

# Adam Smith's stages of history

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Discussion Paper No. 08/601

March 2008

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine Smith's four stages theory of history as an account of economic and social development, with an emphasis on the arguments and evidence he used to support it. In his biographical account of Smith's life, his friend Dugald Stewart described Smith's method as 'conjectural history', initiating a debate which has continued ever since. Stewart meant that Smith used (informed) conjecture to fill the unavoidable gaps in the historical evidence, though hostile commentators have interpreted it as saying that Smith simply ignored the facts. This paper sets Smith's account alongside the evidence available to him to try to establish how much of it is pure speculation, unconstrained by historical evidence, and how much is rather a matter of interpreting evidence which can never be complete, as any historian is bound to do. It emerges that Smith did not (usually) neglect or ride roughshod over the evidence as it was available to him, but rather that evidence about some aspects and periods of history simply did not then exist, leaving much in his account that is indeed pure conjecture. The focus of the paper is on Smith, not on contemporaries or predecessors who argued a similar case. It deals with the substance of Smith's case, not with priority.

JEL: B12

Keywords: Adam Smith, history, four stages, conjectural history

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## Introduction

According to Adam Smith, history is divided into four stages: '1st, the Age of Hunters; 2dly, the Age of Shepherds; 3dly, the Age of Agriculture; and 4thly, the Age of Commerce' (LJ(A) i.27).<sup>2</sup> This theory, shared with other Scottish and French writers of the mid-to-late eighteenth century, is familiar enough, but there has been relatively little detailed discussion of Smith's use of the four stages theory and of the arguments he used to justify it.

Discussion of Smith's treatment of history has often focused on the issue of economic determinism. Pascal (1938) and Meek (1971, 1976) saw the four stages as a form of economic determinism ancestral to Marx's theory of history. This has provoked a continuing discussion which has focused mainly on the emergence of commercial societies (or, in Marxist terms, the transition from feudalism to capitalism) in western Europe. Recent contributions to this debate have mainly rejected the charge that Smith was an economic determinist (e.g. Haakonssen 1981 181–9, Winch 1983, Salter 1992). Andrew Skinner (1975, 1982) is sometimes included with Pascal and Meek among those interpreting Smith as an economic determinist (e.g. Salter 1992), but this seems to me to be unfair. Skinner's 1975 paper in particular gives a balanced reading and is still perhaps the best overall treatment of the subject. Alvey's important contribution (2003a, b) presents a wider view, but with the focus still mainly on the rise of commercial society. The debate over economic determinism in Smith has raised important issues. One aim of this paper is to widen the focus beyond medieval and post-medieval Europe.

A second relevant literature deals with the ancestry and development of the four stages theory in writings of the eighteenth century and before. Smith was, of course, not the only or the first to propose a four stage theory. Meek (1976) speculated that although Smith was not first to publish, he may well have used the four stages in his lectures sometime around 1750, giving him priority in the statement of the fully developed form of the theory. More recently, however, discussion has moved away from this kind of claim to priority. For example, Pocock's massive early-modern historiography, *Barbarism and Religion* (1999, see also 2006), does not emphasize the four stages theory as such but stresses the development of what Pocock calls the 'enlightened narrative', which aimed to account for the emergence of the system of independent secular states in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The purpose of this paper is to examine Smith's four stages theory of history as an account of economic and social development, with an emphasis on the arguments and evidence he used to support it. The focus of the paper, therefore, is on Smith. It is important to stress that by discussing Smith's theory in isolation from his predecessors I make no claim of originality for Smith, nor do I deny any such claim. The origins of the theory are simply not on the

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<sup>2</sup> References to Smith's works are in the standard Glasgow format.

agenda. It will, however, be appropriate to discuss what evidence was available to Smith to confirm or falsify the theory, and to discuss the way he dealt with the available evidence.

### **The four stages in the *Wealth of Nations* and the *Lectures on Jurisprudence***

There is a clear, if implicit, reference to the four stages theory as early as the fourth paragraph of the *Wealth of Nations* in Smith's famous contrast between living standards in 'savage nations of hunters and fishers' and 'civilised and thriving nations' (WN Intro.4), that is, between the first and last of the four stages. That reference is typical of many others in the *Wealth of Nations* in that the stages theory is clearly there in the background, but is not spelled out in its own right. There is one substantial section of the book in which all four stages are named, explicitly defined, and contrasted with each other (WN V.1.a and b), but even there the stages are simply compared in a static fashion with no explicit claim that one follows on from another, apart from a description of each stage as more 'advanced' than its predecessor.

The main source for Smith's use of the four stages theory, however, is the *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, consisting of two sets of student notes on his lectures, relating to different years. There are clearly difficulties in relying on the notes since we do not know how complete or accurate they are. The material was presented in a different order in the two years, and one set of notes is longer, and therefore presumably fuller, than the other. There is, however, reassuringly close agreement between the two note-takers in terms of substantive content, suggesting that the notes give a good impression of the content of Smith's lectures. The fact that these are lectures, and lectures on jurisprudence, is a more substantial problem. They are not a finished and considered work prepared for publication, and they are not a work of history, still less a complete history of the world. Where there are gaps in coverage or argument, it may simply be that Smith omitted things that were not directly relevant to the course, or not suitable for that particular audience, or because of lack of time. The lectures, however, together with the rather scattered material from the *Wealth of Nations*, are what there is to go on.<sup>3</sup>

Smith's terminology and definitions can be confusing. In the first stage, Smith's 'age of hunters', subsistence depended on the 'wild fruits and wild animals which the country afforded' (LJ(A) i.27). People in this stage would now be called hunter-gatherers. The second stage, the 'age of shepherds' or of 'pasturage' (LJ(B) 149), is characterised by the herding of animals, but not the tilling of the soil. The animals herded by 'shepherds' need not be sheep. What is critical in Smith's account is that the domestication of animals came before the domestication of plants, to make a distinct stage in development. 'We find accordingly that in almost all countries the age of shepherds preceded that of agriculture' (LJ(A) i.29). This

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<sup>3</sup> There is nothing directly relevant to the four stages theory in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

stage, Smith thought, was typically nomadic – when the pasture in one area was exhausted, shepherd and flock moved on. In Smith’s story the ‘age of agriculture’ or the ‘age of farming’ (LJ(B) 149) added (arable) farming (tillage, the cultivation of the soil), though the keeping of animals and the eating of meat certainly continued. Agriculture in this sense required investment in clearing and cultivating the land, and allowed food supply and population to increase. I shall use the word ‘agriculture’, as Smith did, to mean settled agriculture with a large arable component, and ‘pasturage’ to mean animal husbandry without tillage.

