

The Review of Politics (2025), 1–18.

© The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of University of Notre Dame. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

doi:10.1017/S003467052400069X

Domination vs. Persuasion: The Role of *Libido Dominandi* in Adam Smith's Thought

Paolo Santori 

Tilburg University, Netherlands

Abstract: Adam Smith argued that human beings naturally desire to dominate others and that they enjoy it. He showed how ancient masters, landlords, and economic actors in some eighteenth-century English and colonial markets were driven by their love of domination against their own economic interests. Recent scholarship argues that to fully understand the role *libido dominandi* plays in Smith's thought, love of domination should be associated with the broader concept of vanity and esteem-seeking. This article challenges that interpretation, showing that, for Smith, the love of domination has nothing to do with the love of praise but that most of the pleasure people derive from it is to see their ends promoted by others without the need to persuade them about the utility of those ends. This understanding locates the love of domination outside commercial society where, under certain socio-economic circumstances, mutual persuasion among individuals is the rule.

Introduction

This article investigates the notion of *libido dominandi* in Adam Smith's thought. Smith referred to the "love of domination" and "love of domineer."¹ I use these terms along with their Latin version interchangeably throughout the text. Thanks to recent and earlier scholarship,² we know that this concept

Paolo Santori is Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy of the Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences at Tilburg University, Warandelaan 2, 5037 AB Tilburg, The Netherlands, (P.Santori@tilburguniversity.edu).

¹This latter expression, while grammatically incorrect, comes from the eighteenth-century English lexicon employed by Smith in his books.

²Dimitrios Halikias, "Adam Smith's Four Invisible Hands and the Problem of Political System," *History of Political Thought* 44, no. 2 (2023): 338–68; Eric Eustace Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina, 1944); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution 1770–1823* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975); Albert Otto Hirschman, *The Passions and*

played an important role in Smith's philosophical and economic views. We read in the *Lectures on Jurisprudence (LJ)*³ and *Wealth of Nations (WN)*⁴ that masters' love of domination is what will make slavery or servitude perpetual, in contrast with masters' real interest that would be fostered by having free men rather than enslaved people working for them. In the small branch of literature that focuses on Smithian *libido dominandi*, there is consensus that he associated *libido dominandi* with the recognition, admiration, and esteem-seeking that every human being naturally pursues. We dominate because we want to be seen and admired.⁵

My article challenges this consensus, showing that, for Smith, *libido dominandi* has little or nothing to do with how others perceive us. Instead, the effects of *libido dominandi*, the pleasure we have in commanding rather than having to persuade and convince others, make it attractive. In both *LJ* and *WN*, persuasion is intimately related to the structure of free-market exchanges. Smith argued that the emergence of European commercial society, grounded on free-market exchanges between individuals based on persuasion, marginalized and undermined *libido dominandi*. However, he knew that commercial society could not eliminate *libido dominandi* and that, whenever socio-economic circumstances allow, human beings will try to dominate each other. He saw this in the colonies and in specific markets (colliers and salters).

The first section of this article presents the portion of literature that associates Smithian *libido dominandi* with vanity and recognition, trying to understand the reasons for the link. The second section rebuts this position through a close reading of Smith's texts, particularly his distinction between the

the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph (*Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997*).

³Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, ed. Ronald Meek, David Daiches Raphael, and Peter Stein (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1982).

⁴Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. ed Harold Campbell, Andrew Skinner, and William Todd (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1976).

⁵Thomas Lewis, "Persuasion, Domination and Exchange: Adam Smith on the Political Consequences of Markets," *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 33, no. 2 (2000): 273–89; Daniel Luban, "Adam Smith on Vanity, Domination, and History," *Modern Intellectual History* 9, no. 2 (2012): 275–302; Ana Paula Londe Silva, "Adam Smith on Colonial Slavery: The 'Love of Domination' in a Mercantile System," *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology: Including a Symposium on David Gordon: American Radical Economist* 40 (2022): 141–55; Heikki Haara and Aino Lahdenranta, "Smithian Sentimentalism Anticipated: Pufendorf on the Desire for Esteem and Moral Conduct," *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (2018): 19–37.

Proud Man and Vain Man, as exposed in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*.⁶ The third section is devoted to showing that the clear oppositions between *libido dominandi* and “real interest” can be interpreted as the opposition between vertical-hierarchical domination and horizontal-free persuasion. The fourth section analyzes *libido dominandi*’s role in Smith’s interpretation of social and economic history. It illustrates that the textual analysis aimed at disentangling *libido dominandi* from vanity, esteem-seeking, and recognition can enrich our understanding of Smith’s view on the advent of commercial society.

This is not a historical reconstruction of the sources of Smith’s concept of *libido dominandi*. Even if Augustine of Hippo and Bernard Mandeville are mentioned in the course of my argument, many other (potentially relevant) thinkers, such as John Calvin, Thomas Hobbes, Cornelius Jansen, Pierre Nicole, are not. This exclusion is tied to my aim of understanding what Smith had in mind mostly through textual analysis. Where necessary, I provide hints and information about possible sources. Moreover, there is no political–economic message or agenda I want to promote with my interpretation of Smith (champion of the free-market economy rather than an advocate of political intervention in the market, proto-socialist, post-liberal, etc.). My task is to adhere as closely as possible to what I believe was his intended meaning of *libido dominandi*.

