

## Adam Ferguson and the division of labour\*

—An unpublished essay by Adam Ferguson—

Yasuo Amoh

### Introduction

Adam Ferguson (1723–1816) is well known as the author of *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. This book, particularly his view on the division of labour in it, raised a priority controversy between Ferguson and Adam Smith. Alexander Carlyle said that “Smith had been weak enough to accuse him of Having Borrowd some of his Inventions without owning them. This Ferguson Denied, but own’d he Deriv’d many Notions from a French author and that Smith had been there before him.”<sup>1</sup>

Karl Marx, however, wrote about one hundred years later that as for the division of labour, particularly the recognition of its disadvantages, Smith was a pupil of Ferguson, or Ferguson was a teacher of Smith.<sup>2</sup>

\* I would like to thank the Edinburgh University Library for permitting me to publish Ferguson’s Ms. (Ms. Dc. 1.42.). In transcribing this manuscript, I am deeply indebted to its Sub-Librarian, Dr. J. D. Hall and Professor E. Sawamura of Kochi University.

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Carlyle, *Anecdotes and Characters of the Times*, edited with an introduction by James Kinsley, OUP, 1973, p. 144.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Misère de la philosophie*, 1847, *Marx Engels Werke*, Bd. 4, Ss. 146–147; Do., *Das Kapital*, 1867, Bd. 1, *Marx Engels Werke*, Bd. 23, Ss. 137, 383.

Ferguson's priority in the theory of the division of labour was also asserted by Ferdinand Lassalle, Karl Bücher and Heinrich Waentig.<sup>3</sup> For example, Bücher said as follows: "Adam Smith ist freilich nicht der Urheber jener Lehre (von der Arbeitsteilung). Er entlehnt sie in wesentlichen Punkten dem *Essay on the History of Civil Society* seines Landsmannes Adam Ferguson, welcher 1767 erschienen war."<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, August Oncken denied Marx's view. He argued that Ferguson pirated Smith's ideas on the division of labour, for Smith had treated it earlier than Ferguson in his *Lectures on Justice, Police, Revenue and Arms*.<sup>5</sup>

Since then, this priority controversy has been frequently referred to by many scholars. Some argue Smith's priority, and others Ferguson's. For example, Jacob Viner asserts Smith's priority in his introduction to John Rae's *Life of Adam Smith*. "Here Adam Smith has clear claims to priority as far as British writers are concerned, although according to Marx, who was not acquainted with Smith's contributions to the *Edinburgh Review* in 1755, it was Smith who was taught by Ferguson, rather than the other way around."<sup>6</sup> But Ronald Hamowy denies Oncken's view and concludes that "Ferguson, in dealing with the division of labour, can claim priority over Smith in offering not an economic analysis of the question which was original with neither writer,

<sup>3</sup> August Oncken, Adam Smith und Adam Ferguson, *Zeitschrift für Sozialwissenschaft*, Bd. XII, 1909, Ss. 132-133.

<sup>4</sup> Karl Bücher, *Die Entstehung der Volkswirtschaft*, Erste Sammlung, Tübingen, 1922, S. 304.

<sup>5</sup> A. Oncken, *op. cit.*, S. 136.

<sup>6</sup> Jacob Viner, Guide to John Rae's *Life of Adam Smith*, in J. Rae, *Life of Adam Smith*, Reprints of economic classics, New York, 1965, pp. 35 - 36.

but rather, the first methodical and penetrating sociological analysis, an analysis which was to have far-reaching consequences in intellectual history by contributing substantially to the sociological groundwork of Marxism. It is on this sociological point that the position of Marx and Lassalle, who point to Ferguson as Smith's forerunner, can be vindicated."<sup>7</sup> Recently, R. H. Campbell and Andrew S. Skinner have commented on this problem.<sup>8</sup>

This controversy, however, is unanswerable and fruitless in itself. David Kettler says as follows: "In as close-knit a group as the Scottish philosophers' was, the question of priorities is even more unanswerable than otherwise. They shared so many problems and ideas that, except for a really individual thinker like Hume, the skein of mutual influence cannot be untangled."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, it is uncertain whether Smith reproached Ferguson for his plagiarism. It is still more uncertain whether the point at issue was concerned with the division of labour. Carlyle did not say that Smith's accusation was concerned with the division of labour. Hiroshi Mizuta writes it is a groundless conjecture to argue that it concerns the theory of division of labour.<sup>10</sup>

In this respect, I think that there is a more important problem than a priority controversy, that is, a contrast between their views on the division of labour. We should pay attention to two distinct views on the division of labour in the Scottish enlightenment. Smith's view on it

<sup>7</sup> Ronald Hamowy, Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson, and the Division of Labour, *Economica*, 1968, p. 259.