The commercial stage is different in that it is not defined by the main source of food. Commerce (trade) plays some role in all stages of society, while the commercial stage, as Smith defined it, is a development of the agricultural stage. A simple agricultural system might have ‘little foreign commerce’ and only ‘coarse’ manufactures produced in the household (WN V.i.a.6). A division of labour and corresponding pattern of trade develops bit by bit (LJ(A) i.31), with no clear dividing line at which society becomes ‘commercial’.

### **Conjectural history**

In his biographical account of Smith’s life, his friend Dugald Stewart described Smith’s method as ‘conjectural history’, initiating a debate about the methodological basis of Smith’s history which has continued ever since. Discussing Smith’s *Dissertation on the Origins of Language* and, more generally, his view of history, Stewart noted the lack of direct historical evidence about (at least) the early stages of development from ‘rude tribes’ to contemporary society, and remarked that:

In this want of direct evidence, we are under a necessity of supplying the place of fact by conjecture; and when we are unable to ascertain how men have actually conducted themselves upon particular occasions, of considering in what manner they are likely to have proceeded, from the principles of their nature, and the circumstances of their external situation. ... To this species of philosophical investigation, which has no appropriated name in our language, I shall take the liberty of giving the title of *Theoretical or Conjectural History*. (Stewart 1980 293)

This points to an important question: how much of Smith’s account of history is based on evidence and how much is ‘conjecture’, invented to fill the gaps? Meek (1976 231) read Stewart’s comments as ancestral to a line of criticism that accuses Smith of neglecting historical facts in favour of theory. Thus, Coleman has remarked that ‘historical evidence was of secondary importance in [Smith’s] grand design of a comprehensive system’ (1980 775), and Wightman (1975 54) accepted a role for gap-filling in the absence of direct evidence, but complained that Smith left the reader in doubt where fact ended and fiction began. Stewart himself did not intend any such criticism – he saw conjecture as a means of filling the gaps, and suggested that otherwise disconnected pieces of evidence might act as a check on the story (1980 293). Indeed, one could reasonably argue that historical evidence never tells the

whole story and that the historian always has to use judgement (that is, in Stewart's terms, conjecture) to construct a comprehensible narrative.

It may be useful to distinguish two different forms of 'theoretical or conjectural' history, or at least two ends of a scale of possibilities. First, there is what one might regard as wholly 'conjectural' history, in which evidence of what happened is almost completely lacking, but in which Smith provided a 'likely story' to account for the (known) end result. Thus, Smith started his discussion of the origins of language by telling a story about 'two savages who had never been taught to speak' (Languages 1). This is pure conjecture, constrained only by the requirement that the story must be consistent with Smith's general view of human nature and must end up with the construction of a language with the known features of human languages. How far the four stages theory fits this pattern remains to be established. A second pattern appears in the discussion of relatively well-documented periods, where the facts are not in real doubt but where Smith used more general theories to provide causal explanations, which the facts alone can never do. This might more reasonably be called 'theoretical' history or (following Skinner 1975 154) 'philosophical' history. The key difference is the extent to which the story is constrained by historical evidence.

In all cases, Smith's explanations are based on an assumption that 'certain basic structures of human motivation' are constant (Fleischacker 2004 64). Fleischacker rightly describes this as a methodological choice, necessary to the construction of causal explanations. Smith himself stated the methodological principle that 'in the manner of Sir Isaac Newton we may lay down certain principles known or proved in the beginning, from whence we account for the severall Phenomena, connecting all together by the same Chain' (LRBL ii.133). Skinner (1975) argued (with special reference to the development of commerce in Europe, but his argument has wider application) that Smith saw change as the result of self-interested actions, where the individual's motivation was often political rather than narrowly economic, and the overall results of individual actions were not necessarily intended by any of them (see also Raphael and Skinner 1980 3).

A complication arises because Smith sometimes described an idealised or simplified process of change, before allowing for the existence of distortions which alter the pattern. For example, the *Wealth of Nations* account of the 'natural progress of opulence' is followed by chapters explaining why Europe had not in fact followed that route (WN II.i-iii). In that case the argument is very fully spelled out with no real possibility of confusion, but Smith left no full and considered account of the four stages theory as a whole, so it is harder to tell exactly how the theory should be applied.

In both of the years for which there are lecture reports, Smith introduced the four stages with a little story. In the report dated 1766 it goes like this:

The four stages of society are hunting, pasturage, farming, and commerce. If a number of persons were shipwrecked on a desert island their first sustenance would be from the fruits

which the soil naturally produced, and the wild beasts which they could kill. As these could not at all times be sufficient, they come at last to tame some of the wild-beasts .... In process of time even these would not be sufficient, and as they saw the earth naturally produce considerable quantities of vegetables of its own accord they would think of cultivating it so that it might produce more of them. Hence agriculture. ... The age of commerce naturally succeeds that of agriculture. As men could now confine themselves to one species of labour, they would naturally exchange the surplus of their own commodity for that of another of which they stood in need. (LJ(B) 149)

The earlier year's report has essentially the same story, at somewhat greater length (LJ(A) i.27–32).

This is explicitly hypothetical, and if treated (as it is surely intended to be) as an outline of the actual development of society it is evidently pure conjecture and can hardly be taken seriously as it stands. Remember, though, that it was by way of introduction, and was directed to a lecture class of young students. The question remains: to what extent did Smith succeed in supporting this sort of speculation with historical evidence?

### **Historical evidence**

Smith could only rely on the evidence known to him to justify his view of history. Since we cannot easily forget what we now know, it is worth briefly reviewing the evidence available in the mid-eighteenth century and noting some of the major differences between the evidence available then and now.

