Marx versus Smith on the Division of Labor
by Donald D. Weiss

I

The division of labor is a particular form of the differentiation of productive functions; just as the differentiation of productive functions is a particular form of social cooperation. Let us look at this more closely.

Social cooperation occurs whenever people work jointly to effect a particular end.

Differentiation of function occurs when those who are cooperating perform qualitatively distinct tasks. Thus if you and I are both pushing a wagon, we are cooperating, but there is no differentiation of function. If, on the other hand, you push while I drive the horses, there clearly are different functions involved.

Division of labor is a special case of functional differentiation. It occurs whenever the various productive functions are performed in such a way that each person is assigned a task as his or her particular occupation. If jobs are rotated, then we have differentiation of function but not division of labor. This distinction is crucial. Thus, sometimes it is argued that the division of labor is inevitable, because any society has various tasks that must be accomplished—indeed must be accomplished simultaneously. It is inevitable that one person do one thing while another does another. But, of course, all that this truism proves is that differentiation of functions is inevitable. To rebut a common adage: even if it is true that, in a given society, "somebody (in particular) must dispose of the garbage," it does

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not follow, without any ado, that there must be garbagemen, i.e., people who spend their entire working life at this one task. And if, say, each of us must spend one week per year on garbage detail, then we do not (insofar) have division of labor properly so called.

In short, we have the division of labor only when we have specialists. But, just for this reason, such division seems always to involve some degree of special expertise on the part of the practitioners of the respective functions. For if I spend all my working time farming, while you spend all yours fishing, then—assuming we are both able-bodied and sound-minded—I will be better than you at farming and you will be better than I at fishing. The concentrated practice of a function generally does make one at least somewhat better at it than those who have not so concentrated.

A correlation is implied in this between the extent of the division of labor and the efficiencies of expertise. And this correlation is, in fact, cited by Adam Smith as the first great advantage of specialization. The greater the degree of specialization, the more "dextrous" do people become at their particular tasks. Indeed, one of the two other advantages also discussed by Smith involves a closely related point, though this connection is not explicitly remarked by him. I refer to the promotion of inventiveness. Smith claims that people will generally be better at spotting opportunities for technological improvement in functions with which they have detailed acquaintance—an assertion which surely is plausible. I would only point out that it is a little misleading to treat this advantage, as Smith does, as entirely independent of the first. It would have been theoretically more elegant for him to claim that the division of labor promotes expertise, such expertise having at least the following two aspects: it creates efficiency in each phase of production; and it makes the practitioners of each function more sensitive to the ways in which such efficiency can be even further promoted. (The third advantage of the division of labor discussed by Smith will not concern us here; and so reference to it may be confined to a note.)

Now given this connection between specialization and expertise, it is natural to assume that there is, in general, a
fairly strict correlation between the degree of material culture attained by a people and the degree to which that people has divided up its labor. It would seem that with increased division of labor, we could produce better goods, and could produce more of them in less time, than we could if everyone were, as the old saying has it, a jack-of-all-trades and master of none. And this is, of course, just the conclusion that Smith does in fact draw.6

But it is to his credit that Smith does not let matters simply go at that. He knows full well that the productive advantages of the division of labor are only one side of the story.7 A quite negative side must also be considered. For insofar as the division of labor advances, it clearly is necessary for each person to concentrate his interests and to cultivate his talents within a more and more restricted domain. The more the division of labor advances, expanding our collective productive capacities, the more restricted, correspondingly, becomes the productive activity of each individual. But notice, now: it is clear that the skills and abilities developed in each person are primarily a function of the particular sort of work he does. And it is also clear that a person’s capacity to assimilate intelligently the contributions of his fellows is a function (in turn) of the skills that he has developed. If, therefore, my primary life’s activity restricts the development of my sensibilities to one particular function, I am to that extent culturally crippled. And we are thus led to a poignant dilemma: the ever increasing specialization which augments the wealth of nations also has a tendency to make each specialist less and less able to appropriate that wealth beyond the boundaries of his ever shrinking bailiwick.

Smith proposes no dramatic escape from this dilemma. On the one hand, there can for him be no question of a historical retreat, a return to times when the division of labor was less pronounced. For despite the fact that the division of labor makes each person more and more restricted relative to the totality of material culture about him, it nonetheless does increase the collective wealth—the national product—immensely. As a result people are, in an absolute sense, wealthier than they would be if the division of labor were less fully developed. That is, despite
the fact that each person is, relative to the totality of culture about him, poorer than his more primitive predecessors were relative to the totality of material culture in which they were immersed, each person is nonetheless wealthier in absolute terms, i.e., has more of life's conveniences, than those same predecessors. The increase of absolute wealth is purchased at high cost, that of a decreased wealth of the individual powers relative to the level of culture available, but it is an increase of absolute wealth, nonetheless. A historical retreat is therefore out of the question.  

