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Contributive justice and meaningful work

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Abstract

The dominant focus of thinking about economic justice is overwhelmingly distributive, that is, concerned with what people *get* in terms of resources and opportunities. It views work mainly negatively, as a burden or cost, or else is neutral about it, rather than seeing it as a source of meaning and fulfilment – a good in its own right. However, what we *do* in life has at least as much, if not more, influence on who we become, as does what we *get*. Thus we have good reason also to be concerned with what Paul Gomberg has termed *contributive justice*, that is, justice as regards what people are expected and able to contribute in terms of work. Complex, interesting work allows workers not only to develop and exercise their capacities, and gain the satisfaction from achieving the internal goods of a practice, but to gain the external goods of recognition and esteem. As Gomberg's analysis of the concept of contributive justice in relation to equality of opportunity shows, as long as the more satisfying kinds of work are concentrated into a subset of jobs, rather than shared out among all jobs, then many workers will be denied the chance to have meaningful work and the recognition that goes with it. In this paper I examine the contributive justice argument, suggest how it can be further strengthened, arguing, inter alia, that ignoring contributive injustice tends to support legitimations of distributive inequality.

Introduction

The dominant focus of thinking about inequalities and economic justice is overwhelmingly distributive, that is, it is concerned with what people have or *get* in terms of resources and opportunities. It views work mainly negatively, as a burden or cost, merely a means to an end, or else is neutral about it, rather than seeing it as a source of meaning and fulfilment – a good in its own right (Breen, 2006). Social benefits are viewed in terms of what we receive, not what we do. It therefore offers little for understanding what 'meaningful work' might be, indeed it makes it hard to see any connection between meaningful work and economic justice. However, what we *do* in life has at least as much influence on who we become and the quality of our lives, as does what we *get*.

An Aristotelian approach can illuminate this relationship. Other things equal, a complex, interesting job that demands the use of skilled, practical judgement enhances the capacities and satisfaction of the worker, whereas a boring, unskilled job dulls the mind. The former is also likely to bring more recognition than the latter, providing the skilled worker with a source of self-esteem. What we can do depends not only on our resources but upon the opportunities for contributing provided by the wider society, particularly by the formal economy. Thus we have good reason also to be concerned with what Paul Gomberg has called '*contributive* justice', that is, justice as regards what people are expected and able to contribute in terms of work (Gomberg, 2007). He argues that as long as the more satisfying kinds of work are concentrated into a subset of jobs, rather than shared out among all jobs, then many workers will be denied the chance to have meaningful work and the recognition that goes with it. Usually this separation of complex from simple work is defended on the grounds of efficiency or differences in workers' aptitudes. As James Murphy has shown these defences typically conflate two kinds of division of labour –a division between different *tasks* within a given process, and a division between different *workers* whereby each worker is limited to a single or very small number of tasks. Murphy argued that the former does not in fact entail the latter, and that through various forms of rotation and sharing of complex and routine work within a given process, more workers will be able to avoid the dulling effects of routine, repetitive work (Murphy, 1993). These arguments are not simply a contribution to normative political philosophy; they also aim to provide a partial explanation of actually existing inequalities of class and race.[1]

In this paper, I shall outline and assess these arguments and try to strengthen them by drawing upon other authors, evidence and arguments. Firstly, I shall explain what is meant by 'contributive justice' through examples, introduce the Aristotelian conception of work, character and dignity, and outline the arguments of Murphy and Gomberg regarding the social division of labour as a barrier to contributive justice and as a cause of economic inequalities. Secondly, I shall discuss some probable objections to their arguments in order to come to an overall assessment. Thirdly, shall briefly discuss some implications for ideas of distributive justice in relation to desert-based arguments, and conclude.

[1] Race is Gomberg's main concern, but in my view, class is more directly related to the mechanisms that he analyses. The relation between race and class is asymmetric: wherever there are racialised distinctions between people which are used to assign them different value, this inevitably also results in divisions of economic class. But class can exist in the absence of racialised divisions, and sometimes still does. The unequal distribution of complex and routine work does not require divisions of race, though if the latter exist, it tends to reinforce them.

