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Adam Smith: Radical Neo-Roman and Moderate Realist

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Abstract: There is long-standing disagreement about how radical Adam Smith should be taken to be. Recently, Jonathan Israel's work on the enlightenment situates Smith as a moderate enlightenment thinker. This article challenges that assessment. Smith sees aristocrats as largely devoid of competence, wisdom, and virtue and thinks they do not wield significant political power in commercial societies. He is also highly critical of their economic power; and uses a neo-Roman concept of liberty to provide a powerful critique of slavery and feudalism. In so doing, he extends discussions of liberty and focuses them on economic relations in ways that prefigure labour republicanism. Finally, I show how these more radical commitments can be reconciled with his moderate proposals for political reform through his epistemology and realist anti-utopianism. These are aspects of Smith's thought that are essential for understanding it correctly and have much to teach us today.

1 Introduction

How radical was Adam Smith? To thinkers like Friedrich Hayek,¹ Smith was a paradigm case of the careful and conservative empiricist, counterpoised to the radical rationalist wings of enlightenment thought. To others, like Emma Rothschild,² Smith is a much more progressive figure, with more in common with later radicals such as Condorcet, while Andrew Skinner and Kalle Moene go further, arguing that Smith's writings on the grounds of state interference with markets prefigure important aspects of social democracy³ – a particularly interesting contention in light of recent comments by Steven Lukes and Nadia Urbinati to the

1 Hayek 1960, 1973, 1976, and 1979.

2 Rothschild 2002.

3 Skinner 1996 and Moene 2011.

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same effect regarding Condorcet.⁴ This debate matters to how we situate Adam Smith with regard to his past, his sources, and the social changes he aims to further; to how we understand his short-term influence and legacy; and to what his work has to teach us about doing political philosophy in ways suitable to our current social and historical situation.⁵ I will argue that Smith combines a radical neo-Roman or republican emphasis on non-domination in social life, especially in the economy, which is married to a sophisticated form of realist anti-utopianism designed to guide legislation and public policy, showing that Smith has much to contribute to contemporary debates about the neo-Roman concept of freedom and realist political philosophy.

Broadly speaking, determining the radicalness of Smith's position today is made simpler by Jonathan Israel's recent work on the history of enlightenment ideas. This work has fundamentally changed the way we think about that period and its thinkers, dividing a vast intellectual movement into two principal parts: the radical enlightenment and the moderate enlightenment.^{6,7} This makes the task of contextually locating Smith's political views more tractable than before, and forces us to re-open this important question in light of the new classifications it introduces. Israel argues that Adam Smith's work falls squarely within the moderate enlightenment tradition, focusing on Smith's supposed defence of aristocratic superiority and their political rule, support for imperialism, and lacking any strong moral objections to slavery. Israel's critics point out that Smith is much more radical than this picture allows. For example, Eric Schliesser shows⁸ that Smith advocated both land reform and progressive taxation, alongside the complete disestablishment of religion, significantly beyond anything advocated by Spinoza or many other radical enlightenment thinkers. More recently, Samuel

⁴ Lukes/Urbinati 2012. The connection between Smith and Condorcet is also famously discussed by Rothschild 2002.

⁵ For three prominent examples, see Forman-Barzilai 2010, Schliesser 2017, and Sen 2010. This article contributes to their broad interest in bringing Adam Smith's work into contemporary debates in political philosophy, but differs in focusing more specifically on his contributions to work in the neo-roman/republican and realist traditions.

⁶ Israel 2001, 2006, 2009, 2011, and 2014.

⁷ Note that I am not here claiming that Israel's work contributed to a new reading of Adam Smith – as I argue below, he does not. What I am claiming he adds is a new perspective on the surrounding history of ideas within which Smith is situated. This perspective – i. e., the distinction between radical and moderate enlightenment traditions – has largely been lacking in much of the scholarship (but see the footnotes below for some important exceptions), and it's my contention here that paying attention to it can add to our appreciation of the sophistication of Smith's political positions and argumentation.

⁸ Schliesser 2014.

Fleischacker⁹ has argued that Smith does have a strong moral argument against slavery, that his views on poverty are radical and egalitarian, that he was a strong critic of imperialism, and that he was often held up as a figurehead of later radicals, such as Condorcet, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Thomas Paine.

I argue that Smith doesn't fall neatly into either radical or moderate enlightenment camps, that this is the case for reasons that are insufficiently explored in these debates, and that this points to two neglected ways in which Smith's work is important for contemporary political philosophy. Smith is committed to a neo-Roman concept of freedom as non-domination, which he employs not only to mount a powerful moral critique of slavery, but also of feudalism. The way that Smith shifts the focus of non-domination from political to economic relations to make a comparative argument about the freedom of economic institutions prefigures later work in labour republicanism¹⁰ and challenges the overwhelming focus on political institutions among contemporary neo-Roman thinkers¹¹. Given how radical the implications of this were in later thinkers, why are Smith's proposals so comparatively modest? The answer to this question is not merely his moderate epistemology, but also his policy-focused realist anti-utopianism. These jointly explain how the radical elements in Smith's thinking on non-domination support only modest proposals for political reform and show how Smith's work can contribute to methodological debates about realism in political philosophy^{12,13}.