The crippling effect of the division of labor must therefore be treated as a necessary evil, and hence at best as a condition to be ameliorated and compensated for, but not to be eliminated. Smith does suggest a strategy for tempering the negative implications of the division of labor: we should provide at least a minimally decent level of education for all. True enough, people's lives are being made narrower and narrower by the work process per se; but their horizons can be broadened in the classroom. There, each person will be guaranteed some training and exposure in areas beyond his occupational thoughts and concerns. He will to that extent be more humanized. It must be admitted that this is only a compensation for, not an overcoming of, the crippling effects of the division of labor. But it is certainly better than no compensation at all.

II

The following question was bound to arise: Might there be a way of counteracting, in more than merely compensatory fashion, the ravages of the division of labor—without sacrificing productive efficiency? It was Marx who provided the theoretical framework for understanding how the answer to this question could actually be yes. In discussing Marx's views on the division of labor, I will first restrict myself to the question of industrial labor. This restriction will be dropped in section III where I will discuss the division of labor in general.

It is clear that despite Marx's deep admiration for Smith, he nonetheless considered Smith to be a "political economist" in
a peculiar, pejorative sense of the term: one who mistakes the conditions of the existing system of production for the necessary conditions of production in general. According to Marx, Smith had noted a quite real correlation: that between the division of labor and productivity; but Smith had failed to see that this was a correlation that could be expected to hold only under particular historical conditions. These conditions, Marx believed, were changing. And once they had changed sufficiently, a new correlation would be established: that between increasing productivity and the abolition of the division of labor.

Marx stakes himself to no less a proposition than this: the division of labor characteristic of industrial production is in the process of withering away. It is the inherent tendency of capitalism to work toward the abolition of specialization in the industrial sphere.

Marx reasoned as follows. In the first major stage in the development of capitalist production, that of hand production or “manufacture,” there is a tendency toward the extension and intensification of the division of labor. For, wherever we have hand production, we have the circumstance that the practitioner of one craft must master certain, usually quite subtle, physical movements, while other craftsmen must master other such movements. As long as industry is based upon the mastery, by human beings, of certain physical-manipulative skills, productivity will clearly be fostered by the improved “dexterity” promoted in each worker by the division of labor. From the point of view of each individual capitalist, therefore, the extension of the division of labor will be desirable. The more refined the division of labor, the more productive one’s plant and therefore the greater one’s profit. Under these circumstances, Marx would freely admit, the Smithian correlation between the division of labor and productive efficiency clearly holds.

But with the introduction of machine production we have the onset of a striking new tendency. A historical point is reached at which the differences between the skills involved in the various branches of industry start becoming less and less pronounced. As production becomes increasingly automated, the skills required to make product A come increasingly to re-
semble those required to turn out product B. The reason is that while the physical movements required to produce A and B must, until the age of automation, be mastered by human hands, insofar as automation does take hold, these physical movements are no longer performed by human hands at all. They come to be done by machines. Insofar as human labor is still involved in production, it tends to be more and more restricted to a narrow range of maintenance functions. Unlike the skilled worker, who dextrously wielded his tools, the factory worker comes more and more to be "an appendage of the machine." Plainly, whatever skills are involved in tending an A-producing machine do not differ from those involved in tending a B-producing machine nearly as much as A-producing skills differed from B-producing skills during the period of hand production.

From the point of view of the individual capitalist, it is automation that now becomes the key to greater efficiency and hence higher profits. Thus, the very same "will to profit" that intensified the division of labor during the period of hand production now drives the system into a qualitatively new phase: one in which the differentiation of skills that defines what we mean by the "division of labor" becomes ever less pronounced. Under capitalism, the division of labor is first intensified; but after a certain point it begins, parabola-like, to describe a downward path.

But if automation implies a decline in the industrial division of labor, it also implies, Marx maintains, the radical dehumanization of those who remain trapped in factory work. Insofar as jobs require less and less skill, people come to spend their productive lives involved in monotonous tasks which make no demands upon, and hence cannot possibly engage, their intelligence. And this situation will continue as long as the social relations developed by capitalism prevail.

