

Full Length Research Paper

Labour exploitation and division of labour: A meta-analysis of divergent ideological perspectives

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Division of labour has been acknowledged and praised by conservatives as the source of wealth to nations, without considering its exploitative effects on labour. Conversely, social progressives believed that division of labour is inhuman and demeaning in nature, particularly towards labour. The authors of this paper harmonises more with the social counteractions that, division of labour is a form of capitalistic labour exploitation, in the general capitalistic labour relations and, postulate certain ameliorating mechanisms to counter the lopsided effects of division of labour in the workplace. The aims of the paper are to provide an intellectual discourse on the phenomena of labour exploitation and division of labour, in addition to examine divergent social-economic ideological perspectives, and to pay particular attention to their impact on people in the workplace. The paper is a meta-analytical study, which relied on secondary data. It is a qualitative study that based on conceptual and philosophical analysis, theory building and “emic” perspective (author’s viewpoints).

Key words: Accumulation, capital sharing, division of labour, exploitation, industrial humanism, production.

INTRODUCTION

Capitalistic division of labour in most societies and especially in recent business environment is hugely complicated. The way jobs are dispensed to a particular worker and the manner or reason for such an assignment is also multifaceted (Ukpere, 2010:54). Economic scrutiny has a tendency of accepting division of labour as a product of economic and social relations by explaining it in terms of allocation of each individual to particular jobs according to an individual's inclination and dexterity (or according to an expertise acquired through investment in 'human capital') (Adewumi, 2007:56). The inputs and efforts of workers tend to be ignored and incorporated under technology, which is assumed to evolve superficially as a technical advancement (Miles, 1987; Dowd, 2002; Adewumi, 2007). Fine (1982:35 also cited in Ukpere, 2010:55) reiterated:

“Economics has become oblivious to the fate of workers in the jobs that they undertake and the

division of labour is taken for granted as a desirable source of increased productivity and growth”.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The above discussion led to the following research questions:

- What is the functional relationship between labour exploitation and division of labour?
- What are the mechanisms to ameliorate probable distinction between division of labour and labour exploitation?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The following are the objectives of this research:

- (a) To provide an intellectual discourse on the phenomena of labour exploitation and division of labour.
- (b) To examine divergent social-economic ideological perspectives, and to pay particular attention to their impact on people in the workplace.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The paper is a meta-analytical study, which relied on secondary data. It is a qualitative study that is based on conceptual and philosophical analysis, theory building and “emic” perspective (author’s viewpoints). The research also made use of exploratory methodology. Exploratory studies are typically conducted for the following reasons:

- (a) To satisfy the researcher’s curiosity and desire for better understanding.
- (b) To test the feasibility of undertaking on more extensive studies.
- (c) To develop the method to be employed in any subsequent study.
- (d) To explicate the central concepts and constructs of a study.
- (e) To determine priority for future research.
- (f) To develop a new hypothesis about an existing phenomenon.

In their view, Selltiz et al. (1965, cited in Babbie et al., 2007) emphasized three methods by means of which exploratory research may be conducted:

- (1) A review of the related social science and other pertinent literatures.
- (2) A survey of people who have particular experience of the problem to be studied.
- (3) An analysis of ‘insight stimulating’ examples.

Exploratory studies usually lead to insight and comprehension rather than the collection of detailed, accurate and replicable data. Since the paper is poised to analyze divergent views, it was necessary to utilize the exploratory method. It was necessary to follow open and flexible research strategies and to utilize methods such as detailed literature reviews, views of experts and authorities in the area of inquest, which has led to insight and comprehension. Exploratory and descriptive methodology was adopted because the research was not an empirical study. Being a non-empirical study, the research placed more emphasis on philosophical analysis, conceptual analysis and theory building/literature review. Hence, the research was not based on any given sample of the universal population, less control was exercised and existing data on related topics were employed.

The unique contributions of the paper

This paper has contributed within the social economic domain by analysing the functional relationship between division of labour and labour exploitation based on divergent views. This has contributed to literatures relating to division of labour and pertinent issues revolving around labour exploitation. Also, the suggestions made in this treatise could help to create an empowered workforce that will be willing to contribute their best to organisations.

