the invasion and occupation of Iraq (BBC News:2003), to the closeness of London’s relationship to Washington, to Britain’s stance on the Israeli-Hezbollah war of 2006 (on both the special relationship and Lebanon war,

see Glover & MacAskill:2006), and to the proposed replacement of the Trident nuclear system (Stratton:2009). A large majority believes that the invasion of Iraq increased, rather than decreased, the threat from international terrorism (World Public Opinion:2006). Perhaps most strikingly, almost one in four British voters believe that the last Prime Minister of the country should be tried for international crimes, with over half believing that he deliberately misled Parliament and the public over the invasion of Iraq (Smith:2010). Any sharp and sustained divergence between public opinion and the fundamental elements of government policy must clearly raise questions about the health and proper functioning of the democratic system. The critical view would say that this divergence is at least partially, perhaps even substantively, explained by the disproportionate influence that voices other than those of the general public have over policymakers. It is precisely out of a moral concern for the implications of these disparities in power and influence that the critical scholar turns his or her attentions to the issues set out above.

Providing an exhaustive and all-encompassing account of the ways in which, and the degree to which, concentrations of socio-economic power shape British foreign policy, is beyond the scope of this paper, as indeed is any attempt to demonstrate conclusively the veracity of the broader critical account of the political economy of British foreign policy. The foregoing remarks are intended to set out, however briefly and incompletely, the basis upon which such an analysis might be built, and the reasons why research in this area, and with this focus, may prove productive. The purpose of this paper is to argue that such a research agenda is very much consistent with central themes of our intellectual heritage. For this reason (in addition to its empirical and moral relevance) I argue that the critical research agenda described above is deserving of a place within the

mainstream of scholarly activity today. To illustrate the point, I will explore the relevance to this discussion of the work of one of the most prominent figures in Enlightenment thought: Adam Smith.

The critical Enlightenment and Adam Smith

The influence of the Enlightenment on intellectual activity over the past two centuries, whilst by no means absolute, has been both fundamental and extensive. The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy states that the Enlightenment

“...provided one source of the revolutions that shook Europe and America at the end of the Eighteenth century, and it laid the intellectual foundations for both the generally scientific worldview and the liberal democratic society, which, despite the many attacks made on them, continue to function as cultural ideals.”(Audi:1999)

Leading Enlightenment thinkers used their key works to challenge power intellectually and politically. David Hume questioned the foundations of religious belief (Audi:1999:402-3), Mary Wollstonecraft challenged patriarchy with the case for female emancipation (Audi:1999:981; Schama:2003:59-60), and Thomas Paine called for “democratic republicanism”, redistribution of property and an end to slavery (Audi:1999:639; see also Foot:2005:50-54 and Schama:2003:46-47).

The work of the Eighteenth century Scottish philosopher and political economist Adam Smith played its own part within this broad, progressive intellectual movement. He remains a well known figure to this day, and his appearance on

one side of the British twenty pound banknote tells us something about the iconic status he retains in our society. His most famous work, "The Wealth of Nations", combined a theoretical treatise on economics with a powerful political critique of the way in which influential economic groups had been able to distort public policy to suit their own ends at the expense of the general interest. Smith's political analysis repeatedly emphasised the role of power, influence and class in policy making. Furthermore, his critique was of an explicitly moral nature, returning repeatedly to the injustice of the status quo.

Smith argued that the system of mercantilism - whereby Britain's trade, especially with its colonies, was strictly regulated and protected - was highly inefficient, and as such impeded not only Britain's prosperity, but also that of its colonies and of other countries in the emerging international economy. Instead of directing economic activity in this way, Smith said, the government should allow the market to take the lead in pricing and allocating resources. This would maximise the efficient use of those resources, and thereby maximise the prosperity of all.