It is at this juncture that Marx achieves a simple yet profound dialectical insight. He sees that the very process—automated production—which dehumanizes the factory worker under capitalist social relations can, given new social relations, emancipate him. The drudgery of factory work is due to its utter simplicity; and the utter simplicity of this work is rooted, in turn, in the circumstance that human physical labor has
become a much less significant component of production. In other words, _just because_ industrial capitalism reduces skilled labor to unskilled labor, it must be considered _a tendency to make industrial labor more and more superfluous._

In short, society as a whole needs to devote less and less of its time to factory work. Eventually, Marx thought, this can have only one result: the notion that an entire class of people _must_ spend their lives confined to drudgery seems less and less defensible. It begins to enter people's heads that what little factory work—the maintenance work already referred to—does need to be done, could be socially distributed in such a way that no given person need spend much of his time doing it. If everyone did a short stint of factory work each year, it would be possible for everyone to be free from such work for most of the year. No longer need it be the case that only a privileged sub-group of society—the ruling class—is, in being free _from_ the drudgery of industrial production, free _to_ develop its creative intelligence. It is now possible for all people to devote themselves to the "higher functions"—a circumstance which is, moreover, not only intrinsically desirable, but also _productively useful_; for an advanced industrial society can be even more efficiently administered if the right to the full development of intelligence has been made universal. In short, for Marx, "the division of mental and material labor" can now, finally, be abolished; and for one very simple reason: "material labor" is becoming increasingly obsolete.

For Marx this means that the functional basis of _class distinctions_ is being eroded by capitalist development. The essential distinction between a ruling class and a ruled class is, for Marx, that between a class that monopolizes mental/directional functions, and a class that is confined to the sphere of manual work. Insofar as capitalist development renders such manual work less and less necessary, classes lose their historical point and purpose. We thus arrive at the conclusion that _the growing obsolescence of the industrial division of labor, determined by the growth of automated production under capitalism, is at the same time the key to the establishment of a classless society._
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III

We have so far discovered two basic Marxian propositions concerning the division of labor: (1) that capitalism has an intrinsic tendency to abolish the division of labor within the factory by transforming skilled into unskilled labor; and (2) that this very same process is the basis for overcoming the distinction between mental and manual functions, i.e., between classes.

We can also discern a fundamental difference in approach between Smith and Marx. While the former regards the industrial division of labor in essentially static terms, as an eternal *sine qua non* of high productivity in any advanced economy, the latter regards the development of the industrial division of labor as a *process* culminating in the establishment of a technology which renders that division obsolete. In dialectical terms, for Marx, unlike Smith, the industrial division of labor produces the conditions of its own negation.

The reader has, by now, probably gathered that my sympathies are with Marx. This is not to say that I am insensitive to problems regarding the Marxian conception; but rather to say that I believe these problems can be handled with minimal disturbance to the basic insight.

But it must be admitted that there is at least one very large stumbling block in the way of accepting Marx's orientation toward the division of labor—one which we have not so far considered and which, moreover, concerns a very basic aspect of his thinking on this matter. To appreciate this problem, we must drop the restriction imposed at the start of the preceding section: we must consider not only the industrial division of labor, but the division of labor in general.

The problem is as follows. While Marx does advance cogent reasons for supposing that the industrial division of labor is becoming obsolete, this seems the most that the considerations advanced by him could be taken to prove. And yet the language used by Marx in many of his writings suggests that he takes himself to be arguing that "the division of labor"—in general and without qualification—is in the process of being eliminated. And this, it inevitably is objected, commits Marx to a much
bolder, and quite implausible, implication: that the division of labor even within the non-industrial sphere—i.e., among society's "mental laborers"—is also being, or could also be, eliminated.

That Marx does speak in unqualified terms about the "abolition of the division of labor" is beyond dispute.\(^{14}\) It would seem also to be beyond dispute that this conception is implausible even for one who accepts the possibility of the elimination of class distinctions. The literal and complete abolition of specialization would seem to involve transforming everyone into an entirely "universal man," who is learned in all branches of inquiry. It would involve abolishing the circumstances under which we are entitled to say such things as, "Ludwig is a philosopher while Marx is a sociologist." But since each of us has, on the average, but three score years and ten, such a conception seems wild. Given the shortness of life, there is only so much a person can do. A rare individual might, like a latter-day Leonardo, astonish us with mastery of four or five different disciplines. But a literally "universal man"—this would appear to be out of the question. It is nonetheless the implication that seems to be suggested by Marx's own words.

Whoever would try to defend Marx must take one or the other of two courses: argue that such "universality"\(^ {15}\) is not as absurd a prospect as it seems; or else argue that Marx meant something somewhat less radical by the expression, "the abolition of the division of labor," than these words might seem to suggest.

