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THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG
DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS

Adam Smith
Stage Theory and the Status of Women

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Adam Smith, Stage Theory and the Status of Women

In the late eighteenth century an important theoretical device became highly influential in Europe. This tool has become known as the 'four stages theory'. It is the contention of this paper that by utilising this theory Adam Smith was able to advance significantly the development of the economic analysis of the status of women. The paper argues that Smith's contribution to the 'women's question' was fundamental. It constituted the economic discipline's first ever substantive explanation for the social position of women through the ages. It also greatly influenced subsequent economic debate on the status of women and it challenged the claim that the biological differences between the sexes necessarily condemned women to a secondary social position relative to men.

The Four Stages Theory

The four stages theory was a model of socio-economic development which held that everything in society was bound together by a succession of causes and effects, social change and development being a blind but not an arbitrary process. The key factor in development was considered to be the mode of subsistence, i.e. the means by which individuals obtain the material needs of life. In explaining the process of social change, the theory held it was important to emphasise the reciprocal interconnection between property and government and the expansion of a social surplus. Development, moreover, should be perceived as normally proceeding consecutively, through four distinct socio-economic stages each of which was based on a particular mode of subsistence. These were the hunting, pastoral, agricultural and commercial stages. (Meek 1977:18-19) Identifying the mode of subsistence that characterised any given society at a specific point in time, it was claimed, enabled one to make broad statements about the nature of the society's politics, morals, legal system and division of labour. These statements could only be general in nature for it was not accepted that the economic base alone determined social phenomena. What was accepted:

was simply that the key factor in the process of development was the mode of subsistence. As William Robertson put it in his *History of America*, 'In every inquiry concerning the operations of men when united together in society, the first object of attention should be their mode of subsistence. Accordingly as that varies, their laws and policy must be different'. (Meek 1976:2)

The two men credited within the literature with pioneering this theory are Adam Smith the most well known member of the Scottish Historical School and A.R.J. Turgot.

That the development of the four stages theory influenced the analysis of the social position of women made by various members of the Scottish Historical School, has been widely recognised. (Bowles 1984; Tomaselli 1985; Rendall: 1985,1987) This awareness has motivated a number of individuals to give consideration to precisely where the analysis of women fits into the four stages theory and how the development of the theory influenced the school's perspective regarding relations between the sexes. The work of Bowles (1984) has been of particular significance in this regard. In his contribution to the debate Bowles sought to challenge those who argued that the Scottish Historical School utilised the four stages theory only as an illustrative device aiding the creation of prescriptive analysis and not as a tool to explain the nature of historical development. Those advancing this hypothesis, Bowles noted, have failed to appreciate the extent to which the school utilised stage theory not only to prescribe how human beings should behave but also to explain why they behaved as they did. In order to show that this was the case Bowles used, as an example of their approach, John Millar's analysis of the changing social position of women through history. By so doing he managed to show that Millar did not primarily utilise the theory to prescribe how men and women should behave as human beings and how they should relate to each other. Rather, in his use of the theory this major theorist of the school sought to explain both the diversity of human experience and why relations between the sexes tended to change as societies moved through different stages of economic development. Bowles correctly notes:

Millar's discussion of the condition of women was stimulated by a desire to explain the occurrence of the "greatest diversity of manners and customs" and as such formed part of a scientific inquiry into the nature of human society. It was in this context that Millar used the four-stages theory and he found it a very powerful explanatory device. (Bowles 1984:637)

Bowles is right in reaching this conclusion. Where he and those others who have studied the economic contribution to the analysis of the 'women's question' made by the Scottish Historical School are mistaken, however, is in accrediting the development of this pioneering approach to Millar. For Millar in fact was only the student who took the master's ideas, slightly reformulated them, and presented them to the world. The master who actually pioneered this approach to the 'women's question' was Adam Smith.

Smith advanced this contribution as part of the jurisprudence component of his Glasgow moral philosophy lectures. In these lectures Smith began by observing that the first and chief design of all civil governments is to preserve justice amongst the members of society and to prevent the rights of individuals being encroached by others. It is true that when doing so he utilised the term 'man' when speaking of humanity but as he included wives within this category it would appear he was not referring merely to males when he discussed the character of natural and civil rights. (Smith 1978:141,399) Justice, Smith suggested, is violated whenever people are deprived of what they have a right to enjoy and thus could justly demand from others or when they are done an injury or hurt without cause. There are three fundamental ways by which an individual may be injured. These are as a human being, as a member of a family or as a citizen. In the course of his lectures Smith examined these categories in turn, dividing each into subcategories in order to facilitate closer study.

In the process of beginning the first of these detailed examinations Smith laid down the elements of the four stages theory. (Smith 1978:14-16). Having done so, he went on to utilise the theory to explain the manner by which laws, property and the nature of the state change as societies tend to develop. He also used the theory to examine the social position of women. While there are many references to the status of females throughout the lectures,

his most detailed consideration of their situation is undertaken as part of his discussion of the family and the injustice that can be accorded an individual as a member of a family. Meek (1976:122) has asserted that there is virtually nothing of the four stages theory in this part of Smith's work. If the lectures are read for the conscious purpose of examining Smith's economic ideas regarding women, however, it can be shown that stage theory provides the critical organising principle guiding Smith's approach to this issue.

