

Adam Smith's real views on slavery: a reply to Marvin Brown

Thomas Wells [Erasmus University, Netherlands]

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Marvin Brown's [recent paper](#) in the *Real-World Economics Review* (52) misuses Adam Smith gravely in making his argument that Smithian economics was responsible for slavery. I consider this particularly unfortunate since Adam Smith was certainly a real-world economist and thus a natural friend to the supporters of this journal.

In this short response I will confine myself to rebutting Brown's uses and interpretations of Smith rather than addressing the wider argument of the paper. I would note however that it is not uncontroversial whether slavery was economically more productive than employing 'freemen' (Smith certainly thought not), even though there was certainly profit to be made in the slavery business. This reflects a difference between business and economics – that some people may have made lots of money selling cigarettes says little about its general economic benefits to society.

Brown's argument proceeds by contrasting the facts of 18th century commercial society with Adam Smith's economic theory to reveal that Smith committed sins of omission (neglecting to mention the role of slavery in the British economy) and commission (his economic theory endorsed slavery by prioritising property rights above all).

Smith's sins of omission

As we know, Smith never mentions the role of slavery in the commercial society he enjoyed... (Brown 37)

It is hard to know how much [Smith] knew about the plight of slaves on the tobacco or sugar plantations, or how much his readers wanted to know. (Brown 36)

On closer and perhaps more neutral inspection of Smith's work Brown's claims seem hard to sustain. Smith actually talks about slavery quite a lot in the *Wealth of Nations* [WN] (and extensively in his *Lectures on Jurisprudence* [LJ], though he never published these himself). His remarks can be divided into an analysis of the political-economy, ethics, and empirics of slavery.

Smith argues that slave labour is generally less productive than free labour since freemen work for themselves and will therefore work much harder and better for less, so it is not generally in the interest of slave-owners (for example, WN I.8.40). He also notes that slavery reduces productivity growth because slaves do not have any incentive to innovate and argues that this fact has held back societies' economic development throughout history (WN IV.9.47). (However he does acknowledge that the high profit tobacco and even higher profit sugar plantations were able to afford the additional expense of slave labour, particularly if there was a shortage of free labour available (WN III.2.10).) These are hard-nosed arguments meant to persuade hard-nosed readers – they do not concern justice but they do forestall arguments for slavery based on utilitarian considerations.

As to the ethics of slavery, Smith is clearly against it. Brown himself notes this (Brown 33) but allows the reader to fall under the misleading impression that in this Smith's feelings went no further than was fashionable, and anyway found no place in his "dissociative",

property rights based economics.¹ However, what one in fact sees is that Smith assaults the foundations of slavery on multiple fronts.² His distaste and disapproval of slavery permeates his economic analysis. For example, "In every country where the *unfortunate law* of slavery is established.... (WN IV.7.76)." It is true that most of Smith's moral analysis of slavery comes in his analysis of ethics *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS) and government (LJ), but since most scholars consider that Smith was engaged in a coherent project to systematise different branches of philosophy, that would seem to fall under division of labour rather than schizophrenia.³

Thus we find that Smith wasn't content to express a merely passive distaste for slavery. Smith paints vivid pictures of the barbarity of slavery which invite our sympathy with the slave and the justified resentment he should feel: the severity and arbitrariness of punishment (LJ 181); lack of family rights (LJ 178), fatal neglect of their children (LJ 193).

Smith staunchly criticises the ethical failings of those who own slaves: only the kind of 'proud' people who like to dominate others (without having to persuade them with words, or money). "The pride of man makes him love to domineer, and nothing mortifies him so much as to be obliged to condescend to persuade his inferiors. Wherever the law allows it, and the nature of the work can afford it, therefore, he will generally prefer the service of slaves to that of freemen (WN III.2.10)". Brown professes to be puzzled by what Smith can mean by this, but taken in the context of Smith's concerns and methodology it seems to be the answer to the puzzle of why the economically inefficient institution of slavery is so pervasive in human history and the world Smith lived in – it springs from a natural tendency in human nature (pride) that easily becomes a vice (domination) without intervention. That tendency is, as Smith makes clear, particularly apparent in the richest and most powerful merchants and aristocrats who are in fact most secure from the humbling domain of market competition where their partiality in favour of themselves would be ridiculed (TMS 1.iii.3.5).