1. *Libido Dominandi*, Recognition, Vanity

The association between *libido dominandi* and vanity is employed by Daniel Luban⁷ to clarify a passage of the *LJ* where Smith contrasts the love of domination of the masters with their “real interest.”⁸ The common reading⁹ of this passage (considered in section 4) goes as follows: Smith argued that the economic interest-profit of masters would be better served by having free-men working for them rather than enslaved people. The transition from enslaved people or servants to freemen did not happen, or at least was significantly slowed down, during feudal society because of the *libido*

⁶Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (New York: Dover Publication, 2012). Henceforth *TMS*.

⁷Luban, “Adam Smith on Vanity.”

⁸Smith, *Lectures*, 177.

⁹Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*; Davis, *Problem of Slavery*; Spencer Pack, “Slavery, Adam Smith’s Economic Vision and the Invisible Hand,” *History of Economic Ideas* (1996): 253–69; Eugene Heat, “Adam Smith and Self Interest,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Adam Smith*, ed. Christopher Berry, Maria Pia Paganelli, and Craig Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 241–59; Srividhya Swaminathan, *Debating the Slave Trade: Rhetoric of British National Identity, 1759–1815* (London: Routledge, 2016); Jacob Sider Jost, *Interest and Connection in the Eighteenth Century: Hervey, Johnson, Smith, Equiano* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2020).

dominandi of the masters. *Libido dominandi* is an element that opposes the birth of commercial society which would be based on horizontal rather than feudalism's vertical social relationships.

Luban opposes this reading. "For Smith, self-interest and the love of domination are not opposites, but cousins. They are both forms of vanity—of the tendency, rooted in human corruption, to seek esteem through vertical relations of superiority."¹⁰ Luban's interpretation can be divided into five sub-theses. First, the only anthropological constant in Smith's thought is the desire for approbation, of being seen, recognized, and admired by others. Second, people can be recognized by peers for their virtues (praiseworthiness) or by superior, peer, and inferior people through vanity (praise) for their wealth and power: "vanity refers ... to any form of approbateness through vertical relationships governed by power rather than horizontal relationships governed by virtue."¹¹ Third, vanity is more widespread than virtue. Fourth, in a commercial society, the institutional background determines that vanity is satisfied by possessing riches, which are more related to economic interest, but also by political power. Fifth, the real change between ancient and feudal societies and commercial ones is due to socio-economic factors rather than an evolution in the psychology of human beings.

Whereas before *libido dominandi* was fostered by legal structures of direct dependence, i.e., landlord and servant, in the eighteenth-century European commercial society, there is a relation of interdependence between economic actors. This new socio-economic and institutional background prevents domination from being legally exercised by masters over slaves or servants. And yet, according to Luban's interpretation of Smith's thought, *libido dominandi* did not disappear, being a particular manifestation of vanity, but was included in the continuous search for more riches and power to establish one's superiority over, and therefore recognition by, others.

Luban aimed to show that the story of the economic, rational interest defeating the political, irrational *libido dominandi* is false or, at least, not Smith's story. The Scottish philosopher maintained a more nuanced view: "Smith's history explains how the transhistorical fact of vanity—that is, approbateness through external superiority—comes to be predominantly expressed in economic interest rather than war, domination, and all the other more malicious ways in which humans seek superiority over others."¹² Luban saw the Smithian love of domination as a particular manifestation of vanity, the two being inseparable in Smith's conceptual apparatus.

Something similar was argued by Thomas J. Lewis,¹³ who contrasted the love of domination with persuasion. According to Lewis, a person who takes

¹⁰Luban, "Adam Smith on Vanity," 278.

¹¹Luban, "Adam Smith on Vanity," 291.

¹²Luban, "Adam Smith on Vanity," 298.

¹³Lewis, "Persuasion, Domination."

pleasure in dominating wants to avoid the inconveniences of persuasion. If I can dominate you and force you to foster my aims, I do not need to persuade you about the importance of those aims. In section 4, I show that Lewis rightly put one element in contrast to the other and provided a faithful representation of Smith's thought. However, Lewis also associated the love of domination with recognition and approbation:

Persuasion itself is not an end; it is a means for obtaining the end of recognition and approval for being correct. Similarly, domination is not an end in itself; it is a means to the end of recognition for being powerful. ... To describe humans as having a "love of domination" is a cryptic way of saying how much we wish to be recognized as potent beings who can impose our will on others. Domination is the means we employ to be recognized as powerful enough to enforce our wills.¹⁴

According to Lewis, Smith says that we dominate others because we want to be recognized as powerful by the people we dominate, our peers, and, if any, our superiors.

We find a similar understanding in *The Passions and the Interests* by Albert O. Hirschman.

