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Socialism vs. Capitalism

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Smith’s Flawed Division of Labor

Adam Smith and Karl Marx, both influential economic and philosophic writers of their time, created ideas that have lasted long enough to permeate our society today. They can be described as polar opposites – Smith advocating for capitalism, Marx advocating for communism. While they both desire to create a system beneficial to all working people, they fundamentally disagree on what that means. One of the most concrete examples of this is the division of labor. While Marx agrees with Smith that it is a central idea of capitalism, they disagree on the morality and success of it. Smith argues that division of labor is in the best interest of the working class and will bring wealth to the nation while Marx argues that it creates alienation of men from each other and a trapping of the working class into poverty. Smith creates a more easily followed argument, littered with concrete examples, and would be unarguably convincing had he not backtracked and destroyed his argument for distribution of labor near the end of “Wealth of Nations.” Because of this, Marx ends with the upper hand in this argument. Adam Smith very well describes the essence of what division of labor is through his pin-making example. He describes two scenarios, the first of which features a workman not educated in the skill of pin making. This workman could make, if any, one pin in a day. Now, a business that is divided into branches where each man specializes in a specific part of the pin-making process (“one man draws out the wire, another straightens it, a third cuts it”…etc.) can make around 48,000 pins each day. (Smith, 163) This pin-making example, while very simple, serves as a model of all divided labor. Essentially, division of labor is the breaking down of a manufacturing process into parts where a worker specializes in one part of the process. A series of workers will then create products faster by completing their part and then passing the product on to the next worker/phase of manufacturing. This is even further developed during the Industrial Revolution, because machines can make these steps even easier. We can see in “Wealth of Nations” that Adam Smith is a huge advocate for division of labor. His argument surrounds the dexterity of the worker. If a worker’s purpose, due to division of labor, is reduced to one simple task, he can improve greatly his ability to do that task. (Smith, 164) By doing the same thing day in and day out, the worker becomes extremely skilled in that thing, and can complete it at a faster pace and better quality. By having a number of people who are extremely skilled at one part of the manufacturing operation, it can be carried out faster than physically possible by one person. Also, time is saved because the worker does not need to move from one place to another or switch tools to carry out a different task. Smith gives the example of a country weaver moving from his farm to his loom and back to display how much time is lost when one man carries out an entire manufacturing process. (Smith, 165) Marx, on the other hand, has a number of qualms about the division of labor. Mainly he discusses the estrangement of the worker from the labor. Marx says that this alienation comes not only from the result of the workers labor, but from the act of production, which points a finger at the concept of division of labor. (Marx, 73) He describes how the concept/act of labor divided is foreign to the worker, thus it does not belong to his essential being, and so he is trapped. “The external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else’s, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another.” (Marx, 74) Marx believes that man is defined by his labor. Thus, the division of labor creates issues. As a member of this manufacturing chain, the worker is estranged from the product, their fellow workers, and themself. They no longer have the satisfaction of owning the product they create, but rather they are just a piece of a moving machine. In this manner, they become enslaved by the product they are creating. The production “neither depends on nor belongs to him.” (Marx, 75) Marx describes in detail the relationship between the product and the worker. Specifically, he describes that during labor in the political economy “the worker sinks to the level of the commodity.” (Marx, 70) He also claims “the wretchedness of the worker is in inverse proportion to the power and magnitude of his production.” (Marx, 70) Thus, the more the worker produces, the more estranged and powerless they become. He reiterates later, “the worker becomes an even cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates.” I like to think of it in the following example: if a laborer works for a bread manufacturing company that makes twenty loaves a day and he buys two to take home, he owns 10% of the bread he makes. If the same company has him laboring harder and/or creates more branches of divided labor and begins making two hundred loaves a day, if he still only buys two loaves, he only owns 1%. Thus the more he produces, the less he owns. It can also be explained in a manner where the laborer buys none of what he produces. If he is paid $10 a day for work and works for a company that creates $100 of profit a day, he is worth 10% of what he creates. Now if that same company manufactures even more and makes $10,000 of profit a day, the laborer is only worth .1% of what he creates. Thus, the more commodities he creates, the less valuable the worker becomes, as Marx states. The division of labor creates a system where man can create more commodities, thus becoming a less valuable laborer. Marx further explains this enslavement to labor by comparing it to religion. “The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself.” (Marx, 72) This translates to the worker retaining less in themself as they put more into their labor. Unlike religion, this is not a good thing. The workers are being distanced from themselves but aren’t receiving peace of mind like in religion. Marx further develops his ideas, stating that the division of labor creates class divide. “It produces palaces – but for the worker, hovels.” (Marx, 73) The laborers remain poor while the factory owners become