Smith also savagely criticises the character of those who trade in slaves:

There is not a negro from the coast of Africa who does not.... possess a degree of magnanimity which the soul of his sordid master is too often scarce capable of conceiving. Fortune never exerted more cruelly her empire over mankind, than when she subjected those nations of heroes to the refuse of the jails of Europe, to wretches who possess the virtues neither of the countries which they come from, nor of those which they go to, and whose levity, brutality, and baseness, so justly expose them to the contempt of the vanquished. (TMS V.I.19)

At various points Brown suggests that Smith knew little about the significance of slavery for his commercial society, or perhaps tried to hide that knowledge. But WN and especially Smith's Lectures are filled with detailed notes on slavery in history and his contemporary world. He notes for example recent developments in New England (manumission by the Pennsylvania Quakers (WN III.2.10); and the latest legal interpretations on the status of slaves brought to Britain (LJ 456).⁴

¹ Brown's phrasing "It is well known that Adam Smith was against slavery" (Brown 33) is inapt. In fact Smith was famous for his anti-slavery positions (Griswold 1999, 198)

² For an excellent account of how Smith goes about this see Griswold pp 198-201

³ See for example Charles Griswold's admittedly bold reconstruction of Smith's intended corpus, including missing and uncompleted parts (Griswold 1999, chap. 1).

⁴ Brown remarks that Smith must have known about such cases but doesn't mention them in WN, implying that he should have. This kind of criticism doesn't seem fair to Smith who after all was writing a

In judging Smith's coverage of the Africa-Americas trade one should also bear in mind the scale of slavery. In Smith's contemporary world "A small part of the West of Europe is the only portion of the globe that is free from slavery.....and is nothing in comparison with the vast continents where it still prevails (LJ 96)," while history, even of the 'civilised' Greek and Roman states, reinforced the apparent pervasiveness of slavery whether within or without the commercial society Smith lived in.

Smith's sins of commission

[T]he four stages are as much a story of property and property relations as a story of the evolution of the means of production..... here we do see how important it was that there were laws to protect an owner's property, or in the case of slavery, to protect the slave owner. For Smith, the economics of property always overrides the rights of humans, and especially the rights of those who did not belong to "commercial society.' (Brown 37)

The blind optimism of Smithian economics depends on ignoring the desperation and powerlessness of those who are used to produce goods and services, whether they are slaves, workers, women, children in sweatshops, or illegal immigrants. (Brown 38)

One of the problems of reading Smith through a particular lens – such as slavery – is that one can easily miss or misjudge his own purposes, values, and rhetorical strategies.⁵ Smith was in fact an ardent defender of commercial society in comparison to actually existing systems exactly because of his commitment to social justice and liberty. He did indeed use a four stages of history scheme to support his claims about the relative benefits of commercial society to other existing socio-economic systems, particularly to argue that commercial society better promoted the material improvement of the poor (and the wealth of society more generally) and the liberty of individuals (since individuals enmeshed in extended networks of interdependency had much more freedom than in the closed dependency relationships associated for example with feudal systems).

But Smith was no simple minded apologist for commerce in general, let alone the mercantilist commercial society of his time. One has to distinguish his descriptive project analysing the relative benefits and costs of existing commercial society from his critical project directed to the improvement of commercial society in the direction of a 'natural system of liberty', focussing on the efforts in ethical and institutional development required to make commercial society a good society (Rasmussen 2008; Hanley 2009; Hanley 2008). When one takes his critical project seriously, it is clear that Smith does not support commercial society for its own sake, but only to the extent that it supports liberty, justice, ethical development, and the poor.

