

Die Adam Smith probleme: Karl Polanyi on Smith's division of labour

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Abstract. The concept of the division of labour is comprehensively discussed in Adam Smith's classic work, *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), and it holds a key function in his theory of economic development. As a rigorous critique of liberalism, Karl Polanyi does not make use of this socio-economic concept very much in his works, while he conveys Smith's general understanding throughout *The Great Transformation* (1944). This calls for a review of the two scholars use and perception of the concept of the division of labour. In retrospect, this study compares the analytical frameworks of Smith and Polanyi based upon their views on the division of labour and tries to find affinities in their methodologies and approaches to economic phenomena.

Keywords: Division of labour; economic liberalism; Adam Smith; social change; Karl Polanyi.

[es] *Die Adam Smith probleme*: Karl Polanyi sobre la división del trabajo de Smith

Resumen. El concepto de división del trabajo es ampliamente analizado en la obra clásica de Adam Smith, *La riqueza de las naciones* (1776), y tiene una función clave en su teoría del desarrollo económico. Como crítico del liberalismo, Karl Polanyi no hace mucho uso de este concepto socioeconómico en sus obras, aunque transmite la concepción general de Smith a lo largo de *La Gran Transformación* (1944). Por ello, es necesario realizar una revisión del uso y percepción por parte de ambos autores del concepto de división del trabajo. Este estudio compara los marcos analíticos de Smith y Polanyi en relación a sus puntos de vista sobre la división del trabajo y trata de encontrar afinidades en sus metodologías y enfoques de los fenómenos económicos.

Palabras clave: división del trabajo; liberalismo económico; Adam Smith; cambio social; Karl Polanyi.

[pt] *Die Adam Smith probleme*: Karl Polanyi sobre a divisão do trabalho de Smith

Resumo. O conceito de divisão do trabalho é amplamente discutido na obra clássica de Adam Smith, *A Riqueza das Nações* (1776), e tem uma função fundamental em sua teoria do desenvolvimento econômico. Como uma crítica rigorosa do liberalismo, Karl Polanyi não faz muito uso desse conceito socioeconômico em suas obras, enquanto transmite o entendimento geral de Smith ao longo de *A Grande Transformação* (1944). Isso exige uma revisão do uso e percepção dos dois estudiosos do conceito de divisão do trabalho. Em retrospectiva, este estudo compara os arcabouços analíticos de Smith e Polanyi a partir de suas visões sobre a divisão do trabalho e tenta encontrar afinidades em suas metodologias e abordagens dos fenômenos econômicos.

Palavras-chave: Divisão do trabalho; liberalismo econômico; Adam Smith; mudança social; Karl Polanyi.

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1. Introduction

Before Adam Smith, ancient Greeks, medieval Islamic scholastics, and mercantilists were all aware of societal importance of the social division of labour (Wiles, 1974: 69; Hosseini, 1998). Rashid (1986: 295) claims that Smith's well-known case of the pin factory example was already stated in the French *Encyclopedie*. Smith is supposed to take both the example and the idea of gains from the division of labour from this source. Yet, with the *Wealth of Nations* in 1776, Smith envisioned a renewed version by building his theories of growth and social change on the concept. As in the case of *Das Adam Smith Problem* (Montes, 2003; Tribe, 2008), Smith's vision and handling of the division of labour leads to a variety of conflicting interpretations (See Rosenberg, 1965; Meek and Skinner, 1973; Rashid, 1986). It appears in a dual use throughout his masterpiece as technical and social perspectives.

Technical division of labour became an inspiration to scale economies and increasing returns approach in economics; while social division remained, with its teleological essence, the magic formula of political economy that constructs order in a society. The concept has rarely been used exclusively and never given such a position in the history of economic thought as in Smith thereafter. It lost its attractiveness and marginalized to sociological area (Barnes, 1966; Hill, 2007).

For Polanyi, nineteenth-century civilization owed much to Smith vis-à-vis the birth and advance of self-regulating market system. In chapter four of *The Great Transformation*, "Societies and Economic Systems," Polanyi cites Adam Smith when condemning the system of market economy. Relying on pre-capitalist societies, Polanyi confronts Smith's alleged instinct of economic gain. For him, Smith's understanding of the division of labour, in this account, was inaccurate for primitive man's so called axiomatic self-interest (Polanyi, 1944, 45-47). Polanyi's view for one thing can be thought as a response to the Austrian School of his time. For Özveren (2007: 549), his main point was not Smith's personal ideas, but his legacy inherited by this school.