Smith then takes the final reductionist step ... non-economic drives, powerful as they are, are all made to feed into the economic ones and do nothing but reinforce them, being thus deprived of their erstwhile independent existence ... by holding that ambition, the lust for power, and the desire for respect can all be satisfied by economic improvement.¹⁵

In a commercial society, the love of domination (lust for power) does not disappear; neither is it contrasted with genuine economic interest. Instead, somehow, the love of domination is satisfied by the desire to better one's condition to acquire riches/wealth and be approved and recognized by others. Luban argues that "in many ways, this story is similar to the one traced by Hirschman in 'The Passions and the Interests'"¹⁶ while distancing his analysis from Hirschman's because the latter reduced violent passions to economic interest, unable to see that in commercial society we seek approbation through the quest for both wealth and power.

We can trace the history of *libido dominandi* to its sources (at least in the Western history of ideas) through reference to Hirschman's book. Smith received a tradition with two critical pillars: the Christian theologian Augustine and the Roman rhetorician Sallust. In *The City of God* Augustine wrote:

There is assuredly a difference between the desire of human glory and the desire of domination; for, though he who has an overweening delight in human glory will be also very prone to aspire earnestly after domination,

¹⁴Lewis, "Persuasion, Domination," 287.

¹⁵Hirschman, *Passions and Interests*, 110.

¹⁶Luban, "Adam Smith on Vanity," 298.

nevertheless they who desire true glory even of human praise strive not to displease those who judge well of them. For there are many good moral qualities, of which many are competent judges, although they are not possessed by many; and by those good moral qualities those men press on glory, honour and domination, of whom Sallust says "but they press on by the true way."¹⁷

Trying to distinguish them, as Sallust did, Augustine associated *libido dominandi* with the desire for glory. For Augustine, there are three kinds of people: the righteous, the glory-seeker, and the sinful. The righteous and glory-seeker arrive at the same outcome (glory and recognition) following the same routes (virtuous behaviour) but with different intentions. The righteous man is not interested in glory but sees it as a by-product of his virtuous behavior. The glory-seeker, instead, sees virtuous behavior as a means to an end, i.e., to get recognition by a righteous man. The sinful man does not care to receive praise for his moral qualities. He is controlled completely by his *libido dominandi*, which brings him to desire power and all its benefits (glory included). He is interested in receiving glory as anyone and, if easier, will not hesitate to use immoral means (deception, conspiracy, etc.). The righteous and glory-seeker aspire to recognition and admiration in the right way, while the sinful person always aspire to it in the wrong way. Hirschman was interested in Augustine's *libido dominandi*, when associated with the desire for glory, because, in his reading, it is one of the first times an author admits that a passion can be directed against the destructive effects of other passions (greed, avarice, lust). For this article, what matters is that Augustine and Sallust linked *libido dominandi* with recognition and admiration by others. The human being possessed by this libido asks to be seen, recognized, and eventually praised.

I am not suggesting that Smith read Augustine's *City of God* or was directly influenced by him. Some scholars have taken this fact for granted.¹⁸ In my view, it would be more prudent to acknowledge that Smith might have been familiar with this Augustinian association between *libido dominandi* and pride, as it was circulating in some Jansenist circles and, for sure, in Mandeville's *Fable of Bees*.¹⁹

The connection between *libido dominandi* and some forms of recognition (vanity, esteem seeking) has not been challenged in the literature after Luban.

¹⁷Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God Volumes I & II Revised*, ed. Anthony Uyl (Ontario: Devoted Publishing, 2019), 143.

¹⁸Luban, "Adam Smith on Vanity"; Eric Gregory, "Sympathy and Domination: Adam Smith, Happiness and the Virtues of Augustinianism," in *Adam Smith as Theologian*, ed. Paul Oslington (London: Routledge, 2011), 43–55; Anthony Waterman, "Economics as Theology: Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations," *Southern Economic Journal* 68, no. 4, (2002): 907–21.

¹⁹Robin Douglass, *Mandeville's Fable. Pride, Hypocrisy, and Sociability* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023).

Claiming that Samuel van Pufendorf somehow anticipated Smithian themes on the desire for esteem, Heikky Haara and Aino Lahdenranta²⁰ agree with Luban's characterization of Smith's love of domination as associated with vanity. Ana Paula Londe Silva²¹ analyzes how, in Smith's analysis, *libido dominandi* survives in colonies due to institutional factors (high rate of profit, mercantile system). Although she mentions Luban's analysis in her introduction, Luban's association between vanity and love of domination is not discussed, as if it is taken for granted as a faithful representation of Smith's thought.

2. The Proud Man and the Vain Man

To disentangle *libido dominandi* from the many forms of esteem-seeking, I start from the only passage of the *WN* in which Smith directly mentioned the love of domineer. There, he associated the love of domineer with pride. This association might have misled interpreters, as pride and vanity are sometimes considered together in *TMS*. However, Smith is very detailed in distinguishing the features of the proud man from those of the vain man. This distinction provides a clue to understanding the true features of *libido dominandi* that I address in [section 4](#).

The word "pride" recurs twice in the main text of *WN*. Both are in book III, in the pages in which Smith discussed how proprietors and feudal landlords deal with cultivating their land. Smith is interested in understanding which forces foster the transition from employing the labor of enslaved people and servants to the more profitable use of free men. The first passage is about the right of primogeniture, which "continues to be respected, and as of all institutions it is the fittest to support the pride of family distinctions, it is still likely to endure for many centuries. In every other respect, nothing can be more contrary to the real interest of a numerous family, than a right which, in order to enrich one, beggars all the rest of the children."²² While seeming to have little to do with *libido dominandi*, it reveals an important feature as it mentions "real interest," which, as I stated above, in *LJ* Smith opposes to *libido dominandi*. Here, real interest has nothing to do with recognition or seeking esteem but is connected to the possession of goods to survive and not depend on the benevolence of others.

