

# Notes on the Division of Labour Florian Schneider

## DISCLAIMER:

The following is neither a fully comprehensive analysis, nor a definitively thought-through elaboration on the topic of the division of labour. Rather, it should be understood as an exposé for further research, discussion, and development. It reflects the results of a series of test- or trial probings into an extensive topic that might turn out to be enormously relevant.

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In 1931 the Philips Eindhoven corporation commissioned the first Dutch sound film: *Philips Radio*, or, as it was also known, *Industrial Symphony*. It was a documentary shot by Joris Ivens at the peak of the economic depression, which coincided with radio technology's advent on the mass market.

The 36-minute film was supposed to show the modern production process of making radios at the factories and offices in Eindhoven. What we see is a celebration of images that aims to re-compose the industrial division of labour in the form of an artwork.

Most prominently, the film highlights the very notion of sound by deconstructing the industrial mass production of radio receivers as transmitters of sound. Ivens and his collaborator Helen van Dongen were using a sampling technique combining the noises of work, music, radio broadcasts, and abstract sounds.

The fascination with the abstract beauty of the machine processes on the one hand, and the concrete portrayal of the hard work carried out by the workers on the other, produced a cinematic piece, the ambiguity of which irritated both the commissioners and most critics alike.

The corporation reportedly refused to show the film in its original version, while the Christian newspaper *Het Volk* considered it a "document of inhumanity". Apparently, Ivens did not expose the assembly line as the worker's subjugation under the rule of the machine in the same way as Chaplin did in the famous opening sequence of *Modern Times*, or as René Clair did in a strikingly similar scene of his *À nous la liberté!*.

Rather than a caricature, Ivens tried to make a "cinematic expression of a twentieth century production line manufacturer." Its non-complicity with the clichés of both the advertising of the success of the company as well as mere anti-technological propaganda may constitute a rather unexpected value of the film today.

Eyal Sivan, who, as a guest of honour included the film in a series of his favourite documentaries for last year's International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam, wrote:

Instead of a valiant film parade through all the departments, he reveals the working conditions in a modern mechanized factory and captures the step-by-step development of radio parts along the way. Of course, Philips had a say in the social content of the film. Although Ivens understood Philips's point of view, he tried to compensate for his dissatisfaction by striving for great technical perfection. He exploited every tint of the glass and metal surfaces in the factory and moved his camera in a highly stylized manner. The sensual emphasis led Parisian critics to coin an alternate title for the film: *Symphonie industrielle*.

It is the precise depiction of a division of labour that is at stake: the specialization of labour that was necessary in order to sell, by the time the film was made, more than a hundred million vacuum tubes.

Ivens shows the entire chain from advanced glassblowing techniques to the assembly of complete radios, from the research laboratories to the typing pools with hundreds of secretaries and the packaging of complete radio sets.

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The division of labour is a concept that was first systematically explored by William Petty, whom Karl Marx considered "the founding father of political economy". Petty enthusiastically observed how over the course of the 18<sup>th</sup> century specialization in cloth- and watch-making, as well as in shipping, was supposed to increase overall productivity by its cost-reducing effects:

Cloth must be cheaper made, when one Cards, another Spins, another Weaves, another Draws, another Dresses, another Presses and Packs; then when all the operations above mentioned were clumsily performed by the same hand.

In the making of a Watch, If one Man should make the Wheels, another the Spring, another shall Engrave the Dial-Plate, and another shall make the Cases, then the Watch will be better and cheaper than if the whole Work be put upon any one Man.

Petty tried to explain the material basis of the contrast between the success of Dutch economy and the poverty in Ireland. In fact, he applied the principle of the division of labour, which he experienced in Dutch shipyards, to his survey of Ireland by putting into practice the very notion of a scientific division of labour. He divided the statistical tasks into those that could be easily done by unskilled soldiers and those that would require professional attention.

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On March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2007, the Bank of England issued a new-style 20-pound note that has gradually replaced the old one featuring a portrait of Sir Edward Elgar on the back. Along with a different look of the note, the main change is the inclusion of a portrait of Adam Smith on the back of the note, along with the image of a pin-making factory and a summary of Smith's observations on the benefits of the division of labour, drawn from his major work, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. In the famous example of the pin factory, Smith explained how the factory workers' cooperation in dividing their tasks between them raised their combined output. He went on to explain how, by trading with others, both at home and abroad, we could specialise our own production, whereby society as a whole would benefit from higher incomes and standards of living. The banknote depicts the division of labour in the pin factory, with a caption based on *The Wealth of Nations*: "and the great increase in the quantity of work that results".