The latter course is the correct one; and the key to the solution of our problem is contained in one of Marx's most famous, yet also most puzzling, pronouncements concerning the division of labor. It is worth quoting at some length:

\[ A\]s soon as the distribution of labor comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd or a critical critic,\(^ {17}\) and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in a communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, . . . it [is] possible for me
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to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic. 

I have emphasized certain phrases in this passage in order to indicate that the crucial contrast is that between the unfreedom of those in pre-communist societies and the freedom of those in communist society. The latter are, while the former are not, free to do whatever they wish. Marx speaks here of a freedom “to become accomplished” in whatever field “I have in mind” to become accomplished in. There is no suggestion that each person might literally become accomplished in all fields of human inquiry in one short lifetime. The suggestion is, rather, that there will be no restriction on the individual’s privilege to work in any given field as often as and whenever he pleases.

The solution to our problem thus involves denying that, for Marx, the “abolition of the division of labor” actually means the transforming of each individual into a literally “universal man”; such a conception surely is absurd. Rather “communism” consists in the absence of all forms, direct and indirect, of coercion in the sphere of work. It is the overcoming of the antithesis between what I work at and what I wish to work at.

Such a conception is bold enough in its own right. We see that, to the two Marxian propositions abstracted at the beginning of this section, we must now add a third: that automated production not only reduces the social need for manual labor to such an extent that the emancipation of the working class becomes possible; it also is responsible for so high a level of productivity that the life-long “fixation” (Marx’s term) of each person at one particular task finally becomes socially unnecessary. Whereas, in previous historical epochs, efficient production depended upon the regimentation of functions, i.e., depended on denying to people the right to put down and pick up whatever tasks they pleased whenever they pleased, today, to the contrary, the technology which we have historically developed, and the technological and scientific comprehension which modern culture embodies, make it possible for such
freedom to exist without there being any danger of a historical relapse to a qualitatively lower level of productivity.

It is clear that even though this idea is not nearly so wildly radical as the literal "universal man" conception, it may nonetheless seem quite utopian. It will inevitably be objected that it is naive to suppose that such a society would not quickly degenerate into an orgy of dilettantism and sloth. If people are not made to do socially useful things, if they are not forced to focus their attention on some particular discipline, won't they end up having no socially useful competence at all? And won't this pose the threat that culture's accumulated "technological and scientific comprehension," referred to in the preceding paragraph, will be lost or diminished, and hence that we will suffer a "relapse to a qualitatively lower level of productivity"?

Marx does not, to my knowledge, explicitly address himself to these latter questions. This is quite certainly not because they never occurred to him, but rather because he thought them worthy only of disdain. If Marx were with us today, and could be coaxed into making a reply, I think he would speak in something like the following vein:

"There are," he would say, "two basic errors at the bottom of the above objections. It is supposed, in the first place, that the coordination of people's individual plans and activities, essential to the functioning of any society, is incompatible with the conception of freedom I have suggested. It is supposed that, because human affairs would be hopelessly disorganized if society did not have some sort of unified means of planning, it somehow follows that the coercion of the individual by society is somehow inevitable. It is supposed that the claims of society must confront the individual as a denial, as something externally imposed, that a plan of social coordination could not possibly be perceived by people as the fulfillment of their needs. It is supposed, in effect, that there is something about 'human nature' which prevents people from directly desiring the mutual, orderly arrangement of their plans and projects.

"These are just the sorts of assumptions that flourish in the society of the marketplace. Such a society is founded upon antagonistic relations among people, and hence it requires an ideology that apotheosizes just such antagonism. Under capi-
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talism, people confront one another as foes; and if capitalism is to work, such adversary relations must appear normal or inevitable. Thus as long as this system prevails, it is little wonder that we have the prevalence of theories that imply that it is abnormal or impossible for people directly to desire and to seek mutual coordination.

"We communists have never made any secret of the fact that we regard these paradigmatically bourgeois ideas as scientifically defenseless. Let there be no ambiguity about this: the achievement of communism requires the communization of the human spirit, the creation of needs and desires that are directly cooperative in character, the abolition of the apparently 'necessary connection' between social existence and coercion. And we maintain that there is nothing in 'human nature' to prevent such an achievement. And so we make the following twofold claim: it is true that, in a free society, people will be allowed to pursue whatever life-plans they wish; but it is also true that each person will wish to make sure that his activities are so ordered that his own enjoyment is at the same time a contribution to the community.

"But there is a second sort of reason that the 'abolition of the division of labor' may seem to be a utopian conception. This reason is nothing other than the old Smithian assumption that whenever there are many social functions that need to be performed, the radical division of labor is inevitably the only efficient way of performing them. Giving people the opportunity to broaden their productive activities thus appears, from this point of view, as an invitation to dilettantism.