What is contributive justice?

If the term 'contributive justice' is novel, the ideas behind it are familiar in everyday life. When members of a team or democratically-run household or organization worry about whether everyone is pulling their weight they are thinking about contributive justice. In this respect, the dominant concern is about making sure people meet their responsibilities and avoid free-riding on others' labour. In addition to this quantitative matter, they may also be concerned about the qualitative nature of the work that people do. When they object to a minority hoarding all the interesting, pleasant tasks and leaving the tedious and unpleasant ones to the rest, this too is a matter of contributive justice. In this case, contributions of work are seen not merely as a responsibility or chore, but as a possible source of satisfaction and esteem – one that ought to be shared.

Possibly, the issue of the quality of work might be dealt with under the heading of 'distributive justice applied to work',[2] and some definitions of the scope of distributive justice do indeed include the distribution of good work, though they rarely pursue the issue any further (e.g. Miller, 1999). I would suggest that there are two possible reasons for this: first, the liberal provenance of most literature on distributive justice means that it is reluctant to engage with arguments which it considers depend on conceptions of the good, and second, the distributive perspective easily allows us to position individuals as entitled recipients, rather than active contributors whose good depends heavily on what they can contribute. Though the choice of terminology doesn't affect the arguments which I develop below, Gomberg's term has the merit of forcing us to consider the relationships between work, justice and well-being.

The arguments that occur in everyday life about the domestic division of labour, and which have been the subject of the large feminist literature on the gendering of domestic work, are also primarily about contributive justice (Crompton, 2007; Delphy, 1984; Folbre, 1982; Hochschild, 1989; Laite, 1999; Okin, 1989; Oakley, 1974; Walby, 1986, 1990). Although it was noted that men and women tended to get unequal shares of household income, equalising these shares – a matter of distributive justice - was not enough to make men and women equal in the household if they were expected to do different amounts and types of domestic work; contributive justice as regards housework was also necessary for enabling women to realise their potential. The traditional gendered division of domestic labour was argued to be unfair not only in terms of quantity of housework done but quality too: to the extent that men do such work, it tends to be the more interesting and rewarding tasks – DIY rather than washing and cleaning, for example. One of the rationales for the critique was that the domestic division of labour prevented women from developing their capacities and skills by confining them to the household and to more than their share of tedious work within it. This in turn limited not only their leisure time but their opportunities in the labour market, by restricting the time they had for working in the formal economy, or for education and training for more challenging work. More generally, it was argued to restrict their opportunities for self-development. In effect, contributive injustice in the household reinforced contributive injustice on gender lines in the labour market. Moreover, the common excuse from men that the division of labour was justifiable because they weren't as good at cooking and cleaning as women, and that women weren't as good as men at DIY, was easily rebuffed by pointing to exceptions and drawing attention to the fact that skills in these matters were simply a matter of

[2] I am grateful to a referee for pointing this out.

practice and motivation, and that the gendering of those skills was arbitrary, not a natural necessity.

However, while these kinds of concern are familiar enough, they are rarely extended to divisions of labour beyond the family, or beyond teams or small, democratically-run organizations. In large organizations, workers in a particular occupation might be upset if a few members of their own stratum were given much more pleasant and interesting work than others, but it is less likely to bother them that other occupations are more or less interesting or otherwise desirable than their own. Cleaning is a necessary part of most kinds of work. When we've finished a job, there's usually some clearing up to be done, and in many spheres of life those who made the mess would be expected to clear it up, indeed it would be seen as unreasonable to expect anyone else to do it.[3] However, in the formal economy, it is common for this to be left to specialist cleaners. In my own university, lecturers are now expected to empty their own waste bins instead of having a cleaner to do it. I don't mind doing this provided my colleagues also have to do it: I would feel unfairly treated if I were the only lecturer who had to do it. But before this arrangement was introduced few questioned the existence of a separate occupation of cleaners, most of whose work consisted of emptying other people's bins. (It is less irksome to empty your own bin than to have to empty many other people's; in the former case you are aware that you were responsible for the waste, you know from what activities the waste was created, so the task is more meaningful.)

