

WORKSHOP CALL FOR PAPERS

THE WORDS OF EXCHANGE

ADAM SMITH AND THE DEBATES ON PRIMITIVE SOCIETIES AND THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGES

17 June 2024 / Sorbonne University
Paris – France

The 16th-century European encounter with a variety of societies and languages in the world led to a general debate about their origins, especially during the 18th century. Controversies broke out in many European countries about speech and the human mind, ‘wild’ languages, sociability and the difference between human beings and animals. Were the newly encountered peoples of Americas proof of the primitive and rude state of human beings? Were they the evidence of human nature uncorrupted by the evils of civilization? Were individuals living in these societies without government and private property unsociable and in a perpetual state of war, or were they able to exchange? Was the evidence of diversity in morals and social practices a challenge to the idea of a universal human nature? Was language a fruit of society or its origin? The Scottish thinkers placed particular emphasis on the relationship between living conditions, morality, and sociability, as well as on the idea that language grew alongside the historical development of mankind, instead of being a divine gift or a product of human design. For this reason, they were particularly interested in the ‘primitive’ forms of society and speech.

In 1767, Adam Smith published the essay *Considerations concerning the First Formation of Languages*. Precisely in the same period, he was turning his attention more deeply to political economy and beginning to write the *Wealth of Nations*, where speech was proposed as the possible origin of his famous ‘propensity to exchange’. In his *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, Smith was even clearer and linked propensity to exchange to the capacity of persuading others, whose moral foundation can be found in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.

Even if it is recognised as a key issue for political economy in its early days, there are many open questions concerning the connection between sociability, language, and exchange in Smith’s thought. What precisely is the role of feelings, speech, and persuasion in economic exchange? Under what conditions can exchange be regarded as a communicative and non-violent interaction? Does Smith’s conjectural history of exchange in the “rude state of society” allow a new understanding of his theory of value?

The workshop is open to contributions by scholars and PhD students that intend to consider Smith’s thought in the historical and theoretical depth of the multidisciplinary debates in which he participated, as well as to contributions that discuss other thinkers and works related to the eighteenth-century debate on the origins and history of societies and languages.

The workshop will feature the presence of Maria Pia Paganelli (Trinity University), Jennifer Pitts (University of Chicago), Michelle Schwarze (University of Wisconsin-Madison), Silvia Sebastiani (EHESS, Paris) and Marco E. L. Guidi (Università di Pisa) as discussants.

Papers may focus on, but are not limited to, the following topics:

- Smith on speech, persuasion, and exchange
- Scottish conjectural history and the inquiry into ‘primitive’ societies
- The debate on primitive societies and the constitution of political economy as a science
- The role of language in human sociability in the French and Scottish Enlightenment
- Hobbes, Locke, Mandeville, Hume, Condillac, Rousseau, Ferguson, Turgot and Smith on the origins of languages and societies
- Maupertuis, Formey, Herder and the debate around the Berlin Academy of Sciences
- Travel narratives (Charlevoix, Lafitau, etc.) and the representations of ‘primitive’ societies and languages
- Smith on colonialism

Please reply with an abstract of up to 200 words to Michele Bee (michele.bee@unisalento.it) by 31 March 2024.

The workshop is organised in the framework of the Marie Curie project ‘Rethinking Exchange’ (Department of Economics, University of Salento) in collaboration with PHARE (Sorbonne University), LexEcon project (Department of Economics and Management, University of Pisa) and the International Adam Smith Society (IASS).

For more information: michele.bee@unisalento.it / laurie.breban@univ-paris1.fr / francesca.daldegan@unipi.it
jean.dellemotte@univ-paris1.fr / ivanprates@cedeplar.ufmg.br