The Invisible Hand That Kilt the Congo

By Loren Brodie

For centuries, the phenomenon of "free trade" has been lauded as a symbol of progress, prosperity, global cooperation, and world harmony. Economists, politicians, and world leaders have accredited it as the invisible force of wealth, creation, and innovation. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith famously advocates that a system rooted in free trade and the pursuit of self-interest benefits everyone by encouraging efficiency, productivity, and prosperity. Closer examination of this ideology reveals a more unsettling truth beneath Smith's optimism. While he argues that nations should pursue their economic interests freely, without restriction, the moral cost of such unbridled ambition is never fully addressed. Beneath the polished promises of mutual benefit lies a darker truth: when trade is guided solely by profit and power, freedom becomes exploitation. Smith lays the foundation for modern capitalism on the premise that nations should pursue commerce freely, without interference; however, Smith's faith in self-interest as a societal guiding principle turns dangerous when pushed to an international level, especially when nations prioritize profit over humanity. The bloody exploitation of the Congo under King Leopold II in the late nineteenth century is perhaps the clearest example of how Smith's vision of free trade aims to

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enhance economic prosperity and national sovereignty but ultimately fails because the pursuit of profit in the absence of moral restraint perpetuates decades of exploitation, greed, imperialism, and corruption.

To fully understand the misstep in messaging of Smith's writing, it is important to recall the time in which Smith was writing. Published in 1776, *The Wealth of Nations* appeared at the beginning of the world commerce movement and during the rise of global trade and industrial expansion. Smith argues that nations and individuals should be led by their own economic interests because, in serving their own interests, they unknowingly benefit society. "By pursuing his own interest," he writes, "he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it" (Smith 477–78). Yet this assumption depends on the belief that all participants in trade are equal and moved by moral restraint. In reality, history has proven otherwise, that seeking wealth without ethical boundaries will lead to domination and corruption, not common flourishing. When we apply Smith's theory to global imperialism, where one side possessed guns and the other had no choice, the theory of free trade cloaks greed in the language of progress.

The Congo Free State was founded in 1885 under King Leopold II of Belgium, who to this day stands as one of the most, if not the most, horrific example of how Smith's principles can be used as tools of exploitation. Under the guise of free trade, King Leopold II claimed he was bringing civilization and commerce to Central Africa, by taking control of the heavily resourced Congo. But Leopold was turning the Congo into a giant forced-labor camp dedicated to harvesting rubber and ivory for Belgian greed. The "freedom" that Smith celebrates became, in the Congo, freedom to exploit—free from moral or governmental restraint. Under his rule many villages were destroyed, families were torn apart, children were displaced, millions of Congolese people had their hands, feet, and heads chopped off, many were enslaved, kidnapped, and murdered, all for the sake of meeting the king's demands for money and industrial independence. As historian Adam Hochschild puts it, "Leopold's rule of the Congo was the most savage instance of colonial exploitation in Africa, carried out in the name of commerce and civilization" (Hochschild 115). The moral blindness Smith displayed in his work became the signature of imperial capitalism: profit without humanity.

Smith's argument in *The Wealth of Nations* rests on the assumption that all commerce is between consenting and willing participants, coupled with the fact that, in his mind, everyone's self-interest will balance out in the long term. However, Smith's writing fails to account for the power imbalances that inevitably arise when trade occurs between asymmetrically positioned nations. Smith treats trade as a neutral process of exchange, assuming that everyone has a stake and that both sides will ultimately benefit from this trade. He writes, "By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this . . . led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention" (Smith 119). This notion—that when people pursue their own self-interest, like maximizing profit in a business, they often unintentionally benefit society, even if they don't consciously intend to do so—ignores the darker side of unregulated trade: domination. The kind of domination that plagued Africa during the era of European imperialism, when

Smith's idea of pursuing self-interest was used as justification for coercion, pillaged resources, and unequal treaties.

Belgium's idea of "free," regarding free trade, meant European liberty to pilfer land, plunder wealth, and commit atrocities without any restraint. Under such a system of profit alone, human existence is converted into another form of capital, and the corruption that spread through Leopold's administration—bribery, forgery, and brutality—seems to align with the same unregulated lust for wealth that Smith saw as an ethical good.

In addition to that, Smith's idea that nations should aim to be self-sufficient in production encouraged competition that often led to conquest. In the scramble for Africa, Leopold, on behalf of Belgium, and the other European nations, like France, Britain, Portugal, and Turkey, gathered to discuss their goals of gaining independent access to the raw materials in Africa in order to fuel their own growing industries. This obsession with self-sufficiency, born of economic nationalism, led nations to claim foreign territories under the pretense of open trade. Moreover, Smith's argument that nations should not restrict imports or exports because doing so interferes with natural economic order ignores how "natural" trade relations are often defined by coercion. Leopold's Congo was marketed as an open, competitive economy, but it was a monopolized empire masquerading as free trade. European companies competed for resources, not through innovation, but by exploitative means, using violence to manage the flow of resources. While the revenues squeezed out of the Congo certainly put Belgium on the map and funded the amazing architecture and modernization of Belgium that we see today, this all came at the cost of 10 million Congolese people. Leopold's Congo was no trading partnership but a blood-built monopoly wherein wealth was not accumulated through honest competition but conquest.

In the end, Adam Smith's free trade doctrine overlooks a critical fact: freedom of trade unbound by moral strictures and accountability is freedom to exploit. Free trade, from the Smithian view, assumes that markets perform optimally when motivated by self-interest. Yet when nations seek self-interest without ethical brakes, corruption and exploitation are the outcome. The Congo demonstrates how the line between economic self-interest and moral decay quickly disappears when profit becomes the paramount value. In opposition to Smith's belief, the invisible hand, when truly left alone, does not guide society towards prosperity but guides it to corruption, violence, and dehumanization. The European powers that partitioned Africa in the late nineteenth century believed they were playing out a natural economic order—modernizing, civilizing, and fruitfully employing "unused" land—but behind the march of progress was the same invisible hand Smith toasted, now propelling the dismantling of entire societies. True progress cannot be propelled by invisible hands that are actuated by greed alone—it must be propelled by visible justice, responsibility, compassion, and accountability. The Congo's suffering under the illusion of "free trade" forces us to ask ourselves: what good is wealth if it is built on the bones of the oppressed?

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