This shows how the reference groups that we invoke in comparing our lot with that of others and thinking about contributive justice are already delimited by a division of labour which institutionalizes unequal opportunities for fulfilling work by segregating interesting and uninteresting tasks into different occupations. The parochial character of our concerns about contributive justice in turn enables this division of labour to be normalized and indeed naturalized. In addition to the objective segregation of cleaners and lecturers in work and in life outside employment, the construction of separate reference groups corresponding to the division of labour therefore has the effect of making lecturers and cleaners appear as members of separate castes; they do not even see their contributions as comparable.

As regards the economy as a whole, it may seem hopelessly idealistic to argue that complex and routine work should be equally shared, and it is easily assumed that the inequalities in the quality of work that people do simply reflect differences in ability and effort, or are a function of the pursuit of economic efficiency, from which supposedly, all benefit. In these ways, while we often hold strong views about contributive justice in some limited spheres, there is little concern about it in the economy as a whole. Arrangements which in one sphere seem unjust are accepted as fair in another sphere.[4] To develop this line of argument we can draw upon the work of James Murphy and Paul Gomberg, whose focus is paid work.[5] These authors adopt an Aristotelian view of work.

First, an Aristotelian conception of human well-being or eudaimonia emphasizes doing rather than having. What we do is what we become; our work has a major influence on our character, capacities and hence our well-being. Even though the ultimate point of working is the instrumental one of producing something, the

[3] Of course, in many situations gender norms allocate cleaning work to women, but the feminist critique of the gender inequality can appeal to this argument that those who create mess should clear it up.

[4] This partitioning and inconsistency in our moral economic judgements is a feature of modern society; see Sayer, 2008.

[5] Strangely, they don't mention the domestic division of labour, even though concerns about contributive justice are so common and clear there.

implications of the quality of the work for the worker's well-being are too important to sideline, for it shapes the worker's self-development and character. The restriction of some workers to very limited, de-skilled tasks has aroused concern since the beginnings of capitalism. Thus, in the eighteenth century, Adam Smith, the analyst of the division of labour in the pin factory, commented "The man whose whole life is spent performing a few simple operations . . . has no occasion to exert his understanding . . . He naturally loses, therefore, the habit of such exertion, and generally becomes as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human creature to become." (Smith, 1776, 2.V.I., art.2, pp.302-3). Smith believed that the effects of this deskilled, repetitive work would spill over into life outside work, stunting the ability of workers in such jobs to participate in the life of the community. Murphy cites empirical research on the relation between the intellectual capacities of workers and the cognitive complexity of the work they do which shows that over a ten year period, the cognitive capacities of workers doing complex jobs developed while those of workers doing simple and repetitive work deteriorated. Further, as Smith feared, there is evidence that "(w)orkers in mindless jobs not only undermine their capacity for the enjoyment of complex activities at work but also their capacity for the enjoyment of complex activities during leisure." (Murphy, 1993, p. 7n19). As Murphy adds, while workers are increasingly protected from harm to their physical capacities, they are not protected from harm to their mental capacities.

Second, according to what Rawls calls 'the Aristotelian principle', "other things equal, human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and that this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realized, or the greater its complexity" (Rawls, 1971, p. 414). We tend to seek not only to satisfy our needs and make up deficiencies but to exercise our faculties and try to extend them. We enjoy activities that are skilled, varied and complex more than simple, repetitive ones, and we may try to emulate others whose skills we admire (Rawls, 1971, p. 431).[6] We have curiosity, which extends our interest beyond meeting needs and wants, to a non-instrumental interest in some things for their own sake. Flourishing consists in more than the absence of suffering or need: it has positive content.[7]