"Now such reasoning was appropriate enough in the period canvassed by Smith; and it remains appropriate for as long as the technological basis of society remains relatively underdeveloped. But in our time we have achieved a fantastic elaboration of technological matériel, and a fantastic complexity in human interactions which necessarily go along with it. A point has been reached at which society must begin to place a much higher premium on the development, in each individual, of a general comprehension of how this complex technical-social whole functions. We simply cannot efficiently administer such complexity any longer if each person continues to be canalized
into just one particular function. People must indeed be allowed to broaden their skills, rather than narrowing them.

"Smith saw that the division of labor implied an unfortunate narrowness in the life of the individual. But what he could not foresee was that, in time, this narrowness would, beyond certain limits, come to have a deleterious effect upon the production process itself. What he could not foresee was that the efficiencies of concentration and specialization would someday come to be only one side of the story of human production; that the efficiencies involved in the contrary tendency—that of comprehensiveness of understanding and insight—would someday become of equal significance. Thus if the ethos of the era known and foreseen by Smith rightly stressed the virtues of specific expertise, of division, we must, in the coming age, nonetheless reserve an equally hallowed place for the advantages of breadth, of synthesis."

Notes

1. "Differentiation of functions" is my own expression. To my knowledge, it is used by neither Smith nor Marx.
2. The division of labor may of course be "inevitable" for other reasons.
4. Ibid., pp. 9-10.
5. The other advantage of the division of labor alleged by Smith (ibid., pp. 8-9) is that of time-saving. Smith claims that much time would be lost if each person had to produce an entire article from start to finish. In making this claim, Smith seems to have underestimated the range of alternatives to division of labor. Thus in the context of his famous example of pin manufacture, the only alternative discussed is a situation in which each person makes an entire pin from start to finish, then produces a second pin from start to finish, and so on. The production of each pin would thus involve the putting down and the taking up—by each producer—of a wide varie-
ty of tools within short periods of time, and in the transition from each phase of pin-making to each other phase there would be a considerable loss of time. True enough, there would be such a loss if this were the only alternative to the division of labor. But, as should be plain from the above, there is another. If the people involved in pin-making were to spend equal amounts of time on each aspect of the process, "rotating" jobs every day or two, then the inefficiencies of "putting things down and picking other things up" would be lessened or even eliminated; and we would not have "division of labor" properly so called.

6. Smith makes this point dramatically by speculating that it may even be true "that the accommodation of a European prince does not always so much exceed that of an industrious and frugal peasant, as the accommodation of the latter exceeds that of many an African king, the absolute master of ten thousand naked savages" (ibid., p. 12).

7. Ibid., pp. 734 ff.

8. Smith does not, to my knowledge, explicitly address himself to this particular issue. But the reasons I attribute to him for believing a historical retreat "out of the question" are clearly fundamental to his approach.


10. Throughout his career, Marx did in fact use the expression "political economy" as essentially synonymous with the contemporary Marxist's expression, "bourgeois economic theory."

11. Marx's actual words are as follows: "In handicrafts and manufacture, the workman makes use of a tool; in the factory, the machine makes use of him. . . . In manufacture the workmen are parts of a living mechanism. In the factory we have a lifeless mechanism independent of the workman, who becomes its mere living appendage" (Karl Marx, Capital, Vol. 1 [New York, 1967], p. 422).

12. This theme, concerning the increasing obsolescence of industrial labor, occurs in many places in the Marxian opus. A particularly rich source in this regard is the Grundrisse of 1857-1858, passim.

13. It is not often enough appreciated that the distinction between mental and manual labor is, for Marx, the functional basis of classes. But this is, in my view, one of his most important insights. See especially Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The German Ideology, Part One (New York, 1970).
14. Talk of the "abolition of the division of labor" occurs not only in Marx's early work (see, e.g., n. 18 below), but throughout Marx's work—e.g., in such a late work as *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. The phrase, "the abolishing of the division of labor," occurs, among other places, in *The German Ideology*, p. 83.

15. Our language does not have a cliché for "universal development" that includes the feminine gender. This is itself a reflection of social realities.

16. Marx does use expressions like "all-around development" (see, e.g., the *Grundrisse*, passim), "cultivating . . . gifts in all directions" (*The German Ideology*, p. 83), and other cognate expressions; but my own interpretation (to follow) of what such "universality" should be taken to mean is, I think, nonetheless correct.

17. Marx is referring, of course, to a well-known tendency among the Young Hegelians.


19. Ibid.