9 Fleischacker 2016. For more on Adam Smith's legacy, see Kennedy 2005, McLean 2006 and Rothschild 2002.

10 Gourevitch 2015.

11 See, e. g., Pettit 1999, 2012 and 2014 as well as Skinner 1998.

12 See Finlayson 2018, Geuss 2016, Hall 2017, Raekstad 2018a, Rossi 2016, Rossi/Sleat 2014, and Sleat 2013.

13 Although my focus and arguments differ, this is at least partly in line with Rasmussen's reading of Smith in Rasmussen 2013. I should also point out that this article, like the rest of my work on Adam Smith, is premised on rejecting what is sometimes called 'Das Adam Smith Problem', namely the concern that the views on human nature espoused in *TMS* and the *WN* are somehow incompatible (for a contemporary discussion, see Montes 2004, ch. 2) – although there are several rather different versions of this problem around today, see Montes 2004, Otteson 2002, and Paganelli 2008. Rather, like most contemporary commentators, I see the two works as part of a coherent project – a view that cannot and will not be defended here. Based on this, I deliberately draw on the full range of Smith's surviving works in this article, including both *TMS* and *WN*. This involves a number of challenges, including differences of focus, style of argument and terminology – e. g. taking Smith's talk of the upper ranks in *TMS* to be equivalent to his talk of landed noblemen in *WN* (on which, see my Raekstad 2016). Nevertheless, since *TMS* was continually revised alongside the writing of Smith's lectures and *WN*, there's every reason to take them to be expressions of a coherent body of thought, and draw on both for discussions of questions

This article is structured as follows. In Section 2, I map out Israel's interpretation of Smith as a moderate enlightenment thinker. *Contra* Israel, I argue in Section 3 that Smith does not think aristocrats are wise, virtuous, or wield significant political power. In Section 4 I briefly explore Smith's moral critique of slavery and feudalism, drawing out Smith's highly original use of a neo-Roman concept of freedom to critique economic relations, and the interest this holds for contemporary work. I then raise the question of how to square them with his comparatively modest proposals for political reform. This question is answered in Section 5, by showing how Smith's moderate epistemology and realist anti-utopianism explains this seeming discrepancy, and showing how this can contribute to current methodological work in political philosophy.¹⁴ Finally, in Section 6, I conclude.

2 Israel's Arguments for the Moderate Smith

The radical enlightenment, according to Israel, stretches through thinkers such as Diderot, d'Holbach, Helvétius, Paine, Wollstonecraft and many others all the way back to van den Enden and Spinoza. Its core doctrines are substance monism and atheism; a secular ethics, and a commitment to the general interest; democratic republicanism; a commitment to freedom and equality (especially before the law); full freedoms of speech, press, association and conviction, including broad religious tolerance; complete secularization of government and law, as well as of society in general; feminism; anti-racism; and a wider commitment to legal and social equality across race, gender, ethnicity and religion. By contrast, moderate enlightenment thinkers attempted to find a middle-road between the old regime and its radical challengers, attempting to combine the new sciences with religion, e.g. through variants of substance dualism. Moderate enlightenment thinkers like Locke, Leibniz, Voltaire, etc., defended limited freedoms of religion, press, association and life-style, and typically wanted enlightenment for a minority, not for all people, and supported enlightened despotisms or aristocratic republics. Naturally, many thinkers fall into one or the other of these camps

where they overlap, e.g. their discussions of the virtues of landlords and the moral status of slavery and imperialism.

¹⁴ Smith, of course, never describes what he is doing as 'political philosophy', but insofar as he is clearly making normatively grounded political prescriptions in *WN*, it's fair to describe part of his work as such.

only imperfectly and some thinkers of great historical importance – e.g. Kant – don't fall neatly into either.

Israel argues that Smith fits squarely within the moderate enlightenment camp. His argumentation begins with Smith's well-known claim “[u]pon th[e] disposition of mankind, to go along with all the passions of the rich and the powerful, is founded the distinction of ranks, and the order of society”,¹⁵ stating plainly that “[n]othing [...] could have been further removed from the radical stance”.^{16,17} He admits that Smith “hoped to see the labouring classes lifted from poverty”,¹⁸ but insists that Smith's more critical remarks are few, unsystematic, and largely irrelevant.¹⁹ Israel does note that Smith was no uncompromising supporter of free trade and explicitly criticised European colonialism. Nevertheless, he writes that “Smith was really a promoter of internal and international free trade within a liberal but still uncompromisingly imperial framework”.²⁰ Although he thinks that Smith regarded slavery “with moral distaste”, he insists that Smith “offers no real moral objection to the continued use of slavery” where it was practical, since his “argument against slavery, such as it is, mainly pivots on the economic efficiency of the institution”.²¹ Although he found it “mildly unpalatable”, Smith in practice did much to reinforce it and other hierarchies “with their theories about stages of development, cultural property, and race”.²² In short, the “great defect of Smith's and Ferguson's standpoints in an age of inexorably growing pressure

15 TMS I.iii.2.3.

16 Israel 2011, 238.

17 Here it may be useful to distinguish some of Smith's important technical vocabulary. For Smith, *sympathy* is used in a broad sense of “feeling with” another (for an in-depth discussion of this, see Griswold 1999, ch. 2). Specifically, sympathy refers to “our fellow-feeling with any passion whatever” (TMS I.i.I.5). It arises through a kind of imaginative projection, when we imagine what we would feel in certain circumstances, including those of actual and imagined others. This contrasts with Hume's view, where sympathy consists only in feeling the same as actual others. Sometimes “we “feel with” the other and identify with the other's emotions”, which is “close to what we often term “empathy” and amounts to re-creating in oneself a sort of “analogous feeling” to that experienced by the actor” (Griswold 1999, 88). Both sympathy and empathy should be distinguished from the virtue of *beneficence*, which for Smith “is the cardinal virtue overarching the more positive virtues towards other people [in contrast to the negative virtues falling under justice], such as kindness and generosity” (Raekstad 2016, 277). I would like to thank an anonymous referee for pointing out the need to clarify these concepts here.

