

SMITH AT 300: COMMERCIAL SOCIETY AND THE WOMEN'S QUESTION

BY
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“The laws of most countries being made by men generally are very severe on the women, ... men who make the laws ... will be inclined to curb the women as much as possible and give themselves the more indulgence.”

Adam Smith, Glasgow, Tuesday, February 8, 1763¹

Adam Smith's views on inequality have recently been examined with some interest (Rasmussen 2016; Walraevens 2021). But was Smith really genuinely interested in addressing the shortcomings of the society built on the “liberal plan of equality, liberty and justice” (Smith 1975, *Wealth of Nations*; WN IV.ix)? While critical accounts of Smith's thought may tend to zero in on his concerns with absolute poverty—or the equality in the “share of the necessaries of life” (Smith 1976, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*; TMS IV.1.10)—rather than economic inequality, they may perhaps also tend to confuse his account of our tendencies to admire the rich and powerful with the advocacy of a system in which the rich and powerful ride roughshod over the poor and disempowered as long as the order of the society founded on the “distinction of ranks” (TMS I.iii.2) is preserved.

They may perhaps also wonder why Smith—who famously marvelled at the complex network of relationships that emerge to provide a day-laborer with a simple woolen coat—does not explicitly reflect on where his food comes from and acknowledge who cooked his dinner (Marçal 2015). These accounts, it seems to me, tend to reveal more about the readers than about the author. They may sometimes tend to neglect the fact that on every possible account of the analysis of social relations we might encounter in Smith's writings, he sides with the downtrodden. This, to name just one example, is apparent from Smith's criticism of the slave trade that, indeed, goes way beyond contestations founded upon efficiency (Klein 2020).

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¹ The opening quote comes from Adam Smith's lectures given at Glasgow University later published as *Lectures on Jurisprudence* (1982, LJ; pp. 146–147).

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Far from defending a patriarchal organization of society, Smith aimed at examining and understanding the determinants of the status of women at different stages of social and economic development. In his lectures Smith made it clear that while the biological differences between the sexes are beyond dispute, it is the social significance of these differences that matters for the standing of women in a society. The social significance of the difference between the sexes is, Smith argued, far from constant but rather subject to historical change (Nyland 1993). In examining “the women’s question,” Smith thus developed a careful account of institutional analysis that takes into consideration the material conditions, the characteristics, the history of specific communities at hand, and the kind of processes that shaped the rules that would determine the choices women could or could not make.

Through detailed historical and institutional analysis, Smith made it clear that the key factor that eventually undermined the influence of men over women was the emergence of commerce.² Commercial societies created conditions in which women were no longer subject to men’s whim. This, according to Smith, eventually took place with the help of the Christian church, through the emergence of political stability that reduced emphasis on perpetual warfare, and through the rise of the commercial stage of subsistence in which women gradually gained access to property rights. Simply put, Smith refused to accept that women were forever condemned to the subordinate position.

If Smith was such a fervent feminist, the reader might ask, why did he not make his agenda explicit in his writings? Why do we have to plow through his lectures to learn about them? We might speculate about the rhetorical strategy that a pre-eminent professor of moral philosophy at one of the central platforms of the Scottish Enlightenment chose to adopt. Perhaps, learning from the fortunes of his good friend David Hume, he was too painfully aware how easy it is to “get cancelled.” It is beyond dispute, however, that the students who attended his lectures in Glasgow heard Smith. For instance, one John Millar would later come to devote considerable attention to the condition of women in the differing eras as evidenced in his *Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* published in 1771 and his *Historical View of English Government* published in 1787.

It takes courage to face the injustices we often perpetuate by way of our speech and action. It takes some wisdom to speak up about these, *especially* in academia. Smith’s liberal plan of liberty, equality, and justice was not a dry slogan of complacent neglect; it was a call to recognize and dismantle the obstacles that impinge on the natural liberty of ordinary people, both men and women.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declares no competing interests exist.

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² For a discussion of Smith’s views on the commercial society and the “four stages theory,” see Sagar (2022).

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