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The Curious Case of the Three Adam Smiths: Women and the Nobel Prize in Economics*

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Abstract

On the 300th anniversary of his birth, one thing can be said about Adam Smith: entire libraries (real and digital) have been filled with analyses of his thought. This trend does not seem to be on the verge of ending soon. Everybody hopes to uncover the "real Smith." This article has a more modest double aim. First, it intends to delineate three interpretations, or portraits, of Adam Smith's thought in part of the recent literature: the *self-interested Smith,* the *sympathetic Smith* and the *compatibilist Smith.* The different colors used for each of these portraits of the Scottish thinker stand for the interpretations of his view on the moral nature of the market sphere. Second, I try to answer the question whether the three female Nobel laureates can be classified as "Smithian" scholars. By applying the categories elaborated within the three Smith portraits to the work of the three women who, so far, have won the Nobel Prize in Economics, I show that only the *sympathetic Smith* can be considered a feminist economist. He could therefore be viewed as an ally for the feminist economics project.

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1. Introduction

In the movie *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button,* the element of curiosity is given by the lifespan of the main character. The more years have passed, the younger an elderly-born Benjamin Button becomes. Something similar could be argued about Adam Smith's thought. The more the years pass, the more the body of research on the Scottish thinker grows. The 300th anniversary of Smith's birth gives a plastic example of his curious tale. Hundreds of conferences were organized worldwide, including the one on which this special issue is based. And yet, the present article is motivated by a further "curiosity" related to Smith.

David Ricardo wrote the following about Thomas Robert Malthus: "[…] after the many hours that we have passed in trying to convince each other we appear to have made very little progress. One or other of us must be very much in fault." (Ricardo

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[1821] 2004, 336). Something similar has happened among Smith scholars throughout the centuries. Each scholar believes to have reached the "real Smith," *i. e.*, to have correctly interpreted the intended meaning of the teachings of the Scottish philosopher. The curious feature of this case is that everyone agrees that a "real Smith" is somewhere to be found out there, but none thinks that this "real Smith" has been discovered once and for all (before their own research is published, at least).

The situation in which we find ourselves in the literature is a Smithian overpopulation, with each interpretation claiming to be the "real" one. There are the Chicago (Liu 2020), Institutional (Young 2006), and two-faces (Smith 1998) Smiths; there are the stoic (Waszek 1984), eclectic stoic (Montes 2008), or anti-stoic (Bee and Paganelli 2019) Smiths; there are the critical theorist (Tribe 1999), behavioral economist (Ashraf, Camerer, and Loewenstein 2005), and theologian (Oslington 2011) Smiths. It is merely the tip of the iceberg. There are hundreds of versions of Smith in the literature. How does one navigate this mare magnum?

As the aforementioned labels suggest, the methodological step to take while analyzing Smith is to start from a theoretical point of view. The scholar must choose a perspective from which to analyze Smith's thought. Rather than looking for the one "real Smith" among many, it is worthwhile to choose and adopt some of the supposedly "real Smiths" available in the literature to apply Smithian categories to ancient and contemporary debates. This is my project in the following pages. My point of analysis is Smith's view on the relation between markets and morality. If we imagine the market sphere as a practice in MacIntyre's understanding of the term, *i. e.*, "any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity" (MacIntyre [1981] 2007, 187), then inquiring about the morality of the market means seeking to understand which (if any) elements are necessary to excel in this practice. Excellence in a cooperative endeavor entails realizing a good that involves the good of the participants, *i. e.*, making that endeavor morally good. What did Smith say about the issue?

Not surprisingly, there are many positions on what Smith's answer would have been. In what follows, without any pretense of originality or exhaustiveness, I want to describe three.[1] First, there is the answer to be expected by the *self-interested Smith*, according to which markets are moral insofar as economic agents follow their self-interest.[2] In this interpretation of Smith, for markets to be moral, there is no need for other-regarding preferences or virtues. The combination of self-interest and the invisible hand suffices. The second Smith, whom we can call the *sympathetic Smith*, was born as a reaction to the *self-interested Smith.* This second interpretation prevents the

1 Many other interpretations could additionally be mentioned. Also, within the three I propose, there is a considerable population of scholars with nuanced positions. I will more or less arbitrarily exclude some of them. For the sake of my argument, is it enough if the three portraits of Smith are clear and accurate enough to be applied to the case study I have chosen.

2 As for the sympathetic and compatibilist Smith, I will not provide references for this brief description of the Neoclassical Smith. In section 2, I will provide the references of the scholars I had in mind while sketching each of these figures of Smith.