Consistent with the Locke-Pufendorf tradition, Smith discussed women's social status primarily by examining the nature of the marriage partnership. Drawing on Locke he argued that marriage was necessarily a long term relationship. This was because of the length of time that was required to enable children to reach an age and a level of social maturity which would permit them to subsist by themselves. (Smith 1978:141-142)

In the human species, the ... female (the woman) indeed is furnished with milch which might perhaps enable her to support the child for some time of its infancy; but then it often happens that by the time the 1st child is weaned the woman has a 2d, and so on. So that long before the 1st child is in any way qualified to provide for itself there is a 2, a 3d, or a 4th child born. This necessarily requires a degree of labour to which the woman would be altogether unequal. That therefore this additional labour may be sustain'd, and the children supported in their helpless state, it is [was] necessary that union of the parents should be of a very long continuance. (Smith 1978:142)

The longevity of marriage was also necessary, Smith argued, to provide children with a sustained social environment in which they would be subject to the guidance of individuals who were their superiors and who would teach them self discipline:

This is one of the most necessary lessons one can acquire. Unless one can so bring down his passions and restrain his will and so accommodate it to that of others as that they can go along with him, it is impossible for him to have any peace or enjoyment in society. This lesson is learnt by all children, even by those of the most profligate and wicked parents. (Smith 1978:142-143)

While supporting the need for strong legal and moral bonds on the marriage contract that would ensure that children's material and social needs were provided for adequately, Smith was well aware much of humanity did not accept the view that marriage

is necessarily a permanent relationship. This led him to discuss the marriage customs of nations where divorce was or had been relatively common. Here he wanted to explain why marriage laws might differ radically between differing communities and the guiding principle he utilised to achieve this objective was the four stages theory.

A characteristic of societies which remained in the hunting, shepherding or agricultural stage of economic development, Smith argued, was weak central government. Because the governing powers of those with influence in these 'barbarous' societies lacked strength it was very difficult for even influential community members to intervene effectively in internal disputes between members of the community. In many cases these societies were little more than alliances of differing families who came together for the purpose of defence against mutual enemies. When these families fell out there was no strong external force to resolve any subsequent conflict. People not directly involved consequently, would generally try to avoid intervening in the dispute or at most play the part of peacemaker. This tendency for communities with weak government to avoid intervening in disputes between families, Smith argued, was even more pronounced in the case of intrafamily conflict. Consequently, the affairs of private families were largely left to be resolved internally:

The affairs of private families, as long as they concern only the members of one family, are left to the determination of the members of that family.
(Smith 1978:201)

To reiterate, because the level of economic development could only sustain weak government there was no force, external to the family, which could effectively intervene or arbitrate to assist the resolution of intrafamily disputes, hence families were left to resolve their own problems.

Smith made it clear, however, that he recognised that the policy of nonintervention adopted by barbarous societies was not strictly adhered to. Rather nonintervention was maintained only after a situation that was acceptable to those with influence in the society had been established. In short, those with power utilised their influence to strengthen the position of those individuals who would reciprocate any support they were given.

These individuals having been ensconced in their positions were then left free by their allies to govern their domains as they wished. Thus the leaders of a people who had sufficient power and social cohesion to enable them to conquer a particular region, but not sufficient to govern it centrally, would allot portions of the conquered territory to particular individuals with these people being given absolute power to rule their fiefdoms as they desired. These rulers would, in turn, divide their spheres of influence amongst their followers who would likewise be given absolute control over those they were permitted to rule. By so dispersing power the control of the ruling elite was strengthened. This devolution of power continued even at the level of the family. To ensure that there was a degree of social peace at this basic level those with influence, Smith argued, invariably strove to create stability within each family by establishing one individual as the unquestioned holder of power. Those with influence "endeavoured by all means to strengthen the power of the husband and make him as absolute as possible." (Smith 1978:440) Nonintervention at both the level of the community and the family assumed the establishment of particular power relations:

[T]he government is at first in all nations very weak, and very delicate of intermeddling in the differences of persons of different families; they were still less inclined to intermeddle in the differences that happen'd amongst persons of the same family; on the other hand, that some sort of government might be preserved in them they strengthend the authority of the father of the family, and gave him the power of disposing of his whole family as he thought proper and determining with regard to them even in capital cases. By this means the father possessed a power over his whole family, wife, children, and slaves, which was not much less than supreme. (Smith 1978:143)

Why it should have been the father who was the family member chosen to have his authority strengthened was because the influence of adult men, within barbarous societies, tended naturally to be greater than was that of women or children. Smith argued that, politics aside, there were several factors that tended to give individuals an authority over others.

1st, superiority of age and of wisdom which is generally its concomitant. 2dly, superior strength of body; and these two it is which give the old an authority and respect with the young. 3d, superior fortune also gives

a certain authority, *caeteris paribus*; and 4thly, the effect is the same of superior antiquity when everything else is alike; an old family excites no such jealousy as an upstart does. (Smith 1978: 321)

In the hunting stage of development, because property and government are virtually non-existent, "superiority either of age or of personal qualities are the feeble but sole foundations of authority or subordination." (Smith 1966:201) In the simple communities associated with this stage of development positions of influence must necessarily be based on the individual's personal attributes, i.e. on his or her "superior wisdom, valour, or such like qualifications." (Smith 1978:202) It was the members of the community who had experience, wisdom and physical strength who would enjoy the greatest respect in societies in the hunting stage of development. Because women could gain experience and were rational their council in such societies was held in some regard. They would not, however, normally enjoy the respect that would accrue to adult males. This was because while they might match men intellectually, Smith insisted, they were not their equals in terms of physical strength. This fact, together with their physically debilitating role in reproduction meant that women were not the equals of men either as hunters or as warriors. Smith accepted explicitly that women's biology would affect their ability to engage in manual labour and warfare. His views on the relative productivity of male and female labour he specified when discussing the evils of slavery:

As it is for the labour of the slaves that the masters desire to have them, so it is chiefly male slaves which they procure as they are most able to sustain a great degree of hard labour. The women are not of such strength, and are therefore not much coveted. (Smith 1978:193)

And of the military capacities of females, he noted that while they certainly could fight in battle if this became necessary they "are, as being weaker, not so good soldiers" as were men. (Smith 1978:229)

As far as the family was concerned, Smith argued, the qualifications which would engender a high level of respect and hence influence within this institution were those that contributed to its members' economic and military security. Smith was explicit about who he believed was invariably the senior individual in the family. "The head of the family is the

person on whom the others are all naturally in a great measure dependent for their support and defence." (Smith 1978:176). Thus he notes a male slave could not enjoy this position because he could not provide a woman with economic or military security. (Smith 1978:178) In other words, being a man and a husband was not sufficient of itself to elicit a seniority within marriage. What was required to attain this seniority was the ability to provide a material contribution to the wife's well being sufficient to induce her to accept a lesser position in the marriage relationship.