The concept of the division of labour is central to Smithian theory of exchange and economic growth in Book I and Book II of the *Wealth of Nations*. Polanyi perceives Smith as societal and realist philosopher of his time. With this seemingly paradoxical condition in mind, one problem is to properly address Polanyi's critique to Smith. This study compares the views of Smith and Polanyi on the division of labour and tries to find affinities between two scholars. By this, we aim to contribute Smith scholarship from a societal perspective. The paper is composed of five sections. Second and third sections conveys, respectively, Smith's and Polanyi's visions of the division of labour. Fourth section gives a comparison, and the last section summarizes basic affinities and differences.

2. Reconciling "two views of the division of labour"

Meek and Skinner (1973) detect three versions of the division of labour in his works: (1) student notes based on 1762-3 and 1763-4 *Glasgow Lectures* published by Cannan (1896); (2) *Early Draft of The Wealth of Nations*; (3) the final edition of *the Wealth of Nations*. Early draft is said to be a revised version of the economic part of Smith's moral philosophy lectures at Glasgow. Early draft does not include the discussion of the dependence of the division of labour on market extent. However, when working on the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith might have realized the importance of market extent and transportation costs. His comparison of sea and land transportation illustrates their relative effects on the division of labour about the Scottish Highlands. At the end, Smith reached a conclusion that the division of labour was dependent upon the extent of the market (Meek and Skinner, 1973: 1103). However, there were also some points that Smith did not develop and omitted in the final edition. Our comparison grounds on the final edition.

The Wealth of Nations begins with examination of the division of labour in the very first chapter titled "Of the Division of Labour" (Smith, 1776: 9). After stating the ways in which the division of labour increases the productive forces of labour, Smith gives illuminating instance of pin production which was highly renowned among political economists of his time. Dexterity, time-saving, and invention are the channels through which the division of labour exerts its benefits for the economy of a nation in micro level. Smith's theory of economic development is based firstly and as a pre-condition on the division of labour and only later to other factors like prolific employment of capital stock, and market extent (Smith, 1776: 38).

Division of labour, in accordance with his depiction of self-interested man, originates from human nature. In Chapter II of Book I "Of the Principle Which Gives Occasion to the Division of Labour" it is stated that:

This division of labour, from which so many advantages are derived, is not originally the effect of any human wisdom, which foresees and intends that general opulence to which it gives occasion. It is the necessary, though slow, and gradual, consequence of a certain propensity in human nature, which has in view no such extensive utility; the propensity to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another (Smith, 1776: 22).

After establishing the roots of the division of labour on human nature, Smith extends his logical examination to market exchange and international trade. On the way, Smith passes from technical division of labour to social division of labour. Throughout *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith draws on both types, yet technical division of labour is only employed in Book I and Book II. Afterwards, when Smith refers to the division of labour, it is indeed social division of labour.

Smith thinks that commercial system of a nation should be in favor of increasing the productive powers of labour by acceding to foreign trade (Smith, 1776: 539-

567). Thus, commercial system can give occasion to social division of labour and hence development. America had been a proper experimental place for his theory of growth due to vast opportunity in commerce and agriculture (Smith, 1776: 466-468). American colonies, in this regard, have a high potential for growth with the help of agriculture’s high profitability there. The historical background of Europe in this respect is explained in a detailed manner. In Book III, Chapters II and III manage two main causes of Europe’s current situation. One is engrossment of all land by large proprietors after the fall of the Roman Empire. The other factor is the rise of cities and towns as a stimulus for commerce². Moreover, as Smith admits, such a gain from the division of labour is limited to specific subsectors of manufacturing; hence agriculture is not perfectly suitable for this. In sum, the theory of the division of labour links economic growth to social division of labour and market extent.

From this comparison, we can infer that, being aware of the contradiction with pin factory example, the division of labour in fact does not increase total output in

“every instance” (Smith, 1776: 463). Indeed, this fact coincides with the Chinese example. Contrary to English Industrial Revolution that is associated with labour productivity with increased machinery and capital use, China experienced an industrious expansion based on social division of labour till the eighteenth century (Arrighi, 2007). The contradiction of early Chinese experience with his theory of the division of labour is bearing.