Why was the more efficient and productive economic course not being taken? For Smith, the answer was that government policy had not been to promote the wealth of nations, but to promote the wealth of those economic elites that were best placed to influence the government. Since the merchants of the colonial trade had been the government's "principal advisers" on the regulation of that trade, it was no surprise that "their interest has been more considered than either that of the colonies or that of the mother country" (Smith.b:1999:165 – Book IV, chapter vii, part ii)

The “principal architects” of policy

Some of Smith’s most compelling language is directed against the “particular orders of men who tyrannise the government” (quotation from Smith’s “Theory of Moral Sentiments”, cited by Lieberman:2006:241) and the effect they have on policy. The “English legislature has been peculiarly attentive to the interests of commerce” because policymakers were continually “imposed upon by the sophistry of merchants and manufacturers, who are always demanding a monopoly against their countrymen” (Smith.b:1999:44 - IV, ii, and Smith.a:1999:517 - III,iv).

The influence these forces could bring to bear was considerable. The vested interests “like an overgrown standing army, ... have become formidable to the government, and upon many occasions intimidate the legislature” (Smith.b:1999:48 - IV,ii). They argue their case “with all the passionate confidence of interested falsehood” predicting national ruin if their demands are not met (Smith.b:1999:75,76 - IV,iii,part ii). The politician who supports them

“...is sure to acquire not only the reputation of understanding trade, but great popularity and influence with an order of men whose numbers and wealth render them of great importance. If he opposes them, on the contrary, and still more if he has authority enough to be able to thwart them, neither the most acknowledged probity, nor the highest rank, nor the greatest public service can protect him from the most infamous abuse and detraction..., arising from the insolent outrage of furious and disappointed monopolists” (Smith.b:1999:48-9 - IV,ii).

The government's deliberations are therefore directed, not by "an extensive view of the general good" but by "the clamorous importunity of partial interests"(Smith.b.1999:49 - IV,ii). These economic elites are "the principal architects" of policy, ensuring that their interests are "most peculiarly attended to" (Smith.b:1999:247 - IV, viii), and Smith reserves his most stinging criticism for the iniquitous result of this corrupt and compromised process:

"To found a great empire for the sole purpose of raising up a people of customers may at first sight appear a project fit only for a nation of shopkeepers. It is, however, a project altogether unfit for a nation of shopkeepers; but extremely fit for a nation whose government is influenced by shopkeepers. Such statesmen, and such statesmen only, are capable of fancying that they will find some advantage in employing the blood and treasure of their fellow citizens to found and maintain such an empire."(Smith.b:1999:197 - IV,vii, part iii)

Smith and class

Central to this critique is Smith's emphasis on the diverging interests of different social classes, principally between the elites and the majority. The former are as organised in pursuit of their interests as any trade union. "We rarely hear, it has been said, of the combinations of masters, though frequently of those of workmen. But whoever imagines, upon this account, that masters rarely combine, is as ignorant of the world as of the subject" (Smith.a:1999:169 - I.viii). Rothschild and Sen note that Smith's analysis sees these men of profit pursue their interests "by both political and commercial means" (quoting Rothschild & Sen:2006:346), and he does not look kindly upon their aims. "All for ourselves

and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind” (Smith.a:1999:512 - III, iv).

Smith is clear that the “principal architects” of policy neither serve the general interest nor promote the wealth of nations as they adhere to the “vile maxim”. Elite interests are, in Smith’s analysis, “not identical with and are often opposed to, the interest of the society” (quoting Rothschild & Sen:2006:328). The socio-economic elite constitutes “an order of men, whose interest is never exactly the same with that of the public, who have generally an interest to deceive and even to oppress the public, and who accordingly have, upon many occasions, both deceived and oppressed it” (Smith, quoted by Rothschild & Sen:2006:328-9). Smith repeatedly returns to the point that while the mercantile system does not benefit the general interest it does benefit the “principal architects” of the policy (Smith.b:1999:29 – IV, ii; Smith.b:1999:72 - IV,iii,part ii; Smith.b:1999:92-3 – IV,v; Smith.b:1999:197 - IV,vii, part iii). While Smith believed that “[t]he real interest of [the] masters, if they were capable of understanding it, is the same as with that of the country”. (Smith.b:1999:225 - IV,vii, part iii), he also recognised that, endowed as they were with the power to influence public policy, “the masters” choose to pursue their narrow interests as they perceived them, contrary to those of the nation as a whole.