Third, "What gives skilled work its dignity, according to Aristotle, is that a worker first constructs in thought what he then embodies in matter; conversely, what makes unskilled work sordid is that one man executes the thought of another."(Murphy, 1993, p.8). This proposition, echoed by Marx, implies that for work to be a source of well-being, conception and execution should not be split between different individuals. This in no way implies abolition of all division of labour, merely those kinds which deny some workers significant discretion and control over what they do and how they do it. Recombining conception and execution does not require abolishing distinctions between quite different kinds of work, such as health services, newspaper production, tourism and food processing; rather it requires abolishing or

[6] Sociologists often object to these kinds of generalisations on the grounds that there are exceptions. But that objection misunderstands the nature of generalisation. Alternatively, they may object to claims about universals as 'essentialist'. But characteristics like curiosity and enjoyment of complexity and skill are tendencies whose activation can be blocked or overridden, and hence there is no determinism. Nor is there any need to deny human variety; but when we encounter exceptions, we naturally ask what it is about the uncurious person or the person who prefers routine unskilled work that makes them different. Perhaps they have been socialised into believing that their lowly lot in life is all they should want.

[7] While Rawls provides a rich account of these characteristics, he only mentions meaningful work in passing (1971, p. 425) Rawls believed that the worst aspects of the division of labour can be surmounted: "no one need be servilely dependent on others and made to choose between monotonous and routine occupations which are deadening to human thought and sensibility. Each can be offered a variety of tasks so that the different elements of his nature find suitable expression." (1971, p. 529). However, he does not take up the implied issue of contributive justice.

reducing the polarisation between conception and execution, and complex and routine work *within* particular sectors or organisations.[8] Further, dignified work within a division of labour implies, among other things, scope for workers to exercise self-command, take responsibility and be trusted to do so (Sayer, 2007).

Fourth, work projects tend to have a shape and unity to them. They may comprise many different tasks, each of which differs in its qualities, in the skills and effort it requires, and the interest or tedium it tends to generate, but the meaningfulness of any task depends not only on these qualities but on their having an intelligible connection to the larger project to which they belong. Thus, filing is one of the more routine and uninteresting aspects of office work, but if the filer is sufficiently involved in the larger work project of which it is part for her to be able to see its point, then it becomes more meaningful. If, in addition, she is allowed to do other, more interesting tasks on that project too, then her work as a whole becomes more meaningful.

Gomberg uses debates about equality of opportunity as his point of entry. He argues that if the more interesting, fulfilling and pleasant kinds of work are concentrated into particular jobs, rather than shared out among workers, there cannot be full equality of opportunity, merely 'competitive equality of opportunity', which itself is something of an oxymoron (Gomberg, 2007). Formally, even if job seekers could compete on equal terms for these high quality jobs - that is, if there were 'a level playing field' - then no matter how hard they strove for them, only a subset of them could get them. Those who were successful would be so at the expense of others, indeed under these conditions it is in the interest of any particular job seeker that *others fail* to find high quality employment. This is commonly legitimized through a fallacy of composition – that because success in getting a good job and upward social mobility are possible for some individuals, success must be possible for all individuals simultaneously. This fallacy is an important component of capitalist ideology. Legitimations in terms of desert reinforce it too: in crude form the division of jobs is seen as a response to differences in ability and effort.

Writing in a US context, Gomberg claims that the education system is adjusted to this situation, and is organised to prepare a significant proportion of children only for a life of routine labour (Gomberg, 2007, p.36). Whether one accepts this claim or not, strictly from the point of view of minimising the economic cost of education and training, where highly skilled tasks are concentrated into a subset of jobs, it is not worth over-producing highly-qualified workers; it is a waste of resources to train 100 people for 40 skilled posts. Of course, we may want to argue that education should be for life, not just employment, but in the context of such a division of labour, this goal is bound to appear as a luxury. From the point of view of workers, where the division of labour restricts good quality work to a subset of jobs, then many – particularly those who are disadvantaged by class, gender or race - might reasonably consider it not worth the effort of pursuing them. To the extent that the social system, and within it, the unequal social division of labour and the educational system, produces a matching unequal distribution of abilities and aspirations, it encourages self-congratulation in the fortunate, and resignation in the less fortunate. If it overproduces qualified job applicants in relation to vacancies, disappointment is inevitable for