The more significant passage is the following: "The pride of man makes him love to domineer, and nothing mortifies him so much as to be obliged to condescend to persuade his inferiors."²³ Smith argues that there is a causal

²⁰Haara and Lahdenranta, "Smithian Sentimentalism," 22 (note 2).

²¹Silva, "Adam Smith on Colonial Slavery."

²²Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 384.

²³Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 388. The connection with Mandeville's *Fable of Bees* is evident: "The desire of dominion is a never-failing consequence of the pride that is common to all men." Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees or Private Vices, Publick Benefits*, ed. Frederick Benjamin Kaye (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 202.

nexus between pride and love of domineer, i.e., pride as the cause of *libido dominandi*. He suggests that insofar as we are proud human beings, fully aware of our worth and willing to let others recognize it, we enjoy dominating our inferiors. To understand *libido dominandi*, we must understand pride. Smith considered the topic extensively in TMS, distinguishing between the proud man and the vain man. Analyzing this distinction shows the weak point of the interpretations reviewed in [section 1](#).

In TMS, Smith condemned pride and vanity as two vices. Hence, we are surprised to read that "The proud man is sincere, and, in the bottom of his heart, is convinced of his own superiority [...] he wishes you to view him in no other light than that in which when he places himself in your situation, he really views himself."²⁴ The vain man, by contrast "is not sincere, and, in the bottom of his heart, he is very seldom convinced of that superiority which he wishes you to ascribe to him."²⁵ The vain man needs others to confirm his worth, while the proud man stands on his own two feet. Roos Slegers²⁶ showed convincingly that the vain man's need for the approbation of others might lead him to pursue virtue. This is very similar to what Augustine said through Sallust's words, i.e., the desire for glory can be well-directed when we seek the approbation of virtuous men. But this has nothing to do with pride, as the proud man's "sense of his own dignity renders him careful to preserve his independency."²⁷ While more sincere than the vain man, the proud man's behavior cannot be directed toward a virtuous path as he does not care that much about the opinions of others.

Smith explained that the proud man does not wish for the company of his peers, nor of his superiors: "The proud man does not always feel himself at ease in the company of his equals, and still less of that of his superiors."²⁸ Smith reported the funny story of an Earl who was told to go to court because there he found a man greater than himself, but that also went very seldom because, there, he found a man superior to him. "It is quite otherwise with the vain man. He courts the company of his superiors as much as the proud man shuns it."²⁹ The vain man hopes to shine in the same light as that of his superior. Conversely, the proud man is more interested in the company of his inferiors because they confirm his belief in his own superiority. As Smith cleverly showed, the vain man does not need inferiors. He is also willing to esteem people he deems inferior to himself simply to receive back the same or, if possible, more esteem.

²⁴Smith, *Theory*, 381–82.

²⁵Smith, *Theory*, 382.

²⁶Roos Slegers, *Adam Smith's Moral Sentiments in Vanity Fair* (Cham: Springer, 2018).

²⁷Smith, *Theory*, 383.

²⁸Smith, *Theory*, 383.

²⁹Smith, *Theory*, 384.

A precise message emerges from Smith's text, which I encapsulate in a syllogism: love of domineer is associated with pride, and pride is very different from vanity; therefore, love of domineer has nothing to do with vanity. This is what the literature reviewed in [section 1](#) fails to acknowledge. It can still be argued that the master seeks recognition from his inferiors as if his pride is nurtured by the consciousness of how his inferiors look at him. Not even Hegel, in the lord-bondsman dialectic of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*,³⁰ a book entirely devoted to the topic of self-consciousness and recognition, theorized something like that. Whether this was Smith's understanding cannot be stated with absolute certainty. What can be argued is that, if this dimension of inferior recognition had a role in fostering *libido dominandi*, this was a very minor one compared to the real source of pleasure we have in dominating others, that is, that we do not need to persuade them.

3. *Libido Dominandi* vs. Persuasion

The association of pride and the love of domination that we read about in *WN* disappears in *LJ*. While lecturing, Smith did not intend to inform his students explicitly that pride or vanity are essential elements for understanding the *libido dominandi* of the masters over the slaves or the landlords/proprietors over the servants. Two key passages in *LJ* parallel what he later wrote in the *WN*. The first goes:

and tho as I have here shewn their [the masters] real interest would lead them to set free their slaves yet the love of domination and authority and the pleasure men take in having every done by their express orders, rather than to condescend to bargain and treat with those whom they look upon as their inferiors and are inclined to use in a haughty way; this love of domination and tyrannizing, I say, will make it impossible for the slaves in a free country ever to recover their liberty.³¹

Here, the elements of pride and vanity are totally absent. They have nothing to do with the love of domination, which contrasts with the masters' real interests. One might argue that the conjunction "and" separates love of domination and authority from the pleasure of having things done without the need to bargain for them. However, in the subsequent sentence, Smith cleared this misinterpretation by conflating the two things in the expression "this love of domination and tyrannizing." The same emerges in the second passage: "The love of domination and authority over others, which I am afraid is natural to mankind, a certain desire of having others below one, and the pleasure it gives one to have some persons whom he can order to do his

³⁰Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. John Niemeyer Findlay (Delhi: Motil Banarsidass Publisher, 1998).

