

THE INTELLECTUAL STANDARDS OF ADAM SMITH'S DAY

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In reviewing the contributions of Adam Smith to the growth of economics Hans Brems writes that "[m]uch of what Smith had to say had been said before—but in French. Academic etiquette of his day demanded no acknowledgements, and he offered none."¹ This is an unusually clear statement of a point of view that appears to circulate through much of the economics profession. Adam Smith, it would appear, borrowed much without acknowledgement. Nonetheless, it is not fair to dig deeply into this issue because the mid-eighteenth century was not an age much concerned with scholarly courtesies. I am not aware, however, of any study of the nature of scholarly expectations in this period. It has also been suggested that much of the earlier literature may have been so hard to obtain that it was simply not reasonable to expect Adam Smith to hunt out such material. This note aims to examine the view extant in the literature that academic etiquette of Smith's day "demanded no acknowledgements." We find indignant charges of plagiarism raised against John Asgill in 1696 and against one M'Arthur by

¹ Hans Brems, "Frequently Wrong But Rarely in Doubt," *Challenge* (November–December 1987). It is certainly striking that all the "second-generation" Scottish economists—Dugald Stewart, Francis Horner, and Henry Brougham—as well as Thomas Robert Malthus showed a preference for the Physiocrats. I have alluded briefly to the evidence presented here in Salim Rashid, "Adam Smith's Acknowledgements: Neo-Plagiarism and the Wealth of Nations," *JOURNAL OF LIBERTARIAN STUDIES*, 9, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 1–24.

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George Chalmers in 1803, and it would thus require curious circumstances for scholarly manners to have altered during the century in between. The obituarist of Sir James Steuart was already accusing (unnamed) scholars of having plagiarized Steuart's works, and the suspicion that the barbs were aimed at Smith need to be examined.²

There are four main streams of economic knowledge from which Adam Smith could have drunk. First, the classics were a staple in every educated man's diet and Smith, in particular, relished the Stoics. Second are the natural law philosophers, exemplified chiefly by Grotius and Pufendorf, whose works were discussed and transmitted to Scotland by Adam Smith's teachers. Third, Scotland had long had close ties with France and Holland and even though there do not appear to be direct links with the Dutch, several French economists were undoubtedly familiar to Smith. Finally, we must consider the long tradition of English pamphleteering, a literature that was generated in order to debate policy issues but which often provided insights of permanent value. Those who assert that acknowledgements were not expected in the eighteenth century will have to establish not only that all of the above traditions are deficient in providing due acknowledgement, but also that there was no such practice in other fields such as history or literature—important parts of education in Adam Smith's day, and areas to which Smith himself paid considerable attention.

Strictly speaking, we should separate some closely related issues. While evidence from sources of a much earlier age might show that Smith was familiar with the practice of careful citation, it does not tell us about the literary manners of Smith's own day. If we look at Smith's contemporaries we may be able to infer that Smith knew his period required careful citation. Finally, there is the murky question of plagiarism and the attitude of scholars in economics as well as other fields towards this issue. My concern here is with the practice of citation.

I. GROTIUS AND HUTCHESON

It is well known that the Greeks provided only very limited material on economics; even here, however, Adam Smith did not fully escape censure.³ In his translation of Aristotle's *Ethics and Politics*, the Scottish

² John Briscoe, Mr. John Asgill, *his Plagiarism detected* (London: Printed for Andrew Bell, 1696).

historian John Gillies accused Smith of borrowing the main ideas of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Subsequently, Vernard Foley has dealt with Smith's use of a variety of examples—cloth and ships being the main ones—which suggest Greek inspiration, as well as the use of the contrast between a porter and a philosopher, which is suggestive of the life of Protagoras.⁴ However, as our interest is not the substantive doctrines themselves but rather what Smith may have taken to be due literary courtesy, we may move on from the Greeks to the Moral Philosophers.

The writings of Hugo Grotius will serve adequately to emphasize the importance of acknowledgements, especially since most later writers were, by their own admission, commenting on Grotius. A quick look at *De Jure Belli* will serve to justify the appellation of "miracle of Holland" that stuck to Grotius. The careful scholarship that he brings to bear on each issue is striking. To take but one example—because the principles stated have relevance to the wider issue being discussed, the fair treatment of one's predecessors—we turn to the chapter, "On Interpretation," where the proper way to deal with treaties and promises is discussed. The first four principles stated are

- I. Promises are outwardly binding.
- II. If other implications are lacking, words are to be understood in their ordinary sense.
- III. Technical terms are to be explained according to their technical use.
- IV. Resort is to be had to conjectures in the case of ambiguous and contradictory expressions, or if conjectures naturally suggest themselves.⁵

There is a manifest desire to be "fair" to one's sources. To support these points alone we find references to Cicero, Isocrates, Livy, the Jewish scholars who wrote on *Numbers*, Procopius, Polybius, Thucydides, Ulpian,

³ As reported by Dugald Stewart, "An Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith, LL.D." in W. Hamilton, ed., *The Collected Works of Dugald Stewart*, vol. 10 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1872), pp. 82–84.