With the realistic and historical side of the theory, he did not attribute a transformative role on the division of labour and instead conditioned institutional environment and market extent as further conditions to be explained⁴. Inferiority of British institutions over the Chinese clashes with the theory preset. Based on this dual nature of the concept, it can be asserted that Smith tried to incorporate his static technical division-based analysis of growth dynamics to social division-based international trade theory.

The table below summarizes Smith’s use of the concept in the *Wealth of Nations*.

Table 1. Alternative uses of the division of labour

	technical definition	social definition
Main Advantages	pioneer of scale economies; increasing returns; higher labour productivity	order-establishing employment of sources; producer and consumer advantages
Methodology	growth oriented; introspective and inductive method	policy oriented; historical and institutional method
Application	factory production and economic sectors	rural-urban and international trade; economic systems

Growth-oriented definition is a technical issue. Smith can be thought as one of the first on insistence uniquely on the division of labour in this sense. However, social division of labour by using these two definitions without even an explicit articulation stay as historical. Chinese market economy is assumed by Smith as an application of the policy-oriented approach. His comparative method in later parts of his work is blurred with this problem. Even through the end, Smith insists on negative effects of highly specialized “ordinary employment by technical division of labour as leading to labour alienation (Smith, 1776: 987-988). Considering Smithian frame of political economy “as a branch of the science of a statesman” (Smith, 1776: 537), policy-oriented definition is more amenable to his aim.

Two development projections of Smith led to a contradictory policy in transition to a higher level of civilization. his theory of economic progress, in its essence, is a theory of social change, not limited to the dynamics of the division of labour³. Institutional setting and legislation also count for this aim.

3. Review of Adam Smith in *the Great Transformation*

The Great Transformation (1944) had been written in an epoch of destruction and collapse of the liberal world system. Insistence on economic progress despite individual freedoms and democracy had created suppressive regimes in once-democratic European countries. The bond between economic science and history in the making emerged as a primary case of interest to Polanyi during these years (Block, 2003).

Polanyi maintained a line in his works to support his argument of social embeddedness beginning from early societies to the modern society of the twentieth century (Polanyi, 1947). Technical division of labour or economic development, particularly, had not been a subject for him to write upon since he was not an economist in the proper sense. Hence, at the right time, there emerges a basic dissimilarity between Smith and Polanyi about their approaches to division of labour. From his perspective, the di-

² Smith says that “the great commerce of every civilized society is that carried on between the inhabitants of the town and those of the country” (Smith, 1776: 307).

³ Meek and Skinner (1973) find evidence that Smith discharged the division of labour as a transformative dynamic in his stages theory and omitted through to *The Wealth of Nations* from the *Early Draft*. Only he extensively used the concept in commercial society in which

further progress was told to be contingent upon other instances like institutional setting and legislation.

⁴ Arrighi (2007:58) states that China and Holland holding the highest stage of economic development at the time did not permit further economic expansion. The only way to break out this trap was a change in institutional environment. Therefore, Smith’s illustration of the division of labour is not simply an explanation of the past, but a prediction of the future.

vision of labour was not an economic issue to be discussed in purely economic terms. Its social roots were prior to economic ones.

After establishing the premises of the nineteenth-century liberal system onto four institutions, that is, the international balance of powers, the gold standard, the liberal state and the self-regulating market economy, Polanyi outlined the basic areas of inquiry to better understand the ‘transformation’ of western society since the industrial revolution. Planning to make his reasoning well-grounded, Polanyi discusses economic systems while differentiating market society from previous societies and binding economic systems to social institutions. For this point, Polanyi firstly mentions Smith as the forerunner of ‘Economic Man’ (Polanyi, 1944: 45). Economic liberalism, both before Polanyi and during his time, like in Ludwig von Mises and Walter Lippmann, continued in this fashion, and raised market exchange as the spontaneous social organizer. According to Polanyi, the problematic point in this idea showed its misleading effects on studies of pre-capitalist societies. In other words, markets were thought to be the products of the division of labour and market exchange was a universal mode of economic relations in the market.

For Polanyi, seeking economic motive in the life of primitive man was an economic fallacy. In his view, two pioneers of two distinct disciplines, political economy and political science, Smith and Rousseau, fell into such similar fallacies of economic and political psychologies of early men (Polanyi, 1944: 46). Polanyi sees the tradition of Smithian liberalism as an “unintended consequence” of his thought⁵. Industrial progress and expansion of the market system in the second half of the eighteenth and through the nineteenth centuries was a milestone for Polanyi about the economic psychology to noticeably take part in economic sphere of the society. It was the great transformation of the western civilization by political reformations. Polanyi pursued a societal approach, in affinity with Smith.