Limitations of the research and future research direction

Several literatures on this topic were non-empirical, which was a reason why the author adopted a meta-analytical cum exploratory

study. Hence, a qualitative research method was utilised. However, in future, potential researchers should explore the possibility to conduct an empirical study of the topic. Also further research may be done to ascertain how the suggested ameliorating mechanisms could help to mitigate the burdens of labour exploitation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conservative contentions

The celebrated work of Adam Smith (1776 cited in Stoner and Freeman, 1992:312; also see Boonzaier, 2001:18) on ‘division of labour’, has been considered as a major step in the productive and optimal utilisation of human resources. Adam Smith (1850, cited in Hackman and Oldham, 1980:47; Giddens, 1993: 493; Boonzaier, 2001:18) presented one of the clearest and oldest illustrations of the application of division of labour. While analysing the pin-making process in his famous writings, ‘Wealth of Nation’ (WN), Smith explained: “A person working alone could perhaps make twenty pins per day. But by breaking down the task into a number of simple operations, however, ten workers carrying out specialised job in collaboration with one another could produce 48,000 pins per day. The rate of production per worker, in other words, is increased from 20 to 4800 pins, each specialist operator producing 240 times as much as he or she was working in isolation”. Thus, Smith has suggested that the increase in productivity is itself a result of three processes: an increased dexterity that accompanies the confinement of workers to a specialised task, a saving of time for workers from passing from one tool to another and the possibility for the creation and introduction of technology that the division of labour provokes.

Charles Babbage (the inventor of the earliest form of computer) subsequently incorporated Smith’s thought of efficient labour utilisation into his analysis. According to Babbage (1835, cited in Giddens, 1993:493), “Technological progress in production can be measured by the degree to which the tasks of each worker are simplified and integrated with those of other workers. This process reduces the price employers have to pay for hiring workers and the time needed to learn each job, as well as weakening the workers’ bargaining power and thus keep wage costs down”.

Taylorism went further to explicate how industrial processes could be broken down into simple operations that could be precisely timed and organised (Worsfold, 2004:1). Taylor was only concerned with improving industrial efficiency, but gave little consideration to how products should be marketed. ‘Mass production necessitates mass markets’ and the industrialist, Henry Ford, was among the first to take notice of this and exploited its possibilities. Fordism was designated to the system of mass production and tied to the cultivation of mass markets, as enunciated by Henry Ford. The industrial mogul, Henry Ford, established his first plant at

Highland Park, Michigan, in 1913 and made only one product- the Model T Ford- thereby allowing the introduction of specialised tools and machinery that was designed for speed, precision and simplicity of operation.

The most spectacular innovation of Ford was the construction of a 'moving assembly line', which was inspired by Chicago slaughterhouses, where animals were disassembled section-by-section on a moving line. Each worker on Ford's assembly line had a specific task, such as fitting the right-side door handles, while the car bodies moved along the line. The result of this system was astronomical, since prior to 1929, when production of the model T ceased, fifteen million cars were made and 80 percent of the cars in the world were registered in the United States of America (Giddens, 1993:494).

Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist in his writing towards the end of the 19th century, believed that the greater the division of labour, the more people would have to depend on each other, and the closer they would become (Hawthorn, 1981:33) . Thus, Smith and his associates, without considering the negative effect of this system on labour, believed that division of labour leads to efficiency and growth, thereby tracing the wealth of the nation to the interaction between a growing division of labour and the scope of market relations.

Social progressive counteractions

Contrary to the abovementioned views, Marx (1818-83, cited in Hawthorn, 1981:33) contended that:

"Division of labour impoverishes the worker and makes him a machine...for as soon as labour is distributed, each man has a particular exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape".