18 Israel 2011, 238.

19 Israel 2011, 238.

20 Israel 2011, 240.

21 Israel 2011, 240.

22 Israel 2011, 245.

for reform was that it provided no grounds for challenging the general principles of empire, aristocracy, slavery, and ecclesiastical power”.²³

According to Israel, Smith argues that landlords should govern society because its interests are aligned with the general interest, which “was the crucial difference in his eyes between the landed nobility who are also the most refined and educated class, and the capitalist merchants and manufacturers” – although this “harmony of interest” might falter due to the landlords’ indolence and ignorance of their own interests.²⁴ Apparently, Smith “by no means meant to suggest” that “merchants and manufacturers pursue the common interest better or more energetically than the nobility”, since the former are “not only mostly more ignorant than noblemen”, but also because they seek to narrow competition and secure monopolies for themselves contrary to it, which they are able to do thanks to their better understanding of their own interests vis-à-vis landlords.²⁵

From all of this, we can extract the main reasons why Israel’s Smith is a simple moderate enlightenment thinker:

1. Smith believes that commercial societies are politically governed by the aristocratic class.
2. He believes that this is a good thing, and that society is best ruled in that way.
3. This is in part because aristocrats are the most educated and informed of the classes – more so than, *e.g.*, merchants and manufacturers.
4. He supported a general liberal “imperial framework”.
5. He had no principled moral or ethical objections to slavery.
6. He thinks that it is both necessary and good that all of commercial society, including property relations, are governed by the nobility, and that workers therefore remain subject to their rule.

There are several arguments for complicating this picture of Smith, including his commitment to land reform and progressive taxation; his argument for the complete dis-establishment of religion;²⁶ his radical views on poverty and its alleviation, his staunch critique of imperialism and colonialism; and his role as a figurehead for later radical enlightenment thinkers.²⁷

As such, my argument will focus on other aspects of Smith’s radicalism. In Section 3, I argue, against points 1–3, that Smith does not believe the landlord or

²³ Israel 2011, 244.

²⁴ Israel 2011, 243.

²⁵ Israel 2011, 243.

²⁶ Schliesser 2014.

²⁷ Fleischacker 2016.

aristocratic class to be wise, virtuous, or politically powerful, as well as briefly discuss how this connects with his explanation and critique of imperialism; in Section 4, I argue against points 5–6, examining Smith’s use of a neo-Roman concept of freedom to critique both slavery and feudalism; and in Section 5 I show how this radical use of a neo-Roman concept of freedom for all is tempered by his epistemology and realist anti-utopianism. Sections 4 and 5 also show how these neglected aspects of Smith’s thought are especially interesting today.

3 The Political Rule of Landlords?

Smith’s positive assessment of merchants and manufacturers is well-established, as is his unusually high regard for ordinary labourers,²⁸ but what about the supposed superiority of the landed nobility? Smith writes that since landlords’ income “costs them neither labour nor care”, the “indolence, which is the natural effect” of this “renders them too often, not only ignorant, but incapable of that application of mind which is necessary in order to foresee and understand the consequences of any publick regulation”.²⁹ They therefore avoid demanding tasks, plans, or projects, foregoing the virtues they would develop if they did:

He has an aversion to all public confusions, not from the love of mankind, for the great *never look upon their inferiors as their fellow-creatures [...]* (H)e shudders with horror at the thought of any situation which demands the continual and long exertion of *patience, industry, fortitude, and application of thought. These virtues are hardly ever to be met with in men who are born to those high stations.*³⁰

For Smith, landlords lack both cognitive virtues like patience and fortitude and more moral virtues like benevolence, scarcely viewing their supposed inferiors as fellow creatures at all. They are thus, on Smith’s view, highly deficient in both cognitive and moral virtues.³¹ Aristocrats might be able to afford better schooling than those of other social ranks, but this is clearly insufficient to compensate for the effects of their station, on Smith’s view. What are the implications of this for their political influence?

²⁸ On the latter, see Himmelfarb 1984 and Fleischacker 2004, esp. 62–8.

²⁹ *WN* I.xi.p.8, cf. also I.xi.a.1, I.xi.p.8, I.x.c.25, IV.ii.21 and IV.v.23.

³⁰ *TMS* I.iii.2.5, my emphases.

³¹ As I have argued elsewhere, landlords also feature a range of moral failings which are often missed in the literature, see Raekstad 2016.

Given the fact that landlords have an abundance of leisure time, probably the greatest external goods such as wealth, power, and rank and status, and that their interests line up with the general interest of society,³² a Smithian thinker might think that they are highly influential in the formation of public policy. However, this is not the case. Smith believes that landlords “have commonly neither inclination nor fitness to enter into combinations” and convinced by “the clamour and sophistry of merchants and manufacturers” that their private interests “is the general interest of the whole”.³³ Coupled to this lack of motivation and cognitive ability is the landlords’ difficulty of organisation. Spread across the rural landscape, communication and thus deliberation and organization are slow and ineffective, so what little potential there is for political organising is diluted. This is not to say that this class is completely politically impotent, only that it is much less influential and effective than the class of merchants and manufacturers is, and that the former are therefore often tricked by the latter into supporting legislation and policy that promote the latter’s particular interests,³⁴ including colonialism and imperialism.³⁵

By contrast, Smith writes that “[m]erchants and master manufacturers are, in this order, the two classes of people who commonly employ the largest capitals, and who by their wealth draw to themselves the greatest share of the publick consideration”.³⁶ Smith, comparing the class of merchants and manufacturers to the landlord class, sums the matter up elegantly:

As during their whole lives they are engaged in plans and projects, they have frequently more acuteness of understanding than the greater part of country gentlemen. As their thoughts, however, are commonly exercised rather about the interest of their own particular branch of business, than about that of the society, their judgment, even when given with the greatest candour (which it has not been upon every occasion) is much more to be depended upon with regard to the former of those two objects, than with regard to the latter.³⁷

Constantly engaged in plans and projects requiring skill, focus, prolonged mental exertion, social interaction, attention to detail, etc., merchants and manufacturers have significant cognitive abilities important for political influence.³⁸ And this same employment with specifically *their own* plans and projects renders them

³² WN I.xi.p.8.