To take an example, therefore, from a very trifling manufacture; but one in which the division of labour has been very often taken notice of, the trade of the pin-maker; a workman not educated to this business (which the division of labour has rendered a distinct trade), nor acquainted with the use of the machinery employed in it (to the invention of which the same division of labour has probably given occasion), could scarce, perhaps, with his utmost industry, make one pin in a day, and certainly could not make twenty. But in the way in which this business is now carried on, not only the whole work is a peculiar trade, but it is divided into a number of branches, of which the greater part are likewise peculiar trades. One man draws out the wire, another straightens it, a third cuts it, a fourth points it, a fifth grinds it at the top for receiving the head; to make the head requires two or three distinct operations; to put it on is a peculiar business, to whiten the pins is another; it is even a trade by itself to put them into the paper; and the important business of making a pin is, in this manner, divided into about eighteen distinct operations, which, in some manufactories, are all performed by distinct hands, though in others the same man will sometimes perform two or three of them.

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“The average man in a communist society would be able to go fishing in the morning, work in a factory in the afternoon and read Plato in the evening”. According to the bestseller author Alain de Botton, Karl Marx must have imagined communist utopia as an “implausibly high-minded combination of activities”. In one single work day one would enjoy unhurried peasant lifestyle, benefit from the efficiency of industrial production, and then turn to the blessings of brainwork. In such an idyllic scenario communism would be anything but boring.

As a celebration of the whole variety of human capacities, it would mark the unification of the body and mind in an integral approach. And isn't the utopia that Marx purportedly described in the 19<sup>th</sup> century precisely the reality for a growing number of highly skilled workers, namely in the “creative industries”?

There is only one little problem. The quote, whose author is most recently responsible for projects with titles such as *The School of Life*, which he calls the “concluding volume” of *The Capital*, is an invention of de Botton himself.

Unfortunately, Marx did not make any remarks like that in any of the volumes of *The Capital*. Instead, there are remarkably different lines in *The German Ideology*, a book he had written thirty years earlier:

In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.

After that, Marx did not dare give any further hints about how one should imagine communism, although he was constantly pressured by the growing proletarian movement to reveal his vision of a communist utopia. Marx refused a religious, utopian notion of communism and insisted instead on the “scientific” character of his research.

Indeed, much more interesting than the distribution of concrete pursuits between hunting, fishing, and herding, plus some criticism after work, is the rather abstract Marx's thought that comes after that:

**This fixation of social activity, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations, is one of the chief factors in historical development up till now.**

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**In the first volume of the *Capital* Marx introduced a sharp distinction between, on the one hand, a division of labour that is technical or economic and aims at increasing efficiency in the process of co-operation and, on the other, a division of labour that is socially constructed. The result is a double division of labour:**

- the technical division of labour in the enterprise and in a particular industry that broke down the production process into a sequence of tasks and
- the social division of labour among enterprises, industries, and social classes that was mediated through commodity exchange in market relations.

The division of labour appears as a double relation along two axes or “connections”, the specific combination of which constitutes the historical uniqueness of a mode of production (Althusser and Balibar *Reading Capital*):

- 1 – a relation of real appropriation designates the structure of the labour process, that is, the relation of the labourer to the means of production by which the transformation of nature is undertaken. This relation constitutes the “technical division of labour” or the forces of production;
- 2 – a property relation designates the mode of appropriation of the social product. This relation, the “social division of labour” or relations of production, implies the intervention of an individual or a collectivity, who, by the exercise of economic ownership, controls access to the means of production and the reproduction of the productive forces.

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The success of Ford's *model T* (“a motor car for the great multitude”) was made possible by the introduction of a new factory system that was characterized first of all by a new technical division of labour.

It was based on enormous increases in

- precision: only interchangeable parts were used in manufacturing;
- specialisation: breaking up the assembly of a car into 84 distinct steps;
- synchronisation: a minimum time spent in set-up between these steps. Motion studies by Frederick Taylor had to determine the exact speed at which the work should proceed and the exact motions that the workers should use to accomplish their tasks.

*Model T* was the first automobile that was mass-produced on assembly lines with completely interchangeable parts. Machines were used to reduce the complexity of the production process in 84 areas in order to streamline the assembly process of a car from 12.5 hours down to 93 minutes. Instead of skilled craftsmen, low-skilled or untrained workers were hired, each of whom needed skills and knowledge in only one of the 84 areas.