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readers from distinguishing Smith as a moral philosopher from Smith as an economist. The elements characterizing human beings exposed in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (TMS, Smith 1759), including sympathy, fellow feeling, and generosity, are also features of economic agents. The invisible hand does not have that primacy that the perpetrators of the *self-interested Smith* interpretation believed. Morality in markets is present insofar as moral sentiments are expressed in economic exchange. In the middle among these two, we find the *compatibilist Smith.* For the authors choosing the third option, the *self-interested Smith* interpretation is faulty of reductionism. Still, the *sympathetic Smith* also fails to notice that the market lacks space for generosity or sympathy. In Smith's whole theory, there is a social equilibrium: the market is a place for masculine virtues (self-command, prudence), whereas other spheres of social life (family, friendship) are expressions of feminine virtues (generosity, compassion, *etc.*). The compatibility between market and non-market spheres sheds light on the relationship between markets and morality.

These are the three Smiths I refer to in the title. Which of them is *the* real one? It is hard to say, but luckily, answering that question is not the aim of my paper. In section 2, I present these three portraits as straightforwardly as possible. Its purpose is to provide a foundation to apply the three Smiths to a case study. Section 3, in fact, will interpret the work of the (three, so far) female winners of the *Sveriges Riksbank* Prize in Economic Sciences in memory of Alfred Nobel in light of the three Smiths.[3] Are Elinor Ostrom, Esther Duflo, and Claudia Goldin "Smithian" economists? Are their views on markets and morality aligned with Smith's? If so, with which Smith interpretation among the three mentioned are they aligned?

These questions are relevant to the growing literature on feminist economics (Ferber and Nelson 2009). Audre Lorde wrote that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde [1979] 2018). Applied to feminist economics, this means that the conceptual tools we find in Smith's thought are still within a framework that contributed to the theorization and spread of masculine economics. And yet, I claim that Smith's house is full of hidden tools, corresponding to the many Smiths populating it. We need to rediscover these hidden tools to demolish the house of masculine economics and build a feminist one. Moreover, we need to complement the analyses illustrating that Smith was far from feminism both in his private life (Marçal [2015] 2017) and in his view on women (Slegers 2021).

Providing an answer to the aforementioned questions is the real aim of this article. It will turn out that all three female Nobel laureates in economics can be seen as close to the *sympathetic Smith* interpretation. This, in turn, will bring another point to light, namely, that only the *sympathetic Smith* can be considered a feminist economist.

2. The Three Adam Smiths

When facing multiple accounts of the "real Smith," the natural tendency would be to express an evaluative judgment on which of those best represents the original ideas of the Scottish philosopher. In what follows, I will resist this temptation. The labels I

3 Henceforth abbreviated as Nobel Prize in Economics.

choose to delineate the three accounts of Smith do not have to be read in an evaluative way – many would naturally side with the *sympathetic* rather than the *compatibilist* and, even more, the *self-interested* Smith. All these portraits are, to a certain extent, useful in their own right, which opens hermeneutical doors to applying Smithian concepts to contemporary issues.

2.1 The Self-Interested Smith

The *self-interested Smith* is one of the most famous portraits of Smith and, as a consequence, one of the most criticized. In this perspective, Smith would have argued that for the market to be moral, *i. e.*, for that practice to produce internal goods, the combination of self-interest and the invisible hand is a necessary and sufficient condition. The message of the *Wealth of Nations* (WN, Smith 1776) can be summarized as follows: rather than depending on the benevolence of our fellow citizens, we should try to obtain what we want by appealing to the self-interest of others. The market is a positive-sum game, meaning that the people involved in this practice are better off at the end of the day. Not only relying on our self-interest will procure us more benefit. As a marvelous example of the unintended consequences mechanism, the self-interested agent, "[b]y pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it" (WN IV.ii.9). We often contribute to the good of society when we do not seek to intend it *per se.* We should care about our own self-interest, as other economic actors care about theirs. The wealth created by mutually advantageous market transactions will also augment the wealth of nations, *i. e.*, the good of the practice in which we are involved. According to the *self-interested Smith*, there is no need to care directly for the good of the party with whom you are exchanging, even less for the good of society as a whole. Markets do not require virtue but just rational, self-interested individuals free to pursue their own goals. In the plural centenary known as *The Adam Smith Problem* (Montes 2003), the *self-interested Smith* would side with those who argue that TMS is unnecessary to understand Smith's view of the market. The reference point was and has to be WN.