<sup>8</sup> R. H. Campbell and A. S. Skinner, *Adam Smith*, Groom Helm, 1982.

<sup>9</sup> David Kettler, *The Social and Political Thought of Adam Ferguson*, Ohio State University Press, 1965, pp. 74-75.

<sup>10</sup> Hiroshi Mizuta, *Adam Smith to Gendai* (*Adam Smith and Today*), Tokyo, 1977, pp. 93-94.

has been frequently referred to, and there is no new material relating to it.

As for Ferguson's view on the division of labour, however, there is an important essay which has scarcely been noticed and which I reproduce below. This essay is No. 15 of his thirty-two holograph essays<sup>11</sup> in the Edinburgh University Library (Ms. Dc. 1. 42.), and the full title of it is *Of the Separation of Departments, Professions and Tasks, resulting from the Progress of Arts in Society*.<sup>12</sup>

In transcribing this manuscript, I retain, as a rule, Ferguson's spelling, capitalization and punctuation, but in some places I supply some letters, commas and periods in order to make Ferguson's sentences clear. In these cases all my amendments will be bracketed. Numbers in brackets will indicate holograph page numbers.

**Of the Separation of Departments Profes[s]ions and Tasks resulting from The Progress of Arts in Society**

Every Man in the outset of Arts must do all for himself [and] find at once his Subsistence[, ] his Shelter & his Rayment.

How much his State has been improved by the recourse of different Men to different employments and the Mutual Exchange or Commerce of their

<sup>11</sup> These essays were formerly owned by Sir John Macpherson. The titles of them are listed in Hiroshi Mizuta, *Shakai Shisoshi no Tabi* (*Journey of the History of Social Thought*), Tokyo, 1956, pp. 34-35; Yoshikazu Kubo, Adam Ferguson and the French Revolution. *Kwansei Gakuin University Annual Studies*, vol. 11, 1962, pp. 1-2 and D. Kettler, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>12</sup> According to J. T. D. Hall, the paper on which the essay is written is made by Curteis and Son and is dated 1806. Therefore, we can infer that this essay was written after that year.

several productions need not be stated.

Every accommodation will be more Compleat & every Supply more plentyful as this Expedient advances its height: but like every thing else in human Life it has its limits.

A Pin we are told furnishes a separate Task to no less than twenty different Workmen & the implement is better & more cheaply furnish[ed] than it could be by fewer Workmen. Yet there are limits to this Separation of Labour. The pointing [2] of a Pin can be completed by one Person [and] to divide that Task and pass it from on[e] to another for the completion of it would be loss of time & risk of defect in the work by by<sup>13</sup> the attempt to join effects not justly fitted to one another.

Similar limits might be pointed in the performance of every Mechanical Task. And even if we should admit that the improvement of Workmanship might be advanced indefinitely by this means: Yet there are other considerations to make us pause in the pursuit of it. The comparative importance of the improvement gained gradually diminishes and ceases at last to be of sufficient value to compensate the trouble of farther arrangement. Parts ceased to be equally well perform[ed] by separate hands as they would by the same hand. In Masonry[,] for instance[,] suppose the Stone to be placed by one Person and the Mortar placed by another[,] the work probably would be inferiour to that which one tradesman [3] could produce: besides that they would probably interfere & interrupt one another.

There is still a farther consideration of consequence in this bussiness.

This Separation of Tasks is intended for the better performance of each & for the Benef[i]t of Mankind in general. If it Should

<sup>13</sup> 'by' is repeated unnecessarily.

ever Mar the performance or become prejudicial to human Nature: in either Case no doubt it ought to be stopped.

If in Painting for Instance The different shades[, ] lights & Colours were to laid by different hands[, ] the work it is probable might Suffer[, ] And the Artists Fancy impaired by his being restrained from the scope of his Conception which subsists not in parts but in the Unity of a Whole.

The Work of man may be important: but the Artist himself is still more so. It is true no doubt that altho Society is intended for the Good of its [4] Members; Yet the individual on Occasion must be sacrific[e]d to the Whole.

Amidst the Departments of Bussiness & Profession there is great [u]nequality of Effect in the Cultivation of Intellectual Faculty & Moral Habits and some are of so mean a tendency in these Respects as to be matter of general Regret[, ] yet to be necessary for the general accommodation. And it may be difficult to fix the extent to which this may be endured & where it must be absolutely stopped. It may with confidence be said that slavery is a point to which it should never Extend. And Yet there are voluntary stations and occupations in human society more debasing than slavery necessarily or even generally is. All we can say is that the less that there is of this sort the better, and that subordination however valuable is too dearly bought by the debasement of any order or Class of the [5] People.