It was on the above grounds that Marx (1818, cited in Fine, 1982:40) went further to rebuff Smith and his cronies: "Now it is quite possible to imagine, with Adams Smith that the difference between the above social division of labour and the division in manufacture, is merely subjective, exists for the observer who in the case of manufacture can see at a glance all the numerous operations being performed on one spot, while... the spreading-out of the work over great areas and the great number of people employed in each branch of labour obscured the connection. But what is it that forms the bond between the independent labour of the cattle-breeder, the tanner and the shoemaker? It is the fact that their respective products are commodities. What, on the other hand, characterises the division of labour in manufacture? It is the fact that the specialised worker produces no commodities". Therefore, since the system of division of labour in the production process may be gratifying to the capitalists in their respective factories, the social organisation of division of labour is intolerable

in its totality. Toward this, Marx (1845, cited in Fine, 1982:41) opined: "division within the workshop implies the undisputed authority of the capitalist over the workers, who are merely members of the total mechanism, which belong to him". Thus, in Marx's view, the division of labour, under a capitalist mode of production, leads to incessant exploitation of the working class.

The capitalist system of division of labour leads to the creation of surplus value through productivity increases at deplorable wages, which reduces the value of labour (Marx, Cap.v1, 1976:33-4). According to Marx (1844, cited in Greaves, 1975:212), "The source of man's immediate difficulty is the division of labour. Division of labour was the very essence of all that was wrong with the world. It is contrary to man's real essence".

The effect of division of labour on the working class is the creation of a hierarchy of skills and wages in correspondence to the increasing specialised tasks that are undertaken. In many instances, however, the detailed labour becomes increasingly simple even if certain dexterity is gained with practice. Accordingly, hand-in-hand with the creation of skilled specialised labour, there is an overwhelming amount of simple, unskilled jobs that are formed to which a large section of the working class is assigned (Worsfold, 2004:1). Marx traced the introduction of machinery that eroded jobs to the increasing division of labour and went further to show the extent to which machinery production utilises the division of labour to weaken the role of workers in the field of production.

According to Marx (Cap.v1, 1976:548), "whereas manufacture adopted existing methods of production and transformed them through the utilization of the co-operation and division of labour, machinery took on much greater significance and transformed the role played by labour as a whole in the production process. In manufacture, the division of labour brings a range of specialist tools for the workman to use in his detailed task. Machinery production brings the displacement of the worker from the handling of his own tools and instead he becomes a tool of the machine. He becomes robbed even of the simple and specialised task that has been left by the manufacture. The pace of the machine dictates the pace of work. In short, machinery seizes the division of labour created by manufacture, intensifies it and transforms it into a division of tasks between the parts of the machine to which labour becomes an appendage".

In that case, it is no longer the labourer that employs the means of production, but it is the means of production that employs the labourer, since labour has taken the position as one of the limbs of the machine, which he has created (Leatt et al., 1987:204; Adewumi, 2007:056). The implication of this is that, not only will labour continue to be inferior to capital economically, but it will also be subordinated to capital technically. Thus, capitalist division of labour is the creation of a class of

wage-labourers dispossessed of means of production and compelled to the side of the machine (Marx v1, 1976; Fine, 1982; Leatt et al., 1987; Miles, 1987).

Marx sees the introduction of machinery (a by-product of division of labour) as a stage in the development of capitalism and accentuated that as manufacture compelled different capitalists to accumulate, this force was strengthened with the introduction of machinery that necessitates huge funding costs, which was once beyond the power of raising funds through savings and capital accumulation. The reorganisation of capital through liquidation, acquisition and amalgamation/merger, became the new trend and credit system through banking, which was utilised as another instrument of such accumulation (Fine, 1882:45; Ukpere, 2010b: 473) . Thus, the greatest fillip to production by huge automation is only achieved by eradicating the possibility for competition from capitals, which continued to be realised through backward methods (retrenchment, downsizing, re-engineering and international division of labour) but remain profitable through imposing long working hours and low wages (Fine, 1982; Slabbert, 1996; Klein, 2001).