³³ WN I.x.c.25.

³⁴ WN I.x.c.25.

³⁵ See *inter alia* WN I.x.c.25, WN IV.ii.21, and WN IV.v. a.23.

³⁶ WN I.xi.p.10, obviously, we must not conflate wealth with capital here.

³⁷ WN I.xi.p.10.

³⁸ Raekstad 2016.

acutely aware of their own particular interests, though not of the general interest.³⁹ They can also organise more easily for political influence than can a scattered nobility or rural labour force.⁴⁰

Furthermore, as Rothschild and Sen correctly point out, Smith sees the interests of merchants and manufacturers as “not identical with, and [...] often opposed to, the [general] interest of the society”.⁴¹ Smith therefore writes that:

[t]he interest of the dealers, however, in any particular branch of trade or manufactures, is always in some respects different from, and even opposite to, that of the publick. To widen the market and to narrow the competition, is always the interest of the dealers. To widen the market may frequently be agreeable enough to the interest of the publick; but to narrow the competition must always be against it, and can serve only to enable the dealers, by raising their profits above what they naturally would be, to levy, for their own benefit, an absurd tax upon the rest of their fellow-citizens.⁴²

For Smith, it is always in the interest of individual merchants or manufacturers to seek to restrict competition, and similarly for organized factions thereof. This is why merchants and manufacturers are subject to the “spirit of monopoly” both at home and abroad.⁴³ Smith therefore writes that “the proposal of any new law or regulation of commerce which comes from this order, ought always to be listened to with great precaution”, since “it comes from an order of men [...] who have generally an interest to deceive and even to oppress the publick, and who accordingly have, upon many occasions, both deceived and oppressed it”.⁴⁴

Far from being politically governed by aristocratic landlords, commercial societies are, on Smith’s view, overwhelmingly dominated by merchants and manufacturers. One of the specific fields in which the negative impacts of the rule of merchants and manufacturers is felt is foreign policy, where we find in Smith a staunch critique of European imperialism and colonialism. Since this is well-established in the literature,⁴⁵ I won’t belabour it much. I will, however, make two points which are often overlooked.

First, Smith’s critique of colonialism and imperialism connects to his critical analysis of the political power of merchants and manufacturers, demonstrat-

39 *WN* IV.i.10.

40 *WN* IV.ii.21.

41 Rothschild/Sen 2006.

42 *WN* I.xi.p.10, cf. also *WN* IV.iii.c.9.

43 Cf. *inter alia* *WN* IV.ii.43f., IV.iii.a.10, IV.iii.c.9f., IV.iv.1 and IV.vii.b.49, IV.viii, and V.i.e.4.

44 *WN* I.xi.p.10.

45 See, e.g., Muthu 2008, Stocker 2017, and Vaki 2017, Fleischacker 2017 and throughout *WN* IV.vii.c.15.

ing the strength and extent to which the interests of the class of merchants and manufacturers is allowed to trump those of all others. Initially driven by a desire for precious metals, Smith writes that European imperialism was based on “[f]olly and injustice”.⁴⁶ Colonial trade is done only to “promote the little interest of one little order of men in one country”, namely merchants and manufacturers, while “it hurts the interest of all other orders of men in that country, and of all men in all other countries”, reducing “[a]ll the original sources of revenue”.⁴⁷ It is driven entirely by the local interests of merchants and manufacturers⁴⁸ and is “hurtful to the general interest of the country.”^{49,50}

Smith thus clearly opposes imperialism and colonialism, because it harms the interests of the colonised and of most of the population and the general interest of the colonising nations. Although he believes it to be advisable for a host of moral and political reasons, Smith believes that, sadly, a colonial power will never give up their dominion over their colonies willingly.⁵¹

However, he does believe that international trade might alleviate this situation by equalizing different nations’ military force. As communication increases, military knowledge and technology will spread, putting the victims of European foreign policy on a more equal footing militarily, thereby ending once and for all the terrible injustice they have suffered:

Hereafter, perhaps, the natives of those countries may grow stronger, or those of Europe may grow weaker, and the inhabitants of all the different quarters of the world may arrive at that equality of courage and force which, by inspiring mutual fear, can alone overawe the injustice of independent nations into some sort of respect for the rights of one another. But nothing seems more likely to establish this equality of force than that mutual communication of knowledge and of all sorts of improvements which an extensive commerce from all countries to all countries naturally, or rather necessarily, carries along with it.⁵²

International trade and commerce will, in the end, further some sort of equality between nations and diminish the power of colonial empires, with the downstream results of enhancing the ability of colonies to resist and defend them-

⁴⁶ *WN* IV.vii.b.59.

⁴⁷ *WN* IV.vii.c.60.

⁴⁸ *WN* IV.vii.c.103, cf. also IV.vii.b.11.

⁴⁹ *WN* IV.vii.c.62, see also *WN* IV.vii.c.18–28 and 81–90.