Smith then, believed that wives did not have the level of physical attributes required for hunting and warfare that were available to men. Further, even if they had these capacities they were commonly rendered incapable of utilising them effectively by their reproductive function. Women, consequently had less influence than did men in both the hunting family and the hunting society. Given this situation for Smith it followed that both men and women would agree that if social stability made it necessary to give absolute power to any family member this power should be given to the father. This conclusion would be reached because human beings are "naturally inclined" to favour those who already have influence and because men would utilise the status they enjoyed, as a consequence of their greater economic and military capacities, to ensure that the decision went their way. That he believed husbands would tend to so favour themselves Smith made clear when discussing the double standards men tended to apply to adultery. Here he noted that when they have the capacity to influence the making of laws regarding their relations with their wives men "are inclined to curb the women as much as possible and give themselves the more indulgence." (Smith 1978:147) Indeed, he noted, that in general the "laws of most countries being made by men generally are very severe on the women." (Smith 1978:146)

Smith thought that while societies remained in the hunting stage of development with personal attributes being the only important source of social influence, women's economic and military dependence on men would ensure that they remained very much the latter's social subordinates. He did not accept, however, that women were forever condemned to this inferior position. As societies progressed to the age of shepherds and on to the age of agriculture, new sources of social influence emerged. Of these new sources the two most

significant were the ownership of property and the eminence of one's family line. Smith made clear why he believed these two power sources were important. He also explained why they could not emerge as such while societies remained tied to the hunting mode of subsistence:

In the age of hunters there can be no hereditary nobility or respect to families. Families can then be noways respectable; one who has distinguished himself by his exploits in war and signalized himself as a leader will have considerable respect and honour. This will in some measure descend to the son by his connection with his father. But if he be noways remarkable or distinguished as a leader, his son will not be esteemed a whit the more because he was come of such or such a great man, as military glory and famous achievements are the only thing which can give one weight in a country of this sort. But in the age of shepherds descent gives one more respect and authority than perhaps in any other stage of societ whatever. In this stage, as property is introduced, one can be eminent not only for his superior abilities and renowned exploits but also on account of his wealth and the estate he has derived from his forefathers. This continues the respect paid to the father down to the son and so on, for ever perhaps. (Smith 1978:216)

During the early period in which property and lineage were maturing as sources of power and influence, Smith believed men's dominant social position would remain unchallenged by women. This was because the primary form of property characteristic of the shepherding mode of subsistence required the population to place great emphasis on military prowess and hence on men's greater capacities as warriors. The domestication of animals provided communities with the opportunity to accumulate great wealth in the form of livestock. This wealth, moreover, could be augmented by the breeding of bigger herds. It could also be augmented by stealing the herds of others. It was the latter possibility that Smith thought was so significant in ensuring that military prowess remained of critical importance in the daily lives of shepherding communities. The people of these societies, he argued, were constantly open to opportunities for enriching themselves at the cost of others. At the same time, they were forever fearful that they might be attacked by other communities and if vanquished lose their all. (Smith 1978:215) As a consequence of the existence of these opportunities and dangers, perpetual warfare characterised shepherding societies. All members of the community without distinction were consequently expected to be always prepared for war. As a result, it was necessary that these communities remain societies of warriors and that the warrior be accorded great prestige and respect. (Smith

1978:229) In such an environment women with their lesser military capacities would have no chance of attaining the social stature of men.

The degree of importance Smith placed on the need for shepherding communities to emphasise military prowess is shown by his argument that even shepherd women's ability to inherit property would not be a factor of sufficient influence to enable them to gain any significant degree of social equality. Heiresses in these societies, he noted, invariably lost control of their property to their protectors upon marriage, i.e. to their husbands. Nor was this situation reversed even in the early stage of agricultural development, for in these societies the amount of land that a family could work was relatively small and hence there was little in the form of property that a woman could bring to a marriage. Certainly, they could not bring enough to enable them to induce their men to accord them any significant level of social equality:

By the ancient marriages, which were performed either by *confarreatio* or *coemptio*, the wife became intirely the slave of the husband. He had absolute power over her, both of death and of divorce. Wives could not at that time give any great addition to a mans fortune. They brought either nothing with them or a very small matter, as seven acres of land were accounted a large estate. The wives were accordingly not much regarded in those times. (Smith 1978:66)

For Smith this situation would not change until society had advanced to a stage of economic development where first, it became possible for heiresses to inherit a quantity of property sufficient to enable them to enjoy a high level of bargaining power with prospective bridegrooms; and second, it had advanced to a stage where the nature of its mode of subsistence became incompatible with a culture dominated by *warriordom*. In practice this meant when a society had become rich and had both a highly developed agricultural and commercial sector. In the early stage of agricultural development this could not occur because, as suggested above, landed estates tended to be small and also because the danger of warfare remained a daily pervading experience. This last occurred because the small agrarian producer had a great deal of free time to go a-raiding once his crops were in the ground:

