

Attitudes Towards Race, Hierarchy and Transformation in the 19th Century*

Sandra J. Peart
David M. Levy

Abstract :

Using the debates between Classical political economists and their critics as our lens, this paper examines the question of whether we're the same or different. Starting with Adam Smith, Classical economics presumed that humans are the same in their capacity for language and trade; observed differences were then explained by incentives, luck and history, and it is the "vanity of the philosopher" incorrectly to conclude otherwise. Such "analytical egalitarianism" was overthrown sometime after 1850, when notions of race and hierarchy came to infect social analysis as a result of attacks on homogeneity by the Victorian Sages (including Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin), in anthropology and biology (James Hunt and Charles Darwin), and among political economists themselves (W.R. Greg). Two questions were at issue. Do everyone's preferences count equally, and is everyone equally capable of making economic decisions? In Smith's account, philosophers and subjects alike are capable of making decisions. The oppositional view held that some are different from others. Since "difference" implied "superiority" in the period we study, we call this doctrine "analytical hierarchicalism."

JEL classification numbers : B 12, Z 1.

I Introduction

Using the debates between Classical political economists and their critics as our lens, this paper examines the seemingly simple question of whether we're the same or different. At the beginning and throughout much of the nineteenth century, social scientists endorsed a hard form of what we have termed "analytical egalitarianism." Starting with Adam Smith, Classical economics presumed that humans are the same in their

capacity for language and trade; observed differences were then explained by incentives, luck and history, and it is the "vanity of the philosopher" incorrectly to conclude that ordinary people are somehow different from the expert (Smith 1776, I. ii Section 4). We show that such analytical egalitarianism was overthrown in the Post-Classical period sometime after 1850, when notions of race and hierarchy came to infect economic and social analysis as a result of attacks on homogeneity by the Victorian Sages (including Thomas

* This paper is an invited summary of our research over the last 5 years. Much of the material here appears in more detailed form in our book, *The "Vanity of the Philosopher": From Equality to Hierarchy in Post-Classical Economics* (University of Michigan Press, 2005). We thank this journal's editors and referees for helpful comments. The patience and encouragement of Masazumi Wakatabe are particularly appreciated.