⁵⁰ This is not to say that Smith’s political views are entirely salutary on issues of colonial governance. For instance, there’s still an argument that Smith polity excluded non-Europeans in important ways, see Schliesser 2017, ch. 7.

⁵¹ *WN* IV.vii.c.66.

⁵² *WN* IV.vii.c.80.

selves. Far from any sort of reconciliation with the *status quo* or optimism about the justice and beneficence of imperial dominance, Smith's hope and prediction is that international trade will inadvertently enable colonized subjects to better resist their attackers. Until then, the commercial/capitalist European nations will act as they please, while their victims suffer what they must.

We have thus seen that Smith holds aristocrats, or the landlord class, in very low regard. *Contra* Israel, Smith thinks they are not wise, virtuous, or politically powerful. The politics of commercial societies are instead generally carried out by and for merchants and manufacturers, and Smith thinks the result of this is harmful to virtually everyone else. He does, however, believe that aristocrats wield significant economic power as landlords, which he is highly critical of.

4 Slavery, Freedom and Economic Relations

If Smith rejects colonialism and imperialism, what does he think about the slavery that often accompanied it? Israel admits that Smith thinks it is inefficient;⁵³ but he neglects the importance of Smith's principled objection to slavery.⁵⁴ Smith was famous for his opposition to slavery in his own time.⁵⁵ He mentions slaves' lack of family rights,⁵⁶ the arbitrariness with which they are treated,⁵⁷ the neglect and abuse of their children,⁵⁸ and he harshly characterises the moral failings of slave traders,⁵⁹ describing them as "sordid" and escaping slaves as "heroes".⁶⁰

This principled opposition to slavery is well-established in the literature, but should be connected with Smith's highly critical explanation of how it arose and is maintained. As Weinstein has shown, Smith thinks slavery has three main causes: (erroneously) supposed economic advantages; "love of domination"; and "incapacity to sympathize".⁶¹ On this view, slavery is caused and maintained by people wrongly believing it to be economically advantageous,⁶² by the desire

53 E.g. *WN* I.8.40 and IV.9.47.

54 For more on this issue, see in particular Wells 2010, 156–60.

55 Griswold, 1999, 198.

56 *LJ(A)* iii.94.

57 *LJ(A)* iii.100 f.

58 *LJ(A)* iii.132 f.

59 *TMS* V.I.19.

60 *TMS* V.2.9.

61 Weinstein 2013, 87.

62 *WN* III.ii.12.

people feel to dominate others making them want to own slaves,⁶³ and the incapacity of people to sympathise properly with their perceived inferiors. It is thus driven by a mistaken factual belief about its efficiency, an inherently reprehensible human drive, and a clear instance of systematic moral failure. Because it is so damning, this explanation makes it very hard for a reader who accepts it to keep supporting slavery. In fact, we may read this both as an important aspect of Smith's critique of slavery and a critique of slavery's supporters. Smith therefore not only provides a principled critique of slavery as an institution, but also a highly critical analysis of the faults and failures through which it arose and of the reasons why people support it.

Smith even goes so far as to say that if a commercial society, with all its benefits, required the majority of the population to be slaves it would not be 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.⁶⁴

Here, the increased wealth and freedom of slave-holders is deleterious for their slaves (a) because it will make it harder, perhaps impossible, for slaves ever to gain their freedom⁶⁵ and (b) because it will tend to increase the social distance between masters and slaves, resulting in worse treatment of the latter.⁶⁶ If anything is a principled objection to slavery, this is.

In light of this, it's unclear why Israel thinks that Smith doesn't have a principled objection to slavery, but the combination of three factors seems plausible: the fact that Smith never produced a dedicated discussion of slavery; the fact that many economically liberal thinkers he's often associated with lacked such a critique; and the fact that Israel connects many elements of Smith's thought to moderate enlightenment ideas, which often was supportive of slavery. Despite never producing a focused critique of slavery, Smith is, as we have seen, strongly opposed to the practice – and there's more to be said.

It is often missed that Smith's critique of feudalism is couched in a familiar neo-Roman conception of freedom opposed to domination, dependence, and ser-

⁶³ *LJ(A)* iii.117.

⁶⁴ *LJ(A)* iii.111.

⁶⁵ *LJ(A)* iii.102.

⁶⁶ *LJ(A)* iii.110.

vitude.⁶⁷ On this basis, Smith develops a critique of feudal social relations and the economic power of landlords. For example, when writing of the dangers of entering service at court he asks whether you are “in earnest resolved never to barter your freedom for the lordly servitude of a court, but to live free, fearless, and independent”.⁶⁸ He contrasts how “commerce and manufactures gradually introduced good government” and therewith “liberty and security”, where previously people had lived in conditions “of servile dependency upon their superiors”.⁶⁹ He writes that those who live and work on landlords’ estates are “in every respect as dependent” as the latter’ retainers, and that both depend heavily on their lords’ “good pleasure”.⁷⁰

Freedom or independence is important for a number of interconnected reasons. Smith praises the abilities of (more) independent workmen – a species of workmen which, probably not coincidentally, he holds to increase with the increased real wealth of labourers.⁷¹ He claims of more independent workmen that they work harder and are less liable to bad company, and that they are more so the greater their independence.⁷² More, he holds that freer labour, such as that employed by active capital rather than as dependents of aristocrats,⁷³ is more efficient.⁷⁴ Commercial society, by increasing the wealth of ordinary labourers and replacing feudal economic relations with those between workers and merchants and manufacturers, itself increases the freedom and independence for labourers.⁷⁵ This is of particular importance for their moral and intellectual development – that is, their cultivation of “wisdom and virtue” – as there is nothing so likely “to corrupt and enervate and debase the mind as dependency”.⁷⁶ Commercial society has brought “order and good government” and therewith the “liberty and security of individuals” who had previously been in a “continual state of war with their neighbours, and of servile dependency upon their superiors”.⁷⁷ This, he writes, “is by far the most important of

67 I am not the first to make this case, see esp. Casassas 2013, though the lessons I draw from Smith for contemporary thought on neo-Roman liberty here differ considerably.