[8] Although Marx was clearly influenced by all three of Aristotle's arguments in his views on work, he tended to see divisions of labour of all kinds as damaging; hence his comment that "in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic." [Marx, German Ideology - (Collected Works, vol.5: 47).]. Translated into a modern context, this would imply superhuman individuals, able to master a large range of skills, many of them unrelated. For an excellent critique of this, see Murphy (1993).

some.[9] Gomberg argues that there can only be equality of opportunity in a meaningful sense if opportunities for good quality work are not scarce, and this can only be the case if as far as possible, complex work is shared out among workers – which of course implies, that routine work should be shared out too. As he points out, this is still compatible with insisting that successful applicants for jobs have to be appropriately qualified, in the same way that while there is no restriction on the number of driving licenses issued, only those who pass their driving test are entitled to them.

Murphy shows that the practice of concentrating good quality work tasks into a subset of jobs, and the arguments that legitimize this, conflate *two* different kinds of divisions of labour within organizations – the division of tasks and the division of work roles of workers (Murphy, 1993); the first divides work, the second divides workers. He terms the first the technical division of labour and the second the social division of labour. (Note that while this terminology is the same as Marx's, *the conceptual distinction is completely different*.[10]) The two divisions do not necessarily go together; one could have a division of tasks and a rotation of workers among them, whether on an hourly, daily, or weekly or more ad hoc basis. Henceforth I shall use Murphy's terminology and call the divisions between complex and routine labour, and between conception and execution, '*unequal* social divisions of labour'. Murphy argues that the besetting sin of analyses of divisions of labour has been to reduce the social division of labour to the technical division of labour.

> "Efficiency requires only that the work be analyzed into its fundamental elements, not that the workers be restricted to the performance of a few such elements. Once the labor had been technically analyzed it could then be synthesized efficiently in a variety of ways – from restricting each worker to a single task to enabling each worker to perform several tasks in sequence." (Murphy, 1994; p. 23).

Let us now consider some possible objections to this idea of sharing tasks of different qualities instead of allocating complex and routine tasks to different workers.

Objections and responses

1. The efficiency/cost arguments. The usual justification for unequal social divisions of labour ignores or rejects Murphy's claim and argues that it is more efficient not only to separate out tasks but to make each one the specialism of an individual worker, and supposedly, everyone benefits from the efficiency gains. Particularly where the product or service is a uniform one that can be produced in volume, it is more efficient to do this. Rotation, by contrast, allegedly wastes time in moving workers between tasks and increases set-up time. Secondly, where complex work is needed, training is required, which of course is costly; an unequal social division of labour means that fewer people have to be trained than would be necessary if complex and simple work were shared more widely among workers. Thirdly, once such a division of labour is established, employers become more dependent on the skilled workers than on unskilled workers, as the former are harder to replace than the latter. Since the price they have to pay for skilled workers tends to be higher, employers can

[9] Brown and Hesketh's research on the UK graduate labour market estimates that 40 per cent of recent graduates are in jobs which do not require degree-level skills three years after finishing their studies (Brown and Hesketh, 2004).

[10] Very roughly, for Marx, the social division is that between workers working for different employers and the technical or detail division is that between workers working for the same company. Gomberg and Murphy's target – which they call the social division of labour - is Marx's detail or manufacturing or technical division, not his social division of labour. The matter is made more complex by the fact that Marx's own distinction itself compounds others (Sayer, 1995, chapter 3).

save money by accentuating the unequal social division of labour to ensure that skilled workers do not do any tasks that can be done by less skilled, lower paid workers, and concentrate purely on what only they can do. Lower skilled tasks are thus stripped out from the skilled worker's responsibilities and given to lower skilled workers. Thus, in addition to an efficiency gain in terms of individual labour productivity, there is also likely to be a net labour cost saving. Economists argue that the market mechanism maximises not only productive efficiency but allocational efficiency, that is, efficiency in the allocation of scarce resources among competing ends. These points function both as evolutionary explanations of the development of unequal social divisions of labour and as justifications.