The reader familiar with Smithian literature would have noticed the similarity between my *self-interested Smith* and the Chicago Smith (Evensky 2005). The latter is the sum of the interpretation given to Smith's thought at the Chicago School of Economics, a neoclassical school of economic thought developed in the 20^{th} century in the United States. One of the most illustrious members of this school, George Stigler, wrote that Smith "put into the center of economics the systematic analysis of the behavior of individuals pursuing their self-interest under conditions of competition" (1976, 1201). What WN shows, according to Stigler, is that "the immensely powerful force of self-interest guides resources to their most efficient uses […] in short, it orders and enriches the nation which gives it free reign. Indeed, if self-interest is given even a loose rein, it will perform prodigies" (Stigler 1971, 265). These comments match perfectly with the *self-interested Smith.*

The resemblance becomes more evident if we address another famous scholar of the Chicago School, Milton Friedman. Today, every university course in business ethics all over the world begins with the definition of corporate social responsibility of the firm. In summary, for Friedman, the only moral responsibility attributable to corporations is to increase profits (Friedman 1962, 133). This view is perfectly coherent with the *self-interested Smith.* Economic actors need to follow their self-interest. In doing so, they already contribute to improving society, *i. e.*, the public good. If Friedman's position is known, it is also one of its sources. In his presidential address to the *American Economic Association*, Friedman said: "As another example of Smith's relevance to specific issues, here is his comment on the widely proclaimed 'social responsibility of business,' and on those nauseating TV commercials that portray Exxon and its counterparts as in business primarily to preserve the environment: 'I have never known much good done by those who affected to trade for the public good'" (Friedman 1976, 7, quoting WN IV.ii.9).

All these things considered, why not choose Chicago Smith as a label? The answer is simple and straightforward. Even if tied by a certain unity of intents, the Chicago School is not a uniform bunch of authors, and its position can be exhausted by referencing two (important) economists, Stigler and Friedman. When it comes to the interpretations of Smith, for example, Medema (2010) wisely recalled McCloskey's distinction between a "Good Old Chicago School" (Viner, Coase) and the "new Chicago" (Becker, Stigler). I am uninterested in these evaluative statements (good-old, new-bad). However, they explain why I did not choose Chicago Smith as a label for the *self-interested Smith.*

2.2 The Sympathetic Smith

Many accusations have been voiced against the *self-interested Smith.* Among them, the portrait is guilty of anthropological reductionism with respect to the complex view of human beings advanced by the author of the TMS. Smith the moral philosopher and Smith the economist are not two different persons but the same. Reformulating the charge in the known lexicon of the *Adam Smith Problem*, WN cannot be read, least of all understood, without reference to TMS. From these critiques arose the *sympathetic Smith.*

To understand the main colors of the second portrait of my analysis, it is enough to read the incipit of TMS: "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it" (TMS I.i.1.1). According to the supporters of the *sympathetic Smith*, the market cannot work correctly if it ignores this essential trait of human beings. Smith provided a rich analysis of sociality based on the hypothesis that benevolence, sympathy (Heath 1995), and a capacity for fellow feeling (Sugden 2002) are fundamental properties of human nature. Smith knew very well the richness and complexity of human nature and motivations. Therefore, it is natural that he saw these aspects of human psychology as fundamental to a functioning market.

For the *sympathetic Smith*, the good of the market as a practice is the intentional mutual concern of the parties involved in the exchange. I care about your good and you care about mine, while we both also care about our own interests. The market is a giant network of cooperation. According to the *self-interested Smith*, this cooperation is unintentional, whereas, for the *sympathetic Smith,* it is intentional and constitutes the essence of the market. This second portrait depicts Smith advocating for virtuous markets, where we express our sociability in all forms (from kindness to friendship). In an article titled "Uses and Abuses of Adam Smith," Amartya Sen (2011) provided us with one of the most precise descriptions of the *sympathetic Smith* and its accuracy with respect to the *self-interested Smith:*

> The butcher, the brewer, and the baker want to get our money in exchange for the meat, the beer, and the bread they make, and we—the consumers—want their meat, beer, and bread and are ready to pay for them with our money. The exchange benefits us all, and we do not have to be committed altruists to find reasons to seek such exchange. This is a fine point about the motivation for trade—interesting in itself—but it is not a claim about the adequacy of self-seeking for the success of a society or even of the market economy. In the rest of Smith's writings, there are extensive discussions of the constructive role of other motivations that influence human action and behavior. For example, in the *Moral Sentiments*, Smith argues that while "prudence" is "of all virtues that which is most helpful to the individual, […] humanity, justice, generosity, and public spirit, are the qualities most useful to others." The working of society goes much beyond the motivation for seeking a trade, and even the successful operation of the market economy demands more than self-love (265).