In a state which is a little more refined than this [a simple shepherding community] the men only go to war, but then the whole of the men, whether they be shepherds or a nation in the form of a small agrarian state, where the greatest and richest men, those who are at the head of affairs, have not above 10 or 11 acres, as was the case with Regulus, Cincinnatus, and others at the time of their greatest glory. Such persons can all go out to war as easily as the shepherds. In this state the campaigns were only summer ones. They continued but three or four months in the middle of the summer, after the spring and before the harvest work. They could easily be absent in the intermediate time, as the corn grows and the crop comes on, if the season favours, as well as if they were at home. (Smith 1978:229)

In these simple agrarian communities, Smith argued, approximately 25% of the population is normally capable of being sent to war. As these societies were in constant danger of being attacked by others, this military elite were invariably honoured by all and held in great social esteem. The factor that eventually undermined the influence men gained from their greater military prowess, however, thus enabling power resources that were more easily available to women to grow in relative social significance was the emergence of the commercial stage of development. A society with a developed commercial sector, Smith argued, finds the economic cost of constant warfare much higher than does a less developed society:

[A simple agrarian state] could send out all those of the military age, which are generally counted to be 1 in 4, or 25 in 100. Of the 100, 50 or the half are women; of the other 50 men, the half is reckoned to be below 16 or above 45 or 55, the longest term of the military age. But in a state where arts, manufactures, and handicrafts are brought to perfection this is not the case. They can not dispense with the labourers in this manner without the total loss of business and the destruction of the state. Every hour a smith or a weaver is absent from his loom or the anvil his work is at a stop, which is not the case with the flocks of a shepherd or the fields of the husbandman. Trade, commerce, can not go on, and they therefore will not go out to the wars. As one in 4 can go out in the former case, so not above 1 in 100 in those who are polished and cultivate the arts. (Smith 1978:230, see also 411)

Smith argued that imperial Rome was the first society to reach the commercial stage of economic development and thus experience the specific opportunity costs of warfare that accrue to this type of economy. He argued this cost involved not only forgone income but also forgone leisure. In a less developed economy, he suggested, the standard of luxury the wealthy soldier could enjoy at home was little more than was experienced while he was in

the field. As the arts and manufacturing increased in significance and an expanded number and range of luxuries could consequently be savoured if one was rich and stayed at home, so the warrior life became of ever decreasing relative attractiveness. This was important for the social position of women because it made wealthy Roman men averse to being soldiers. Consequently, the military defence of the Empire was placed increasingly in the hands of an army made up of the poor and of mercenaries recruited from barbarous nations. This development, in turn, lowered the social standing of the warrior amongst the rich and consequently lowered the degree of influence men attained purely from their greater military prowess. The decline in the status that men's greater strength provided them was also accentuated as Rome became more dependent on slaves. With this development men's greater capacity for manual labour became largely irrelevant as a source of social esteem. (Smith 1978:233-234)

I have mentioned Smith's observation that weak central governments tend to encourage the creation of regional absolutism, through all levels of society, because the government does not have the power to effectively enforce its rule from the centre. This was not the situation that existed in Rome in its period of expansion. As the power of the government became ever more substantive the need for absolutism diminished both in Rome and in the secure parts of the Empire. Consequently, the demands of those with wealth, that they be given a say in the governing of the nation manifested itself first in Rome becoming an aristocracy and subsequently a republic. Thus the culture of absolutism was undermined in an environment where men were increasingly disinclined to respect the attributes of the soldier and labourer and the growing prosperity of the society meant that it became possible for individuals to inherit enormous wealth from their parents.

This combination of factors, Smith argued, created an environment in which the social position of Roman women was transformed radically. Despite the attempts of certain 'austere disciplinarians' to limit the power of females, by restricting the mass of wealth they could inherit, a significant number of Roman women did become wealthy heiresses. (Smith 1978:66-67) They did so, moreover, in a context in which the perceived social significance of the biological differences between men and women had been greatly decreased and belief

in the need for absolutist government through all sectors of society greatly undermined. Women who were thus empowered had large fortunes which they could confer on a prospective husband. This fact was not lost on the women concerned, their suitors or their families. Indeed, as the mass of wealth an heiress could inherit increased, rich families became increasingly concerned at the fact that control over the wealth of their female members passed out of their hands when these individuals married. This was a particular difficulty given that traditionally, the Roman women had no legal rights as regards divorce while their husbands could divorce them with ease. The possibility existed that a woman's fortune could be transferred to another family which could then squander this wealth as it wished, with the wife having no effective capacity to prevent this occurring. Moreover, once the money was spent the penniless bride could be simply packed up and sent home.

Smith argued that it was originally in order to prevent these rich women being so misused that traditional Roman marriage laws were abandoned. These were largely replaced by a marriage contract which enabled wives to attain a great deal more effective power in their relations with their husbands. Under the new laws, the prospective bride and groom were able to negotiate a marriage agreement in which the husband's control over the bride's wealth was limited merely to the right to use any interest this wealth might generate. The wife's power, moreover, was further enhanced by extending to her the powers of divorce traditionally enjoyed only by men. (Smith 1978:144)

Though the new form of marriage was introduced by and for the rich it soon became the established marriage form throughout the Roman Empire and remained so until its fall. That the marriage practices of the rich would thus spread through the community Smith perceived as normal because he thought human beings had a natural penchant for looking to their social superiors for the standards of correct behaviour. Smith also reports, however, that following the destruction of the Empire, women's situation soon reverted to its former state, i.e. women lost the power of divorce and once again were rendered their husband's slaves. His explanation for this development maintained consistency with the four stages theory. He argued that the nations that broke the Empire and swept across Western Europe at the beginning of the 5th century, were barbarians who had developed economically

and socially only to the early agricultural stage of development having no commercial sector and only a basic knowledge of agriculture. (Smith 1978:107) Their marriage laws, as Smith would expect reflected this fact, the relative standing of husband and wife being in that state characteristic of warrior societies:

The savage nations which issuing out from Scandinavia and other northern countries overran all the west of Europe were in that state in which the wife is greatly under the subjection of the husband. By the small remains of the laws of those nations which have come down to our hands, this seems to have been very much the case. The husband had then a very great authority over her and was allowed divorce in the same manner as formerly amongst the Romans, but the wife had no power of divorcing the husband. (Smith 1978:146)

That the people who destroyed the Roman Empire had progressed past the age of shepherds and had some rudimentary knowledge of agriculture, Smith argued, was fundamental to the subsequent history of Europe. It meant these people appreciated that one could have property in land as well as in movable goods. This appreciation led their leaders to divide up the conquered territories amongst themselves. The form this division tended to take reflected the fact that the leader or king was rarely able to impose strong central government over his lords. He therefore allotted the land amongst these individuals keeping as much as possible for himself and giving each of the lords free right to rule his region in whatever manner he wished. In other words, we see once again the establishment of regional absolutism as a consequence of the fact that the mode of subsistence was not capable of sustaining a strong central government. Hence, for Smith, the only way there could be any substantive government at all was by dividing power amongst the lords and enabling them to do with it as they wished. The lords, in turn, apportioned the use of their property to others in return for some form of rent and most importantly, for a commitment that his tenants would defend him militarily when he required such assistance. That the lord would do so periodically was expected. This period in Europe, Smith notes, was a time of constant warfare and banditry with the people having to contend with, repeated incursions from raiders such as the Normans and Danes, with the "lawless and freebooting" lords' who

engaged in perpetual attempts to encroach upon each others property and with constant thievery from the vassals of other lords:

Each allodial lord was as it were an independent prince, who made war and peace as he inclined. Each of these lords was commonly at war or at least in enmity with all his neighbours, and all his vassalls were in like manner seperate from those of the other lords and would always endeavour to carry off plunder from the lands of their neighbours. (Smith 1978:128)

In the barbarian social environment established in Western Europe following the collapse of the Roman Empire, the culture of absolutism and warriorism thus flourished once again. Military prowess accordingly, was a primary factor determining the social standing of the individual. To gain access to the use of a lord's land and thus survive economically an individual had to be willing and able to both pay whatever rent was demanded from the lord and "follow him in arms to battle" (Smith 1978:248) when called upon to do so. If a family was unable to fulfil both these basic requirements it forfeited its tenancy. This fundamental provision meant women were rarely allowed to become tenants in their own right. Were they to inherit the rights of tenant at will, moreover, it was generally accepted that they must marry someone capable of providing the lord with his requirements if the inheritance was to be taken up. (Smith 1978:249; see also 34, 417)

In the first period of the feudal government the succession of females was never allowed; for they could not perform any of the services required of those who were vassals either of the king or his nobles; they could neither serve him in the field nor in the council; and as they could not inherit so neither could their descendants by their right. Nor could it for the same reason be allowed of in the allodial governments, as the females could neither lead the vassals to battle nor preside in council and exercise jurisdiction. (Smith 1978:59-60)

The significance Smith places on the military aspect of his explanation for women's social position in allodial and feudal society is attested to by the exception he noted to the normal ban placed on their ability to inherit the rights of a tenant. This one exception was sockage or sock land, i.e. that land the lords allowed to be utilised in return for a money rent or the performance of certain work alone. As the use of this land did not require military service, Smith argued, there was no reason why women should not inherit sockage rights

and so women generally were allowed this right. (Smith 1978:61) Smith made it clear, however, that he considered the possession of land in this manner to be of relative insignificance compared to that demanding military service. In the overwhelming majority of cases, he insisted, if an individual "could not discharge the duties of a vassal" then he or she could at best hope to become a ward of the lord. Given this situation, Smith accepted that with few exceptions women were dependent on men at the most basic of levels, i.e. their very survival required men to assist them both economically and militarily.

Such dependence in an absolutist culture meant, for Smith, that women were largely subject to men's whim and had no chance of gaining any significant level of sexual equality. He argued, however, that this did not mean that in the Dark Ages women returned completely to the slave-like position they had endured prior to the rise of Rome. For in time, he suggested, they found allies who were able to ameliorate some of the more excessive iniquities they were compelled to endure. These allies were the male functionaries of the Christian church. These men, Smith argued, became extremely influential during the period of regional absolutism largely because the people clung to the church as a means of ameliorating the powers of the local lord. This was a tendency the church and the King encouraged in order to enhance their own power. (Smith 1978 :90, 188-190, 264-266) The church's willingness and ability to undermine regional absolutism in order to further its own interests, Smith argued, proved a great boon to women. The men of the church did not marry and this fact, together with the church's desire to undermine the culture of absolutism, tended to encourage these individuals to adopt a more balanced approach to the handling of relations between husband and wife than did the secular authorities. The most important single means by which the church aided women, Smith believed, was by making divorce all but impossible for both men and women. By so doing the economic position of women was enhanced:

This rendering divorces not easily obtainable gave the wife a more respectable character, rendering her in a great measure independent on the husband for her support. She was accordingly considered as a considerable member of the family, who had the same interest in the common stock as the master or the children; and from this it was that the wife after the demise of her husband came in for the same share as either of the other two parts of the family. (Smith 1978:47)

The indissolubility of marriage also enhanced the stature of women, Smith argued, by inducing men to take much greater care when selecting their marriage partners. Compelling the relationship to be for life encouraged men to ensure that when they were choosing their bride the woman chosen was one for whom they truly had a strong emotional attachment. Smith claimed that this development in turn, generated love in marriage for the first time. This was a phenomena which he believed required a permanence in marital relations because it was difficult to sustain this emotion in an environment where men could dispose of their wives with ease or, as in late Rome, where the institution of marriage was unstable because both partners had access to easy divorce. (Smith 1978:146-150, 160)