³¹Smith, *Lectures*, 177.

work rather than be obliged to persuade others to bargain with him, will forever hinder this from taking place.”³²

This passage shows what Smith held as the constitutive feature of love of domination, that is, the pleasure we experience (and seek) in not having to persuade others. Not only is the love of domination natural to mankind but, as I show in [section 4](#), it blocks the advent of a commercial society where work relationships are based on a certain degree of freedom from both parties. According to Smith, we desire and take pleasure in domination because we can order others to do things that we deem essential without bothering to persuade them that those things are important for them or in general. The hierarchical relationship between master and enslaved person, landlord and servant, perfectly serves this goal. Through orders, the master forces the enslaved person to accomplish his aims. The pleasure he derives from it is not related to his vanity, the need for admiration or esteem, and is only slightly connected to his pride, his assessment of his own worth. The *libido dominandi* comes from a more basic fact: the comfort that derives from avoiding wasting time, resources, and efforts in persuading.

The opposition between domination and persuasion that Smith remarked on several times plays an essential role in his thought. As shown in the literature,³³ there is a direct link between the first book of *WN* and the description of persuasion in *WN*. In *WN*, we read that division of labor is the “slow and gradual consequence of a certain propensity in human nature which has in view no such extensive utility; the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another.”³⁴ This propensity, related to human faculties of reason and speech, is connected to persuasion: “If we should enquire into the principle in the human mind on which this disposition of trucking is founded, it is clearly the natural inclination everyone has to persuade. The offering of a shilling, which to us appears to have so plain and simple a meaning, is in reality offering an argument to persuade one to do so and so as it is for his interest.”³⁵ Persuasion is at the very core of commercial activity; it is the configuration where the exchange between free human beings occurs. As Lewis showed, for Smith, human beings have a propensity to persuade even in things that distantly concern them (Smith referred to China) or do not concern them at all (Smith referred to the Moon). The pleasure we take from persuasion and exchange differs significantly from the pleasure of domination. The former has to do with recognition

³²Smith, *Lectures*, 181.

³³Lewis, “Persuasion, Domination”; Leonida Montes, “Adam Smith’s Foundational Idea of Sympathetic Persuasion,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 43, no. 1 (2019): 1–15; Deirdre McCloskey, “Adam Smith did Humanomics: So Should We,” *Eastern Economic Journal* 42 (2016): 503–13.

³⁴Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 25.

³⁵Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 295.

and approval; the latter is quasi-independent of it. The former characterizes commercial society, the latter the ancient and feudal societies.

Before approaching the role of *libido dominandi* in Smith's broader theory and historical analysis, I address a complicating element in the opposition domination–persuasion. As we read in *TMS*, persuasion is connected to the desire to lead:

The desire of being believed, the desire of persuading, of leading and directing other people, seems to be one of the strongest of all our natural desires. It is, perhaps, the instinct upon which is founded the faculty of speech, the characteristic faculty of human nature ... Great ambition, the desire of real superiority, of leading and directing, seems altogether peculiar to man, and speech is the great instrument of ambition, of real superiority, of leading and directing the judgements and conduct of other people.³⁶

Pierre Force argues that the desire to lead and the love of domination are the same thing for Smith.³⁷ While the desire to lead could lexically recall the love of domination, the conceptual difference is very marked. *Libido dominandi* is our desire to dominate someone because of the pleasure it gives to have that someone accomplishing our aims without any need for persuasion. The desire to lead is instead the desire to convince someone, whether that someone is superior or inferior, that our aims are worth pursuing, and the pleasure we have in “being believed.” Here, as Smith argued, approval and recognition play a role: “To approve of another man’s opinion is to adopt those opinions, and to adopt them is to approve them. If the same arguments that convince you, convince me likewise, I necessarily approve of your conviction; and if they do not, I necessarily disapprove of it.”³⁸ These interpersonal dimensions are foreign to the person moved by *libido dominandi*, who, if possible, will try to eschew the need to be approved. Love of domination requires inferiors to be mere executors of orders. Conversely, the desire to lead requires inferiors, peers, or even superiors to collaborate in a common endeavor toward an end we establish as important. Along these lines, the mutual advantage characterizing the market exchange can be interpreted as the agreement or compromise between two person’s desires to lead and persuade.

Among other sources, Smith encountered the psychological trait of *libido dominandi* in *The Fable of Bees*, where Mandeville describes the love of dominion as a kind of pleasure that involves both adults (educators of charity schools) and children:

³⁶Smith, *Theory*, 504.

³⁷Pierre Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 46.

³⁸Smith, *Theory*, 22–3.