Like many supporters of the *sympathetic Smith*, Sen does not argue for a market made just of altruistic sentiments or behaviors. His idea is instead that self-interest is too little to explain the good functioning of a commercial society. For the market to work correctly, the intentional concern for the good of others goes hand in hand with an intentional concern for the public good. Therefore, the supporters of the *sympathetic Smith* naturally diminish the role of the invisible hand in Smithian theory. After all, this expression recurs just three times in the texts published by the Scottish author. According to Emma Rothschild (1994, 319), for example, the invisible hand is nothing more than an "ironic and useful joke" employed by Smith.

2.3 The Compatibilist Smith

The dichotomy between the two Smiths so far presented is not a necessary outcome. There is at least a third way in which the Scottish philosopher's view about the morality of the markets can be depicted. In other words, there is a third way to understand the relation between TMS and WN. The story I am about to tell exemplifies this third way, corresponding to the *compatibilist Smith* portrait.

Human beings are not naturally selfish. All the elements introduced in the TMS are indeed features displayed by economic agents. However, there is a good moral argument to sustain that markets need the combination of self-interest and the invisible hand to work correctly. If we read WN, Smith listed the virtues of economic actors. Among them, prudence and self-command are the most important. As Smith understood them, both virtues are related to self-interest. In different ways, both advise economic actors not to follow their self-interest blindly but to moderate it when necessary. Unlike the *sympathetic Smith* argues, however, these virtues do not ask economic actors to care about the good of others or the good of society. The correct functioning of the market, grounded in self-interest, the invisible hand, prudence, and self-command, allows human beings to fully express other virtues (humanity, generosity, compassion) in other spheres of their life. There are at least two further specifications of these arguments in the literature.

First, there is a textual argument to sustain this *compatibilist Smith.* As Bruni and Sugden (2008) showed, in TMS, Smith divided between masculine and feminine passions and virtues:

> Significantly, when he describes the "social passions" (listed as "generosity, humanity, kindness, compassion, mutual friendship and esteem, all the social and benevolent affections"), his principal examples are of the family. To illustrate the social passions, he draws a rose-tinted picture of what, for him, is an ideal family, characterized by "cheerfulness, harmony and contentment," in contrast to a family in which the social virtues are absent (38–40). Significantly, too, Smith's distinction between justice and humanity is gendered: humanity, we are told, is "the gentle virtue," "the soft virtue" (153), "the virtue of a woman" (190); it "consists merely in [an] exquisite fellow-feeling" which, because of its spontaneity, requires no self-command (190–1). In contrast, self-command is identified with "manhood and firmness," while the "useless outcries" of men who fail to show this virtue are "womanish lamentations" (244). Recall that humanity is what we do not appeal to when we go out to buy our dinners. The suggestion is that the social passions are exercised in the softer and (we seem to be being told) optional domains of family and intimate friendship, and that these are separate from the harsher and more essential worlds of politics and economics (*ibid.*, 45).

The market is the realm of masculine passions and virtues. It coheres with Smith's times, where businesspeople could be translated, unproblematically, with businessmen. The social equilibrium emerges when we consider that men can also express feminine passions and virtues as long as those are lived in the private sphere of family and friends. In this reading, TMS and WN are neither disjointed works nor two chapters of the same book. They are two pieces of the same puzzle, compatible with each other.

Bruni and Sugden (2008) provided another argument to sustain this third image of Smith. Suppose we go along with the view of the *sympathetic Smith* and seek friendship in the market sphere. How sincere can a friendship relation be when there is money? This is a matter of conventional wisdom and has a long history in Western philosophy. Aristotle knew perfectly that friendship based on utility "is for the commercially minded" (1984, 1830) and, therefore, holds a qualitatively inferior rank compared to true friendship based on virtue. In Smithian terms, to have real friendship, you need to have a certain independence. You are not dependent on someone; you can choose that person as your friend (elective friendship).

On the other hand, the independence of your friends assures you against the risk that they are interested in you and not in your money. According to the *compatibilist Smith*, the market is the means through which you gain independence; therefore, you can live authentic and genuine relations in other spheres of social life. If the market functions well when self-interest is the rule and not the exception, we risk inefficiency when elements such as humanity, benevolence and sympathy are introduced. That inefficiency, in turn, can cause the loss of our independence.

To sum up, the *compatibilist Smith* lies in the middle of the other two portraits. As I said at the beginning of this section, each model has a certain usefulness. They will be the hermeneutical keys to access the case-study that I propose in the next chapter.