[W]hen marriage became indissoluble ... The choice of the object of this passion, which is commonly the forerunner of marriage, became a matter of the greatest importance. - The union was perpetual and consequently the choice of the person was a matter which would have a great influence on the future happiness of the parties. From that time therefore we find that love makes the subject of all our tragedies and romances, a species of epic poems till this time. It was before considered as altogether trivial and no subject for such works. - The importance being changed, so also the figure it makes in the poetical performance. It is become from a contemptible a respectable passion as it leads to a union of such great importance, and accordingly makes the subject of all our public entertainments, plays, operas, etc. In those of Greece or Rome it never once appeared. (Smith 1978:150)

For as long as the nations of Europe advanced no further than the agricultural stage of development Smith argued that even with the aid of the church, women's ability to attain any degree of equality with males remained severely curtailed. In his analysis, what began to change this situation was, as with Rome, the eventual establishment of a degree of political stability and the rise of the commercial stage of subsistence. In his lectures Smith outlined the elements of this transformation tracing the development of Europe from the allodial system, through the creation of feudalism and on to the eventual establishment of strong nation states with central governments capable of maintaining a significant degree of social peace. With these developments, he argued, a degree of political stability was slowly established in much of Europe. Warfare in these areas, consequently became less of an all-pervading element in people's lives. Concomitant with this development went the maturation of the agricultural stage of subsistence and the eventual

emergence of the commercial stage. As with Rome, the latter development brought with it an increase in the range and quality of the goods and services available to those with money to purchase them. Smith argued that the combination of these two factors fundamentally transformed women's social position within these parts of Europe by undermining the culture of warriorism. Political stability lessened the esteem and influence men could gain from their greater biological capacity to engage in warfare. At the same time an increasing proportion of men found the cost of war becoming prohibitive given the earnings they were forced to forgo by not being able to engage in manufacturing at home. Further, the lords' growing desire for cash, to enable them to purchase the ever increasing mass of commodities commercialism was capable of generating, seduced them into increasing acceptance of money rent from their tenants in the place of the service of the field and the availability of these luxuries made going to war much less attractive. This last development being so because of the life of luxury that could be enjoyed if one stayed at home. A consequence of this combination of factors was that only the "meanest" of individuals could eventually be induced to become soldiers and the social status of the warrior plummeted accordingly. (Smith 1978:264-266)

These developments were important for the social position of women because (as in Rome) they weakened the power and influence that could be derived from activities where women had a natural relative disadvantage. By establishing this fundamental degree of equality within the property owning classes the stage was set for the social advancement of women:

[I]n time the military fiefs came to be considered in most respects as property, and the services of the field were not always required, but were dispensed with for a certain gratuity. This gratuity, which they called [escuage], was often more esteemed than the performance of the actual services, and new fiefs were given out on that condition. The lords or feudall chiefs did not now exercise the jurisdiction themselves, but by their steward. In this state of things females could succeed in every shape as well as males; they could pay the [escuage] and maintain a steward to exercise judgement on their tenants as well as men. From this time therefore females were admitted to the succession. (Smith 1978 :60)

Thus women gained the material foundation Smith thought was a fundamental prerequisite for their emancipation and for the attainment of any significant level of social equality between the sexes.

Smith's Legacy

The primary criteria by which a scholar's contribution to the history of economic thought can be assessed relate first to the quality of the contribution and second to its influence. By the first measure Smith's Glasgow lectures must be considered of great significance in the development of the economic discipline's contribution to the study of the 'women's question'. Smith's analysis of women's status in the differing stages of development, with its blending of economic and sociological forces and its grounding on biological and historical facts, constituted nothing less than the first ever materialist explanation for the social status of the female sex. Admittedly, this was a limited materialism which understated the fact that property relations produce political forms of conflict and that human beings are active social agents who both make as well as are made by their environment. Smith thus tends to be overly mechanistic in his analysis paying inadequate attention to the active role that men and women play in bringing about social change. Even allowing for these criticisms, however, it must be said that, compared to his predecessors and his peers, there can no doubt Smith's analysis of women's status and his explanation for how and why their social position might change was a great advance in the study of women and their place in society. Where Gersholm Carmichael (1724, II, ii, 2-6) and Francis Hutcheson (1755: 151-165), Smith's predecessors in the Chair of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow had largely limited their analysis of women's place in society to the abstract, idealised world of the natural law theorists (where one spoke of the abstraction 'woman') Smith chose to systematically consider women in specific historical social situations. By so doing he linked real life situations to women's status. This approach, moreover, was without precedent in the work of any of the other major scholars who dabbled with stage theory prior to the time we know conclusively that Smith used this theory to consider the 'women's question'. Discussion of women's role in society is

not even an issue in either Dalrymple's (1757) Essay Towards a General History of Feudal Property in Great Britain or in Kames' two works of 1758, i.e. the second edition of his Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion and the Historical Law Tracts. Likewise, there is no attempt to apply stage theory to the study of women in the 1750s writings of Turgot (1773) or Helvetius (1773). Indeed, the only individual who may truly be considered a precursor for Smith was Montesquieu. This scholar, in his The Spirit of Laws argued that the social significance of the biological differences between the sexes was not a given but rather was a function of a range of social and natural factors. These included the customs of the society, its political constitution and its climate. (Montesquieu 1978: 266-274) Should any of these conditions change, Montesquieu asserted, then women's status within both domestic and civil society could be expected to undergo corresponding changes. (Kra 1984)

The publication of The Spirit of Laws constituted a significant step in the development of stage theory. Montesquieu's use of the stadial concept, however, differed markedly from its utilisation by Smith and Turgot. While including the mode of subsistence amongst the material features of society that he believed shaped the nature of its laws, Montesquieu did not give the economic dimension any particular significance. Certainly, he did not give it anything like the emphasis it was to be accorded by the Scottish Historical School and its French counterparts. This assessment is valid both as a general hypothesis and as regards laws directly related to women and their position within society. Consequently, while Montesquieu's contribution to the analysis of women's place in the world is significant in that it aided the undermining of biological fatalism, it cannot be considered a significant advance in the development of the economic discipline's analysis of women's social position. Rather, it was a philosophical catalyst, a facilitator of the pioneering socio-economic insights that were to be developed by Smith. John Millar's comment as regards the general nature of the relationship between the work of Montesquieu and Smith can aptly be applied to their respective contributions to the 'women's question'.

