

# Smith, Marx and Alienation

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There has always been a tendency among non-Marxists to ignore the specificity of Marx's perceptions in the realm of political economy, and to reduce them instead to similar but antecedent ideas that might be found in Adam Smith or David Ricardo. Economist Paul Samuelson expressed this tendency in the most blatant, if deliberately provocative, manner when he referred to Marx as a "minor post-Ricardian".

The problem with this tendency is that it misses the leap that Marx made over his predecessors, and hence seriously misinterprets him. The classic case of such misinterpretation is Marx's theory of value, which is erroneously taken to be no different from that of David Ricardo (an error that informs Samuelson's characterization of Marx). An analogous error is also committed with regard to Marx's views on alienation.

Adam Smith it would be recalled had underscored the profound significance of the division of labour both in society at large and also inside the factory. As regards the latter, he had given the famous example of the pin factory where the work of manufacturing pins was broken down into a number of separate activities and different workers were assigned these different activities; as a result there was an enormous increase in productivity per worker. Smith had held such productivity increase, and the ratio in which the total labour force was divided into "unproductive workers" (such as domestic servants) and "productive workers" (who produced surplus value), as the two key factors that determined the increase in the wealth of nations.

But having emphasized the role of the division of labour in bringing about economic progress, in the sense of enhancing the "wealth of nations", Smith went on to highlight the fact that such specialization tended to cause "mental mutilation" of the workers, since each of them was confined to performing a single repetitive task. It is worth quoting Smith here in full:

"The man whose whole life is spent in performing a few simple operations, of which the effects are perhaps always the same, or very nearly the same, has no occasion to exert his understanding or to exercise his invention in finding out expedients for removing difficulties which never occur. He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become. 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... 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 government takes some pains to prevent it."

While this view of Smith no doubt captures an important aspect of capitalist production, an aspect that many Marxists have also written about and that was tellingly captured in Charlie Chaplin's film *Modern Times*, it is also often held to be the precursor of Marx's theory of "alienation" and to contain the gist of the latter. This latter claim however is erroneous and misleading, notwithstanding the insights contained in Smith's own remarks.

Smith wanted the "governments" in "civilized societies" to prevent this torpor of mind that befell the laboring poor, as the necessary complement to a nation's economic progress. Pre-

Marxian communists like Proudhon too had been exercised by the adverse consequence of division of labour, and expressed themselves on how to overcome this torpor. Marx had summarized Proudhon's view on this in *The Poverty of Philosophy* in the following words:

"M.Proudhon ...proposes to the worker that he make not only the twelfth part of a pin, but successively all twelve parts of it. The worker would thus come to know and realize the pin. This is M.Proudhon's synthetic labour...he can think of nothing better than to take us back to the journeyman or, at most, to the master-craftsman of the Middle Ages."

Thus alienation, as Smith or even Proudhon saw it, did not require the transcendence of capitalism for overcoming it (this notwithstanding the fact that Proudhon himself was a communist). Marx's understanding of alienation, though not negating the perception that Smith, and following him Proudhon, had put forward, was nonetheless completely different from this; and overcoming it did require a transcendence of capitalism.

In Smith it was only the workers who were alienated in this manner. But in Marx alienation was a universal characteristic of the system, affecting everybody, not just the workers but the capitalists as well. And the universality of alienation characterizing the system meant that it could not be overcome within the system itself; it necessarily required a transcendence of the system.

Alienation was immanent in the commodity form itself. A commodity is of course both a use-value and an exchange value; but it is not a use value for the producer. While for the buyer it is both an exchange value, representing a certain sum of money, and a use-value, with certain physical and chemical properties which cater to his requirements, for the seller it is only an exchange value, only a certain sum of money. The physical and chemical properties of the commodity are of no use to him personally.

This is a basic point of difference between Marxian political economy and "mainstream" bourgeois political economy, since the latter is founded upon the presumption that the commodity that is exchanged for money between the seller and the buyer constitutes a use-value for both (apart of course from being an exchange value for both). But if the commodity is only an exchange value, not a use value, for the producer, then the producer cannot ever simply withdraw from the market and consume his own commodity. Come hell or high weather he must sell it for a certain sum of money; if he cannot sell then he is doomed, unless he has some cash reserves to fall back upon.

Since all sellers know this, building such reserves by enlarging the business at the expense of rivals becomes essential for each. Competition in other words introduces a Darwinian struggle among commodity producers; and this carries over into capitalism, which is nothing else but generalized commodity production (where labour-power itself has become a commodity). It is this Darwinian struggle which underlies the drive for capital accumulation and for introducing technological progress.

What this means is that it is not just the workers who have to compete against one another for employment in a world characterized by unemployment (i.e. by the perennial presence of a reserve army of labour), but the capitalists too have to compete against one another. In short, all participants in this system have to play out particular roles, whether they like it or not; for if they do not then they fall by the wayside. Each of them can retain his or her position within the system, no matter whether that position entails being an exploiter or one who is exploited, only by playing a certain role, acting and behaving in a particular manner. Each individual participant in the system appears to have "agency" in the sense of being apparently free to do what he or she chooses to do; but in fact this appearance is

deceptive because the mode of his or her action is determined by his or her position within the system and the role this enjoins upon him or her. It is noteworthy that Marx called the capitalist “capital personified”, i.e. the immanent tendencies of the system work themselves out inter alia through the nominal “agency” of the capitalist (as indeed of the workers).

Capitalism in other words is not just an exploitative system; it is not just an anarchic system where the aggregate outcome of the actions of individuals turns out to be different from what they intended; it is also, additionally, a “spontaneous” system, where the mode of acting on the part of the individuals itself is determined not by their volition but is forced upon them by the position they occupy within the system.

Alienation under capitalism is basically linked to this, i.e. to the fact that the actions of individuals are not based on their own volition but derive from the coercive logic of the system. The capitalist accumulates not because he likes to but because he has no other option within the logic of the system if he is to avoid falling by the wayside. The workers obey orders because if they did not they would be sacked and fall by the wayside. Technological progress is introduced because if a capitalist with access to new technology did not introduce it, then somebody else would; and the first capitalist would get outcompeted and fall by the wayside. It is this coercion that is alienating, the fact that nominal agency does not entail authentic agency, but is merely the mediation through which the immanent logic of the system works itself out.

This spontaneity however is precisely what is challenged by the workers through “combinations” that increasingly take on a political complexion (with the help of theory brought from “outside”). Such combinations in other words constitute steps to overcome the alienation imposed by the system upon the workers. But the immanent tendencies of the system (e.g. the tendency towards centralization of capital, its formation into larger and larger blocks), always act to thwart or roll back these efforts towards overcoming alienation within the system itself.

The fact that globalization of capital which is an expression of the highest level of centralization reached so far has served to undermine the trade union movements all over the capitalist world, and with it the Left political movement, is only a confirmation of this assertion. From this it follows that the overcoming alienation as understood by Marx is not possible within the system itself; it is possible only through its transcendence. This fact only underscores the basic difference between the Smithian understanding and the Marxian understanding of alienation.

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