The first thing to note is that archaeology in the modern sense hardly existed and certainly provided Smith with no useful evidence at all. He was therefore confined to written evidence. As Stewart noted, many important developments happened 'long before that stage of society when men begin to think of recording their transactions' (1980 292), so there could be no written evidence of that time. Indeed, early written evidence which we have now, from Mesopotamia and Egypt for example, was not available to Smith because the scripts and languages used had not been decoded and archives of baked clay tablets and the like had not yet been unearthed.

From the (very few) explicit references provided by Smith, the implicit references noted by his editors, and the contents of his library (Mizuta 2000), it is clear that Smith's knowledge of the pre-medieval world was almost entirely based on classical authors, and therefore focused on Greece and the Roman empire. His own 'History of Historians' in the *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (LRBL ii.44–73) deals almost entirely with classical writers – it seems that he preferred Livy to all other historians (LRBL Appendix 1, 229). Almost the earliest identifiable source that he used, and probably about the earliest available to him, was Homer (with the possible exception of the Old Testament of the Bible, which deserves

separate discussion). The editors of the *Lectures on Jurisprudence* note thirteen references to Homer in their index. In Smith's words, 'we have the best account which is to be had of the ancient state of Greece from [Thucydides] and from Homer' (LJ(A) iv.65). He evidently thought that Homer's *Iliad* was based on real events, selected and presented poetically; 'Homer accordingly has recorded the most remarkable war that his countrymen had been engaged in before those days' (LRBL ii.45). Smith also made occasional reference to Greek legends (as we would see them), so, for example, Theseus, the legendary founder of Athens, plays a role in his discussion of the beginnings of Greek cities. Whatever one thinks of this sort of evidence, the main point is that Smith had no evidence about periods before Homeric Greece.

Smith did not give chronological dates for early periods, so we do not know quite what date he would have assigned to the Homeric period. I will occasionally use some very approximate dates to summarize Smith's implicit dating and the dates covered by his evidence, as compared to what is now known about the chronology of events. The dates themselves are not important – what matters is that Smith's evidence cannot possibly cover some of the key stages in his 'conjectural' history.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Smith made little use of the Bible as a source for early history<sup>4</sup> although the Old Testament was a genuinely old document which claimed to give a historical account of even earlier times, and one which was well known to Smith and his students. This must have been a deliberate decision, though it would not be safe to deduce anything about Smith's religious views from it. The simplest explanation is that he was a very cautious man, and if he had said anything, explicit or even implicit, to support or reject the biblical account, it could have led to trouble.

Not only did Smith avoid referring directly to the Bible, he said remarkably little about the early history of the whole region from Mesopotamia to Egypt.<sup>5</sup> It is now thought that this area saw the first agriculture, the domestication of key food plants and animals and, later, the first cities, and the first writing. Smith could not have known the results of modern archaeology, but even in the eighteenth century it was recognized that Egyptian civilization, say, was very old. In a fragment on the division of labour attributed to Smith, he remarked that 'Egypt, of all the countries on the coast of the Mediterranean seems to have been the first in which either agriculture or manufactures were cultivated or improved to any considerable degree' (printed in LJ p. 586) because the Nile provided opportunities for water transport.

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<sup>4</sup> There is an example of a rather unpleasant story from Genesis, used to argue that tribes or nations in early times were small (LJ(A) iv.14) and a passing remark that 'Abraham, Lot, and the other patriarchs were like little petty princes' (LJ(B) 20). Not surprisingly in a course on jurisprudence, there are also a few biblical citations on points of law.

<sup>5</sup> A (probably mythical) pharaoh called Sesostris is mentioned once in each year's lectures (LJ(A) iii.128, LJ(B) 54), but not linked to the four stages.

Apart from this isolated remark, preserved by chance, one could get the impression from Smith that agriculture, and all that followed, started in Greece,<sup>6</sup> perhaps because he was primarily interested in tracing the history of Europe but surely also because of his ingrained caution in dealing with anything which might embroil him in religious disputes.

It may be worth noting that there was nothing in the available evidence to prevent Smith, or any of his contemporaries, from accepting a biblical chronology, even Bishop Ussher's date of 4004 BC for the creation. That Smith chose to be silent does not mean that he had any idea of the geological time scales which we now take for granted. It is quite likely that he believed in some sort of fairly recent creation, if not the specific account of creation given in the Bible. Before Darwin, and before modern archaeology and geology, there was little else on offer.

### **The age of hunters**

The first of Smith's stages was the age of hunters. We now know that humans evolved as hunter-gatherers over a period of millions of years, that anatomically modern humans emerged some 150,000–200,000 years, and that they remained hunter-gatherers until about 10,000 years ago. Smith and his contemporaries did not know that. The claim that hunting was the first stage from which all human societies had developed was entirely 'conjectural', in Stewart's sense. That we now regard this particular conjecture as correct does not make it any the less conjectural.

Without any usable archaeological information, Smith was limited to written sources, but hunter-gatherer societies are illiterate. He could therefore only look to reports from literate outsiders. In practice, that meant reports by European observers of hunter-gatherers in the Americas and, to a lesser extent, in southern Africa and elsewhere. This sort of evidence, however, demonstrated the existence of a hunting *type* of society, but not a hunting *stage*, as the first in a sequence of successive stages. In particular, Smith and his contemporaries had no reliable evidence that any more advanced society had started out from a hunting stage, still less any evidence of a process of change from hunting to a later stage (pastoral, in Smith's framework).<sup>7</sup>

As far as the evidence available to the eighteenth century was concerned, it could have been the case that some societies were, and remained, hunters while other societies never went through a hunting stage. In Smith's introductory story, people marooned on an island have no

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<sup>6</sup> The same fragment also remarks that agriculture and manufactures 'seem to have been of very great antiquity' in China and Bengal (LJ 586), almost his only reference to the early history of these areas.

<sup>7</sup> This is not quite true. For example, Smith cited Ossian to show that the Scots and Picts had been 'much in the same state as the Americans' in the early middle ages (LJ(A) iv.101), though he made no more of it. The poems of Ossian are now known to have been an eighteenth century forgery.

option, initially, but to subsist on what they find, but real human societies are not formed in that way. To apply this argument to the history of real societies Smith would need some account of how human societies were first formed, either supporting the biblical account (as many others did) or explicitly differing from it. It is not surprising that he remained silent.