The great Montesquieu pointed out the road. He was the Lord Bacon of this branch of philosophy. Dr Smith is the Newton. (Millar 1787:528)

Smith accepted that human development proceeded blindly but not arbitrarily and that it was possible to discern certain uniformities and regularities in the process of social change. Consequently, he was led by his discussion of women's condition to seek out those unconscious factors which could explain both the uniformity of women's experience in differing societies and different ages and the regularity with which their status tended to change as the process of development unfolded. By so doing Smith was able to deal with both the fact that in every known society men have been the dominant sex while, at the same time, accepting without difficulty that the relative social position of the sexes was not preordained but rather was historically variant. For Smith it was men's greater physical strength and freedom from the encumbrances of fecundity that was the fundamental factor explaining their universal dominance over women. These biological attributes were universals but it was to Smith's credit that he recognised that the social significance of these universals was not a constant but was subject to historical change. Hence, he explained women's social position in a manner which recognised the existence of fundamental biological differences between the sexes and yet he cannot be considered a biological fatalist.

By this last category is meant one who believes women's biology necessarily prescribes forever their social standing. This was not Smith's position for while he recognised the constancy of sexual differences he also recognised that the significance of biology was a variable and not a constant. Hence, while men's greater muscular strength and freedom from pregnancy might be an important factor in a particular socio-economic environment the status and rewards that can be attained from this particular attribute are not forever prescribed. Indeed, Smith actually goes further than simply stating that in theory sexual differences might diminish in social significance as societies develop socially and economically. He argues that built into the very essence of economic development are forces that tend to enhance women's social position. He does not, it is true, claim that full sexual equality is possible. But given he was writing in a period prior to the industrial revolution where muscular strength was still a fundamental fact influencing the productive

capacities and hence living standards of most of the population he could not logically have reached such a conclusion. To have done so would not have been consistent with his claim that the head of the family was invariably the individual upon whom the other family members were dependent for their economic as well as their physical well being. From Smith's perspective one could only expect full social and familial equality between the sexes if women ceased to be both economically and physically dependent on men. Nevertheless, what is important, is that Smith did acknowledge, indeed insist that women were not necessarily condemned by their biology to perpetual subservience to the male sex. Biology might be a constant and a fundamental determining factor in the history of women but for Smith its significance was historically variant. In short, Smith was a 'biological determinist' in the narrow sense that he accepted biology was a determining factor that had historically shaped relations between the sexes, but he rejected that tradition of biological fatalism which insisted that women's social status was preordained by their biology. His incorporation of this perspective into his theory of socio-economic development was a great advance in the study of the status of women.

Smith intended to publish those parts of his lectures which includes his discussion of the changing nature of women's social position. He did not, however, live to fulfil this intention and had all his unpublished manuscripts burned shortly before his death. Consequently, knowledge of his pioneering analysis of the status of women could not become public until 1978 when Meek, Raphael and Stein published a second set of student notes of Smith's lectures that were markedly more comprehensive than those published by Cannan in 1896. The fact that Smith did not publish his ideas regarding women does not, however, mean that this aspect of his work must be considered as of little significance in terms of the second gauge by which the value of a scholar's contribution to the development of economics can be assessed, i.e. its degree of influence on peers and later generations. Precisely what this measure consists of as been spelt out by Groenewegen. (1983:585) It refers to the influence of the scholar's work;

...on his contemporaries and successors, either because that work acted as an authority which guided the direction of further investigation or because it was a fresh thought and analysis. In particular, if influence

on later generations of economists is considered to be large, the author ought to be assured of an important place in the history of economic thought.

By this criterion Smith, even though he never published his ideas, must be considered an important contributor to the development of the economic discipline's analysis of the status of women. For his ideas certainly influenced his contemporaries and successors. Moreover, through this influence he subsequently guided the direction of further investigation and influenced significantly, later generations of economists.

That Smith's ideas regarding the status of women influenced his contemporaries is indicated by the discussion of women in the hunting stage of society in Adam Ferguson's (1767) An Essay on the History of Civil Society and William Robertson's (1777) History of America. Of far greater significance, however, was Smith's influence on John Millar as evidenced in his Origin of the Distinction of Ranks published in 1771 and his Historical View of English Government published in 1787. In both these works and particularly in the first, Millar devoted considerable attention to the condition of women in the differing eras of the four stages theory. A reading of this work, if undertaken with knowledge of Smith's ideas, shows clearly that it was from Smith that Millar drew his inspiration as regards the status of women.

Millar's biographer has noted that Smith was the greatest single intellectual influence in Millar's life and that Millar was deeply affected by his attendance at Smith's lectures, this experience having "touched off a spark that burned for many a year." (Lehmann 1960:114) Despite having perceived the master-student relationship that existed between these two men, Lehmann (1960:130) failed to recognise that Millar drew his basic ideas as regards the position of women in society from Smith. Consequently, Lehmann accepted that Millar's decision to utilise the four stages theory as the basic organising device around which to structure his analysis of the social position of women was a unique and totally original approach to this topic. This perspective was also subsequently accepted by Meek (1976:166-171) and Bowles (1984).