2. Doubts about feasibility for highly specialised work. In some cases it may be infeasible to rotate workers across tasks involving very different levels of skills. Thus, while it would be possible for university lecturers to do cleaning work in their universities, say for one day per month, it would not be possible for anyone not trained in political philosophy, Greek literature or evolutionary biology to teach and research them. Some tasks require the full-time commitment of individuals over many years if they are to be performed competently.

3. Differences in workers' abilities. The unequal social division of labour is argued to reflect the different abilities and capacities of workers. Employers have to respond to the range of skills that are available in designing jobs. Many workers are only capable of routine labour.

We can respond to these claims with both undermining and overriding arguments (Taylor, 1967). The former reject some of the claims made in these justifications of the unequal social division of jobs. The latter accept certain of those claims, but argue that there are, in addition, further considerations which should override those favouring an unequal social division of labour.

First, the efficiency/cost argument was at least partly undermined, in the 1970s and 80s, by the discovery that Taylorist and Fordist forms of work organization, which took the technical and social divisions of labour to extremes, failed to generate the hoped-for efficiency gains because of communication and quality control problems brought about by the restriction of workers to single tasks. They also tended to provoke worker resistance, often in the form of absenteeism. By contrast, Japanese methods of work organization which involved more training, more use of workers' know-how and more work rotation, and also so-called 'post-Fordist' forms of organization, were allegedly more efficient (Sayer and Walker, 1992).[11] In many countries, various alternative forms of job design were tried out to increase task sharing and team work, such as the Volvo experiments (Berggren, 1993; Murphy, 1993, p.31). Although these alternative forms of work organization were not always successful, they at least weaken the efficiency argument.

A further partially undermining argument against the efficiency/cost objection might be made by drawing upon Charles Tilly's theory of 'categorical inequalities' (Tilly, 1998). Tilly argues, in effect, that the unequal social division of labour is partly a product of power strategies involving hoarding of opportunities and resources by the dominant, rather than simply an outcome of the pursuit of efficiency and lower training and labour costs. The strategies are evident in industrial relations, in job demarcation disputes, and in struggles to construct professions and get recognition for them. He claims that these strategies are most effective where the dominant construct *categorical* inequalities between themselves and the subordinate, such as manager and

[11] However, the post-Fordist literature tended to oversimplify the issues and idealise alternatives (Sayer and Walker, 1992).

worker, skilled and unskilled, or occupational distinctions. Where there are merely gradients, rather than clear boundaries between groups with different power, then the dominant are more susceptible to challenge. Thus, the categorical distinction between doctor and nurse is itself important for enabling doctors to hoard the most satisfying work and offload the less interesting work.[12] Further, if the adopted categorical inequalities become widely emulated they are likely to be naturalised as people adjust to them and frame their expectations in terms of them. Thus the unequal social division of labour is not merely the consequence of its superiority in terms of efficiency but a product of power differences.