⁴ Vernard Foley, *The Social Physics of Adam Smith* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1976), p. 154.

⁵ Hugo Grotius, *The Law of War and Peace*, translated by F. W. Kelsey (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1925), pp. 409–13.

Augustine, Servitus, and the Greek Rhetoricians. In another place, in order to justify Plutarch's claim that "There is no war among men which does not originate in a fault," Grotius wrote in a footnote that "[t]his thought is absolutely true, but men seldom reflect upon it, though it has been set forth by many admirable statements by the ancients. What harm, then, to fortify it by the sayings of others, which are not less effective?"⁶ Grotius goes on to quote Athenaeus, Fabianus, Papirius, Philo, Pliny, Terome, Chrysostom, Claudian, and Agathias in support. Even in a work designed to have practical influence, as *De Jure Belli* eminently was, a love of scholarship shines abundantly.

When Adam Smith's teacher, Francis Hutcheson, came to write a short textbook, he made it very clear that he was only representing well-established notions and gave an explicit reference to Grotius and to his own teacher, Gershom Carmichael.⁷ In the preface addressed "To the Students in Universities" Hutcheson is careful to note how heavily he depends upon others:

The following books contain the elements of these several braches of moral philosophy; which if they are carefully studied may give the youth an easier access to the well known and admired works either of the ancients, Plato, Aristotle, Xenophon, Cicero; or of the moderns, Grotius, Cumberland, Puffendorf, Harrington and others, upon this branch of philosophy.

The learned will at once discern how much of this compend is taken from the writings of others, from Cicero and Aristotle; and to name no other moderns, from Puffendorf's smaller work, *de officio hominis et civis*, which that worthy and ingenious man the late Professor Gerschom Carmichael of Glasgow, by far the best commentator on that book.

Hutcheson was apparently not satisfied with such a general acknowledgment and indicates later how he would have liked to have elaborated on it.

In the second impression of this book some few additions seemed necessary and several amendments. The author once intended to have made references all along to the more eminent writers, ancient

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

⁷ Francis Hutcheson, *A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy* [1747] (Hildesheim: George Olms, 1969), p. i.

or modern, who treated the several subjects. But considering that this could be of no use except to those who have the cited books at hand, and that such could easily by their indexes find the corresponding place for themselves: He spared himself that disagreeable and unnecessary labour. All who have looked into such subjects know that the general doctrine and foundations of morals may be found in the antients above mentioned, and in Dr. Cumberland, and in Lord Shaftesbury: and that scarce any question of the law of nature and nations is not to be found in Grotius, Puffendorf, especially with Barbeyrac's copious notes, Harrington, Lock, or Bynkershoek, to mention no more. Nay in Barbeyrac one finds the principal authors who have published large dissertations on particular heads. Such as want more full discussions of any such points, must have recourse to these authors.⁸

It is worth emphasizing that Hutcheson was so careful even in a textbook, where originality would have been a minor concern and readers would not have expected the citation pattern of a research report.

II. CONTEMPORARY ECONOMISTS

The authorities referred to by Adam Smith himself in the *Wealth of Nations* suggest that the eighteenth century had much higher literary standards than has been commonly supposed. Charles Smith, whom Adam Smith called "the very well-informed author" of *Three Tracts on the Corn Trade*, provides careful references to all his sources.⁹ The "sober and judicious" Adam Anderson, as he is called in the *Wealth of Nations*, is yet another author who is careful to document his work in the *Historical and Chronological Deduction of the Origin of Commerce*. The extent to which some of Smith's authorities took pleasure in looking up predecessors is amply indicated by the following entry in Anderson's book.

The author . . . has in his possession a most judicious pamphlet, published in this year 1581, and dedicated to Queen Elizabeth, which, in his opinion, merited this short mention, being entitled, A compendious Examination of certain ordinary Complaints of divers of

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. iv.

