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# THE DOMINANCE DYNAMIC IN BUSINESS: THREE SOLUTIONS

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A COMMENTARY ON Gregory Robson and James R. Otteson (2025), “Freedom In Business: Elizabeth Anderson, Adam Smith, and the Effects of Dominance in Business,” *Philos Mgmt* 24: 103–115,  
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## ABSTRACT

Elizabeth Anderson (2017) argues that many corporate bosses exercise a form of imperial governance over their employees, controlling everything from their bathroom breaks to their lives outside of work. The issue is not the use of power per se, but the considerable power employers have over others and can use at any point. Gregory Robson and James R. Otteson (2025) detail why this “dominance dynamic” of employer power over employees is, in fact, worse, for reasons connected to the workplace analyses of Adam Smith. In this Commentary, we discuss Anderson’s proposed response to the dominance dynamic and suggest instead three solutions of our own.

**ELIZABETH ANDERSON (2017)** argues influentially that many corporate bosses exercise a form of imperial governance over their employees, controlling everything from their bathroom breaks to their lives outside of work. The issue is not necessarily that employers constantly use the power they have, but that they have problematic power over employees that they can use at any point. Gregory Robson and James R. Otteson (2025) detail why this “dominance dynamic” of employer power over employees might be worse than Anderson supposes, for reasons connected to the workplace analyses of Adam

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Smith. They observe (2025: 105–112) that, perhaps more than any other writer, Smith (1759) documents the weighty influence of the educations we receive and our interactions with others in forming what we regard as proper sentiments. In *An Inquiry Into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth Nations*, Smith (1776) goes on to discuss the debilitating effects on our sentiments of an extreme division of labor that leaves workers spending scores of hours weekly performing simple tasks such as the straightening of pins. This doubly-degrading pattern of behavior malforms one’s sentiments and, in some cases, crushes one’s spirit.

Here, we argue for three new solutions to the dominance dynamic. Robson and Otteson (2025) detail the problem but not its solutions. Anderson (2017) argues especially for one fix – giving workers more voice – which we critically discuss before providing our own solutions.

### **The Problem**

Anderson (2017) hints at the problem that Robson and Otteson (2025) outline. She argues that one of the effects of “ideology” is to “misrepresent the space of possibilities so as to obscure better options, the means to realizing them, or their merits” (2017: xxi). Anderson argues that the market exchanges that Smith describes recognize and reflect mutual dignity (2017: 4), but because a firm “controls communication,” it can also have “a propaganda apparatus that often [problematically] persuades many to support the [firm’s] regime” (2017: 39). This is not necessarily “brainwashing,” however, because, in “many cases, people willingly support the regime and comply with its orders because they identify with and profit from it” (2017: 39).

This argument is the first step toward what Robson and Otteson (2025) identify as the complementary argument that Smith offers for Anderson’s conclusion. Workers who have extensive exposure to their workplace’s conventions and norms may come to regard its policies and activities as expected and natural, even proper. Even when neither coerced nor brainwashed, workers may suffer under the weight of *their own* vitiated judgment. This “derangement of judgment” (Robson and Otteson 2025: 105) can lead them to choose only from within an artificially narrowed set of options that they internalize, or even rationalize, as exhausting their full option set. Yet, “[c]onsent to

an option within a set cannot justify the option set itself” (Anderson 2017: 61).

Aware of workers’ falsely seeing their option sets as artificially narrowed, Anderson considers four basic strategies for enhancing workers’ dignity and autonomy: (1) exit, (2) the rule of law, (3) substantive constitutional rights, and (4) voice (2017: 65–69). She argues that the first three are insufficient. First, although an exit right does allow employees to leave, Anderson argues that prevalent noncompete clauses imply that while “employers can no longer hold workers in bondage, they can imprison workers’ human capital” (2017: 66). Thus, she contends, “the suggestion that enhancing exit rights alone would be sufficient to deal with the problems I have documented is not credible” (2017: 141). (For a reply to Anderson on exit rights, see Cowen [in chap. 7 of Anderson 2017] and Robson [2023: 216–217].)

Second, because “efficient production nearly always requires close coordination of activities according to centralized objectives,” she argues that “obstacles to applying rule-of-law protections in the workplace” naturally arise, which can “empower employers to abuse their authority, subject workers to humiliating treatment, and impose excessive constraints on their freedom” (2017: 67). Finally, substantive constitutional rights are also insufficient: because “they prescribe uniformity across workplaces, they can at best offer a minimal floor”; “they are also grossly underenforced for the least advantaged workers”; and they “do not provide for worker participation in governance at the firm level” (2017: 69).

Anderson thus primarily advocates her fourth general strategy, voice. She argues that “workers need some kind of institutionalized voice at work to ensure that their interests are heard, that they are respected, and that they have some share of autonomy in workplace decisions” (2017: 143–144). Anderson claims that giving workers a voice in the workplace can provide them a measure of “dignity, autonomy, and standing” (2017: 143). This befits them as equal moral agents, can help ensure (or at least enhance) their independence, and, hence, can provide an avenue for not only expressing but also realizing their interests.