Regarding the feasibility objection, I think it has to be conceded in the case of the most highly skilled kinds of work. Excellence in such activities is thus often a product of one-sided development of individuals, though of course they may enjoy it, and we may consider this a price worth paying for their achievements. But even these kinds of work have their more routine elements – in the case of academic work, checking bibliographies, dealing with routine correspondence, photocopying, recording marks, and numerous minor administrative tasks. The more routine elements are necessary parts of the work that the lecturer engages in. Compiling and checking a bibliography for an article one has written is less interesting and demanding than writing the article, but if one does one's own bibliography it is clear that that task is part of a unified work project and it therefore derives some meaning from this. By contrast, doing other people's bibliographies for them so they can concentrate on tasks that made more use of their abilities would be more tedious and meaningless. For the sake of contributive justice these more mundane and simple tasks should not be taken off the academics and given to others who already have a large burden of routine work. Further, workers filling these elite roles might be required to do occasional routine work (we might argue that it would be 'good for their souls' and prevent them becoming arrogant and unappreciative of the privilege of being allowed to be excused the greater part of the routine work). This would also free up others to do some more complex or pleasant work, even if it is not of the expert kind, and unleash some of their currently unactivated potential. It should also be remembered that many skilled jobs do not have such massive training requirements, and it might still be a reasonable aim to create jobs with some element of skilled work for all. So while there is some force in the objection, it does not justify maintaining the unequal social division of labour where it is feasible to reduce it.

The unequal abilities objection reflects a naïve conception of the origin of differences in abilities. In line with Aristotle's emphasis on the development of excellences through practice, and Smith's view of differences in abilities as a product of the division of labour rather than vice versa (Smith, 1776)[13], Gomberg argues that while not all are born equally able, abilities are largely a product of socialisation and activities (Gomberg, 2007, chapter 10). Early socialisation tends to have lasting effects, resulting in a strong tendency for advantages and disadvantages to be transmitted to the next generation. Research by Leon Feinstein on children's cognitive capacities shows that these develop more slowly in low social class children than high social class children, so that by 120 months, the brightest of low social class children

[12] In many work situations the boundaries are often surmounted on a temporary, ad hoc basis so as to deal with problems of absenteeism or shifting workloads; thus workers may some times briefly take on tasks officially assigned to those above or below them.

[13] "The difference of natural talents in different men is, in reality, much less than we are aware of; and the very different genius which appears to distinguish men of different professions, when grown up in maturity, is not upon many occasions so much the cause, as the effect of the division of labour. The difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter, for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom, and education." (Smith, 1776, Bk I, ch.ii, pp.19-20).

at 22 months are overtaken by the weakest of high social class children at 22 months (Feinstein, 2003). The score at 22 months predicts educational qualifications at age 26 and is related to family background. The children of educated or wealthy parents who scored poorly in the early tests had a tendency to catch up, whereas children of worse-off parents who scored poorly were extremely unlikely to catch up. Feinstein found no evidence that entry into schooling reverses this pattern. Social mobility in all major capitalist countries is low (Aldridge, 2004; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992). While this does not contradict the claim that different qualities of work have a long term effect on cognitive abilities, the development of differences in ability and the correlation with class clearly develop long before individuals reach the labour market.

We can illuminate the intergenerational transmission of advantage and disadvantage by using Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1984; 1994; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Bourdieu argues that much of what we do and think and aspire to is a product of semi-conscious, embodied, learned dispositions that are acquired particularly in early life. The habitus is a set of dispositions acquired by an individual that is shaped by and attuned to the dominant social relations, practices and environments that they experience from their particular position in the social field. These dispositions then tend to produce actions which relate to these circumstances, and thereby tend to reproduce them.[14] Thus someone who is born into a low income, low status family, acquires a set of dispositions attuned to that position, a 'feel for the game' - accustomed to economic insecurity and not being valued by those of higher class, associating with people with little power, who are used to serving others and doing work that involves little autonomy and scope for decision-making. On the other hand, someone born into a high income, highly educated, high status family gains a set of dispositions that attune them to their position in the social field – in particular an ease that derives from distance from economic necessity, and a sense of entitlement and confidence that they are the rightful inheritors of the most favoured positions, in which they will have the power to take decisions affecting others, and be served by them, and listened to. Working class lives characterized by lack of power are prefigured in the authoritarian character of working class childrearing, which tends to set clear disciplinary limits without defending them through elaborate justifications – theirs is not to reason why; children are also expected to amuse themselves, rather than interact with adults. By contrast, middle class parenting places great stress on reasoning, on education and self-development, and on talking to adults (Lareau, 2003; Walkerdine and Lucey, 1985). These prefigure lives of working in occupations where they are allowed to use these reasoning powers and take decisions, and where they can deal with gatekeepers as equals. Although the habitus can be changed, it is a slow process that depends on repeated practice at new behaviours. (Bourdieu's Aristotelian affinities are clear here.) *In these ways, the unequal social division of labour has an indirect effect on the next generation's habitus by shaping the character and circumstances of their parents. Through its influence on the distribution of abilities and skills, the unequal social division of labour produces effects which appear to legitimise it*.[15]