### **The age of shepherds**

In the four stages story, the hunting stage is followed by the domestication of animals and a whole stage of social development in which people live from their herds of animals, before the start of what Smith calls agriculture, the domestication of food plants. This is quite different from the way social development is now seen. To understand how Smith justified his view, it is helpful to review the sort of evidence now available and compare it with the evidence available in Smith's time.

Archaeological evidence now suggests that the domestication of plants and animals started before 8,000 BC, in the 'fertile crescent' area of western Asia and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> The domestication of key food plants like wheat probably preceded the domestication of animals (except dogs) by a little, but it was the combination of domesticated plants and animals (Barker 2006 145) that spread through western Asia and Europe long before the earliest period known to Smith. Literate, urbanized civilizations emerged in Mesopotamia and Egypt by about 3,000 BC.

If arable agriculture and animal husbandry developed side by side, the relation between the two, and the proportion of animal and vegetable foods in the diet, varied according to geographical conditions and other circumstances. In general, arable farming was concentrated on the better land, improved by investment in clearance, drainage, and so on, with animal husbandry relegated to less fertile and more remote lands whether locally, say within the territory of a village, or on a larger scale. Smith himself described the process of agricultural development at some length in the *Wealth of Nations* (Brewer 1995), with corn grown on improved land and 'waste' land used to raise animals. As well as animals raised in close association with arable, there were whole communities and geographical areas which specialized in animal husbandry, justifying Smith's 'nations of shepherds', but not his 'age of shepherds'.

Smith, however, was dependent on written sources going back to classical times and to Homer, that is, to the first millennium BC but not much further. In the earliest period which his evidence covered, both agriculture and pastoralism already existed, as he well knew.

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<sup>8</sup> There is a huge literature on early neolithic (agricultural) societies. Many details are disputed but the outlines are clear enough. See for example Smith, B. (1998), Bellwood, P. (2005) and Barker (2006).

Why then did he think of pastoralism as a distinct stage coming before (arable) agriculture? The simplest explanation is that this view of pastoralism was the conventional wisdom among his contemporaries, with a provenance stretching back to classical antiquity. Shaw (1982–3) has documented the classical prejudice that pastoral societies are inherently backward or primitive by comparison with agriculture. He does not make much of the corollary that pastoralism came first, chronologically, but his citations show that, for example, Varro (in the first century BC) thought of pastoralism as preceding farming (1973 II i.4–5). What was new in the early modern period was the addition of hunting as a stage preceding pastoralism.<sup>9</sup> Civilization, literally, means ‘living in cities’. Cities grew up where there was good land, suited to arable agriculture, while pastoralism was generally banished to worse land where it supported a poor, sparse, and often nomadic population. Barbarians were, originally, those who did not speak Greek, but by the eighteenth century ‘barbarians’ were often defined as pastoralists (and ‘savages’ as hunter-gatherers).<sup>10</sup>

In his little introductory story to his lecture class, Smith gave an entirely conjectural argument. His hypothetical group of people marooned on an island ‘would more probably begin first by multiplying animals than vegetables, as less skill and observation would be required. Nothing more than to know what food suited them. We find accordingly that in almost all countries the age of shepherds preceded that of agriculture’ (LJ(A) i.28–9). The first two sentences are hard to take seriously – what experience did Smith have of taming and controlling wild animals? The last sentence seems to promise evidence, but all that is offered at this particular point in the argument is a comment that ‘Tartars and Arabians subsist almost entirely by their flocks and herds’ (LJ(A) i.29), followed by an admitted exception in the case of North American natives.

In the *Lectures* taken more broadly, however, he did build up a picture of the role of pastoral societies, or (in his terms) the pastoral stage, which is surprisingly convincing (given, of course, the limitations of the evidence). A central role in the story is played by what Smith called the Tartars, a term he applied geographically to all the people of the Eurasian steppe, ‘all the nations north of Mount Caucasus thro all Asia’ (LJ(A) iv.36), extending chronologically from the Scythians described by Herodotus and others in the fifth century BC to the inhabitants of the steppe in his own time. He often extended the term to cover peoples who occupied other areas but came originally from the steppe, or whose form of government and customs were similar to those of the Tartars proper.

The steppes, according to Smith, were bound to remain in the pastoral stage for geographical reasons: ‘the Tartars have been always a nation of shepherds, which they will always be from the nature of their country, which is dry and high raised above the sea, with few rivers tho

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<sup>9</sup> The hunting-pastoral-agriculture sequence survived into the early days of archaeology, and was not abandoned until the end of the nineteenth century (Barker 2006 4–9).

<sup>10</sup> Smith did not use this terminology consistently, sometimes using ‘barbarian’ and ‘savage’ as synonyms.

some very large ones, and the weather and the air is too cold for the produce of any grain' (LJ(A) iv.53; see also iv.62, LJ(B) 30–1, WN I.iii.8). Note that Smith reads this as saying that the Tartars (as long as they remain on the steppes) cannot go beyond the pastoral stage, the second of his sequence of stages. One could just as well read it as explaining why the inhabitants of the steppes are pastoralists even in a world in which arable agriculture more generally preceded, or developed alongside, pastoralism.

The Tartars are important to Smith's story in two ways. First, Tartar invasions have played a key role in the historical narrative. 'More of the great revolutions in the world have arose from them than any other nation in the world' (LJ(A) iv.53). It is worth quoting the *Lectures* to illustrate this point. (This is a very abbreviated version of a more detailed account.)

If we look back into the first periods of profane history of which we have any distinct account, we find Cyrus with his Persians over running Media; this nation appears undoubtedly to have been a Tartar nation. ... The Medes too, who possessed those countries before them, appear to have been Tartars originally. ... The Parthians, who afterwards over ran that country, were without doubt a Tartarian nation; and made a noble stand against the Roman arms. After this time Cengis Kan ... arose amongst the same nation; and 2 or 300 years after, Tamerlane of the same country made still greater revolutions. But previous to these the Huns made very great commotions in the affairs of the world. [They] drove out the Ostrogoths, who in their turn drove out the Wisigoths, [who] in their turn, under the different leaders Theodoric and Aleric, over ran all Italy and Gaul and continued there till they were repelled by Charlemagne. (LJ(A) iv.53–5)

The governmental structures of Europe were indirectly shaped by Tartar incursions at the time of the fall of the Western Roman empire, but the connection was much more direct in the major states of the east. The governments of 'the eastern countries, were all established by Tartarian or Arabian chiefs. The present Sultans, Grand Seignors, Mogulls, and Emperors of China are all of Tartarian descent' (LJ(A) iv.108). Smith counted the Arabs as essentially the same as the Tartars, equally constrained to pastoralism by the geography of their homeland. The Arabs appeared only once on the wider stage but to devastating effect in the original expansion of Islam.