3. The Three Smiths Meet Three Female Nobel Laureates

In this section, I apply the three profiles of Smith described above to three of the ninety-three winners of the Nobel Prize for Economics to date. As announced, I will focus on the only three women who have won the Nobel Prizes in Economics so far. By analyzing their speeches/lectures during the Nobel ceremony and the reasons the Nobel committee gave for awarding the prize, I infer which versions of Smith's view on the market and morality they seem to endorse. After that, in sub-section 3.4, I discuss the implications of attributing to Smith – more precisely, to one interpretation of Smith – the etiquette of feminist economist.

3.1 Elinor Ostrom

The first woman to win a Nobel Prize in economics had to wait forty years. In 2009, Elinor Ostrom (1933 – 2012) was awarded the prize, together with Oliver E. Williamson, "for her analysis of economic governance, especially the commons" (Ostrom 2009a). The fact that Ostrom won the Nobel Prize for the commons is significant in at least two respects.

First, the association between women and commons in economics came from the dawn of the discipline. Katharine Coman (1857 – 1915), the only woman to attend the founding meeting of the American Economic Association, was the author of the first article of the first issue of the *American Economic Review.* The title was "Some Unsettled Problems of Irrigation" (Coman [1911] 2011). On the one-hundred year anniversary of *AER*, two years after the Nobel Prize ceremony, Ostrom recognized her connection with Coman: "It is instructive to read the article that Katharine Coman published in the first issue of the *American Economic Review* to gain insight into the problems of collective action related to irrigation in the American West" (Ostrom 2011, 49); moreover, "Coman's article illustrates that the typical solution posed to the problem of collective action – turn the problem over to the government – is not a panacea" (*ibid.*, 51). As we read in her Nobel Prize lecture, these were the starting points of Ostrom's analysis. Her first research was directed at understanding water resource management in Southern California. More importantly, like Coman, Ostrom transcended the dichotomy of individual-state, according to which any economic issue can be addressed either by the free initiative of the privates or by the intervention of public authority: "the market was seen as the optimal institution for the production and exchange of private goods. For nonprivate goods, on the other hand, one needed 'the' government to impose rules and taxes to force self-interested individuals to contribute necessary resources and refrain from self-seeking activities" (Ostrom 2009b, 409).

To formulate Ostrom's starting point through the Smith profiles I have delineated in the present paper, we can say that Ostrom starts from some failures of the *self-interested Smith.* The combination of self-interest and the invisible hand fails when confronted with common goods (or commons), *i. e.*, those goods that, if we consume following our unleashed self-interest, will disappear. In economic jargon, commons are non-excludable goods (I cannot prevent you from access to those goods) which are rivalrous in consumption (when you consume, you reduce someone else's ability to consume). In his pioneering article, Garret Hardin (1968) advanced the example of the pasture and herdsman. His conclusion was clear: "freedom in commons brings ruins to all" (*ibid.*, 1244).

The classical solution to Hardin's "tragedy" was to call for top-down government intervention. What Ostrom understood through empirical studies, however, was that the state was also unsuccessful in avoiding the waste of the commons. Something else was needed. Refusing the *self-interested Smith*, we can imagine Ostrom facing the other two profiles I described, *i. e.*, the *sympathetic or compatibilist Smith.* The latter would have preached to individuals the virtues of prudence and self-command while dealing with the commons. Self-interest cannot be blind and has to be controlled, otherwise, in the long run, it damages everyone. Ostrom seems to opt for another solution, more inclined to the *sympathetic Smith:*

> The most important lesson for public policy analysis derived from the intellectual journey I have outlined here is that humans have a more complex motivational structure and more capability to solve social dilemmas than posited in earlier rational-choice theory. Designing institutions to force (or nudge) entirely self-interested individuals to achieve better outcomes has been the major goal posited by policy analysts for governments to accomplish for much of the past half-century extensive empirical research leads me to argue that instead, a core goal of public policy should be to facilitate the development of institutions that bring out the best in humans. We need to ask how diverse polycentric institutions help or hinder the innovativeness, learning, adapting, trustworthiness, levels of cooperation of participants, and the achievement of more effective, equitable, and sustainable outcomes at multiple scales (2009b, 435–6).