There is a Principle of subordination in the difference of Natural Talents [and] in the distribution of Property, Power & Dependence.

The Poor must labour in order to Subsist. The Rich may hire the Labour of others: but still find occasion on which to labour for themselves.

There is nothing debasing in in<sup>14</sup> either condition but the Vices to which both are obnoxious[, ] Envy & Rapacity on the part of the Poor[, ] Arrogance & Licentiousness on the part of the Rich.

These Vices are found in the extremes & in all the intermediate orders of a People. The worst possible condition in which Man can be conceived is that in which all Labour were precluded or in which all Power is vested in one and all Dependence imposed upon another. The nearest approach to this Condition is that of Master & Slaves [6] however constituted whether as a Civil relation of Proprietor & Property or Sovereign & Subject.

Of These The Political Servitude is debasing in the greatest degree [gree] & to the greatest Extent. The Courtiers of Tiberius or Nero[, ] even the senators of these time, were debased to a degree far beyond that of the Slave to an Ordinary Master.

Such abuses however it may be said are not necessary or unavoidable in the subdivision of Labour or the subordination of Ranks. Here indeed it is necessary that the human faculties should be unequally cultivated in proportion as the task assigned to each tends to exercise and improve them. In a Person whose task is a mere movement of the hand or the Foot as is the Case in the distribution of Labour which is made in some branches of manufacture may be supposed to remain in some measure of Torpor[, ] while that of a Master who directs the Whole or that of any Artist who has many things to combine[, ] [7] many Incidents to guard against and a choice to be made amidst a Variety of Expedients which different occasions require[, ] is still in the very state which Nature has devised for her Intelligent order of Being tending at once to exercise and Cultivate their faculties.

<sup>14</sup> 'in' is repeated unnecessarily.

The subdivision of Tasks tends in some Instances to mar the effects of this Destination & to improve them in Others. The mind of a Tradesman in many Instances is less practised in thought than that of a savage[,] While in more liberal Stations of Life the mind Profits by exemption from Inferiour Cares & Anxieties & the effect of more extensive Views And the more Arduous combinations of Thought.

Men are carryed along in the Progress of Establishments and of Arts as Vessels afloat in the Water are carryed along by the Torrents to which it is Subject. And it is uncertain how far information respecting this direction of their [8] movements may enable them on any degree to change that direction or modify the result.

Men certainly act from opinion as well as Instinct or Habit and Correct opinion is desireable in itself whatever be the measure of its Influence in the general Affairs of Men.

It has been observ[e]d that by the separation of Tasks & Professions The work is improved and obtained at a smaller Cost. The Artist also is sometimes improved in his designation of Intelligence & Manhood: But if neither is always the case; it is no doubt of moment to distinguish the Instances in which the Separation of Arts & Profession is unfavourable in the Result whether in respect to the Character of the Artist or the Value of his Work.

In the mass of the People it is not required of a Tradesman that he be knowing in any Branch but his own[,] nor does any collateral skill enable him the better to execute his peculiar Work [9] except where different works proceed upon some common Principle of Science.

For those who are termed Gentlemen or persons dissengaged from peculiar pursuits or applications there is no peculiarity of skill required[.] Of them it is requir[e]d that they be Happy[,] That is to say[,] Wise[,] Benevolent[,] Courageous and Temperate[,] and the less



they possess any habit to the exclusion of others equally valuable so much the Better.

In Actual Profession of Publick Station the Case is different. Scholars & Men of Science And publick Functionaries of any denomination have their Tasks assigned them and must devote themselves in a peculiar manner to some Particular Branch. It is so in mere Science as well as in the learned Professions of Medicine or Law.

To obtain what may be obtain[e]d in any Branch of Science it is necessary it is necessary<sup>15</sup> that it be made the object of peculiar study : but yet to know one Branch & nothing more is to be a Tradesman[,] not a [10] Scholar. The sciences are more [or] less connected and give mutual lights to one Another. To possess them all is to know the Order of Nature[.] And the Person whose knowledge is limited to a particular Branch must know even that the less Perfectly that he is ignorant of its place & connection in the general Order of Nature. To be a Man of Science on the best model thus it does not exclude all separate & peculiar Pursuits [and] requires a Liberal extensive View to the Nature & importance of Collateral studies. It is thus the Scholar may avoid that narrow and illiberal Contempt which Professional Men sometimes entertain for every Branch of Study but their own. The Mechanic or the Chymist despises the Moralist & is equally treated in his Turn. The mere Lawyer & the mere Doctor of Medicine are but ungracious members of society, And but lame practi[ti]oners even in what they profess: from a defect [11] in those habits which are required in the concourse of men.