For this reason, Smith’s economic theory cannot be fully understood without taking into account the accompanying political critique. Considering Smith’s emphasis on competing class interests affords us a more complete understanding of his famous view of the harmony of self-interest that would take place in a proper relationship between government and the market. As Mehta explains:

“Establishing the ‘system of natural liberty’ under which everyman is ‘left perfectly free to pursue his interest in his own way’ is thus for Smith a *task*, rather than something that comes naturally [emphasis in original]. The paradox is that the very motive, self-interest, that allows that system to produce the beneficial consequences it does, constantly threatens to undermine it. It is the pursuit of their interests that leads merchants to demand monopolies and privileges that harm society; yet, those very same interests can, under right institutional conditions, produce beneficial outcomes. *The Wealth of Nations*, is an account of how the interests of all might be harmonized, not a claim that they are always, or naturally, in harmony” (Mehta:2006:257. On the importance of class in Smith, see also Chomsky:1993:16)

Smith’s guiding sense of justice

Smith’s concern with questions of justice was not confined to his other famous work, “The Theory of Moral Sentiments”. There he wrote that a sense of altruism was innate to human beings, that “it is the great precept of nature to love ourselves only as we love our neighbour”, and that “the corruption of our moral sentiments” was occasioned by “the disposition to admire the rich and great and to despise or neglect persons of poor and mean condition” (cited in McLean:2006:129-30 and 146). However, these views also took centre stage in his work on political economy. The technical argument for economic efficiency and the moral argument for just outcomes are not separate and distinct in *Wealth of Nations*. They are intrinsically bound up together.

Smith argues that “The establishment of perfect justice, of perfect liberty and of perfect equality is the very simple secret which most effectually secures the highest degree of prosperity to all ... classes” (Smith.b:1999:255 - IV, ix). Open markets play an important role, but when they reach their limits, the state must step in to ensure the delivery of these outcomes. It would be necessary to establish and maintain “certain public works and ... institutions” for the benefit of society as a whole, where individuals seeking profit could not be relied upon to provide them (Smith.b:1999:274 - IV, viii). The division of labour would promote economic efficiency, but an extensive system of education together with subsidised cultural events would be required to counteract the deadening effect on the condition of those “whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations” (Rothschild & Sen:2006:322, Smith quoted in McLean:2006:94). Market liberalisation should occur “by slow gradations, and with a good deal of reserve and circumspection” in cases where society would face initial difficulties in adapting to the new arrangements, otherwise hasty liberalisation could cause “still greater disorders” than the continuation of the status quo (Smith.b:1999:46 - IV,ii and p189 - IV,vii, part iii).

In all events, the goal was the wealth, prosperity and liberty of the entire nation, not merely the most influential classes. The sovereign had “the duty of protecting, as far as possible, every member of the society from the injustice or oppression of every other member of it” (Smith.b:1999:274 - IV, viii). “To hurt in any degree the interests of any one order of citizens, for no other purpose but to promote that of some other, is evidently contrary to that justice and equality of treatment which the sovereign owes to all the different orders of his subjects” (Smith.b:1999:238 - IV, viii). This was not a principle that could be honoured by adopting a pure, detached impartiality between the powerful and the powerless.

As Carl Menger, founder of the Austrian School of economics, wrote in 1891, “Smith placed himself in all cases of conflict of interest between the poor and the rich, between the strong and the weak, without exception on the side of the latter” (quoted in Rothschild & Sen:2006:363-4).

The injustices of imperialism

Smith applied these principles to his analysis of European imperialism. The discovery of the Americas by the Europeans could, in his view, have resulted in great mutual advantage to both sets of people. However, the Europeans, driven by the “principal architects” of policy in their pursuit of the “vile maxim of the masters of mankind”, had made this impossible. “The savage injustice of the Europeans rendered an event, which ought to have been beneficial to all, ruinous and destructive to several of those unfortunate [American] countries” (Smith.b.:1999:25 – IV,i).

