Chapter Fourteen: The Division of Labour and Manufacture

1 The Dual Origin of Manufacture

(The manufacturing period: from the middle of the sixteenth century to the last third of the eighteenth.)

Manufacture arises in two ways:

1. By assembling in one place workers of different handicrafts in the production of a single product or group of products. Here, the trades assembled adopt a one-sided character through their application in the production of one single product, by acquiring the character of a component part of a more general labour process.

2. By assembling in one place a number of the same craftspeople who all do the same type of work. Here, the division of labour asserts itself through the splitting up of the handicraft into its component operations.

In both cases the result is that previously independent trades lose their independent character and are reduced to merely supplementary and partial operations within a broader social production process.

2 The Specialised Worker and His Tools

Manufacture [...] produces the skill of the specialised worker by reproducing and systematically driving to an extreme within the workshop the naturally developed differentiation which it found ready to hand in society.1 At the same time, ‘the conversion of a partial task into the life-long destiny of a man corresponds to the tendency shown by earlier societies towards making trades hereditary.2

The incorporation of the specialised worker into the co-operative capitalist production process increases her productivity either by increasing the intensity of her labour, or by decreasing the proportion of unproductive labour, or both. But, at the same time, ‘constant labour of one uniform kind disturbs the intensity and flow of a man’s vital forces, which find recreation and delight in the change of activity itself.’3

Specialisation of labour in turn leads to a specialisation of tools according to the simplification of the component parts of the production process. Manufacture ‘thus creates at the same time one of the material conditions for the existence of machinery, which consist of a combination of simple instruments.’4

3 The Two Fundamental Forms of Manufacture – Heterogeneous and Organic

It is necessary to distinguish two distinct forms of articulation of manufacture, which arise from the nature of the article to be produced – whether it involves the final assembly of already produced partial products, or arises from a series of connected processes.

1 For the first articulation, Marx gives the example of watch-making. Here, even though the specialised worker, who may well work from home, has an entirely different relationship with her capitalist employer that the independent craftsperson, who works for her customers, she hardly, due to the splitting-up of the production process into a large number of heterogeneous operations, formally differentiates her work from handicraft proper.

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1 Karl Marx, Capital vol. 1 (Harmondsworth, 1990) [hereafter C.], pp. 258-9.
2 C., p. 459.
3 C., p. 460.
4 C., p. 461.
2 The second type of articulation of manufacture, ‘its perfected form’, is that in which the produced article passes through a series of processes in its manufacture. Here, the division of labour, which simultaneously isolates the various stages of production and brings them together, both physically and organisationally, gains significant gains in productive power.

- Now, manufacture not only finds the conditions for co-operation ready to hand but intensifies them though further specialisation and subdivision.
- Regulation of labour-time now becomes something of a property of the production process itself, since the latter forms a more or less linear sequence of operations, the following one being unable to commence until the preceding one has been completed.
- Alongside a qualitative division of labour, there also grows up a quantitative – proportional – one, since different operations require different periods of time and different numbers of workers to complete them. Expansion of production now requires the scale expansion of the production process.
- In addition, we see the development of combinations of manufactures, just as manufacture itself arises as a combination of handicrafts. Not only may homogeneous production processes form distinct acts within single manufactures, but whole manufactures themselves may form as elements within a combination, in which the product of one may act as the raw material of another.

At this stage, the use of machinery is a subordinate element in production: ‘the collective worker, formed out of the combination of a number of independent specialised workers, is the item of machinery specifically characteristic of the manufacturing period.’ This in turn converts the worker herself into something of a machine: ‘The habit of only doing one thing converts him into an organ which operates with the certainty of a force of nature, while his connection with the whole mechanism compels him to work with the regularity of a machine.’

Through specialisation, manufacture develops a hierarchy of labour, and a consequent scale of wages. It also develops a class of unskilled workers, hitherto excluded from handicrafts: while manufacture develops one-sided specialisations, it also makes non-specialisation a specialisation in itself. For the skilled worker, the cost of apprenticeship falls; for the unskilled it disappears. In both cases, the value of labour-power falls. Once again, the objective effect is a fall on necessary labour-time.

4 The Division of Labour in Manufacture, and the Division of Labour in Society

Marx begins by making a sharp distinction between what he calls ‘the division of labour within society’, and ‘the corresponding restriction of individuals to particular vocations and callings’.

Whence the former? Within family and tribe-based communities, a division of labour based on age and sex, i.e. ‘on a purely physical foundation’, springs up naturally. The expansion of communities, conflict between communities, the subjugation of one community by another, reinforces this. The spontaneously developed differentiation between communities promotes the exchange of products, and the limited exchange of commodities, once and when communities come into contact with one another. Such exchange does not create

5 C., p. 463.
6 C., p. 468.
7 C., p. 469.
8 C., p. 471.
the differences between spheres of production, but it does bring different spheres of production into contact with one another.

