

Division of Labor: The Progression and Deterioration of Society

Both Adam Smith and Jean-Jacque Rousseau desire to understand the correlation between human nature, the progress of society, and society's condition in modernity. They highlight the division of labor as the vehicle of society's evolution and focus on the desire for self-preservation and a capacity for improvement as the two human traits that drive this progressive vehicle. However, Smith and Rousseau form divergent philosophies about the human condition in modernity when assessing the consequences of division of labor on social order and conflict. Though both philosophers believe that the division of labor is a derivative of humankind's ability to improve the powers of labor and forge relationships based on mutual self-interest, Jean-Jacques Rousseau believes that interdependence ultimately leads to the disintegration of empathy while Smith believes that interdependence is an affirmation of humanity at its most basic level.

Both Smith and Rousseau believe innate self-interest drives humans to improve the powers of their labor and societal interactions. According to Rousseau in *The Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*,

Taught by experience that love of well-being is the sole spring of human actions, he was in a position to distinguish...occasions when common interest should make him count on the help of his kind....this is how men...have acquired some...idea of mutual engagements and of the advantage of fulfilling them (Rousseau, 163).

Men discovered early that mutual benefit is the product of reciprocal desires for self-preservation; thus becoming the foundation upon which division of labor and trade developed. Reciprocal self-interest is an unfailing bargaining chip humans depend on when trading with each other; men do not depend on goodwill, but hold each other accountable to mutual self-

preservation while considering personal survival above all else. In *Wealth of Nations*, Smith echoes these sentiments, stating that in order to barter effectively, men must "...address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages" (Smith, 15). When the desire for self-preservation takes on this definition – a common standard that humans can depend on to get what they need - the capacity for perfectibility manifests itself in the division of labor.

The division of labor is the definitive implementation of humankind's ability to perfect the powers of labor and societal interactions. According to Rousseau, "This initial progress finally enabled man to make more rapid progress. The more the mind became enlightened, the more industry was perfected" (Rousseau, 164). Driven by unswerving self-interest, the human propensity for perfectibility improved both peoples' individual powers of labor and the ways in which they traded with each other; in order that by using each other, they might achieve the highest level of utility for themselves. Due to the division of labor, people began to perfect their talents and specialize in particular trades. Smith further illustrates the progression,

And thus the certainty of being able to exchange all that surplus part of the produce of his own labor...encourages every man to apply himself to a particular occupation, and to cultivate and to bring to perfection whatever talent...he may possess (Smith, 16).

The improved quality of products, rise in the amount of leisure time, and increased productivity are consequences of specialization and "this same trucking disposition which originally gives occasion to the division of labour" (Smith, 16). In other words, increased productivity and specialization create the conditions for society to advance and the quality of life to improve; all of which are a product of the division of labor – the pinnacle invention of humankind's adaptability and regard for self-preservation.

Though Smith and Rousseau agree that the division of labor accelerates society's progress into modernity and are due to faculties found in human nature, the philosophers diverge in their viewpoints when assessing the consequences of said societal change on social order and conflict. Rousseau depicts society's progression with cynicism and disdain,

Nascent Society gave way to the most horrible state of war: Humankind, debased and devastated, no longer able to turn back or to renounce its wretched acquisitions, and working only to its shame by the abuse of the faculties that do it honor, brought itself to the brink of ruin (Rousseau, 172).

To Rousseau, division of labor results in innovation and interdependence, but for the worse. Ultimately, man's honorable malleability crafted a culture of manipulation and "a situation that armed all of them against one another" (Rousseau, 173). He defines interdependence under the division of labor as the turning point in humanity's doomed evolution. "The moment one man needed the help of another; as soon as it was found to be useful for one to have provision for two, equality disappeared, property appeared, work became necessary, and...slavery and misery were soon seen" (Rousseau, 167). Under the division of labor, humans became dependent upon each other and power structures formed, thus transforming the desire for self-preservation and basic human pity into a vicious habit of "...the most frightful disorder: thus the usurpations of the rich, the Banditry of the Poor, the unbridled passions of all, stifling natural pity and the still weak voice of justice, made men greedy, ambitious, and wicked" (Rousseau, 171).

Though Rousseau believes that interdependence breeds unwarranted social hierarchies, exploitation, and the deterioration of humankind's morality, Smith argues that the actual outcome of interdependence is positive and a foundation for overarching prosperity. "...Man has almost constant occasion for the help of his brethren....Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want, is the meaning of every such offer; and it is in this manner that we

obtain from one another the far greater part of those good offices which we stand in need of' (Smith, 15). To Smith, humans are not harmed by a system of interdependency, but more prosperous for choosing to be part of one. "This division of labor from which so many advantages are derived....is the necessary...consequence of a certain propensity in human nature which has in view no such extensive utility" (Smith,14). Since the tendency to barter and exchange is a derivative of humankind's propensity for self-preservation and perfectibility, Smith believes that affirming interdependence is the most human thing one can do and only improves the general welfare and quality of life for all of society. Furthermore, Smith disagrees with Rousseau's belief that interdependence creates social inequity, but rather that "the person who either acquires, or succeeds to a great fortune, does not necessarily acquire or succeed to any political power, either civil or military" (Smith, 34). In other words, division of labor and dependence between humans in the marketplace does not generate social disparities or conflict, but rather maximizes utility.

To Rousseau and Smith, malleability and perfectibility under the division of labor acquires a different set of consequences for society in modernity. To Rousseau, interdependency warps humankind's primal self-interest from mere survival to economic and political greed; thus rearing a state of malicious rivalry and exploitation on all sides. To Smith, the primal self-interest was and always will be to work less and enjoy more personal and collective rewards. He believes that social harmony is a natural outcome of humankind's propensity to live and work together. Therefore, self-interest drives the economy and accelerates social progress, facilitating mutual benefits and increased universal prosperity for everyone.