68 *TMS* I.iii.2.7.

69 *WN* III.iv.4.

70 *WN* III.iv.6.

71 See *WN* I.viii.48.

72 *WN* I.viii.48.

73 Smith sees the relation between merchants/manufacture and worker as far freer and less oppressive than the master/servant relation between a worker and a noble or landlord.

74 *WN* II.iii.12.

75 See *inter alia* *WN* III.iv.4–18.

76 *LJ(A)* vi.6, cf. also *LJ(B)* 205 and 328.

77 *WN* I.iv.4.

all their effects”.⁷⁸ As a result, the shift from feudal to commercial society has (unintentionally) brought about a “revolution of the greatest importance to the publick happiness”.⁷⁹

In short, according to Smith one of the best things about commercial society is its reduction of aristocratic economic rule in favour of that of merchants and manufacturers, in part because this entails less dominating and therefore freer economic relations. In this respect, and again *contra* Israel, the economic power of landlords is maligned by Smith, and he is happy to see it reduced as much as possible.

This brings out three important points about Smith’s thinking on independence and freedom that are important from the perspective of contemporary discussions of neo-Roman freedom. First, compared to many previous thinkers, Smith radically shifts the neo-Roman concern with freedom as non-domination in two major ways: he extends it to cover all human beings (rather than just a minority); and he applies it not merely to states, but to economic relations. Commercial society and free trade are lauded not just because they increase the material wealth of labouring majority of the population, but also because it increases their freedom and thereby promotes their development of a wise and virtuous character.

In so doing, Smith prefigures two moves that were later made by radical trade unionists, who likewise extended their concern with freedom to all human beings and applied it to assess relations in the workplace.⁸⁰ Much of the early labour movement drew on ideas of freedom as independence, applying them to criticise the relations they saw between capitalists (master manufacturers to Smith) and labourers in the workshops and factories that were gradually replacing independent craftsmen. Smith was one of the earliest to begin applying the neo-Roman concept of freedom to economic relations in this way, and we have yet to see much focused discussion on the role or influence his work might have had in this regard.

Secondly, thinking about the reasons why Smith shifts to focus on economic relations allows us to reconstruct an argument for why these are just as important, perhaps even more important, as a locus of freedom or domination than the structure of the state or polity. Recall that Smith believes freedom is important and valuable primarily for promoting the development of wisdom and virtue and that nothing is as likely “to corrupt and enervate and debase the mind as depend-

⁷⁸ WN I.iv.4.

⁷⁹ WN II.iv.17.

⁸⁰ See Gourevitch 2015.

ency”.⁸¹ Now, if “the understandings of the greater part of men”, including their moral and cognitive capacities, “are necessarily formed by their ordinary employments”,⁸² then it follows that the relations which structure one’s working life are particularly important sites of freedom or domination. If most human beings spend more time at work than almost anywhere else (apart from sleeping), if work is therefore especially influential in moulding people’s development (especially of wisdom and virtue), and if one of the main reasons why freedom is important is that it promotes the development of wisdom and virtue, then it follows that one of the most important sites of freedom or domination is one’s everyday economic relations in the workplace. In fact, on the basis of Smith’s remarks one could make the case – though I will not do so here – that one’s relations at work in many cases affect one’s life-process in a stronger, more direct, and more extensive way, and are therefore more important than one’s mode of government or polity.⁸³ This may in fact explain why Smith focuses much more on economic relations than on the structure of the state or polity: If the latter is a much more important site of freedom or domination, and relatively little discussed in the literature at the time, there is good reason to focus on it rather than the more familiar debates about the requirements of a free state or polity.

This poses a powerful challenge to both the historical and contemporary neo-Roman literature, because it furnishes an argument for *why they should be* concerned with economic relations in ways that they often are not – even today.⁸⁴ If Smith is right that the workplace is a particularly important site of freedom or domination, then contemporary neo-Roman philosophers of freedom who do not discuss it are ignoring something very important. If one is concerned to make domination not only less likely or more costly, but impossible, then any account of a society free from domination must include an account of a domination-free workplace. This is rarely the case today.

Finally, Smith presents a vision of free, or at least freer, labour under capitalism, which, as we have seen, he uses to argue for the comparative superiority of capitalism to feudalism. Labourers may still be subject to the power of master manufacturers, but much less so than under the feudalism it replaced. In the case of manufactures or industry, Smith presented a vision of largely independent

⁸¹ *LJ(A)* vi.6, cf. also *LJ(B)* 205 and 328.

⁸² *WN* V.i.f.50.

⁸³ This is an interesting point that Smith shares with Marx, see Raekstad 2018a.

⁸⁴ For good examples of this, see Pettit 1999, 2012, and 2014. This also applies to neo-Roman theorists who specifically examine the ways in which capitalist and proposed alternative economic institutions affect people’s prospects for neo-Roman liberty, such as Thomas 2017. For notable exceptions, see González-Ricoy 2014, Hsieh 2008 and 2014 as well as White 2011.

producers and smaller capitalists competing for highly-paid labourers enjoying a high level of wealth and independence. Looking especially to North America, Smith believed the same would be true in agriculture, once primogeniture and entails are abolished. These gone, large estates would be broken up and sold; the increased supply of land will lower its price; and in time farms will become affordable to industrious farm workers.⁸⁵ Thus, here too the economy would be dominated largely by independent producers and smaller masters, employing well-paid and independent workers. This gives Smith a well-known case for the superiority of capitalism to feudalism on the grounds that the latter leads to greater freedom and prosperity for ordinary labourers, the vast majority of the population.