Yet, the Smithian argument raises the following question: Would a policy that allows a voice for workers who have been acculturated to business norms and conventions constitute a sufficient vehicle for enhancing their freedom and autonomy? Not so, we suggest. Smith argues that the development of our sensibilities, sentiments, and preferences – and even our personalities and identities – is rooted in our desire to cultivate shared sentiments with our peers. In particular, as Robson and Otteson (2025: 108) observe, Smith holds that

[w]hen we see that others agree with us, or when we imagine that others would agree with us if they knew our full situations, we find this ‘sympathy of sentiments’ pleasurable[,]

and its opposite unpleasant. If Smith is right, then allowing employees to express their attenuated interests after acculturation to business norms would come a step too late. An opportunity to voice interests to their supervisors may occur significantly downstream of the onset of the process of adulterating their interests. It would then reflect merely the *constricted set* of inculcated options that workers have already internalized as not just the only possible but even the only proper set.

Anderson (2017: 20) is right that, in Smith’s view, the “market nexus replaces a relation of domination and subjection with an arm’s-length exchange on the basis of mutual interest and personal independence.” Yet her argument seems to underestimate the extent to which the potential benefit of increasing prosperity from “mutual interest and personal independence” can come at the cost of “mental mutilation” of workers (Smith 1776: 787). It is far from clear that mentally mutilated workers should be expected to transform suddenly into rational choosers when, at long last, they are given an opportunity to voice their interests. Nevertheless, Robson and Otteson (2025) suggest that if Anderson (2017) is right that many firms are dictatorial, and the Smithian account (1759, 1776) is right about the negative effects thereof for workers, then worker domination might indeed warrant “aggressive institutional remedy” (Robson and Otteson 2025: 105, 113). The Otteson–Robson account, however, does not elaborate on “what an appropriate institutional remedy would entail” (2025: 113). What kinds of remedies seem promising?

## Remedies

We suggest that the Anderson/Smith argument might necessitate not only more extensive intervention into the labor relations between employers and workers but also a comprehensive educational program designed to combat the mentally constraining effects on our character, intellect, and judgment of the prevailing culture of business. Given the time we allocate to our workplaces, and thus the time we will spend adopting sentiments from our business culture, and given how deeply ingrained those acquired sentiments can eventually become, perhaps such an educational program would have to begin early in people's lives and continue well into adulthood, targeting not only workers but supervisors as well. It at least seems safe to assume that we must go beyond both Smith's (1776: 785–786) suggestion of partially subsidized primary education in reading, writing, and arithmetic and Anderson's suggestion to give workers additional voice. We offer three further suggestions.

First, workers would benefit from a different program of education (public or private). Such a program would inform people about (a) the disvalue of certain kinds of work environments and worker-boss relationships, (b) how to identify a dominance dynamic, (c) what to do in such an environment to avoid or mitigate it, (d) how to live well overall (at work and beyond) if one must work a mind-dulling job, and (e) what members of a society can do to avoid having people need to work in such jobs without adequate compensatory benefits. For example, even if workers must endure mind-numbing work, it would benefit many to know that certain edifying opportunities (consumption of reading, art, etc.) outside of the workplace are not only enjoyable to many but can also counteract the troubling mental effects of such work.

Second, in addition to considering this multipronged educational response to the worker/supervisor dominance dynamic, we should zoom out to address the implications of certain social processes for the Anderson/Smith argument. The immense increase in market exchange since the industrial revolution has led (generally) to a flowering of positive-sum human interaction, creating far more opportunities for exchange, wealth acquisition, and employment (Beinhocker 2007; Clark 2007; Otteson 2019). Thus, to respond constructively to the dominance dynamic raised by the Anderson/

Smith argument, scholars might empirically investigate the link between increased wealth and additional job opportunities specifically as regards non-authoritarian work. A plausible hypothesis is that enhanced social wealth eventually helps to free employees from undue authoritarian structures in the workplace. This would be a reason for us to build prosperity and support public institutions that promote it, even if increased wealth is often not itself sufficient to secure more humane employment options.

Third and finally, non-workers might help to mitigate the dominance dynamic. A consumer-based strategy, for instance, could boycott firms whose employment conditions disserve or degrade employees. And firms, too, can avoid engaging with such dishonorable firms. There are also strategies, such as naming and shaming, whereby consumers, firms, or other actors effectively call out firms whose dominance dynamics harm employees (Radzick 2020). If implemented wisely and well, our three solutions might not only complement Anderson's (2017) strategies but also go beyond them, deploying Smithian insights (1759, 1776) to mitigate the dominance dynamics Anderson identifies in many firms today.

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