If we will mind the Pastimes and Recreations of young Children, we shall observe nothing more general in them, than that all who are suffer'd to do it, take delight in playing with Kittens and little Puppy Dogs. What makes them always lugging and pulling the poor Creatures about the House proceeds from nothing else but that they can do with them what they please, and put them into what posture and shape they list, and the Pleasure they receive from this is originally owing to the love of Dominion and that usurping Temper all Mankind are born with.³⁹

The comparison with Mandeville's position helps to shed light on Smith's view of *libido dominandi*. Their views seem similar, but we find an important, although nuanced, difference. Smith and Mandeville agree that this kind of love consists of having the others below and at one's own disposal. However, Mandeville seems to argue that the kind of pleasure associated with the love of dominion lies in the possibility of making one's will a reality. The source of pleasure lies in our self-awareness that we can move others to do whatever we like because they are puppets in a show where we are the puppet masters. This is not totally separate from what Smith had in mind. However, sticking to the Smithian texts, the pleasure associated with the love of domination is narrowed and confined to the convenience (advantages) of not wasting time and resources in having to persuade others. Mandeville furnishes a positive definition of the love of dominion as a psychological trait that consists of the desire to control others and the pleasure of having one's will realized. Slightly differently, Smith offers a negative definition whereby the love of domination is a psychological trait that consists of the desire to have others below ourselves and the pleasure derived from not having to persuade them to accomplish our aims. For Smith, love of domination is strongly associated with the desire to "not have to persuade" and the pleasure derived from it.

In Mandeville's view, the idea of being God-like seems to open the door to the desire to recognize ourselves (pride) and be recognized by others (vanity) as such. As a puppet master, one can be proud to recognize one's almighty will in directing the puppets' actions. Vanity can come into play where the pleasure deriving from being proud of oneself is not enough anymore; being seen, recognized, and admired by others might amplify the pleasure derived from the love of dominion. Mandeville seems closer than Smith to Augustine's and Sallust's view that love of dominion and esteem-seeking are intertwined. Understanding Mandeville's position is beyond the scope of this article. However, the comparison with Smith serves to restate my thesis that Smith's explicit and unequivocal association of love of domination with non-persuasion—something that is absent in Mandeville—closes the door to any form of vanity and esteem-seeking.

³⁹Mandeville, *Fable*, 281.

4. *Libido Dominandi* and the Advent of Commercial Society

I have shown how Smith's *libido dominandi* is not related to vanity or esteem-seeking and only vaguely to pride. This disentanglement of the love of domination and vanity sheds light on the contrast between *libido dominandi* and "real interest." My interpretation is crucial to understanding *libido*'s role in Smith's historical account of the emergence of commercial society in Europe and abroad. The aim of this section is to show that, while *libido dominandi* can be described separately from other psychological elements and social forces, the latter are crucial to understand the part *libido dominandi* played in the socio-economic evolution of European societies.

The first thing to notice is the above-mentioned contrast between the love of domination and "real interest." Smith is interested in ancient societies where the economic system was based on slavery⁴⁰ and some forms of feudal society characterized by feudal landlords and their servants.⁴¹ In both cases, Smith discussed at length the economic disadvantages of masters in having slaves or servants rather than employing free men. It would be more convenient for proprietors to have free men working on their properties because the latter would put much more effort into their work if they could have partial access to the fruits of their labor. The contrast seems to be between the apparent convenience (the advantages derived from non-persuasion) of *libido dominandi*⁴² and the real convenience of the great advantages deriving from persuasion. It might seem that my interpretation reaffirms the classic interpretation of Smith's contrast between love of domination and real interest. While this would already be a step further in the literature mentioned in section 1, more can be said.

I see a possibility to push Smith's theory toward expanding the notion of "real interest" beyond its meaning of something that pertains to economic convenience and material advantages. In my reading, real interest also concerns the role of persuasion in one's relationship with others. The presence or absence of persuasion seems to be the real divide between apparent convenience and real interest in Smith's thought. Smith seems to argue that the master should prefer interaction with free individuals based on a certain equality. Vanity plays a big role in commercial society because when (imperfect) equality is present, the desire to be praised (vanity), or even better, be worthy of praise (praiseworthiness), is fulfilled. According to my

⁴⁰John Salter, "Adam Smith on Slavery," *History of Economic Ideas* 4, no. 1–2 (1996): 225–51.

⁴¹John Salter, "Adam Smith on Feudalism, Commerce and Slavery," *History of Political Thought* 13, no. 2 (1992): 219–41.

⁴²Aside from an apparent convenience, the love of domination is deleterious in terms of individual happiness: "the state of slavery must be very unhappy to the slave himself. This I need hardly prove, tho some writers have called it in question. But it will not be difficult to shew that it is so to the masters." Smith, *Lectures*, 180.

reading, this is why commercial society based on horizontal relations must be preferred to the ancient, static, hierarchical society based on vertical relations. To Smith, commercial society is a more mature way of conceiving life in common and civil society. In contrast, love of domination expresses a childish wanting to obtain everything without effort.⁴³ Human beings can flourish when they learn to live in a society where they cannot impose their aims. They must deal with others' aims and opinions in relations based on persuasion rather than domination. Adult life in a commercial society requires something better than the love of domination. Here, I am expanding Smith's argument, but hope to have remained faithful to his spirit. If one combines vanity and love of domination as if they are different expressions of the same thing, one cannot see this central element of Smith's argument.