At the same time, Fordism triggered a dramatic expansion of a new social division of labour, from what was by then called productive to re-productive work: workers were not only supposed to produce products with much greater efficiency, but due to their relatively high wages, were at the same time targeted as consumers. The intensification and differentiation of the production process was partly compensated for by increasing amounts of free time and higher wages, which, in return, had to be spent on the enjoyment of the same products.

The intensification of the labour process was accompanied by moral regulation of the workers' private lives. Work and non-work life grew increasingly bound up. In his famous text *Americanism and Fordism* Gramsci argued that the new methods of work were inseparable from a specific mode of living and thinking and feeling life.

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For Emile Durkheim, the founder of modern sociology as an academic discipline, the principal cause of the progress of the division of labour was what he coined "organic solidarity" – as opposed to primitive societies which were characterized by a "mechanical solidarity" based on resemblance.

"Each organ, in effect, has its special physiognomy, its autonomy. And, moreover, the unity of the organism is as great as the individuation of the parts is more marked."

Durkheim rejects the utilitarian explanation of the division of labour by gains in efficiency. Instead, he introduces the idea of a "moral density" between previously unrelated social units and the emergence of a new "conscience collective".

Besides the highly problematic analogy of society as a biological organism Durkheim's theory of the division of labour draws from two sources that seem constitutive of the emergence of the modern humanities:

- the binary opposition of primitive versus civilized society, which is inseparably linked with 19<sup>th</sup>-century colonialism;
- the direct transposition of Darwin's "struggle for survival" onto the idea of economic competition as the mediating mechanism between a growing social volume and advances in the division of labour.

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[the problem of moral: The morals of the Enlightenment and the division of labour in the orgy: de Sade's Juliette (Horkheimer/Adorno), Goddard, teamwork ]

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The separation of manual and intellectual labour is constitutive of industrial capitalism: the separation of those who work "with their hands" and those who work with their "brains" is the fundamental proposition of the class society.

Alfred Sohn-Rethel sees the division of manual and intellectual labour as being in close correspondence with the real abstraction of the commodity form and the epistemological implications of a philosophical tradition that understands thinking as a product of thinking and ultimately separates theory from practice, thus opening the gap between conception and execution.

The exchange of commodities goes along with the abstraction of specific goods. Only the value of these goods is important. This abstraction is called "real abstraction" because it takes place without a conscious

effort; whether anybody is aware of it or not is of no importance. "People do not know it but they do it" (Marx). Sohn-Rethel argues that the real abstraction of the commodity form is the real basis of formal and abstract thinking. All of Kant's categories, such as space, time, quality, substance, accident, movement, and so forth, are implicit in the act of exchange.

Sohn-Rethel sees the transcendental unity of self-consciousness as an intellectual reflection of "the form of exchangeability of commodities underlying the unity of money and the social synthesis".

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Adolf Eichmann, who managed the logistics of the mass transport of European Jews to the extermination camps during the Second World War, has been considered the personification of the specialisation of labour in industrial capitalism and the inherent collapse of morality.

Rony Brauman and Eyal Sivan edited the archive footage of Eichmann's trial in their award winning documentary, *The Specialist: Portrait of a Modern Criminal*. When Eichmann was brought to court in Israel in 1961, his line of defence was built on denying any legal responsibility for the deportations to the death camps, although Eichmann himself kept referring to his reputation as a "specialist" in his field, that is, in the logistics of the expatriation, expropriation, and deportation of Jewish people.

In her report from the trial, written for *The New Yorker* magazine, Hannah Arendt coined the phrase "the banality of evil". In Eichmann she discovered neither a lack of empathy, as many other observers did, nor stupidity; rather just thoughtlessness.

It seems that the specification of knowledge and its celebration in managerialism had coincided with a collapse of thinking, since fragmented action evacuates itself of any responsibility or even meaning.

Alongside the massive proliferation of all sorts of specialist-related subjectivities in culture industry (e.g. the TV-expert, the nerd, the Indian IT expert, to name a few), in the realm of production we encounter the opposite: a re-injection of individual creativity, overall responsibility, forced collective liability, group or peer-pressure in ever smaller, isolated units of production under the banner of teamwork and co-operation.

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Facing its increasing political irrelevance over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the official Marxist debate more or less systematically shifted its focus from a materialist analysis of the division of labour towards phenomena of the superstructure: the culture industry, consumer society, society of spectacle, etc.

What we experience today as "creative industries" is a reintegration of all sorts of practices that have not been considered productive under the reign of a new social division of labour. Political theory and organizing practices have to re-address issues of political economy in a significantly extended version.