Human beings are capable of governing the commons through some levels of cooperation and trustworthiness. While Ostrom seems to call back a fourth profile of Smith I do not consider in this paper, *i. e.*, the *institutional Smith*, she does it to complement and support the *sympathetic Smith* who, among the three profiles, seems the one more apt to interact with the different institutions and people involved in the difficult task of governing the commons. Ostrom does not mention Smith, nor does she see her work in continuity with the Scottish philosopher; however, for my argument, we can see her view of a good and moral market functioning in continuity with the *sympathetic Smith.*

3.2 Esther Duflo

Reading Esther Duflo's speech given at the Nobel Banquet in 2019 – Duflo was the second woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize in economics, a prize shared with her husband Abhijit Banerjee and Michael Kremer – we might be tempted to place her among the followers of the *sympathetic Smith.* Consider the following passages:

> In truth, I speak on behalf of many more. For we represent a movement that is much broader than any one of us. We believe that the Prize recognizes not only what this movement has accomplished, but also what it could accomplish in the future. This movement started with the conviction that it is possible to make significant progress against poverty in the world by focusing on well-defined questions, and being as rigorous as possible in answering those questions in the real world.

> Faced with this enormous problem, many people's reaction was to try to not think about it at all. Others hope to find some magic bullet. We believed that like the war on cancer, the war on poverty was not going to be won in one major battle, but in a series of small triumphs, and with no doubt many setbacks along the way. To assess the progress, we adopted the methods of randomized controlled trials, popular in medicine but not really used in economics at the time. An RCT allows a researcher to vary just what she is interested in, leaving the rest constant, and therefore be driven by the question she wants to ask. We had two closely related ambitions. The first one was to contribute to improving the lives of the poor, here and now. The second was to build a better understanding of how they live their lives, from the ground up, by building a fuller picture, one question at a time (Duflo 2019a).

While it might be argued (as I will) that, in these lines, there is an implicit preference for the view of markets and morality endorsed by the *sympathetic Smith,* I must clear the air from possible confusion. It is not Duflo's (and her Nobel laureate colleagues' and movement) attention to the issue of poverty reduction that makes her refuse the other two portraits of Smith. Political economy, and later economics, have always been interested in poverty reduction. The difference in the portraits is in the ways to reduce poverty and include more people in the market mechanism. The *self-interested Smith* is more inclined to let the spontaneous mechanism of the market work its magic, elevating people from beggars to economic agents who go out from poverty appealing to the self-interest of other economic agents, that is, intercepting their needs. The *compatibilist Smith* agrees, pointing out that some virtues are required for the market to function correctly and that other features of human beings (compassion, generosity, humanity) can be exercised in favor of the poor outside the market (philanthropy). The *sympathetic Smith* advocates something different: there is a moment in which the sorrow and suffering of others interests us in the market as well, and this can bring us to take care of them while pursuing our own interests. Cooperation is not an unintentional result of a mechanism but the intentional choice of human beings capable of sympathy and fellow feeling, including the one directed to the poor.

If poverty is not the issue aligning Duflo to *sympathetic Smith*, it is not the method she and her team have adopted either. The randomised control trials method was born precisely from the skepticism of one-size-fits-all models like the three Smith I describe here. To see how, we need to consult her Nobel Prize lecture. Curiously enough, Duflo and her husband split the lectures into two parts. Banerjee gave a lecture on the economic implications of their research, whereas Duflo focused on the relationship between economic results and policy-making. While narrating her intellectual journey, Duflo recalled her analysis of microcredit and microfinance. Behind these experiences, like the one of the Grameen bank, we can see the appearance of the *sympathetic Smith*, the intentional concern for the good of the poor through their inclusion in the market mechanism. This is what Duflo and her colleagues found:

> The objective of the researchers was, of course, never to undermine microfinance: in fact, much of modern development economics is predicated on the fact that financial markets work very badly for the poor, and that this constrains their occupational choice and leads to poverty traps (e. g., Banerjee and Newman 1993). What these results suggested, however, is that the "one-size-fits-all" approach that had been the hallmark of the microfinance movement since Mohammed Yunus (one loan, given once a year, and repaid in weekly, equally-sized installments) was perhaps not ideal, given the extreme heterogeneity in borrowers' needs and types. While some people needed consumption finance or even just good savings

> products, a minority of real entrepreneurs needed business lending with larger and more flexible loans of real entrepreneurs needed business lending with larger and more flexible loans (2019b, 448).

The problem is not which picture of Smith (or other authors) one adopts. The problem is also not which view of the market and morality we choose as the most appropriate for the market conceived as a practice. The principle behind Duflo's research is a refusal of unique models and a pronounced respect for reality's plurality, biodiversity, and heterogeneity.