Smith's view of the passage from feudal to commercial society and the role of vanity in this transition strengthens my interpretation of *libido dominandi*. As often happens in Smith's philosophical and economic thought, it is not the awareness of their condition that brings people to social change. The only passage in which the invisible hand is mentioned in *TMS* shows how the transition from a feudal to a commercial economy is fostered by the combination of the vanity of the great proprietors—"the gratification of their own vain and insatiable desires"⁴⁴—and the self-interest of merchants, both unaware of the social change they were fostering. Rather than being a form in which *libido dominandi* manifested itself, vanity was one of the elements that contributed to its marginalization from the social and economic spheres.

The same argument is repeated in *WN*:

A revolution of the greatest importance to the public happiness, was in this manner brought about by two different orders of people, who had not the least intention to serve the public. To gratify the most childish vanity was the sole motive of the great proprietors. The merchants and artificers, much less ridiculous, acted merely from a view to their own interest.⁴⁵

According to Smith, the emergence of commercial society cannot be explained as the result of increased productivity fostered by the development of agricultural techniques. The great proprietors were not focused on increasing the productivity of their lands but on competing with each other by buying luxury goods produced in the cities. This led to a movement of capital and income from the country landlords to the rising classes of merchants and artisans who became the cornerstones of commercial society. The "childish"

⁴³Mandeville's love of domination concerns both adults and children. Stretching his argument and applying it to Smith's, I argue that love of domination can be conceived as a childish way of conceiving life with others in which you want to impose your will on them.

⁴⁴Smith, *Theory*, 172.

⁴⁵Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 341–42.

vanity of great proprietors leads to the more mature vanity of commercial society based on persuasion. Both vanities, however, have nothing to do with *libido dominandi*.

My interpretation of *libido dominandi* and vanity must be framed within Smith's reconstruction of Europe's social and economic history. Since the passages from *WN* and *LJ* where *libido dominandi* is discussed refer mainly to feudalism and great proprietors, I zoom in to the transition between feudal and commercial societies. Smith's view of economic and social history cannot be reduced to the interplay of psychological traits of individuals. We cannot explain the changes in the production and distribution systems or the division in social classes just by referring to individual characteristics such as sentiments, passions, desires, and virtues. From this erroneous perspective, the transition from feudal to commercial society could be simply explained by the joint action of self-interest and vanity that confined *libido dominandi*. Another error would be to consider Smith as an ingenuous "progressive" thinker according to whom the history of society is a story of linear, uninterrupted improvement of all social factors. Smith was certainly imbued with the ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment. That did not prevent him from adopting a critical and non-ideological distance from reality and history. The two errors are intertwined. Therefore, while separating them for the sake of the argument, I address them jointly.

In *LJ*, Smith shows how the *libido dominandi* of the great proprietors in Europe was opposed by the struggle between that class and the other two classes who hold economic power: the king and the clergy. During the period of feudalism,⁴⁶ the clergy saw the great proprietors as rivals in the "non-spiritual" control of the villains and servants. As the ambition of the Church was to control the *foro interno* (conscience) as well as the *foro externo* (social and political behavior), the opposition was inevitable. The king had similar reasons: he saw too powerful proprietors as nobles who could contest his power and authority. The power of a proprietor is given by his properties, including the people that a noble had at his disposal. In Smith's view, once more, the opposition was inevitable. Aside from the specific legal and political reforms, the joint alliance between the king and the clergy had one main objective, the emancipation of villains:

The landholders were in this manner restricted in their authority over their villains by two of the most powerfull (sic) members of the state. The clergy, a body at that time very powerfull, thought it their interest to encourage the villains, and the authority of the king, the head of the state, coincided with theirs. They in this manner agreeing rendered the

⁴⁶Smith does not furnish precise dates and times: "The government of Europe was at that time feudall." Smith, *Lectures*, 180. His research is interested in the reasons behind development of long-lasting processes, like the abolition of slavery and servitude, rather than detailing single events.

authority of the masters of the villains but very inconsiderable, if compared to what it had | been some time before.⁴⁷

This happened before the invisible hand process, which, by means of the merchants' self-interest and the landlords' vanity, caused the proprietors to move their riches from their treasuries in the countryside to the growing bourgeois class (manufacturers and merchants) of the towns. And yet this class was composed also of the free villains who migrated from the countryside to the city. Alongside or even before psychological and individual factors, Smith described how the institutional settings (king, clergy, proprietors) and the social power dynamics (struggle for power) could impact psychological traits such as the *libido dominandi*.

