

DIVISION OF LABOR

By John Zerzan

Di-vi-sion of la-bor n. 1. the breakdown into specific, circumscribed tasks for maximum efficiency of output which constitutes manufacture; cardinal aspect of production. 2. the fragmenting or reduction of human activity into separated toil that is the practical root of alienation; that basic specialization which makes civilization appear and develop.

The relative wholeness of pre-civilized life was first and foremost an absence of the narrowing, confining separation of people into differentiated roles and functions. The foundation of our shrinkage of experience and powerlessness in the face of the reign of expertise, felt so acutely today, is the division of labor. It is hardly accidental that key ideologues of civilization have striven mightily to valorize it. In Plato's "Republic", for example, we are instructed that the origin of the state lies in that "natural" inequality of humanity that is embodied in the division of labor. Durkheim celebrated a fractionated, unequal world by divining that the touchstone of "human solidarity," its essential moral value is—you guessed it. Before him, according to Franz Borkenau, it was a great increase in division of labor occurring around 1600 that introduced the abstract category of work, which may be said to underlie, in turn, the whole modern, Cartesian notion that our bodily existence is merely an object of our (abstract) consciousness.

In the first sentence of "The Wealth of Nations" (1776), Adam Smith foresaw the essence of industrialism by determining that division of labor represents a qualitative increase in productivity. Twenty years later Schiller recognized that division of labor was producing a society in which its members were unable to develop their humanity. Marx could see both sides: "as a result of division of labor," the worker is "reduced to the condition of a machine." But decisive was Marx's worship of the fullness of production as essential to human liberation. The immiseration of humanity along the road of capital's development he saw as a necessary evil.

Marxism cannot escape the determining imprint of this decision in favor of division of labor, and its major voices certainly reflect this acceptance. Lukacs, for instance, chose to ignore it, seeing only the "reifying effects of the dominant

commodity form" in his attention to the problem of proletarian consciousness. E.P. Thompson realized that with the factory system, "the character-structure of the rebellious pre-industrial labourer or artisan was violently recast into that of the submissive individual worker." But he devoted amazingly little attention to division of labor, the central mechanism by which this transformation was achieved. Marcuse tried to conceptualize a civilization without repression, while amply demonstrating the incompatibility of the two. In bowing to the "naturalness" inherent in division of labor, he judged that the "rational exercise of authority" and the "advancement of the whole" depend upon it-while a few pages later (in *Eros and Civilization*) granting that one's "labor becomes the more alien the more specialized the division of labor becomes."

Ellul understood how "the sharp knife of specialization has passed like a razor into the living flesh," how division of labor causes the ignorance of a "closed universe" cutting off the subject from others and from nature. Similarly did Horkheimer sum up the debilitation: "thus, for all their activity individuals are becoming more passive; for all their power over nature they are becoming more powerless in relation to society and themselves." Along these lines, Foucault emphasized productivity as the fundamental contemporary repression.

But recent Marxian thought continues in the trap of having, ultimately, to elevate division of labor for the sake of technological progress. Braverman's in many ways excellent *Labor and Monopoly Capital* explores the degradation of work, but sees it as mainly a problem of loss of "will and ambition to wrest control of production from capitalist hands." And Schwabbe's *Psychosocial Consequences of Natural and Alienated Labor* is dedicated to the ending of all domination in production and projects a self-management of production. The reason, obviously, that he ignores division of labor is that it is inherent in production; he does not see that it is nonsense to speak of liberation and production in the same breath.

The tendency of division of labor has always been the forced labor of the interchangeable cog in an increasingly autonomous, impervious-to-desire apparatus. The barbarism of modern times is still the enslavement to technology, that is to say, to division of labor. "Specialization," wrote Giedion, "goes on without respite," and today more than ever can we see and feel the barren, de-eroticized world it has brought us to. Robinson Jeffers decided, "I don't think

industrial civilization is worth the distortion of human nature, and the meanness and loss of contact with the earth, that it entails.

Meanwhile, the continuing myths of the "neutrality" and "inevitability" of technological development are crucial to fitting everyone to the yoke of division of labor. Those who oppose domination while defending its core principle are the perpetrators of our captivity. Consider Guattari, that radical post-structuralist, who finds that desire and dreams are quite possible "even in a society with highly developed industry and highly developed public information services, etc." Our advanced French opponent of alienation scoffs at the naive who detect the "essential wickedness of industrial societies," but does offer the prescription that "the whole attitude of specialists needs questioning." Not the existence of specialists, of course, merely their "attitudes."

To the question, "How much division of labor should we jettison?" returns, I believe, the answer, "How much wholeness for ourselves and the planet do we want?"