Moreover, as the division of labour intensified, the source of value and surplus value become more deeply obscured. Firstly, increasing productivity is associated with the power of collective labour organised in co-operation with division of labour that mars the skills of many workers. There is nothing exclusive to capitalism in the power of collective labour, as the construction of the pyramids illustrates. Nevertheless, capitalism took this great innovation of humankind to the highest point, owing to the fact that wage-labour makes collective labour freely available (Jeannot, 2010:228). Therefore, it is capital that increasingly appears to be the source of wealth, since what is a gain for the productive power of capital through collective labour, is a loss to the labourer in terms of dilapidated skills, functions and control. With the growing use of fixed and constant capital and the displacement of the labourer by machine, the significance of labour, as a source of value is increasingly denied, and regarded as one source of value amongst other things (Marx, Cap.v1, 1979:35; Jeannot, 2010:227). Hence, this is how division of labour in production obscures the role of labour in the production of value and surplus value under capitalism. In the social division of labour, the concealment is reinforced. The confinement of each worker to a particular task, within a particular sector, renders impossible a direct vision of the performance of surplus labour. Therefore, as the social division of labour develops, the source of profit in surplus labour will continue to be less transparent (Adewumi, 2007:056).

Adam Smith himself, even later wrote, with discernment, about the intellectual degradation of the worker in a society in which the division of labour has proceeded exceedingly far. Smith (1776, cited in Heilbroner, 2002:5) remarked: "for by comparison with the alert intelligence of the husbandman, the specialised

worker generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human being to become".

Smith went further to assert that there is a tendency in commercial society, owing to advanced division of labour, to corrupt the 'intellectual, social and martial virtues' of its citizens (WN V.i.f.51 cited in Alvey, 1998:1433) . This 'leprosy' (division of labour) is so great a public evil that it leaves people 'mutilated' and deformed in their character (WN V.i.f.60-1, cited in Alvey, 1998:1433) . Therefore, increasing division of labour (specialisation) narrows the range of choice of ways of making a livelihood for workers (Pasricha, 2005:233). The outcome of division of labour is the lowering of value (in terms of dexterity and remuneration) of individual workers (Hooker, 1999:2). By way of increasing division of labour, workers' activities become more and more narrow and monotonous and instead of developing man's creative powers, it evaporates it, degenerating people into 'idiocy' and 'cretinism' (Leatt et al., 1987:204; Heilbroner, 2002:5). It is not a hidden fact that highly monotonous job shrinks workers' alertness decreases their sensitivity to sensory input and in many cases, impairs their muscular co-ordination. Consequently, simple and habitual, non-challenging work is responsible for extraordinary job dissatisfaction, fatigue, boredom, monotony and high rates of labour turnover, which is part of the dysfunctional aspect of industrial psychology and, at the same time, very much peculiar to capitalism (Kumar, 2000:80; Boonzaier, 2001:20).

It may be easy to show how the growing international division of labour helps to boost world economic performance, while at the same time ignoring its effect on the working class, namely the distribution of this performance. In this regard, Martin and Schumann, (1997:231) opined:

"World market integration is economically very efficient. But, in the absence of state intervention, the global economic machine (division of labour) is anything but efficient in distributing the wealth so produced; the number of losers far exceeds the number of winners".

Division of labour introduces inequality between occupations and generates disunity amongst workers, which results in social inequality that divides society into haves and have-nots, rulers and the ruled, exploiters and exploited (Leatt et al., 1987:205). In Marx's view, division of labour pits a man against his fellow man; creates class differences and destroys the unity of the human race (Greaves, 1975:212-3).

ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

In conclusion, division of labour, a subset of capitalistic labour relations, may be surmised as one form of capital

exploitation of labour, both locally and globally. As the name implies, it is actually the multiplication (×) of capital and the total division (÷) or fragmentation of labour. The rapid automation of the workplace that has eroded jobs, the growing outsourcing of labour that has rendered many workers redundant and, as such, retrenched, the unabated migratory character of transnational corporations, the undemocratic work atmosphere and the almost total concealment of the efforts of labour around the world, which is the source of renewed discontentment among workers, may be attributed to the growing global division of labour. Thus, as elucidated above, the author of this paper harmonises with progressive social counteractions, that division of labour is a form of capitalistic labour exploitation, in the general capitalistic labour relations and, postulates ameliorating mechanisms, such as intensive division of profits, accelerated capital sharing, increasing labour directors, effective collective bargaining and industrial humanism as counter-forces to the lopsided effects of division of labour in the workplace.

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