In mere manual operations The Man is sometimes sacrificed to his Trade. An[y] separate parts are assigned to different Workmen who

<sup>15</sup> These three words 'it is necessary' seem to be repeated unnecessarily.

have to perform a Simple movement of the hand or the foot to save necessity of Thought or of time in changing Tools or of thought in passing from one step to another. It is Evident however That the Principle of Subdivision which is so suc[c]essful in Manufacture cannot be applied with the same advantage in those operations where Man himself with all his Faculties is required in every step as well as in the result or Combina[tion] of the whole.

In the Bussiness of State and of War there are no doubt parts that approach to mere mechanism. And in these the Statesman & the Warriour like the Master in a Counting House may have his Tools or his [12] Workmen to whom the principle of Subdivision Applys & in respect to which The Profession of a Statesman and Warriour are materially different. The Statesman must have his Clerks & separate Boards of Commission in Matters of Laws [and] Revenue. The Warriour must have his Tacticians & Leaders of Devision from the smallest of a Platoon to the greatest of a Column Line or Wing of an army. He too must have his Clerks, his Commissaries & his Providers of every requisite to an Army. But the greatest Error that can be committed in the affairs of men is to suppose that the Genius or Art of a Statesman or Warriour terminates in the possession or combination of such mechanical parts together.

The Statesman or Warriour must be so far Master of those Mechanical parts as to [13] know when they are well or ill performed by those to whom they are entrusted: but his own part is that of a Man fit to lead among Men on whom men will rely for Preservation or Success in all their Undertakings[.] Penetration & Strength of Mind[, ] Wisdom & Courage[, ] Goodness or Benevolence that Encourage a Friend [and] Rapidity & Force that strike Terror into an Ennemy are at once his Tools & his Arts. The Statesman must be skillful to

know how every measure will affect every order of the People. How the most dependent may be made to feel secure in his right[, ] how the most powerful may be made to feel the restraints of Justice[, ] humanity & Good Order. In these respects the Warriour too is a Statesman And must practise all the Art & Wisdom of Peace in his own Line or [14] encampment that he may be the more terrible in the View of his Ennemy. Of this Art Socrates expressed himself like a Master no less than in any other department of Moral or Civil Wisdom[.] Of Military Tactics he said nothing can be done without order or form: but a Warriour must be more than a Tactician. He must be Cautious & Rash[, ] a Thief & a Thiefcatcher[, ] Cruel & humane[, ] Penurious & Prodigal [and] Cautious & Rash.

His Tools or Weapons are men & he must know them, how to excite & how to restrain them[, ] what can be expected from them & what not[, ] & when requir[e]d how they can be roused to do all that men will or Can Do.

The Departments of State[, ] Political Civil & Military[, ] in well Regulated Establishments are are<sup>16</sup> on account of the mechanical details, in which they differ[, ] generally separated[, ] But in the Heads under whom those details are conducted [15] proceed on the same grounds of Knowledge & of Power. The knowledge of Men & the Power it gives is the Essence of Ability in either Department and that strength of mind which gives an ascendant over men is equally required in both.

The Mechanical details in which those departments differ[, ] tho necessary[, ] are comparatively of small importance: because they may be learned & practised by persons of Vulgar capacity and ought never to be mistaken for the test or constituent of ability in the Heads of either

<sup>16</sup> 'are' is repeated unnecessarily.

Department. Men of either Department are apt to be je[a]lous of the other. One or the other may have the ascendant under different Establishments. And whether The Statesmen is to choose the Warriour or The Warriour to choose the Statesmen[,] It is evident that the Elector ought to be acquainted in either Case with the [16] merit on which his choice is to proceed. The Statesmen ought to be acquainted with the Professional peculiarities of a soldier that he may he may<sup>17</sup> not mistake them for the whole grounds of his choice or sufficient to Justify if he commit the publick Safety to incompetent. A Statesmen or Minister who err[e]d in this particular has been known to say. The Military is not my Department. I had recourse to the Profession for a Person long Practised & Established in it [and] he is responsible & not I for the Consequences. The mere Military Despot on the contrary may make as ill a choice of those he employs in the Civil or Political Depart[ment]. And it is Evident that in any well Established Community The Qualities of Either department should be so well combined that neither could plead a ruinous Ignorance. A Person ignorant of War [17] and its Forms is as unfit to be Statesman as a Person unacquainted with Variable Winds & Storms is to be a mariner. And to say that a Statesman know[s] nothing of War or a Warriour knows nothing of The state is to detract equally from the merit or ability.

