CHAPTER SIX

The Division of Labour

In modern political economy the division of labour is a main aspect. (VRP, Vol. III, pp. 609 ff)

The aim of the present chapter is to compare Hegel’s opinion on the division of labour with the views of his Scottish predecessors. Following Hegel’s own definition,

Division of labour means that a concrete product is not to its full extent created by one individual, [but] that the individual continues to produce one and the same part of it. (VRP, Vol. I, p. 314)

‘division of labour’ is here understood as specialization within the professions; ‘social’ division of labour, implying the emergence of social classes, the differing economic functions of which have to be mediated by a market economy, has already been discussed (chapter four, section D).

It could now be argued, with some justification, that Hegel’s interest in problems resulting from the division of labour, though he did not use the concept then, can be traced back to the manuscripts of his Stuttgart years. Especially his article “Über einige charakteristische Unterschiede der alten Dichter von den neueren”,¹ and the subsequent Tübingen manuscript,² contain reflections about the problems modern poetry has to face as a result of the division of labour.³ Contrary to the wide experiences of the ancient poet – “With them [the ancients], every one

³ Cp. my paper “The Division of Labour and the Fate of the Poet: Ferguson, Garve,
got to know for himself the functions of other classes.”⁴ – Hegel saw the contemporary poet, due to a more advanced and still increasing division of labour, in a growing danger of losing touch with concrete life, of being restricted to, as Hegel borrows from Lessing, “book learning, which presses on the brain with lifeless signs.”⁵ Poetical production is not the only thing distorted by the division of labour. According to the young Hegel, the receptive side (“der Wirkungskreis” – ‘the sphere of influence’; DHE, p. 48 – *Clio*, VII:3, p. 403) is equally subjected to increasing difficulties:

One part [of the population] has already far removed itself from the system [of belief] upon which the poem either as a whole, or in its particular sections, is based; the other part is too pressingly occupied with its care for the many and various needs and conveniences of life, to have either the time or the inclination to raise itself and approach the mental world of the higher orders. (DHE, p. 49 – *Clio*, VII:3, p. 404)

In spite of the attention which this discussion doubtless deserves, and not only in the framework of Hegel’s intellectual development, it has to be emphasized that Hegel’s mature views on the division of labour, at least as far as the surviving evidence is concerned, did not emerge before his Jena writings.⁶ The briefest of comparisons between the above mentioned Stuttgart and Tübingen manuscripts on the one hand, and the Jena and later writings on the other hand, clearly shows a remarkable development from some vague indication of the impact of the division of labour on poetry to a precise assessment of its conditions and advantages, to a diagnosis of its inherent dangers and shortcomings.

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⁴ DHE, p. 50. I have used my own translation as opposed to the one by Prof. H.S. Harris, *Clio*, Vol. VII:3, p. 405: “Every one learned [. . .] to appreciate the functions of other branches of society for himself.”


⁶ That picture could of course be changed by the finding of more manuscripts. Material from the Frankfurt period should, in this context, be of special significance, as recent studies have shown that some figures of the Hegel–Hölderlin circle there did indeed discuss aesthetic questions in connection with economics; cp.: Chr. Jamme and Otto Pöggeler (Eds.), *Homburg vor der Höhe in der deutschen Geistesgeschichte*. Studien zum Freundeskreis um Hegel und Hölderlin (Stuttgart, 1981).