Smith is no hypocrite about these commitments. He argues in favour of general principles of justice at the heart of his political-economics, for example his natural law arguments for individuals' ownership of their own labour as the "foundation of all other property [rights]" (WN I.10.67) clearly imply the injustice of slavery and its inconsistency with property rights in general, as well as supporting the employment freedom of the poor. He also provides an extensive political analysis of the institution of slavery itself in which he highlights

book about political economy in general rather than only about slavery (and anyway in this particular matter the state of British law on the matter was still in flux (LJ 456, editors' fn 71).

⁵ For example, Brown criticises the false intimacy implied by Smith's butcher, baker, brewer story in contrast to how commerce 'really worked'. In doing so however his view of Smith seems twice distorted, firstly by considering this story in isolation from and as summing up Smith's whole enterprise (as popularised by some neoclassical 'historians'), and secondly through the lens of what the story says about slavery.

the relationship between the rule of law associated with commercial society and the worsening situation of slaves whose status as property is thus confirmed and locked in. Only where government is not so constrained by the rule of law, and thus able to act “arbitrarily”, is it able to intervene with regard to the status and treatment of slaves (WN IV.7.76-77). Here Smith also highlights the role of republican or democratic freedom – if laws are made by the free who are also slave owners, slaves have even less chance of ever securing freedom or better conditions (LJ 181); and the role of wealth which creates a social distance between master and slave that encourages the greatest ill-treatment of slaves (LJ 185).

Far from ignoring contradictions between the benefits of commercial success and the evils of slavery, Smith was fully aware of it and even suggested that such a commercial society was not worth having.

Opulence and freedom, the two greatest blessings men can possess, tend greatly to the misery of this body of men [slaves], which in most countries where slavery is allowed makes up by far the greatest part. A humane man would wish therefore if slavery has to be generally established that these greatest blessing(s), being incompatible with the happiness of the greatest part of mankind, were never to take place. (LJ 185)

So far from supporting a “dissociative” property rights economics at all costs, Smith clearly, repeatedly, and fervently argued for a better freer and more just society for which property rights were most important as a means and not an end. Far from possessing a “blind optimism” about the benefits of commercial society, Smith took seriously and carefully responded to Rousseau’s foundational critiques of commercial society (See for example Rasmussen 2008). Smith was thus a true ‘friend of commerce’, supporting the project because of its potential virtues, but constructively critical about the shortcomings of the mercantilist society he lived in and commerce in general, providing detailed programmes for institutional correctives (such as universal public education) and ethical development (Hanley 2009; Hanley 2008).

Concluding remarks

Some of the claims that Brown makes against Smithian economics, such as the lack of context and ethical dimension in economic analysis, would seem to have much more bite against neoclassical economic thinking. It is indeed unfortunate that so many critics of contemporary economics, including apparently Brown himself, appear to conflate the classical economics of Smith with the neoclassical economics that has been in the ascendant in the last few decades. While neoclassical economists often lay claim to Smith’s authority and legacy,⁶ by for example talking up the invisible hand, there are enormous differences and discontinuities in these really quite separate schools and we should not allow the homunculus produced by neoclassical alchemists to replace the real Smith. Indeed the real Smith would appear to offer positive resources for doing a better kind of economics. (I myself have been particularly impressed by the use Amartya Sen has made of the whole Smith - political economist and moral philosopher (Sen 2009; Sen 2010)). I hope to have demonstrated with this rather exegetical analysis that Adam Smith is not the bogeyman he has been presented as. Not only with regard to this single issue of slavery, but in his wider work, Smith was exactly the kind of ethically engaged economist who should be rescued from the straitjacket that partial interpretations have tied him in. He has much more to offer.

⁶ According to Ronald Meek, George Stigler started his banquet speech at the bicentennial of the original publication of the *Wealth of Nations*, “I bring you greetings from Adam Smith, who is alive and well and living in Chicago” (Meek 1977, 3). One need not take such claims at their face value.

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