What would it be like if instead of reasoning about the essence of immaterial production or the very character of creative industries one investigated contemporary forms of the division of labour in post-industrial production processes?

- 1 – At first sight, an increased level of control appears to be the ultimate purpose of the technical division of labour today;
- 2 – whereas segmentation of the work process in industrial production has led to the evacuation of meaning, in so-called immaterial production it is the other way around: meaning needs to be re-assembled through the re-collection of isolated practices under capitalist command or, in more friendly terms, through co-operation. It is the proprietary code itself that does not only regulate access to the means of production and the reproduction of the productive forces, but also establishes itself as a goal in its own right.

The decomposition of the factory and the break-up of its theatrical unities of location, time, and story line have produced a new social division of labour that reflects that decomposition. The technical division of labour is sourced out to individual mini-entrepreneurial units with various occupations that are split up and scattered across time and space.

The molar segmentations of the traditional division of labour that was based on reducing complexity, decreasing the knowledge that is needed for the steps of production, is replaced by a rather molecular segmentation. The linear dramaturgy of the assembly line has turned into a transversal organization of work without any ends or limits.

This should lead us to the research of other divisions of labour beyond the technical and the social. For example, the intensified Fordist production in the free-trade zones manifests a global division of labour that runs parallel to the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial exploitation, by providing resources like cheap labour force on which the boom of the creative industries relies; or the gender-specific divisions of labour, which have overhauled the Fordist model of the small family, and hence demand new, migrant domestic labour.

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If the "division of labour is limited by the extent of the market" (Adam Smith) and the number and relative density of the population are necessary conditions for the division of labour (Karl Marx), it is as urgent, as it is obvious, that an analysis of the social division of labour today needs to open up a new perspective on the effects of both migratory movements as well as new information and communication technologies that have emerged at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The ongoing lament over the precarisation of labour provides if any, then only very superficial insight into the results of a massive reconfiguration of the work process. A radical political theory and praxis need to attempt at least to get to the root of the problem and investigate a new division of labour that is occurring as a response to the change in the mode of production.

At the same time, the booming praise and worship of the common appears as unadulterated kitsch. Instead of indulging in utopianism, rather than proclaiming an alleged commonality that would exist a priori to the hostile conditions of the postmodern workplace, a political project has to reflect how exactly one mode of production is superseded by another, how the division of labour is altered, and how the understanding of what constitutes fulfilling self-activity is redefined.

In the same way that the concept of proletarian solidarity was rising against the fragmentation and segmentation of the worker's subjectivity at the assembly line, an upgraded version is to be developed, which would be able to resist the new social division of labour in post-industrial production or even propagate a new workerism of the creative industries--a concept of collaboration, as a refusal of co-operation, based on the experience that the only thing we have in common might be the fact that we have nothing in common.

(Nietzsche's concept of negation, affirmation of the affirmation)

The concept of *imaginary property* is situated at the crossing of two axes: images on the one hand and, on the other, an image production that becomes increasingly a matter of proprietarization, since the expansion of capitalist accumulation towards image production is no longer limited to the frontiers of certain media or technologies (like film industry), but sets out to colonize the entire realm of the imagination. This axis intersects with a process of acceleration, in which the very notion of property itself becomes more and more a matter of the imagination (as we experience it today in the crisis of education).

In terms of the division of labour, that means that the real appropriation, the relation of the labourer to the means of production, by which the transformation of nature is undertaken, needs to be understood as an over-appropriation of the real (the production of images), while the relations of production, the exercise of economic ownership, the control of the access to the means of production become more and more imaginary or, in other words: indiscernible in terms of what is and what is not real.

In the field of design we encounter the possibility of virtually undoing the separation between intellectual and manual labour. It is not only because design may be situated in a grey zone between theory and practice. Rather, it is because of the double role that characterizes design in its intrinsic relation to both the technical and social divisions of labour, which are both subject to processes of design as well as formative of the very work of the designer. And this is by no means about an omnipresence and omnipotence of design; on the contrary.

## Proposal

At the end of this very preliminary collection of material and associated thoughts, here is a concrete proposal:

The question of a new division of labour needs to be addressed at once both in a radically practical as well as in a radically theoretical manner. A framework needs to be invented that can facilitate a wide range of experiments from research to campaigning. It could be exemplified by a "design-union", which would also be a think-tank for the future of self-organization in the creative industries directly connected to an organizing campaign. It is about designing a union and at the same time about starting a union for designers.