Second, the Tartars are important analytically as the exemplars of the pastoral stage, used to define a form of government and law which, Smith argued, was the natural result of a pastoral and nomadic or semi-nomadic way of life. Since pastoralism came before agriculture in his sequence of stages, the Tartar form of government is the starting point for the evolution of more developed forms of government and law in the following agricultural stage.

Where hunting societies have little scope for the accumulation of wealth, and hence little need for a concept of property, the pastoral stage sees the accumulation of large herds of

animals, protected by a notion of property in moveable objects but not necessarily or normally of private property in land.<sup>11</sup> Those who have no herds of their own must depend on those who do, while the rich can only use their wealth to support dependents (LJ(A) iv.7–8, LJ(B) 20). Key decisions such as going to war may be made by apparently democratic assemblies but the rich, with their many dependents, are bound to have more influence. ‘They therefore who had appropriated a number of flocks and herds, necessarily came to have great influence over the rest; and accordingly we find in the Old Testament that Abraham, Lot, and the other patriarchs were like little petty princes’ (LJ(B) 20).<sup>12</sup> Nomadic pastoralists go to war as a body, with their families and herds, so the loser loses everything and the leader of the winning side can often recruit most of the losers to his army. The steppe cannot support large numbers in one place for long, but an army or a people (the two could be the same) on the move could become very large, hence the devastating, if irregular, irruptions from the steppes into settled countries and the despotic powers of their leaders (LJ(A) iv.39–40, LJ(B) 29).

Smith then used this account of Tartar, or pastoral-stage, society to argue that various societies which had (just) reached the more advanced agricultural stage still bore the marks of their pastoral past, thus making the stages theory, and the ordering in which the pastoral stage precedes agriculture, more plausible. The most important cases are the early Greeks and the Germanic tribes which brought down the western Roman empire, since they stand at the beginnings of classical civilization and of modern Europe, respectively. Thus, in the *Wealth of Nations*, he referred to ‘those nations of husbandmen who are but just come out of the shepherd state, and who are not much advanced beyond that state, such as the Greek tribes appear to have been about the time of the Trojan war, and our German and Scythian ancestors when they first settled upon the ruins of the western empire’ (WN V.i.b.16).

Smith found several ways in which Homeric Greece resembled his model of pastoral society.

The first inhabitants of Greece, as we find by the accounts of the historians, were much of the same sort with the Tartars. Thus renowned warriors of antiquity, as Hercules, Theseus, etc. are celebrated for just such actions and expeditions as make up the history of a Tartar chief. ... We see that at the Trojan war the expedition was not undertaken with a view to conquest but in revenge of goods that were carried off; and that when the city was taken each returned to his home with his share of the spoil. All the disputes mentioned to have happened by him [Homer] were concerning some women, or oxen, cattle, or sheep or goats. (LJ(A) iv.56–7)

‘In Homer every thing is valued as worth so many oxen; the arms of Glaucus were worth 100 oxen and those of Diomedes worth 9’ (LJ(A) vi.98). ‘[A]t the time of the Trojan war ... there

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<sup>11</sup> Though tribes may have exclusive territories from which other tribes are excluded (LJ(A) i.49).

<sup>12</sup> Previously cited as one of very few biblical references.

was little or no cultivation of the ground, and cattle was the principle part of their property' (LJ(B) 31–2).

The concentration of authority in the hands of chiefs (or kings) in Homeric times was so close to that in pastoral societies that Smith cited Homer to illustrate his argument about authority in pastoral societies: 'at the time of the Trojan wars there were severall nations who were led on by different chiefs. ... But this was not an infringement of the democraticall form of government, as these persons had not any authority more than was acquired by their private influence' (LJ(A) iv.11–12). Smith was perhaps not wholly consistent, since elsewhere (in the *Early Draft of the Wealth of Nations*) he emphasized the extent to which the Greeks had already surpassed the pastoral stage: 'Homer paints the actions of two nations who, tho' far from being perfectly civilized, were yet much advanced beyond the age of shepherds, who cultivated lands, who built cities ...' (ED 27).

Smith gave a rather similar account of the Germanic tribes on the north-eastern frontiers of the Roman empire more than a thousand years later. '[T]he northern nations which broke into Europe in the beginning of the 5 century ... were arrived at the state of shepherds, and had even some little agriculture' (LJ(A) ii.97). They 'had better notions of property [than Tartars] and were a little more accustomed to the division of lands' (LJ(B) 50), but, like the Tartars, they could advance as a mass to devastating effect.

'The fall of the western empire is the third great revolution in the affairs of mankind of which ancient history has preserved any distinct or circumstantial account. It was brought about by the irresistible superiority which the militia ... of a nation of shepherds has over that of a nation of husbandmen, artificers, and manufacturers.' (WN V.i.a.36)

### **The age of agriculture and the growth of commerce**

In Smith's account of history, agriculture came after pastoralism, but its origins were still beyond the limits of the evidence available to him. Modern archaeologists would put the first agriculture many thousands of years before the earliest (written) evidence available in the eighteenth century. Smith had a shorter (conjectural) history in mind – it is possible that he thought of the beginnings of agriculture as only just before the Homeric age of Greece, and therefore only just beyond the reach of his earliest sources.

The main case study discussed in Smith's lectures deals with the origins of Greek city-states, and particularly of Athens. The basic story is quite simple. On the steppes (Tartary) it was impossible to develop beyond the pastoral stage, but when Tartars (or people in that stage of development) arrived in Greece, they found conditions favourable for settled agriculture. Attica (the territory around Athens) was not the richest part of Greece, but it was particularly well placed for defence, since '[t]wo thirds of Attica are surrounded by sea, and the other side by a ridge of high mountains. By this means they have a communication with their

neighbouring countries by sea and at the same time are secured from the inroads of their neighbours' (LJ(B) 31). 'As the country was so much securer than the others, people flocked into it from all hands' (LJ(A) iv.58) and 'Attica was the country which first began to be civilized and put into a regular form of government' (LJ(A) iv.57).