We have now seen that Israel's view of Smith as a straightforwardly moderate enlightenment thinker is deeply flawed. Smith thinks that the aristocracy is not wise, virtuous, or powerful; and that he criticises imperialism, colonialism, slavery and feudalism. Smith even criticises aristocrats' economic power, arguing that its reduction is one of the greatest benefits of commercial society. Finally, we saw that part of Smith's critique of slavery and feudal economic relations appeals to a neo-Roman concept of freedom as independence, which he radically extends to all human beings and applies to evaluate economic relations. This leads to an important question: How can and does he square these radical commitments with his comparatively modest proposals for political reform? To understand why Smith's arguably more radical commitments don't issue in more radical proposals, we must turn to his epistemology and realist anti-utopianism.

5 Explaining the Radical and Moderate in Smith: Epistemology and Realist Anti-Utopianism

If Smith's thought was more radical than is often supposed, why did he stop short of radical proposals for political change? There are two reasons for this. Firstly, his moderate epistemology. Smith holds, on broadly empiricist grounds, that humans know and understand particular instances much better than generalities. Furthermore, they know and understand their own particular interests the best, then those of close friends and family and so on, until they have only a very rough and often inadequate understanding of those of strangers.⁸⁶ We see

⁸⁵ *WN* III.iv.19. See also Anderson 2017, 21.

⁸⁶ *TMS* VI.ii.1.2).

this reflected in his account of ethical development⁸⁷ and proper judgment.⁸⁸ We can thus understand why Smith, on epistemic grounds, argues that legislators should not attempt to influence particular choices of investment or employment of capital and/or labour⁸⁹ or restrain individual consumption they consider vicious.⁹⁰ This partly explains why Smith thinks legislators should avoid political reforms of the scale and complexity seen in many more radical enlightenment thinkers. Since any individual or group will therefore lack the required knowledge to accurately estimate the effects of political reforms on the scale and complexity of, *e.g.*, new political or economic institutions, there is good reason why Smith shies away from more radical proposals of the kind advocated by many more radical enlightenment thinkers.

However, we also need to take into account Smith's realist anti-utopianism. This shows us how Smith developed a realist approach to political philosophy of and for public policy, centred on the political agency of the legislator, which in turn can be used to distinguish permissible from impermissible proposals for political reform. First, Adam Smith constructs his political philosophy as advice to the political agency of legislators in a commercial society. As Dugald Stewart points out, Smith aimed "at the improvement of society [...] by enlightening the policy of actual legislators".⁹¹ For Smith, legislators can do their work only with the materials provided and within the confines set by an already-existing society-type as defined by its historical stage – hunting and gathering, herding, agriculture, or commerce.⁹² Each such stage offers legislators different possibilities and limitations, which political philosophers wishing to guide them must take into account in their prescriptions.⁹³

This conception of *agency* restricts the *scope* of Smithian political philosophy to different alternative schemes of legislation and policy within a given stage of society. Shifts from one stage of society to another only ever happen "blindly", as unintended macro-scale consequences of sets of individual micro-scale intentional actions. Legislators cannot take their society from one historical stage to another, and they cannot simply go ahead and impose a perfect system of laws

⁸⁷ *TMS* III.4.8, cf. also *TMS* III.4.7 and *TMS* IV.2.2.

⁸⁸ *WN* II.ii.7, *WN* IV.v.b.25 and *WN* V.iii.56. See also Lindgren 1969 and 1973 as well as Fleischacker 2005.

⁸⁹ *WN* IV.ii.10 and *WN* IV.ix.50 f.

⁹⁰ *WN* II.iii.36.

⁹¹ *EPS* IV.6.

⁹² See Meek 1967, 1976 and 1977 as well as Skinner 1965, 1967 and 1982.

⁹³ See esp. Haakonsen 1981 and Schliesser 2017.

on their society.⁹⁴ Clearly, this rules out certain large-scale attempts at reform of many basic economic and political institutions of the kind that radical enlightenment thinkers often advocated.

Furthermore, the historical stage of society implies a social structure that provides the context for a legislator's agency, including what we would call the conditions for perceived legitimacy.⁹⁵ As we've seen, Smith believes commercial society is divided into landlords, labourers, and merchants and manufacturers, with only the latter wielding significant political power – which they do in their own interests, which they know very well.⁹⁶ Since Smith's vision of free trade is in the general interest, and opposed to that of merchants and manufacturers, the latter will always perceive it to be illegitimate, and will use their wealth and power to cause the rest of society to do likewise.⁹⁷ In fact, this is one of the main reasons why he believes free trade can never be “entirely restored” in Britain – though he believes (plausibly or not) that it can successfully be approached by sufficiently skilful legislation.⁹⁸

We therefore see why Smith rules out certain kinds of ambitious proposals for political reform. His realist anti-utopian approach to political philosophy rules out anything as ambitious as a perfect system of legislation or changing society's basic economic institutions. This approach does, however, countenance just the kind of moderate legislative and policy proposals designed to increase the real wealth and freedom of the majority of people slowly over time. There is therefore no contradiction between Smith's more radical views and his modest political proposals – even if the former might be thought utopian on, say, account of their ambition. Once we take his epistemology and realist anti-utopianism into account, we see how Smith's radical normative commitments and moderate proposals for political reform can successfully be reconciled.