While we cannot ignore this basic difference between the three Smiths and Duflo, it is important to stress that difference is not a synonym for equidistance. I argue that Duflo is closer to the *sympathetic Smith* than to the two other interpretations. This is because of her desire to have the "full picture" (see the end of the abovementioned banquet speech) of the different lives of the poor. Among the three portraits of Smith, the *sympathetic* one is the most colorful, whereas colors represent human features and motivations that are in play in the market and society. Additionally, Duflo's approach is methodologically and substantially cooperative. Her research does not work for the poor, but it includes them and makes them active agents of the research enterprise. The same is valid for the relationship between economists, policy-makers, and change markets: "The only reason we managed to change the practice of economics, as Abhijit Banerjee describes in his lecture, or the practice of policy, as I describe here, is because we were part of a movement. This movement is not one that is only consisted of academics: while the academic plays a key role, they could not even do their work without their partners, and their staff, who are often much more experienced than them about ground realities" (*ibid.*, 461). Self-interest, the invisible hand, prudence, self-command: all these elements characterizing the *self-interested* and *compatibilist Smith* find little or no place in Duflo's research, at least in her own assessment of her intellectual journey.

3.3 Claudia Goldin

Claudia Goldin received the Nobel Prize in economics in 2023. She was the first woman to receive this prestigious award alone, not sharing it with others. In her case, it is possible to establish a direct connection with one of the portraits of Smith. Goldin is an economic historian, and the central part of her work was devoted to reconstructing women's earnings and access to the labor market compared to men. This research starts by recognizing the problems caused by the *compatibilist Smith's* view on markets and morality. More precisely, the idea that markets require masculine virtues, self-command and prudence, and other feminine traits, generosity-compassion-humanity, should be relegated to the household also meant a gender division between men and women access to the market sphere. This is valid not only regarding the kind of jobs women had access to but also their level of earnings when they got access to the same jobs as men. In the press release of the Nobel Committee, this point is summarized as follows:

> Despite modernisation, economic growth and rising proportions of employed women in the twentieth century, for a long period of time the earnings gap between women and men hardly closed. According to Goldin, part of the explanation is that educational decisions, which im-

pact a lifetime of career opportunities, are made at a relatively young age. If the expectations of young women are formed by the experiences of previous generations – for instance, their mothers, who did not go back to work until the children had grown up – then development will be slow.

Historically, much of the gender gap in earnings could be explained by differences in education and occupational choices. However, Goldin has shown that the bulk of this earnings difference is now between men and women in the same occupation, and that it largely arises with the birth of the first child (Nobel Prize Committee 2023).

According to Goldin, one cause of these historical differences is precisely the idea that women are better in care activities. Women can work, but when they have children and become mothers, they must stop and care for them. I am not arguing that the *compatibilist Smith* is the direct cause of this phenomenon, which is a more prominent manifestation of the breadwinner model of the patriarchal society (Seccombe 1986). However, the social equilibrium envisaged by the *compatibilist Smith* supports the idea that women, insofar as they possess feminine traits mostly expressed in family, should have a different (if any) access to the labor market.

While Goldin's analysis rejects a consequence of the *compatibilist Smith*, it does not reject the portrait *in toto* nor expresses a possible preference for one of the two others. The implications of her research can take many patterns. Among those, three can be applied to the three portraits of Smith under consideration here. First, Goldin can claim that, granted the disentanglement of some features of human beings (compassion, generosity, humanity, *etc.*) from the gendered association with women, the morality of the market requires women to behave like the economic agents of the *self-interested Smith*, which means to follow their self-interest. In parallel, society needs to recognize them as such, removing the causes of the disparities in the pay gap and allowing them access to all the professions. Second, the recognition of the gendered nature of some features could bring Goldin to advocate for a market sphere where men and women show both masculine and feminine traits indistinctly. This will bring her analysis close to the view of *sympathetic Smith.* However, nothing prevents Goldin from expressing support for the *compatibilist Smith* as long as there is gender disentanglement. This third interpretation would entail a market where men and women are treated equally insofar as they express the virtues typical of the market, *i. e.*, prudence and self-command. Given Goldin's work and her closeness to the feminist economics movement, I would say her work supports the second option.[4]

3.4 Discussion

Taking stock, I hold that the three women who have won the Nobel Prize in economics to date are close to the *sympathetic Smith.* I have not comprehensively analyzed their thoughts nor provided the readers with irrefutable proof. However, based on their own articulations from Nobel Prize lectures and speeches, a general question arises: all these things considered, can we state that *sympathetic Smith*, among the three Smith interpretations analyzed, is the one who could be considered a feminist economist?

[4] Her Nobel laureate speech (Goldin 2023) does not reveal much in this respect because she mainly summarized her findings on women and the labor market.