4. Two different narratives with a common concept: social change

Smith’s conception of transition was dependent on long-term division of labour and certain institutional setup shown with a comparison of his “natural” and “unnatural” paths of developmental trajectory. The China-England dichotomy is a source of inspiration for understanding Smith’s institutional and historical perception of the transition. For him, “the natural course of things” would bring increasing division of labour and market economy, or in his own words, commercial society as the highest level of the stages of development. On the other hand, since insti-

tutions and historical parameters mattered, England deviated from the natural path. Beginning from the late Roman period and continuing with the Glorious Revolution of 1688, Europe in general –and England in particular– held a policy favoring unnatural path and the industries of towns against agriculture of the country. Contrary to Smith’s projections, England experienced earlier transition to market economy than China and Holland. As Polanyi put it, although Smith did not make a specific inference from his unnatural path, his projection of natural path produced a counterexample, specifically in China. China did not develop into a commercial society for the next two hundred years. From this two-fold economic theory of transition, we see that his institutionalist precautions came true to show that transition and institutional change are not a natural one-way result but a “socially instituted” process (See Özveren, 2001). So that, the only dynamic of economic growth in Smith, namely the division of labour, in larger-scale and long-term perspective is not valid in Europe, in accordance with Polanyi. His broader description of social change depends on the extent of the market and the institutional factors⁶.

Polanyi’s dynamics were, on the other hand, related to the constitutive processes of the fictitious commodities. To put Polanyi into this picture,

The road to the free market was opened and kept opened by an enormous increase in continuous, centrally organized, and controlled interventionism. To make Adam Smith’s “simple and natural liberty” compatible with the needs of a human society was a most complicated affair. Witness the complexity of the provisions in the innumerable enclosure laws; the amount of bureaucratic control involved in the administration of the New Poor Laws which for the first time since Queen Elizabeth’s reign were effectively supervised by central authority; or the increase in governmental administration entailed in the meritorious task of municipal reform. And yet all these strongholds of governmental interference were erected with a view to the organizing of some simple freedom – such as that of land, labour, or municipal administration (Polanyi, 1944, 146-147).

The division of labour in Smithian economic theory is not a unique force of social change and transition to a higher level of opulence in the long-term. Instead, historical, and institutional confines determine the last word. Özel (2009), being inspired by Polanyi, gives four pre-conditions of the market economy: private ownership, freedom to contract, self-interested individuals, and fictitious commodities of land, labour, and money. Except the making

⁵ “In retrospect it can be said that no misreading of the past ever proved more prophetic of the future” (Polanyi, 1944: 45).

⁶ Polanyi’s neglect of static analysis of economic change based on the division of labour now becomes more meaningful if we consider the fact that even Smith himself abandoned such an exploration after Book II and internalized historical and more realistic approach at the cost of holding a dualist approach.

of self-interested individuals, the three pre-conditions of the market economy are the outcomes of political decisions. 1834 Poor Laws, 1844 Banking Law, and 1846 Abolition of Corn Law established free markets for fictitious commodities of land, labour, and money⁷. These political pronouncements were the institutional backbones of the transition to the liberal system (Polanyi, 1944: 215-216).

Both were aware of the artificial nature of the English origin of market economy in some way. It was unnatural path and dependent on the historical policy of European sovereigns in Smith. For Polanyi, “there was nothing natural about laissez-faire; free markets could never come into being merely by allowing things to take their course” (Polanyi, 1944: 145).

Disembedding of economy from the political and social spheres was the result of market ideology that Smith naively projected. At this plot, Polanyi’s accusation of classical political economists fits the story.

No market economy separated from the political sphere is possible; yet it was such a construction which underlay classical economics since David Ricardo and apart from which its concepts and assumptions were incomprehensible (Polanyi, 1944: 205).

