

Adam Smith, Sociocybernetics, and a Decentralised Society

Harnessing Social Forces for a Sustainable Future and the Common Good.

A seminar led by John Raven¹, followed by a discussion led by Angela Espinosa & Jon Walker²
Hull University, Tue 13 December 2016, 11am-1 pm and 2 to 4 pm. Wilberforce LT 29

Over at least 3 millennia, acute observers of society have noted that hierarchical organisations tend to become governed by “committees of ignoramuses” who lack key information needed to take sensible decisions, result in destructive working conditions for employees, and be endlessly destructive of habitat whilst contributing little to quality of life. Most of the work carried out can therefore be described as senseless. But the perceived need to execute it recursively legitimises the right of those higher in the hierarchy to command the compliance of others. Worse still, this senseless work results in endless destruction of habitat, thus heading our species toward extinction at an exponentially increasing rate.

Yet those at the top *cannot* be “wise men” because they *cannot* know the most important things that would need to be known to act wisely - let alone create conditions for sustainability. This is because, as Smith observed, if actor A initiates some entrepreneurial activity at location X and B initiates some other activity at point Y one cannot tell what will happen as those two developments come together. Smith’s solution was to allow everyone to vote with their pennies at both points. People could buy the entrepreneurs’ goods or services and invest in their enterprises. If the enterprises prospered, previously unimaginable developments would occur as they came together. It was an *organic*, embedded, non-hierarchical, learning and management (governance) system with multiple feedback loops of the kind that governs and controls the internal functioning of organisms.

Unfortunately, Smith’s solution does not, and cannot, work. The problem now is to evolve an alternative.

This seminar will explore this question. In the course of so doing it will be suggested that a basic need is to conceptualise and harness the network of social forces which appear to have the future of humankind and the planet in their grip ... that is to say the network of social forces surrounding, and determining the function of, the network mapped in the dynamic systems models behind *Limits to Growth*.

Further details can be found at <http://goo.gl/HC523w> and a paper covering much the same topics at <http://eyeonsociety.co.uk/resources/Harnessing-the-Social-Forces-Behind-our-Backs.pdf>

¹ Author of *The New Wealth of Nations: The Societal Learning Arrangements needed for a Sustainable Society*. John Raven’s full CV and list of publications viewable on line is available at www.johnraven.co.uk

² Authors of *A Complexity Approach to Sustainability: Theory and Application*.