The foundation of every division of labour which has attained a certain degree of development, and has been brought about by the exchange of commodities, is the separation of town from country. One might say that the whole economic history of society is summed up in the movement of this antithesis.9

A precondition for the societal division of labour is a certain level of number and density of population (but ‘density’ here understood relatively, socially or organically, i.e. in terms too of the level of development of means of communication, not simply in terms of simple density).

That the foundation of capitalist production is commodity production and exchange means that a certain division of labour must already have been reached in society. In turn, capitalist production reinforces and accelerates the development of the social division of labour.

But the societal division of labour, and the division of labour within the capitalist production process, differ in both degree and kind. What is it that forms the connection between independent branches of industry in society? That the products of the one are commodities produced for the others, i.e. the exchange of commodities. What is it that characterises the division of labour in capitalist manufacture? That the specialised worker herself does not produce finished commodities. This difference manifests itself in four different ways:

1 While the division of labour in society is mediated by the exchange of products, the division of labour in the capitalist production process is mediated through the sale of several labour-powers to one capitalist.

2 The division of labour in society is based on the dispersal of the means of production among independent producers; the division of labour in capitalist production is based on the concentration of the means of production in the hands of the capitalist.

3 Outside of the workshop the equilibrium between different branches of production arises from the necessity imposed on the ‘unregulated caprice of the producers’ a posteriori, through the interplay of use-value and exchange-value (every product must have a social need; every product must embody the time socially necessary for its production), in this way re-asserting equilibrium if it is unbalanced. Within the workshop equilibrium is imposed a priori, through planning and regulation governed by ‘the iron law of proportionality’.10

4 The factory division of labour implies the undisputed authority of the capitalist; the division of labour in society acknowledges no other authority than that of competition. Thus, where capitalism prevails ‘anarchy in the social division of labour and despotism in the manufacturing division of labour mutually condition each other.’11

5 The Capitalist Character of Manufacture

With the development of capitalist manufacture – itself predicated on an already existing division of labour, and thus required from the beginning to a minimum number of workers, and hence capital, constant as much as variable – further development of the division of labour, of subdivision, specialisation, of increases in

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9 C., p. 472.
10 C., p. 476.
11 C., p. 477.
productivity, etc., pushes up proportionally the minimum amount of necessary capital, such that, as a law, ‘the transformation of the social means of production and subsistence into capital must keep extending.’\textsuperscript{12}

While simple co-operation leaves the individual’s mode of work largely unchanged, manufacture – which we can see now is necessarily capitalist manufacture – leaves nothing unchanged once it gathers momentum. The worker initially sold her labour-power because she lacked the material means of producing commodities; now even her own labour-power stands useless unless sold to capital. Capitalist manufacture ‘converts the worker into a crippled monstrosity by furthering his particular skill as in a forcing-house, through the suppression of a whole world of productive drives and inclinations.’\textsuperscript{13}

Through the monopolisation by capital of direction in the production process all ‘the knowledge, judgement and will’ exercised by the independent peasant or handicraft worker is lost. ‘The social productive power of the collective worker [...] is enriched through the impoverishment of the worker [seen as] [...] individual productive power.’\textsuperscript{14}

Co-operation, which begins in a more or less spontaneous fashion, becomes the conscious, methodical and systematic form of capitalist production.’\textsuperscript{15} As a consequence, if [...] on the one hand it [i.e. capitalist manufacture] appears historically as an advance and a necessary aspect of the economic process of the formation of society, on the other hand, it appears as a more refined an civilised means of exploitation.’\textsuperscript{16}

(Marx now makes an interesting methodological point. Classical political economy grew up in the era of manufacturing: for this reason it is almost exclusively preoccupied with exchange-value. The writers of classical antiquity, on the other hand, view producers, production and the division of labour almost exclusively through the lens of use-value.)

Manufacture, although the predominant form taken by nascent capitalist production, runs into a number of obstacles which hinder its own development. Marx lists:

1. Although manufacture creates the distinction between skilled and unskilled labour, the very lack of unskilled labour at its birth fetters its development.

2. It is unable to develop the exploitation of women and children, largely due to the resistance of the male workers.

3. Although manufacture considerably cheapens the cost of apprenticeship, and hence labour-power, it can only do so within limits, for the skill of the individual worker cannot yet be technically eliminated from the production process.

In short, ‘the narrow technical basis on which manufacture rested [which amounts to its reliance on skilled labour] came into contradiction with the requirements of production which had itself created.’\textsuperscript{17}

It will be for next chapter to examine how these contradictions were resolved.

\textsuperscript{12} C., p. 480.
\textsuperscript{13} C., p. 481.
\textsuperscript{14} C., p. 483.
\textsuperscript{15} C., p. 485.
\textsuperscript{16} C., p. 486.
\textsuperscript{17} C., p. 490.