About the division of labour, social critique of economic value is valid for both Smith and Polanyi. Taking social cost approach to the commodity fiction process will give us meaningful glimpses considering Smith’s societal approach manifest thorough the end of *The Wealth of Nations* on the alienation of labour. Objection of Polanyi on land and labour issues are not naïve ecological and romantic sensitivity but a social critique⁸. He would indicate the difference between socially agreeable and not so processes. With the process of fictitious commodities, the social value turns to negative. Since the market economy takes these commodities as basis for reproduction of the system, socially non-acceptable outcome is on the horizon. This mechanism works against society. The one that misses the social value, three fictitious commodities here, is bound to collapse instead of self-regulation and produce double movements in the long-term. Polanyi’s call for regulation in these areas, therefore, shows the priority of social value. At the end, Smith and Polanyi prefer societal approach on long-term division of labour and out-weigh social costs rather than economic value.

Both were in favor of central intervention in some instances for public benefit. For Polanyi, “legislation, planning, industrial tribunals, and guaranteed employment” were the instruments of personal freedom and freedom from hunger (Hejeebu and McCloskey, 1999: 295). At this point Smith converges Smith. Polanyi observed Smith’s position as follows:

Adam Smith did not seem to think so when he urged that direct British rule should replace administration through a chartered company in India. Political rulers, he argued, would have parallel interests with the ruled whose wealth would swell their revenue, while merchant’s interests were naturally antagonistic to those of his customers (Polanyi, 1944: 173).

For Polanyi, economic liberalism of 19th century scholars’ understanding of freedom as just the freedom of private property and free enterprise was a limited view. It merely opposed the reality of society at the end. Only in this manner the meaning of Polanyi’s assertive statement can be understood: “In order to understand German fascism, we must return to Ricardian England” (Polanyi, 1944: 32).

5. Conclusion

It is a prevalent inaccuracy to tie Smith exclusively into modern discussions of rationality and market exchange. As Donald Winch stated, Smith should be held within the context of eighteenth-century wisdoms and attached to his definition of political economy as a branch of the science of a legislator (Winch, 2012). Winch’s research on Catherine the Great of the Russian Empire illustrates the application of Smith’s enlightened sovereign. Especially on taxation, her Russia had been an illuminating example. Smith’s exclusion of the rationalist bias, contrary to widespread belief, and choice of a Newtonian naturalist interpretation of exchange brings him to a more realistic position than many thought. From this viewpoint, Smith’s idea on the place of individuals in societal organization is amenable to Polanyi’s social forms of market conduct as the two, irrespectively of whether plainly or implicitly, nullified rational behavior exaggeration.

Smith did not develop a pure theory of the division of labour as a beneficial factor that would discredit his realistic approach. Rather, he emphasized historical and institutional peculiarities that are not in agreement with his theory of the division of labour. The paradox given at the beginning of the study thus can be solved with their perception of time for change. Smith held both a short-term and long-term view of the division of labour and social change; yet Polanyi was concerned with long-term perspective and social effects.

The table below sketches a brief comparison of the two scholars’ ideas on the division of labour and their approaches.

Polanyi wrote, after *The Great Transformation*, extensively on pre-capitalist societies and their trade patterns. Using highly non-capitalist forms of exchange and trade in these economies, his target became a new track in economics with economy embedded in social life in its cultural facets. To this day, his tradition influenced institutional and heterodox economic thought. He worked to analyze alternative modes of allocation systems. This

⁷ Through the Gold Standard (1821-1914).

⁸ Swaney and Evers (1989) shows Polanyi’s cultural analysis of societies in conformity with the anthropological support.

point, whether consciously or not, leads Polanyi to scale down Smith on production and economic growth issues

and to make Smith's ideas on social interrelations and political economy as an instrument of social welfare.

Table 2. General Comparison of Smith and Polanyi

	Smith	Polanyi
Instrument of analysis	Central position to the theory; Short-term: Technical division of labour; Long-term: Social division of labour	Hardly uses; Long-term: Social division of labour
Dynamics of Change	Economic dynamic: The division of labour	Socio-economic dynamic: Double movement
Evolution of markets and social change	European policy since the Fall of the Roman Empire; favoring unnatural path	Political intervention in Mercantilist state and the political economy; favoring foreign trade
Methodology	Historical, institutional, deductive, and Newtonian	Historical, institutional, and Aristotelian

Lastly, Polanyi's works are a research agenda devoted to economic history and focused on the political and economic origins of his time. With reference to his aim, analysis of market economy is half-done in economic terms. He explicates the transformation of non-market system into a market economy while

commenting heavily on the difference between the two. Polanyi's historical and social perspective still provides an opportunity to build up a general analysis of the economic value determination under social costs in market economy through a Polanyian institutionalism.

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