The claim that Attica was the first 'which began to be civilized' is striking. In the context, which deals with early Greece, that may only mean that it was first in Greece (though Greek tradition made Argos the first city). If it were intended as a more general claim (the first anywhere) it would be more surprising, reflecting perhaps both the real lack of evidence of earlier periods and Smith's blind spot for the Middle East. Even the Greeks themselves thought of Egyptian civilization as older than their own.

Given suitable geographical conditions, progress follows. Thus he considered a people with a 'Tartarian' government who

came from thence to settle in towns and become republican (in many parts of Greece, and the same was the case in Italy, Gaul, etc.). We may easily conceive that a people of this sort, settled in a country where they lived in pretty great ease and security and in a soil capable of yielding them good returns for cultivation, would not only improve the earth but also make considerable advances in the severall arts and sciences and manufactures, providing they had an opportunity of exporting their sumptuous produce and fruits of their labour. (LJ(A) iv.60)

The two necessary conditions are that the soil be improvable, and that there should be opportunities of transporting and trading their products. In Greece, but not in Tartary, 'all the necessary circumstances for the improvement of the arts concurred' (LJ(A) iv.62).

In its simple form, the agricultural stage refers to 'nations of husbandmen who have little foreign commerce, and no other manufactures but those coarse and household ones which almost every private family prepares for its own use' (WN V.i.a.6). Smith, however, treated this stage as no more than a starting point. Given the conditions summarized above, a more extensive division of labour will emerge and commerce will grow correspondingly. 'When the division of labour has been once thoroughly established ... the society itself grows to be what is properly a commercial society' (WN I.iv.1).

As society progressed through Smith's first three stages, each transition added a new source of food to what went before (though there is no reason to think that hunting was entirely abandoned in later stages, and animal husbandry certainly continued in the agricultural

stage<sup>13</sup>). The relation between the agricultural and commercial stages is different in that commerce does not add a new source of subsistence though it does require that those who produce food produce a surplus beyond their own needs to support those who work in manufacturing or other sectors. Commerce, therefore, grows up within an agricultural society without a sharp division between the two stages.

Commercial society evolved twice, in Smith's story.<sup>14</sup> First came the development of ancient society from the Greek cities to the rise and fall of the Roman empire. The barbarian invasions of Europe brought down the western Roman empire, effectively destroyed towns and trade, and depopulated the countryside. The process of development had to start over again, in a second sequence of events focused on western Europe, leading to feudalism and ultimately to the commercial societies of Smith's own time. Smith's account is not, of course, a full narrative history. The lectures were on jurisprudence, so they naturally focused on the development of governmental institutions and legal systems. The post-classical development of western Europe is also described in some detail in the *Wealth of Nations*.

In both classical and post-classical cases the driving force is a process of economic development. In the *Lectures* Smith most often used the phrase 'improvement of the arts' as a label for this process, with variations such as 'progress of the arts and commerce', the introduction and improvement of 'arts and luxury', and so on, linked to growing opulence, a growing manufacturing sector, more extensive commerce, and so on. To anyone familiar with the *Wealth of Nations*, it is natural to identify this process with the development of the division of labour, but Smith rarely used that phrase in his *Lectures* in the context of the four stages theory. The probable explanation is simple – in both sets of lectures, the four stages are introduced early on as a framework for discussions of forms of government and law, while the division of labour is discussed much later on. Smith could not use the phrase 'division of labour' when he had not explained its significance<sup>15</sup>. In LJ(B) the treatment of the division of labour is followed by a discussion of the slow progress of opulence (prefiguring a similar discussion in the *Wealth of Nations*), linking the historical story to the division of labour. (The corresponding section of LJ(A) is missing.) Modern readers can reasonably translate 'improvement of the arts' as a growing division of labour.

For Smith, the improvement of the arts is essentially automatic, hence requiring little or no further explanation, given suitable geographical and social/political conditions (improvable

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<sup>13</sup> In a fragment of unknown date, Smith remarked that: 'By means of agriculture the same quantity of ground not only produces corn but is made capable of supporting a much greater number of cattle than before' (printed in LJ p. 584).

<sup>14</sup> Haakonssen writes of 'the three great attempts by mankind to live in commercial societies, in Greece, in Rome, and in modern Europe' (1981 178), but Greece and Rome seem to me to be parts of a single story.

<sup>15</sup> With one exception, perhaps a slip (LJ(B) 37).

soil, access to markets, security, and so on). The presence or absence of the conditions for, or obstacles to, development is an important theme.

There are a number of other components of Smith's argument which he drew on repeatedly in different cases or stages of development. One such element is the link between wealth (or command over resources), the use of wealth, and political power (Fiori and Pesciarelli 1999). Wealth can be used to support dependents who are a source of power, either as a private army or as supporters in an assembly. Once manufacturing develops, however, luxury spending is an alternative, sacrificing power for personal enjoyment. The pattern of inequality matters: if one person (or family or group) is much richer than the rest, then they can match others in luxury spending while still maintaining their political power – the case of a king, or emperor. Otherwise, the tendency is towards oligarchy (aristocracy) or democracy. Smith used this line of argument to explain forms of government in pastoral societies and Greek cities and also to explain the rise and decline of feudalism in Europe.

The improvement of the arts (division of labour) has important military effects. In a simple agricultural society, there are periods in the year when farmers can leave their land to fight for their city or overlord. In a manufacturing and trading society they cannot leave their business so easily, shifting the balance between a citizen army (or militia) and a standing army, with important effects on the form of government and the ability to resist external enemies.

Slavery is relevant here: in a society in which most of the work is done by slaves, citizens are relatively free to participate in the political life of the community or to fight. Slavery was, of course, important in classical times, but not in Smith's own time in Europe (as opposed to European colonies). Slavery was also important for its harmful effects on productivity and on invention.

The four stages theory, then, provided a general framework within which Smith deployed a number of theoretical elements (in a rather informal way) to explain the trajectory of classical civilization and the contrasting development of post-classical Europe. The striking differences between the two have to be explained by different initial conditions and (perhaps) differences in the geographical environment between the Mediterranean and northern Europe.

