

LETTER TO THE EDITOR: WAS SMITH A STAGE THEORIST? A RESPONSE TO AHIAKPOR

BY

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James Ahiakpor claims I am incorrect in my reading of Adam Smith when I suggest that Smith may not endorse, or may even reject, a four stages of development model, given his absence of historical example of any country that developed following the four stages, but rather that his descriptions of different stages look more like a taxonomy to describe different types of societies.

I very much appreciate the time and energy Ahiakpor put on my work and I have no qualm about his reading of my paper. Since I was asked to reply to his detailed comments, I will. But only in a general, methodological, way.

The beauty of Adam Smith's works, in my view, is their complexity and their multiple shades. I do not see Smith as a black and white writer but as someone who sees the gray areas. And his focus on the gray may be what allows centuries of debates and multiple, if not contradicting, interpretations.

The way I see Smith is that he is aware of the complexity of economic phenomena, which may very well have multiple and possibly unknown causes and explanations. The role of the "philosopher," or social scientist, is to try to understand and elaborate them. But trying to understand them does not necessarily imply finding the one and only truth behind them, which, for Smith, may not be available to us, or not even be there. As Smith tells us in his *History of Astronomy*, we want to connect the dots, we want to come up with an explanation for things that happen around us. But there are different ways of connecting the same dots. And there may even be different dots to connect.

And so, differently from *THE Theory of Moral Sentiments*, we do not have *THE Theory of the Wealth of Nations*, or *THE Theory of the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. We have *AN Inquiry* into it.

So, maybe presumptuously, I would hope I follow Smith's spirit of inquiring and simply offer a different way of connecting the dots from Ronald Meek or Ahiakpor, not the one and only correct way of understanding Smith.

Scholars have given different emphases to different sentences or words in Smith. Ahiakpor emphasizes different words and different sentences from what I do. In a sense I completely agree with him that, in Smith, saving and the accumulation of capital are at the base of growth, or that different government policies will have a major effect in the development of a country. And I can also see how he "infers" (his word) a development in stages from it. But in my reading of Smith, I preferred to emphasize a different

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“inference” based on the lack of any historical example that Smith himself gives us of a country that develops following the four stages of development.

We can think that without any government interventions, without any accidents, without any peculiarity of nature, without any luck, we would observe a development in four stages. But we can also think whether, for Smith, it is possible that a nation can even be thought of without government interventions, without accidents, without peculiarity of nature, or without luck.

One may think of Smith as building context-free models. One may also think of Smith as offering context-specific explanations of actual development, given an explanation of the nature and causes of wealth. They are different approaches. I simply suggest one. If others have different explanations, they should be welcomed.

Smith warns us against the “man of system” who believes in the truth and correctness of his system, and he encourages us to inquire instead. I hope to have clarified that my intent was not to offer THE correct interpretation of Smith, but simply offer an alternative explanation from the current standard one based on a different emphasis and a different way of connecting dots. I surely do not want to offer THE correct reading of Smith, but keep inquiring.