This question can give the impression of a logical and theoretical jump. I will zoom in on the logical pattern I have been following in the present article to show that things are otherwise. The scientific community recognizes the Nobel Prize in economics as a valuable indicator of excellence in the discipline. Since the end of the Second World War, ninety out of ninety-three Nobel Prizes in Economic Sciences have been awarded to men. This reveals a male predominance in the discipline. Intuitively, if we are looking for what it means to be a feminist economist or what feminist economics might look like, it would not be incoherent to analyze the profile and thoughts of the three women who were able to win it. Given that these three Nobel laureates are close to the *sympathetic Smith* interpretation, the question I have formulated should not appear strange.

What I have just stated is not to deny that there is a logical fallacy in the very reasoning that brought me to that question. As a matter of fact, there is one fallacy, and it is the association between feminist economics and the three women who, so far, have won the Nobel Prize in economics. To show how, I will recall a distinction made by the US economist Julie Nelson, one of the leading figures in the contemporary feminist economics panorama.

Nelson argues that we must distinguish between feminine, female, and feminist economics. What these three accounts have in common is a reaction against the "masculine" nature of economics. The latter means the predominance of male economists and the supremacy of particular topics, methodologies, and pedagogical styles that characterize 20th-century economics. In Nelson's words, "objectivity, separation, logical consistency, individual accomplishment, mathematics, abstraction, lack of emotion, and science itself have long been culturally associated with rigor, hardness—and masculinity. At the same time, subjectivity, connection, 'intuitive' understanding, cooperation, qualitative analysis, concreteness, emotion, and nature have often been associated with weakness, softness—and femininity" (1995, 133). From the scope of this paper, the element of cooperation and emotion, as contrasted with individual accomplishment and lack of emotion, are of the utmost interest. The reaction to the masculine nature of economics can take three forms.

First, we can advocate for female economics. This would be an economic science made for women by women. The subject of this discipline would be exclusively women, and the conceptual core would gather exclusively around feminine traits such as cooperation, emotion, generosity, and so on. Second, we can advocate for an economic science where the gender hierarchy is turned around. In this case, we will support feminine economics, where the traits of cooperation and emotion have primacy over rationality, self-interest, and masculine virtues such as prudence and self-command. Nelson argues that these two paths do not capture the real meaning of feminist economics:

> Feminist economics, to reiterate, is not female economics, to be practiced only by women, nor feminine economics that uses only soft technique and cooperative models. Feminist scholarship suggests that economics has been made less useful by implicitly reflecting a distorted ideal of masculinity in its models, methods, topics, and pedagogy. Feminist scholars argue that the use of a fuller range of tools to study and teach about a wider territory of economic activity would make economics a more productive discipline for both male and female practitioners (1995, 146).

Feminist economics is an ongoing project to fight the gendered division of the discipline, establishing the equal importance of masculine and feminine traits and the danger of the hierarchy of this gendered division. Men can cooperate and express emotion, and women can be self-interested and prudent. All these traits must be considered when we assess the moral nature of markets and, in turn, the shape of economics as a discipline and practice.

If anything, my application of the three interpretations of Adam Smith to Ostrom, Duflo, and Goldin proves that the *sympathetic Smith* can be close to feminine or female economics. However, my inquiry does not claim that Ostrom, Duflo, and Goldin, as women, represent feminist economics. What I believe to have shown is that their theories, from the commons to poverty, from the pay gap between men and women to access to the labor market, and the underlying view of markets and morality they endorse, are advancing the project of feminist economics as described by Nelson. In this sense, the link with the *sympathetic Smith* suggests that this interpretation of Smith can be eligible for the etiquette of feminist economics. The *self-interested Smith* and the *compatibilist Smith*, in fact, seemed to be trapped in the gender division that gave rise to masculine economics.

4. Final Remarks

Telling the story of the curious case of the three Smiths, I show that the plurality of the interpretations to which the Scottish philosopher's thoughts have been subjected is far from problematic. Focusing on the worthwhile quest for the "real Smith," scholars have furnished fruitful and generative inquiry categories. My application of the three Smith interpretations to the three women Nobel Prize in economics winners demonstrates that the *sympathetic Smith* can be considered a precious ally for the feminist economics project.

Notably, one theorist of the *sympathetic Smith* is Amartya Sen, a male Nobel laureate in economics. This suggests a possible extension of my analysis, *i. e.*, trying to apply the three Smiths to the other Nobel laureates in economics. I would dare to predict that this would show that there are many feminist economists among men – not a new thesis, but one that gets systematically forgotten. And the wealth of Smith interpretations, beyond the three Smith I have used here, would also become more prominent. I hope that the present article has shown convincingly just how interesting this should be.

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