⁹ Charles Smith, *Three Tracts on the Corn Trade and Corn Laws* (London: J. Brotherston, 1766).

our Countrymen in these our days. (By W. S.) It is in the black letter. Therein, public spirit, or zeal for the community,—the point of enclosures for pasture, then so much clamored against,—the dearth of provisions,—the decay of towns,—the multitude of sheep,—the coin's being worn out,—the true standard and intrinsic value of our money, compared with that of foreign nations,—wool, against its exportation,—our extravagant love of foreign wares,—and several other national points of great importance, are all handled in so masterly a manner, and in so pure a diction for the time he wrote, as to give room for conjecturing it might have been penned by the direction of that Queen's ministers, since scarcely any ordinary person, in those early days, could be furnished with so copious a fund of excellent matter.¹⁰

The only economist of Adam Smith's century who has acquired notoriety for plagiarism is Malachy Postlethwayt, whose works Smith appears to ignore, and who has been most fairly treated by Lucy Sutherland.¹¹

Two of the pamphleteers who draw praise from Smith are "Sir Matthew Decker" and the Rev. John Smith. It will be instructive to see what sort of an example these authors set. The author of the *Essay on the Causes of the Decline of the Foreign Trade*, supposed by Adam Smith to be Sir Matthew Decker, is one of the few English pamphleteers to have gained praise from Smith for a theoretical point: "The observation of Sir Matthew Decker, that certain taxes are, in the price of certain goods, sometimes repeated and accumulated four or five times, is perfectly just with regard to taxes upon the necessities of life."¹² There are three other references to the same pamphlet in the *Wealth of Nations* so we may be sure that this is a pamphlet Smith had read with some care. The *Essay* displays quite modern literary standards, especially if we remember that it was a tract for the times, written by a merchant. The author repeatedly uses and duly acknowledges John Locke, Charles Davenant, John de Wit, Roger Coke, *The British Merchant*, and *Britannia Linguens*. When the author of the *Essay* wishes to refute Joshua Gee's opinion on the inadvisability of free ports, he repeatedly references and quotes from Gee's own work.

¹⁰ Adam Anderson, *An Historical and Chronological Deduction of the Origin of Commerce* (London: Printed for J. White, 1801), vol. 2, p. 151.

¹¹ Lucy Sutherland, "The Law Merchant in England," in A. Newman, ed., *Politics and Finance in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Hambleton, 1984).

¹² Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, eds. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), vol. 2, p. 873.

Objections against a free-port here having been made by Joshua Gee, an author of good credit, for that reason must not be left unanswered, in his *Tract on Trade* . . . , he expresses himself thus: "But to think it would be an advantage for a trading nation to admit all manner of foreign commodities to be imported free from all duties, is an unaccountable notion, and still less suitable to the circumstances of our island than to the Continent; for we have no inland countries beyond us (as they have) with whom we may carry on trade by land; but what is of the utmost consequence to us, is, that by laying high duties we are always able to check the vanity of our people in the extreme fondness of wearing exotic manufactures: For were it not for this restraint, as our neighbours give much less wages to their workmen than we do, and consequently can sell cheaper, the Italians, the French and the Dutch, would have continued to pour upon us their silks, paper, hats, druggets, stuffs, rateens, and even Spanish wool cloths."¹³

The *Essay* then proceeds with an extended refutation. Although "Decker" is only a merchant, it is noticeable how well read he is. Indeed, the authors referred to by "Decker" make up a good portion of the *Select Tracts* that J. R. McCulloch was to reprint in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁴

When we turn to an author who had more leisure and who wrote self-consciously as a scholar, we find even higher standards. We are introduced to the Rev. John Smith by Adam Smith as "the very accurate and intelligent" author of the *Memoirs of Wool*, a book indeed fully deserving of such high praise. In order to provide readers with a comprehensive view of the woollen trade, John Smith provides extensive quotes from every author he uses as well as detailed references.¹⁵ "It was adjudged better to be prolix," he says in the preface, "than to omit any thing in the least material; and still better, than to leave any fact of moment doubt-

¹³ Sir Matthew Decker, *An Essay on the Causes of the Decline of the Foreign Trade*, second edition (London: Brotherton, 1756), reprinted in J. R. McCulloch, *A Select Collection of Scarce and Valuable Tracts on Commerce* (London: Privately Printed for the Political Economy Club, 1856). p. 251.

¹⁴ On the basis of contemporary attributions, followed by George Chalmers in his *Estimate of the Comparative Strength of Great Britain* (London: Printed for John Stockdale, 1804), p. 113, note 2. I believe the author is actually William Richardson.

¹⁵ John Smith, *Chronicon Rusticum—Commerciale or Memoirs of Wool* (London: T. Osborne, 1747), vol. 1, p. viii.

ful." The preface also provides a detailed account of all the foreign references he plans to use.

From the nature of which, many of them, it was necessary to be the more large and circumstantial, in several quotations of transcripts, in regard they are not simple, but complicated facts, viz. 1. Opinions and arguments; or, if it is allowable to use the word on this occasion, doctrines or theories. 2. Policies or measures taken in consequence thereof. 3. The result or consequence of those measures. And these being contained partly in small tracks, long since, out of print; the purport of them did not admit of being so briefly summed up, with reference made to the tracts themselves, as if they had been more accessible authors; but in order to a competent pourtrait, they required to be exhibited in their original dress; and though not at full length, yet in some due proportion.

