

LACK OF RIGOUR IN DEFENDING FAIRTRADE: A REJOINDER TO ALISTAIR SMITH

Peter Griffiths

Smith (2010) does not deny that he made errors in economic theory, logic and fact, and that he had misused evidence. He says that I misrepresented a large body of theory, that I distorted what he said in four places and that I was wrong in one sentence. These statements are false.

Keywords: Fairtrade, Fair Trade, co-operatives, ethical trading, distortion, misrepresentation, rigour.

I have shown that Smith (2009) made errors in economic theory, logic and fact, and that he had misused evidence (Griffiths, 2010a). Smith (2010) does not challenge these criticisms. Instead he alleges one misrepresentation, five distortions and a wrong statement. In this short rejoinder I summarise my response. A more detailed refutation is in Griffiths (2010b).

Smith has not attempted to justify his allegation that I have ‘significantly distorted the . . . literature which he accuses others of failing to acknowledge,’ (2010, p. 50) – i.e. the literature on agricultural economics, which constitutes 5% to 10% of economic literature!

I showed that Smith cherry picks parts of non-random case studies to support his argument. Smith’s claim of distortion is that I did not find half a dozen sentences in papers and web documents that he wrote which show that he knows that his use of data is improper. But he goes on to say that he will continue to misuse the evidence (2010, p. 51).

Smith complains that my reply, ‘Twists the original statement that “there *might* be a bias in the current literature which favours research of more successful examples” into “Smith . . . admits *that researchers choose* the more successful Fairtrade co-operatives for their case studies”’ (Smith, 2010, p. 51) – which means the same in normal academic parlance. But he does not deny that the literature is overwhelmingly on the successful co-operatives – and that he generalises from them to the majority of co-operatives.

Smith alleges distortion because I noted that he does not present any statistical evaluation to support one conclusion: he says he did. There is zero statistical evaluation and the source is two sentences from a briefing note containing no statistics (Smith, 2008, p. 18).

Smith complains that I implied that he ‘questioned “whether there *is any evidence* for statements . . .” when the obvious reality is that I have specifically highlighted the lack of substantiation in these particular instances’ (Smith, 2010, p. 51). He never discusses the distinction between lack of evidence and lack of substantiation, nor why lack of substantiation is only an issue when people disagree with Smith.

I pointed out that there is a large literature showing that high coffee prices in Vietnam in the 1980s and early 1990s caused overproduction which pushed down world prices. In reply, Smith says I am wrong and states that production increased significantly in 1996–97 in response to events in 1994, 1995, 1996 and 1997 – which is absurd, given that coffee trees have their first real crop four years after planting and do not reach full production until year six. The papers he cites in support do not make the statements he claims, or anything like them.

Envoi

This is not an academic game: not the published research on Fairtrade, nor the criticisms of it, nor Smith’s attack on the

critics, nor my response to him. Bad research can kill. If money that the public believes is going to help the poor in the Third World instead ends up as increased profit for British firms, people die. If the money is used for low impact aid, rather than high impact, people die – a lot of people.

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