### **Classical antiquity**

In Smith's account, the agricultural stage in classical antiquity started with pastoralists moving in to Greece (and other areas around the Mediterranean), where 'all the necessary circumstances for the improvement of the arts concurred' (LJ(A) iv.62). As agriculture, manufactures, and trade developed, their wealth started to attract raiders, so the inhabitants of each territory established a fortified city to defend themselves. The geography is important

here: Greece is divided into relatively small cultivable territories separated by sea and mountains, so each such area became the territory of a city-state.

Starting from a Tartar-style government, each city was initially ruled by a single king, but the territories were too small for the king's wealth to outclass that of other prominent inhabitants, leading to republican governments, either dominated by a few aristocrats or democracies with offices open to all citizens. The development of luxury helped to promote democracy as the wealth of the rich was diverted to private pleasures. The institution of slavery also promoted 'democracy', meaning a system open to all free, male, citizens (LJ(A) 63–73).

A developing city state faces a choice. It can either seek to keep the benefits of citizenship for the existing citizens within its limited boundaries, a 'defensive' republic, as in classical Greece, or it can seek to expand its territories, as Rome did, a 'conquering republic'. In either case, the republic is doomed, because 'when the arts arrive at a certain degree of improvement, the number of the people encreases, yet that of fighting men becomes less' (LJ(B) 37). 'All defensive states at length fall a sacrifice to their neighbours' through military weakness' (LJ(A) iv.92), especially when improvements in seigeecraft made it harder for them to hold out behind their city walls. A conquering republic may defeat external enemies, as Rome did for many centuries, but only by developing a standing army. With the development of arts and luxury, the natural consequence of a developing division of labour, 'the rich and the better sort of people will no longer ingage in the service. The lower ranks make up the armies' (LJ(A) iv.88). The army commander becomes irresistibly powerful, as first Julius Caesar and then Augustus did, and the republic becomes a 'military monarchy'.

The Roman military monarchy was, in one crucial respect, different from those of Asia. The Roman monarchy was imposed from within, not by external conquest, and the emperors recognized that it was in their interest to retain and improve the framework of civil law inherited from the republic. The emperor's rule was dictatorial, but the civil law was well constructed and predictable, allowing continued economic development. But eventually the (western) empire fell victim to the divorce between the citizen body and the army.

In this manner the great security, and opulence, and progress of arts and commerce which takes place in a military government of some standing makes it both difficult and prejudicial to the state for the people to go to war themselves. They begin therefore first to recruit amongst the barbarians, and afterwards to make a bargain with the chiefs. (LJ(A) iv.103)

As the defence of the western empire came progressively into the hands of Germanic tribes, the authority of the centre faded. When the defence finally failed, the gains of the Roman system – the extensive trade and division of labour – were lost.

## Medieval and modern Europe

Smith described the new rulers of most of western Europe in terms very similar to those he used about the Homeric Greeks. ‘The northern nations which broke into Europe in [the] beginning of the 5 century were arrived at the state of shepherds, and had even some little agriculture’ (LJ(A) ii.97). The societies they formed in Western Europe, however, followed a trajectory radically different from the city states formed in Greece in the earlier period.

The story of development in Europe after the fall of the western Roman empire will be familiar to any reader of the *Wealth of Nations*. The *Lectures*, more than a decade before the *Wealth of Nations*, tell a very similar story, though the later work places a more systematic stress on the role of capital accumulation. Smith emphasized two main features of the societies that emerged in the early Middle Ages. The commerce of the towns was destroyed by the violence and insecurity which persisted for centuries and the ‘chiefs and principal leaders’ of the invaders seized huge tracts of land (WN III.ii.1; see also LJ(A) i.116, iv.115, LJ(B) 50–1). These, of course, point to two of the recurrent themes of Smith’s lectures: the ‘improvement of the arts’ (or, here, its absence) and the pattern of inequality.

As Smith described it, early medieval society was in an almost static equilibrium, in which the territorial magnates, with no urban luxuries to spend on, maintained large retinues of dependents to maintain their power and defend their estates. They had little incentive to improve productivity because it was more important to defend or expand their holdings. The servile status of the cultivators and of those few townsmen who remained left them with little incentive to produce more than a minimum, since they had no security. Primogeniture and entails were introduced to keep the huge estates together, since dividing the estate would leave it open to attack.

Things changed, very slowly, as the king, who had even larger resources than the leading barons, succeeded in establishing some stability. Feudalism, in the formal sense, represented a step towards royal control, as the barons were forced to accept that they held their land from the king in return for military service. Critically, monarchies encouraged relatively independent urban development as a counterweight to the land-owning nobility, allowing a slow development of manufacturing and trade, and an increasing availability of luxury consumption goods. The improvement of the arts finally tipped the balance, as feudal lords sacrificed their military power and switched their spending from maintaining dependents to luxury consumption. The landlords now had reasons to maximize rent income, and introduced contracts which gave tenants greater security of tenure and incentives to increase output. A relatively independent middle class of merchants, farmers and master craftsmen started to emerge.

A revolution of the greatest importance to the public happiness was in this manner brought about by two different orders of people who had not the least intention to serve the public. To gratify the most childish vanity was the sole motive of the great proprietors. The

merchants and artificers, much less ridiculous, acted merely from a view to their own interest, and in pursuit of their own pedlar principle of turning a penny wherever a penny was to be got. Neither of them had either knowledge or foresight of that great revolution which the folly of the one, and the industry of the other, was gradually bringing about. (WN III.iv.17)

A key difference between ancient Mediterranean society and post-medieval western Europe was the absence of slavery in the latter (though not, of course, in European colonies). Smith thought slavery was the norm in human societies, so its abolition in some places required explanation.

Slavery ... has been universall in the beginnings of society, and the love of dominion and authority over others will probably make it perpetuall. The circumstances which have made slavery be abolished in the corner of Europe in which it now is are peculiar to it, and which happening to concurr at the same time have brought about that change. (LJ(A) iii.117)

Slavery had been abolished in western Europe, but not in 'Moscovy and all the eastern parts of Europe, and the whole of Asia, that is, from Bohemia to the Indian Ocean, all over Africa, and the greatest part of America' (LJ(A) iii.101).