Where weak nations, endowed with valuable natural resources, were invaded by Western powers, Smith was unimpressed with the lofty goals proclaimed by the leaders of the aggressor states. The Spanish conquests in the Americas were an effort to “take possession of countries of which the inhabitants were plainly incapable of defending themselves. The pious purpose of converting them to Christianity sanctified the injustice of the project. But the hope of finding treasures of gold there was the sole motive which prompted them to undertake it” (Smith.b:1999:142 - IV,vii, part i). Always, Smith observed power with a critical eye, refusing to take its statements and claimed benign motives at face value.

Assessing the early stages of what we now call 'globalisation', as various parts of the world began to be drawn together in travel, communication and commerce, Smith saw "[a] new set of exchanges [begin] to take place which had never been thought of before, and which should naturally have proved [mutually] advantageous" to all concerned. The fact that they had not was, again, the result of disparities in power leading to unjust outcomes.

What we can take from Smith today

The world has changed in many dramatic ways since Adam Smith wrote the "Wealth of Nations". The power of elites over public policy in Britain has been severely curtailed, as the public have gradually forced their way into the political arena through sustained popular activism (see especially Foot:2005). The case for the value and efficiency of markets does not need to be made with quite the same urgency as it did at a time when the punishment for a first offence of illegal livestock export was to have one's hand cut off and nailed up in the local marketplace, and the penalty for a second offence was death (Smith.b:1999:232-233 - IV, viii). It is therefore rather difficult to state definitively what particular position Smith would take on any given issue, were he alive today. That is not the intention of this paper, and nor indeed is the intention to argue that Smith was correct in all areas of his analysis.

Instead, the intention is to highlight the centrality to Smith's work of three analytical and moral priorities. These are:

- the disproportionate influence of centres of socio-economic power over policymaking;

- the frequent clashes and divergences between the general interest of the population and the interests of those centres of power; and
- the importance not only of highlighting injustice and promoting moral outcomes, but of framing one's analysis of the political economy within an overall conception of justice.

These priorities, consistent with broader Enlightenment themes and thus situated within the mainstream of our intellectual heritage, deserve an important place within scholarly activity today, due both to their place within that heritage and, moreover, to their continuing relevance. As noted above, scholars who share these priorities with Smith will find that the political economy of British foreign policy provides them with a fruitful area for research. Elite power, whilst certainly changing and diminishing over time, still persists (Foot:2005:398-425, Scott:1991:118-152), and arguably remains the defining characteristic both of the international system and of Britain's role within it (Wearing.a:2009).

Numerous potential topics for study can be identified. The British government's quasi-mercantilist support for influential arms exporters, in terms both of its questionable economic efficiency and of the eventual destination and use of those arms, is one area of research where the three abovementioned principles from Smith can be applied (Ingram & Isbister:2004; Stavrianakis:2008. See also Stavrianakis:2006 on relations between academia and the British arms industry). British foreign policy, in the Middle East and elsewhere, continues to raise serious questions about ethical outcomes, and would benefit from scholarly research and critiques on that basis (for an important example, see Herring:2002). The damaging effects of power imbalances in the global political economy, the dangers of hasty liberalisation of markets, and the influence of

vested interests over international economic policy, all retain their relevance as topics for research given Britain's leading role in the governance of bodies such as the International Monetary Fund (Chang:2007:35; Klein:2008; Monbiot:2000:302-330; Stiglitz:2002:195-213). This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it gives a flavour of the wide potential there is for interesting empirical study and analytical work.

Conclusion

Key analytical and moral themes from Smith's "Wealth of Nations" have direct relevance to the study of British foreign policy today, and can be fruitfully applied to that broad area of enquiry in a number of specific respects. In taking up this research agenda, we have a distinguished intellectual legacy to draw upon, and the potential for producing some important results. Given both its scholarly heritage and its current relevance, such research deserves a place in the mainstream of academic scholarship.

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