A similar interplay between psychological and socio-economic factors in determining the course of history can be seen in Smith's analysis of *libido dominandi* in the commercial societies of his time. This time, however, socio-economic factors are the reason for the perdurance of *libido dominandi*, at least in some parts of the world or specific economic sectors. Smith was aware of the existence of American and Caribbean colonies, where enslaved Africans were extensively employed to work in the plantations. The difference between England (and France) and its colonies was not human beings' psychologies. Conversely, some social and economic conditions favored the expression of the *libido dominandi* in the colonies. First, the rate of profit from the slavery business there was so high that the contrast between real interest and *libido dominandi* of the proprietors disappeared. Second, the colonies, by definition, had a political system based on hierarchy and dominion. This could have indirectly favored an intellectual climate where the expression of *libido dominandi* could have been seen as legitimate. As a complement to these points, legislation favored slavery and domination. The passage from WN where Smith associated pride and love of domination quoted in [section 3](#) continues as follows: "Wherever the law allows it, and the nature of the work can afford it, therefore, he will generally prefer the service of slaves to that of freemen."⁴⁸ As Luban and Silva note,⁴⁹ even if the emergence of commercial society has overcome the love of domination in the forms of ancient slavery or feudalism, *libido dominandi* is always ready to reappear as long as the socio-economic factors are ideal.

Smith mentioned the case of colonies but also recognized that he did not have to look far to see reminiscences of the *libido dominandi* in his homeland. He refers to the situation of the Scottish colliers (coalminers) and salters, "which are the only vestiges of slavery which remain amongst us."⁵⁰ The colliers and salters had high wages, the right to property and to form a family,

⁴⁷Smith, *Lectures*, 181.

⁴⁸Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 388.

⁴⁹Luban, "Adam Smith on Vanity,"; Silva, "Adam Smith on Colonial Slavery."

⁵⁰Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 183.

religious freedom, and many other protections. However, they could not change jobs (which was also valid for their sons) and could be “sold” collectively with the mine where they were working. All the quotes on *libido dominandi* from the *LJ* reported in this article were employed by Smith to describe the behavior of the proprietors of colliers and salters. As the circumstances (high profitability of the businesses, social norms, and laws surrounding coalminers’ and salters’ lifestyles) allowed them, proprietors preferred to exercise their *libido dominandi* as non-persuasion rather than having even higher profits via persuasion and bargaining.

My interpretation of Smith’s *libido dominandi* shows that its occurrence is strongly tied to socio-economic circumstances. This is not a cause–effect relationship because, as shown by the role of vanity and self-interest in contributing to the collapse of feudal societies, other elements are at stake. For Smith, the history of societies is not an automatic progress toward more civilized and rich conditions of life. While he thought that everyone should prefer real interests based on exchange and persuasion rather than an apparent interest and convenience based on domination, this understanding was not strong enough to bring about social change. Other social forces and processes, not always foreseen by their protagonists, should help this transition. For Smith, enlightenment is not a destiny but a human project that sometimes escapes human design.⁵¹

5. Conclusion

This article has aimed to show that Smith’s concept of the love of domination must be disentangled from other concepts such as vanity, recognition, and esteem-seeking. We love to dominate not because we seek approval but because, through ordering, we do not need to persuade others to foster our ends. We are free from the troublesome endeavor of persuading them. I have illustrated the role of *libido dominandi* in Smith’s thought, specifically in his reconstruction of the transition from ancient and feudal societies to commercial ones.

I have left aside the possible sources of Smith’s view on *libido dominandi* because I wanted to pay more attention to the meaning he attributed to this psychological trait rather than comparing it with its sources (or alternative views of his contemporaries). Future analysis should focus on reconstructing the story of *libido dominandi* that, as far as Smith is concerned, will probably have Augustine of Hippo and seventeenth-century Calvinist and Jansenist theologians as its pillars. A suggestive connection can also be made with Hobbes’s political philosophy.

⁵¹Friedrich Hayek, *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

If my thesis proves its fidelity to Smith's thought, the connection between *libido dominandi* and his account of moral sentiments deserves to be fully explored. This moral side was marginal to this article, which focused on the economic and civil consequences of correctly understanding Smith's view on the love of domination. However, the separation of *libido dominandi* from vanity, its opposition to persuasion, opens the sphere for a broader inquiry into how this psychological trait can fit in Smith's view of sympathy, including the impartial spectator (who, by definition, should not want to dominate).

As stated in the Introduction, I am not interested in placing Smith in one political tradition over another. Yet there is a contemporary literature with which it would be interesting to engage. John Milbank argues that Smith's economic system is a celebration, rather than negation, of the Augustinian *libido dominandi*.⁵² This is because, for the Bishop of Hippo, the city of man, ruled by original sin, of which the love of domination is one of the most terrible manifestations, is mixed with the city of God, where God's grace redeems corrupted humanity and nurtures mutual benevolence. According to Milbank, Smith removed the city of God from the picture, the chance that human beings could help and assist one another rather than dominating or persuading each other. My interpretation could oppose or integrate Milbank's. From another perspective, there are gender issues that must be discussed in Smith's thought. Roos Slegers did so in her analysis of love, sympathy, and vanity in Smith and Mary Wollstonecraft.⁵³ Indeed, Smith often referred to the vain woman but never to the proud one. Does this mean that women are excluded from the dominion of *libido dominandi*? If so, what are the consequences for Smith's view of markets and society? One thing is sure: from theology to feminism, Smith's ideas still interrogate the present.

⁵²John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

⁵³Roos Slegers, "The Ethics and Economics of Middle Class Romance: Wollstonecraft and Smith on Love in Commercial Society," *Journal of Ethics* 25, no. 4 (2021): 525–42.