Smith listed a number of factors to account for the special case of Europe. In the centuries following the Germanic invasions urban manufacturing and trade almost ceased. 'Our ancestors were then a rough, manly people who had no sort of domestic luxury or effeminacy; their whole slaves were then employed in the cultivation of the land' (LJ(A) iii.121), so slavery consisted of villainage,<sup>16</sup> in which cultivators were tied to the soil and subject to the judgements of the lord's court. The king had a motive for seeking to end this form of slavery in order to weaken the hold of the landowning nobility and to widen the sway of royal courts. It was even in the landlords' interest to emancipate the villains, once their tastes had swung over to luxury consumption, since free cultivators would be more productive. In addition, the church and clergy found that they had a greater 'authority over the lower and more laborious part of mankind than over the rich and the powerfull' (LJ(A) iii.118), so sided with the villains. Villainage ended, Smith argued, where both monarchy and church were powerful (LJ(A) iii.121–2; LJ(B) 142 has a rather weaker claim). The ending of servitude in (parts of) Europe was important, of course, in itself, and also important (with other conditions, such as an appropriate legal system) in creating a setting in which individuals have incentives to produce as efficiently as possible. Slavery, for example, acts a barrier to invention (LJ(B) 299–300).

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<sup>16</sup> Now usually spelled villeinage, that is, serfdom.

## Asia

Smith's lectures focused on Europe – reasonably so, since they were lectures on jurisprudence for an audience of young Scots. The great civilizations of Asia were only mentioned in passing. There is almost nothing about the early history of south or east Asia, while only the Tartars featured significantly from western and central Asia. He saw the Asiatic societies of his own time mainly in terms of the effects of conquest by Tartars or Arabs. 'The Tartars, a savage nation, have overrun all Asia severall times and Persia above 12 times' (LJ(A) iii.41).

Asiatic governments ... are purely military. Turkey, Persia, and the other countries were conquered by Tartars, Arabians, and other barbarous nations, who had no regular system of laws and were entirely ignorant of their good effects. ... A Turkish bashaw or other inferior officer is decisive judge of every thing, and is as absolute in his own jurisdiction as the signior. Life and fortune are altogether precarious, when they thus depend on the caprice of the lowest magistrate. A more miserable and oppressive government cannot be imagined. (LJ(B) 46)

Smith saw China, for example, as rich and well developed but also as stagnant, due to arbitrary government and lack of security, as well as trade barriers.

Parts of Europe had also been overrun but had recovered their independence. 'Germany is every 10 or 12 year almost totally possessed by the troops of foreign states, but no city ever remains with the conquerors. Hungary has been often conquered by the Turks, but was never long in their possession' (LJ(A) iii.45–6). Smith explained the difference between Europe and Asia by pointing to the existence in Europe of a hereditary territorial aristocracy who lead attempts to restore the *status quo ante*, and by arguing that Asia lacks a corresponding class because of the prevalence of polygamy, itself introduced by Tartar conquerors, which undermines the hereditary principle. Again, Europe appears as a special case.

## Conclusion

The four stages theory served Smith in two different ways. First, it had a static, or comparative, function in accounting for the form of law and government in different societies. Thus, hunters live in small groups with little need for a concept of property, pastoral peoples need a concept of property in herds of animals but not necessarily in land, and so on. In a lecture course on jurisprudence, that is, on the forms of law and government, this clearly bulks large, but it is not, as it stands, a theory of history. It becomes a theory of history when the stages are placed in order, with a claim that each stage, given suitable conditions, evolves into or is replaced by the next. The evidence available to Smith provided some basis for the first, comparative, use of the idea of four different types of society, but not for the second use, as a theory of history, except for the final stage, the evolution of a simple

agricultural society towards the commercial stage. The evolution from hunting via pastoralism to agriculture was wholly conjectural. Smith gave no substantive account of the transitions between stages before the transition from agriculture to commerce, making it perhaps doubtful whether the four stages theory deserves to be called a theory of history at all.

A very simple, mechanical, version of the theory would have the institutions and development of a society determined wholly by the stage it has reached, so all (say) pastoral societies would be the same. Smith's use of the theory is clearly more flexible than this, as it had to be given the very different evolution of ancient Mediterranean societies and of post-Roman Europe. Indeed, he seems to have seen the success of Europe not as inevitable but as a remarkably lucky special case.

If the four stages alone do not determine the evolution of society, that does not mean that anything goes. Smith's discussion of history is (implicitly) deterministic, in the sense that he aimed not simply to describe but to explain the economic, legal and governmental development of society, that is, to identify the causes which led one path to be followed rather than another. He clearly recognized that adventitious events, such as the fact that Queen Elizabeth 1st of England was childless (LJ(A) iv.171), could matter, but wherever possible he seems to have preferred general to particular explanations. Roughly speaking, one might say that Elizabeth's decision to run down the assets of the monarchy, thus undermining her successors' position, shunted the development of government in England onto a different track, but it was still a track governed by more fundamental considerations.

General causal factors operating at the level of whole societies can only take effect through the actions of individuals. Smith's view of individual motivation, as set out in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, was complex, and cannot be discussed here. In his discussions of history the motivation of the relevant actors is essentially self-interested, though, as Skinner has pointed out, it was a self interest which was often 'political rather than simply economic' (1975 168). It is not, in fact, clear that any simple distinction between economic and political motivation can be drawn. Thus, for example, if early medieval magnates sought to keep the family estate together for purposes of defence, it was their source of income (as well as power) that they were defending. It makes little sense to debate whether to call their motivation economic or political.

Haakonssen (1981) and Winch (1983) in their criticism of 'materialist' readings of Smith rightly insist on the importance of non-economic factors, but they seem to want more. As I read them, what they really want is to reject determinism altogether in order to make room for a 'science of the legislator', who can design institutions and policy to improve social welfare. There is no doubt that the *Wealth of Nations*, to take the most obvious example, is in part a work of advocacy, making a case against the 'mercantile' system and in favour of 'natural liberty', so Smith must have thought that advocacy can make a difference, despite the deterministic character of his treatment of history. The issue here is surely methodological.

The past cannot be changed, so the study of history can only explain what actually happened. The future is not tied down in the same way, though the scope for choice may be constrained by factors revealed by the study of history.

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