This realist anti-utopianism has some interesting implications for contemporary debates in political philosophy about the extent to which utopianism is compatible with realism. Several recent thinkers argue that realism is incompat-

⁹⁴ Cropsy 1957 and Winch 1995, lect. 3. See also Winch 1996.

⁹⁵ Smith does not employ this Weberian term, but it's plausible to use it here as a way of interpreting what he writes about the perceived unacceptability of certain political proposals. Though unfortunately not much discussed, this is another point where Smith connects to neo-Roman thinkers like Machiavelli and the labour republicans, who likewise connect conceptions of social structure and social class to questions of class power and legislative context.

⁹⁶ *WN* I.xi.p.10.

⁹⁷ *WN* IV.ii.43.

⁹⁸ *WN* IV.ii.43.

ible with utopianism.⁹⁹ As we know, realism is committed to fidelity to the facts, and the notion that political philosophy must start from an accurate conception of, and aim to contribute to, real politics.¹⁰⁰ As we have just seen, this is Smith's approach. He starts with a conception of political agency (a legislator) and its context (commercial society, with all its implications in terms of social divisions and power), and he constructs his political philosophy as a contribution to that real politics – i. e. as advice to legislators in commercial society which they are able, and can reasonably be expected, to follow. Realism is sometimes argued to rule out proposals which are too “utopian” in the sense of being too ambitious and therefore insufficiently respectful of existing forms of real politics; this is sometimes followed by accusations of *status quo* bias.¹⁰¹ Realists have responded to this by arguing that they only oppose unrestricted utopianism¹⁰² and that realism should not be opposed to utopianism *tout court*.¹⁰³

Smith's realist anti-utopianism has two potential contributions to these disagreements: (i) it offers a way of distinguishing permissible from impermissible forms of utopianism; and (ii) it offers an account of how social structure determines which proposals can attain perceived legitimacy.¹⁰⁴ It does the latter by explaining how commercial society generates different social classes with different interests, as well as which of these classes understands their interests well enough and wields power significant enough to decide what society more broadly perceives to be legitimate or not. This explains not only the more institutional and class framework of society that legislators and political philosophers must respect and address; it also explains a major part of which proposals for political reform can and cannot hope for perceived legitimacy. Smith's realist anti-utopianism does the first by giving a criterion for which political proposals are permissible and which are not: a proposal is permissible iff it can guide legislators in the right sort of way – either to bring it or something sufficiently close to it about. Proposals for new economic institutions or whole new societies are impermissible because they cannot guide legislators in this way, while a policy geared towards free trade is permissible because it can. We can thus see how Smith's realist anti-utopianism is able to explain how he combines more radical norma-

⁹⁹ Cf. Galston 2010 and Valentini 2012.

¹⁰⁰ E.g. Geuss 2008 and 2016, Rossi/Sleat 2014, and Williams 2005.

¹⁰¹ See footnote 99. What being too ambitious would mean here is not clear.

¹⁰² Hall 2017.

¹⁰³ Finlayson 2017, Raekstad 2018a, Rossi/Sleat 2014, and Geuss 2016.

¹⁰⁴ I explore the complexities of Adam Smith's realism and utopianism more fully in Raekstad, “The Model of the Legislator: Political Theory, Policy, and Realist Utopianism”. Unpublished Manuscript.

tive commitments and modest proposals for political reform, in a way that continues to be interesting to contemporary political philosophy.

6 Conclusion

In this article, I've argued that recent scholarship provides an opportunity for re-thinking several important and interesting aspects of Adam Smith's work, especially those which remain interesting to contemporary political philosophy. Jonathan Israel's work on the enlightenment can be useful in this regard, despite what I've argued are some major errors in his interpretation of Smith. It might be suggested that my argument points to the problems inherent in Israel's radical/moderate enlightenment distinction as such. I am not going that far. I am, however, challenging the exaggerated neatness and simplicity that sometimes accompanies Israel's usage of the distinction, in particular the errors caused by trying too hard to fit an enlightenment thinker straightforwardly into one of these camps.

In fact, I've tried to suggest that working through these questions can be productive for re-thinking the long-standing debate about how radical Smith's thought was and for its relevance to contemporary political philosophy. Smith's critique of slavery and feudalism highlights his radical neo-Roman commitment to freedom as non-domination or independence – in particular how he extends a concern with freedom beyond wealthy elites to ordinary labourers and his use of this political value to assess economic relations. This in turn raises the question of how to square these more radical normative commitments with his comparatively modest proposals for political reform. This can be answered by understanding his epistemology and especially his moderate anti-utopian approach to political philosophy. The complexity of Adam Smith's thought reminds us that no scheme of historical interpretation, no matter how useful, should be allowed to blind us to the richness, complexity, and messiness of real history.

This also shows us how important parts of Smith's thought remain interesting to political philosophy today. Smith's usage of a neo-Roman concept of liberty remains interesting today, because it prefigures later developments in labour republicanism, which is only just beginning to be discussed again; provides an argument for why neo-Roman thinkers should be much more concerned with economic relations than they often are; and provides an interesting and innovative vision of free labour. His realist anti-utopianism remains interesting because of how it grounds an account of which proposals for political reform can hope for perceived legitimacy, along with a criterion distinguishing between permissible

and impermissible forms of utopianism in a realist account of political agency and its context – specifically that of the legislator in a commercial or capitalist society. These are two important reasons why Smith’s political thought continues to deserve and reward greater attention than it currently tends to receive.¹⁰⁵

TMS Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

WN Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*

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