In the Roman Commonwealth, in many respects the model of Felicity to Nations, The Departments of State & of War were not only strictly allied & known to each other but for the most actively filled & conducted by the same Person. All the Distinction they made between the first Magistrate & the commander in Chief of their Armies

<sup>17</sup> These two words 'he may' seem to be repeated unnecessarily.

was that he was Magistrate within the Walls of Rome & the other outside of those Walls. He acted from his Office in either & in both these Capacities. The mere forms of either were such as the meanest could learn and never intercepted the View of his Country or his own in the choice of Persons to whom they [18] might entrust their affairs, Whether in the Roman Magistrates Gown or the Sagum of the Legionary Soldier.

This Union of Departments was early provided for in the very first Elements of the Roman Constitution. It was provided that every Citizen should state himself as part of his Countrys Strength & to qualify him for any Civil or Political advance by having actually served a Certain Term in the Wars of his Country.

Altho The Talent for Affairs of State in general and War in particular is the same or founded in the same knowledge of men and ascendant of the mind[,] yet the excercises & the habits of Body they require are different. Warriours have been distinguished in Youth or early Life[,] Statesmen profit more by experience and the deliberation of Maturity and Age.

As Military Tactics and Manual Excercise are within the competence of Children they ought not to be neglected amidst the Rudiments of Education [19] in early Life, so that what every one knows or possesses could not be mistaken for the Criterion of great ability or fitness for the highest & most important functions of human Life as the Habits of a Clerk in Office or a drill sergeant on the Parade are made to pass for the qualifications of statesmen or leaders & commanders of men in the Field.

Nothing is supposed more important than Education. And the world

&<sup>18</sup> abounds with Institutions or Establishments for that purpose. Yet Government is seldom attentive to what is taught in those Institutions And even in these Later Ages of great Experience few things except reading[,] writing & Arithmetic that can be of use in after Life are taught either at School or College. The gram[m]ar of Dead Languages, The Mythology which served as the foundation of antient Poetry[,] Even the prosody or fabric of Verse or Metre are crammed down the Throats of high & Low of Future [20] Tradesmen[,] Merchants[,] Senators And Soldiers Rank & File[,] Citizens And Drovers and little with any one except the habit of being obliged in Childhood to regard what others inculcate And which indeed however little it may seem is indeed very great and actually the most important attainment of such schools as we have provided for the Education of the Coming Age.

The occasions & the manners of Human Society are transient and successive. The Institutions of one Age to accommodate Ages that follow at any considerable interval are to be changed or modified. And no age can with advantage Legislate unalterably for the Ages that follow.

On this account a late writer of Eminence on the Wealth and other concerns of Nations places Education on the same foot with Trade and other concerns most safely entrusted to the Per[son] concerned & reprobates fixed Institu[21]tions or Intervention of Government. From this general Rule however he excepts every Case in which Defence or publick safety is at stake and of Course should except Education so far as the publick safety is concerned. A committee of Parliament or other publick authority might no doubt with great Advantage be interposed to report from Age to Age what Regulations might be required in publick schools to prepare the rising Generation for that

<sup>18</sup> '&' seems to be unnecessary.

part which necessity might impose on every Individual for the safety of his Country. He who cannot defend himself is not a Man & he who cannot take part in the defence of his Country is not a Citizen nor worthy of the Protection which the Laws of Country bestow. Other cares may be delegated & become matter of separate Profession [22] to a part of the People: but to set Valour apart as the Characteristic of a few were to [s]hare Virtue & Happinness itself as matter of Profession & study peculiar to a devision of the Community. Tor<sup>19</sup> furnish shoes or erect Palaces may be the object of separate Professions but to be man is the equal concern of all and the want of Courage degrades him no less than the want of Understanding or Truth.

Men are wise to avail themselves of every advantage which the subdivision of arts and the separation of Employments can give: but where this Expedient is noxious to the Genius & Character of Man it is Wisdom to check or restrain it.

Let the Statesman be asha[med] to own he is no Warriour and the warriour to own he is no statesman. Under these confessions the one is a mere Clerk in office The other a mere prize [23] fighter & a Bully.

<sup>19</sup> 'r' seems to be unnecessary.