That Lehmann failed to recognise Millar's indebtedness to Smith in the development of his ideas regarding women is explained by the fact that he did not have access to the

second set of lecture notes when he published his comments in 1960. Had he had these notes available to him, it is possible that he would have recognised in them the key elements of Millar's arguments regarding women. He might, consequently have conceded that his general assessment of the Smith-Millar relationship applied as much to their analysis of the relations between the sexes as it did to any other aspect of their work:

The reader who will take the pains to compare Millar's writings with Smith's long-lost and still much neglected lectures, as made available to us from student-notes by Cannan, or with the more broadly historical and sociological portions of The Wealth of Nations, will find reflected in the former, not indeed as in a mirror, but in a kind of dynamic transformation and enlargement, important elements thrown out in the latter. (Lehmann 1960:4)

Some indication of the inspirational relationship between Smith and Millar's work that Lehmann was attempting to highlight in this comment and the extent of the correlation between the two men's arguments regarding women, may be gained by comparing Smith's depiction of relations between the sexes in the various eras of the four stage theory, as outlined above, with that posited by Millar. (see in particular Millar in Lehmann 1960:192-193; 204-205; 210;219) If this is done it becomes clear that Lehmann's claim that in Millar's work we can see a reflection of Smith's ideas and a 'dynamic transformation and enlargement' of important elements in Smith's lectures applies as much to the two men's study of women's social position as it does to any other element of their work. For both men the social status of women is influenced but not preordained by their biology.

If the social environment changes in a manner which changes the significance of biology and in particular, if the mode of subsistence upon which the society is founded is thus transformed, women's status relative to men can be expected to reflect this change. It is true that Millar appears to place greater emphasis on cultural factors than does Smith, i.e. he is more the sociologist than the economist. Even so, Millar makes it clear that, like Smith, he considers the direction of determination goes from the economic to the cultural and that it is the economic dimension, i.e. the mode of subsistence that is the prime determinant shaping women's social position through the ages.

The revolutions that I have mentioned, in the condition and manner of the sexes, are chiefly derived from the progress of mankind in the common arts of life, and therefore make a part in the general history of society. (Millar 1960:228)

Skinner (1982:104) has described Millar's place in the Scottish Historical School as "the most explicit theorist of the genre". This description is apt in regards to his contribution to the study of women. Because he chose to commit a specific chapter of the Ranks to this topic, his argument is more directed than is Smith's whose contribution is scattered through some 600 pages of lectures. Nevertheless, it is clear that while Millar does advance some interesting ideas in the Ranks that are not found in Smith's writings, such as his suggestion that matrilineality is the cause of the high respect often accorded women's counsel in hunting societies, overall his contribution is essentially little more than an explication of ideas expounded upon by Smith in his lectures. Comparing Millar's work with that of Smith's one is led to the conclusion that while Millar's analysis of the changing nature of relations between the sexes is an interesting contribution to the study of the status of women it does not have the originality suggested by Lehmann and Meek. It is to Adam Smith and not John Millar that credit belongs for devising the pioneering approach to the analysis of women reported in both the Ranks and the Glasgow Lectures.

In asserting that the importance of Millar's contribution to the economic discipline's study of women does not lie in the quality and originality of his ideas, it is not being claimed that this aspect of his work was of little significance. Millar's contribution is important even though it was not an original, inspired effort. This is because it made public Smith's pioneering analysis and thus ensured Smith's perspective was able to influence subsequent debate on the 'women's question' and this is important because influence debate it did. In the last three decades of the eighteenth century Millar's work became highly influential and inspired a number of major studies on women. These included Antoine Thomas's, An Essay on the Character, the Manners and the Understanding of Women in Different Ages, W. Russell's, Essays on the Character, Manners and Genius of Women in Different Ages and W. Alexander's, The History of Women, from the Earliest Antiquity to the Present Time. In all of these works a core theme was stadial theory. In all, moreover, it was

accepted first, that because of their physical weakness and their role in reproduction men had been able to compel women to accept an inferior social position throughout history; second, it was accepted that while biological differences between the sexes had greatly influenced the status of women their social position was not a constant. With the exception of the general commitment to the two spheres concept, i.e. women were naturally the homemakers and men belonged in the public arena, it was accepted that women's lot was not prescribed forever by their biology. Introduce appropriate changes into the social environment, they argued, and one could radically transform the social significance of the fact that there were biological differences between the sexes.

By the end of the eighteenth century this perspective had become accepted widely through Western Europe partly at least because of the influence of Millar's efforts. Millar was also a critical direct link between Smith and the later generations of economists who were to take up the 'women's question'. Macfie (1961: 200) has described Millar as a "bridge between Adam Smith and nineteenth century social thinkers". By this he meant in particular that Millar was a link between Smith and the utilitarians. A sanitised version of many of Millar's ideas which had been cleansed of their emphasis on property rights as a factor in social change, Macfie reports, were taken up by the utilitarians. It is interesting to note here that James Mill came especially under the influence of Millar. This fact is highly significant in the history of the economic study of women's place in the world because the older Mill not only used Millar's ideas extensively to consider women's position in his The History of British India he also introduced these ideas to the most influential of the liberal economists who was to deal extensively with the 'women's question' in the nineteenth century, i.e. his son J.S. Mill. The latter was to subsequently describe Millar as 'perhaps the greatest of philosophical inquirers' into the history of past ages. While a young man beginning to develop an interest in the social position of women, he made extensive and approving use of Millar's discussion of the role of sex and the sexes in barbarian and civilized societies. (J.S. Mill 1826: 95f, 102f) Thus Smith's ideas, though never published by himself, reached out to influence later generations.

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