It was further necessary, for the ascertaining and pointing out to observation, several of these facts, to make large additions, occasionally, by way of note, etc.; which has contributed to swell this work to what it is, the quantity of four volumes, although in the compass of two.

In the two volumes that follow, John Smith is almost embarrassingly complete in the way he provides complete references for every view. Sir Josiah Child, Thomas Mun, Charles Davenant, John Locke, Sir Matthew Decker, and a host of lesser lights of English economic pamphleteering appear in these books, together with copious illustrations of their thought. How could one admire such an author and be unaware of the desirability of due acknowledgement?

III. LITERATURE AND HISTORY

It remains to inquire whether general literary standards permitted a looser attitude to acknowledgments and borrowings. Two examples should suffice. When Samuel Johnson wrote about John Dryden in *Lives of the English Poets*, he noted how Dryden had been frequently accused of borrowing: "The perpetual accusation produced against him was that of plagiarism, against which he never attempted any vigorous defense; for

¹⁶ Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets: A Selection* (London: Everyman's Library, 1975), pp. 135-36.

though he was perhaps sometimes injuriously censured, he would, by denying part of the charge, have confessed the rest."¹⁶ It is of some importance to note that the issue was not one just recently raised by Johnson, but one that had been with Dryden even in the latter half of the seventeenth century.

Edward Gibbon wrote his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* at the same time as Smith wrote the *Wealth of Nations*, and the "solemn sneer" that he cast on the rise of Christianity was immediately recognized.¹⁷ Gibbon's credentials were questioned by several, most notably by H. E. Davis of Balliol College, Oxford, who produced dozens of pages that showed, in parallel columns, the wholesale manner in which Gibbon had borrowed. In replying to Davis, Gibbon does not claim that he is being held up to new standards, or that it was common practice to plagiarize and he should not be made an exception. Rather, his excuse is based on the very different point that, for his purposes, such borrowing did not matter.¹⁸

Even the practice of Adam Smith himself and his friends suggest that borrowing was not considered quite so innocent. In 1752 Smith made a long and vehement speech defending his priority regarding the doctrines of natural liberty.¹⁹ Such vigor surely had little point unless originality were valued—and, by implication, unacknowledged borrowing condemned. A few years later it was reported to Smith that Hugh Blair was using materials from his lectures on Rhetoric, and Smith replied to the effect that Blair was welcome to do so.²⁰ Once again, the report of Blair's purported borrowing to Smith makes little sense unless literary standards then were not widely different from standards today. Adam Smith is careful to acknowledge his debts to David Hume (with the possible exception of the specie-flow mechanism). For example, in singling out Hume for having ntloed the link between commerce and liberty, Smith ignores Sir James Steuart, Lord Karnes, Adam Ferguson, John Millar,

¹⁷ G. W. Bowersock, "Gibbon's Historical Imagination," *American Scholar* 57 (Winter 1988), pp. 33-47.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁹ Dugald Stewart, "Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith," pp. 67-68.

²⁰ This aspect is covered in most biographies of Smith. The most careful journal treatment is Ronald Hamowy, "Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson and the Division of Labor," *Economica* 35 (August 1968): 249-59.

and William Robertson.²¹ Hume himself, of course, was not very careful with his acknowledgments.²² There is the possibility that scholars have been misled about the general intellectual climate by focussing on the mutual admiration club of David Hume and Adam Smith.

IV. CONCLUSION

To summarize, a consideration of the literary standards of acknowledgment prevalent in Adam Smith's day has led to the examination of several possible sources. The moral philosophers from which Smith learned are found to have upheld recognizable standards of scholarship, and this is also true of those English pamphleteers with whom Adam Smith was familiar. It is scarcely possible by means of extracts and quotes to do justice to the extent to which high scholarly standards are visible in Hugo Grotius and the Rev. John Smith; the interested reader has to consult the originals to get such a feeling. The works of Samuel Johnson and of Edward Gibbon show that omitted acknowledgment was reprehensible to both poets and historians. Several incidents from Adam Smith's own life show that originality was well as due acknowledgments were valued. If Adam Smith were indeed deficient in his acknowledgments, there is little justification for supposing that Adam Smith's own practice was justified by the standards of his age.

²¹ Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, vol. 1, p. 412, note 6, where the editors draw attention to this point.

²² Laird Okie, "Ideology and Partiality in David Hume's *History of England*," *Hume Studies* 11 (April 1985): 1-32; David Wootton, "Hume's 'Of Miracles,'" in M. Stewart, ed., *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 202-03; Salim Rashid, "David Hume and Eighteenth Century Monetary Thought: A Critical Comment on Recent Views," *Hume Studies* 10 (November 1984): 156-64.