rich. The less the laborer retains in themself, the more profit is reaped by those who own the means of production. Thus, the division of labor is keeping the human species from being unified. Since the human species is then not unified, more alienation occurs towards each other. While at this point it seems as though Marx and Smith are fundamentally different, an interesting sentiment comes from Adam Smith’s “Wealth of Nations”. Adam Smith describes the people in the division of labor as “confined” to their simple operations. (Smith, 302) He then explains that the men whose lives are spent in these roles, which always yield the same results, have no reason to exercise their understandings or problem-solving skills to remove difficulties, because they never occur. Adam Smith explicitly states that because of this, the worker “generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become.” (Smith, 302) He further elaborates, “the torpor of his mind renders him, not only incapable of relishing or bearing a part in any rational conversation, but of conceiving any generous, noble, or tender sentiment, and consequently of forming any just judgment concerning many even of the ordinary duties of private life.” (Smith, 302) Smith holds nothing back as he describes these factory workers as absolute brainless idiots. He is not ambiguous in the slightest, confusingly enough pre-dating Marx’s ideas. This idea that the division of labor turns the workers into idiots is even reiterated in Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts: “[labor] produces intelligence – but for the worker idiocy, cretinism.” (Marx, 73) Adam Smith further dismantles what he stands for in the same paragraph. “Of the great extensive interests of his country he is altogether incapable of judging…” (Smith, 302). This directly clashes with the ideal of democracy. This may be due to the time period, since such a small group of the population was given the right to vote, but this just proves that his economic model could not withstand time. He continues, “…he is equally incapable of defending his country in war. The uniformity of his stationary life naturally corrupts the courage of his mind, and makes him regard with abhorrence the irregular, uncertain, and adventurous life of a soldier. It corrupts even the activity of his body, and renders him incapable of exerting his strength with vigour and perseverance, in any other employment than that to which he has been bred.” (Smith, 302) If the factory worker can no longer exert strength, this serves as a problem toward agriculture. If society further distances itself from agriculture, these inherent laborers can no longer return to working in the fields if need be. Also, he speaks extensively about the corruption of the mind of these workers. If division of labor corrupts the mind, why is Smith advocating for it? Adam Smith’s first argument as described earlier was about dexterity. Further in the same paragraph as above he states, “His [the worker’s] dexterity at his own particular trade seems, in this manner, to be acquired at the expense of his intellectual, social, and martial virtues.” (Smith, 302) Adam Smith’s most convincing argument for the division of labor involves dexterity of the worker resulting in faster production, but here he states that that comes along with the dismantling of, as Marx would call it, the species-being. He continues, “but in every improved and civilized society this is the state into which the labouring poor, that is, the great body of the people, must necessarily fall, unless the government takes some pains to prevent it.” (Smith, 302) Here Smith admits that the majority of the population must be poor and stupid for the rest of society to be successful. If only a minority of the population is intelligent and wealthy, can we say in good conscience that Adam Smith’s system and views about the division of labor are correct? He suggests that the government *can* help prevent it, but nowhere does he suggest that the government *should* help prevent it. How can Adam Smith call a society in this model “improved and civilized” if “the great body of people” is poor and unintelligent? Adam Smith’s statement here proves Marx’s statement of the rich receiving palaces and the workers receiving hovels. (Marx, 73) The rich get richer, the poor get poorer. We can see flaws in Adam Smith’s view of division of labor in Engel’s count of “Working Class Manchester.” Manchester in the 19th century was extremely influenced by the industrial revolution. There was a heavy influx of factory workers, practicing as parts of divided labor in order to manufacture products. Engels spent 1842-1844 in Manchester and recorded what he saw. He describes the place as “Hell upon Earth” due to the immense filth and overcrowding. (Engels, 584) More specifically, he writes “it is far from black enough to convey a true impression of the filth, ruin, and uninhabitableness, the defiance of all considerations of cleanliness, ventilation, and health which characterize the construction of this single district.” (Engels, 584) These workers acting as subjects to division of labor are living in absolute ruin. They lived in immense overcrowding in order to work in these factories for low wages. As we can see, Adam Smith’s system of division of labor is not creating economic prosperity, rather, horrid and disgusting conditions. These laborers worked long shifts, often working all day, furthering the example of man being alienated from his personal life, alienated from other men, and alienated from family. Adam Smith, in the beginning of Wealth of Nations, does a great job outlining division of labor and providing examples of how and why it works. If one didn’t finish the book, it would be easy to be convinced that capitalism is the truest, best form of government. It is through his exploration of the downside of division of labor that we see Marx’s ideas ring true. Adam Smith single-handedly dismantles his own argument. Marx’s exploration of the alienation and estrangement from labor is very abstract, but not false. Adam Smith overtly describes the deterioration of man that comes from division of labor, thus leaving Marx with the final say. While Marx’s ideas are not all concrete, his view of the division of labor rings truer than Smith’s.

Works Cited

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