Even if one does accept the efficiency/cost and feasibility objections, it may be argued that there are nevertheless *overriding* considerations that outweigh these, for they take no account of the human consequences in terms of workers' well-being and contributive justice. Is it 'efficient' – or socially just - to restrict the development of large numbers of individuals' skills by confining them to routine work? (Gomberg,

[14] There has been much discussion of whether this is too deterministic. I have argued elsewhere that a more moderate version of the concept which acknowledges individuals' reflexivity and agency is more plausible (Sayer, 2005).

[15] " . . . the theory of the habitus allows us to *explain the apparent truth of the theory that it shows to be false"* (Bourdieu, 2005, p.215).

2007, p.142). Is it 'efficient' or just to deny them the recognition that doing complex work can bring and the self-esteem that tends to follow from that? In case that sounds too idealistic, recall that the principle of contributive justice does not come from some Archimedean point but is already a strong principle in certain spheres of life, as we saw in the everyday examples of democratic households, teams and organisations.

However, apart from normative responses such as these, there is a more important point regarding the standing of the unequal social divisions of labour thesis as an *explanation* of economic and status inequalities: quite simply, the likelihood that it would be difficult to dissociate the technical and social divisions of labour without efficiency losses in no way invalidates the argument that the unequal social division of labour is a key cause of economic and status inequality in our society. That we might find it difficult to imagine a modern society existing without such a division of labour and want to retain it does not mean that the argument fails as a partial explanation of such inequality in modern society.

Contribution, Distribution and Desert: From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs . . . ?

While the Marxian slogan is widely cited, it is generally the distributional side of the formula that is the focus of attention, not the contributive side. 'From each according to their ability' implies an expectation to contribute to the extent that one can, and not to free-ride on the labour of others unless there are reasonable grounds for doing so in terms of one's ability to contribute. It acknowledges not only inequalities in individuals' physical and mental abilities to contribute but asymmetries in terms of their dependence on others, indeed the second impacts on the first. Thus, children's free-riding on the labour of adults is warranted: the fit and mature are expected to contribute more than the young, the frail or the infirm.[16] It is the most likely formula to be adopted in a democratically-run household, other things being equal. However, as we have seen, an unequal social division of labour of the kind that has developed in modern societies makes the contributive principle of each according to their ability impossible to achieve, and tends to produce an adjustment of abilities to that division.

Surveys of lay normative beliefs about economic justice tend to produce mixed results, implying that people often use several different kinds of reasoning; they may endorse humanitarian arguments for redistribution to those in dire need, and they sometimes put forward a contributive principle – that everyone should contribute what they can. There is often also support for a desert based justification for patterns of distribution, according to which effort and merit in contribution are seen to deserve higher rewards than contributions which lack these (Miller, 1992; 1999). This accords with the popular 'belief in a just world', according to which the good are rewarded and the bad not, so that failure is taken to be the individual's responsibility. The belief is an attractive idea for the affluent for it implies their advantages are deserved. The principle of distribution according to desert is rejected by many political philosophers; most famously, Rawls argued that natural talents do not deserve to be rewarded, and even effort and initiative can be significantly influenced by individuals' social circumstances. In addition, some may have extensive responsibilities outside employment which limit their input, while others have few. Further the very notion of what constitutes merit is contested. However, the idea of distribution according to desert remains common in everyday thought.[17] Even though popular thought, generally unaware of contributive injustice, tends to overestimate the extent to which

[16] Such judgements imply that we should distinguish not only between earned and unearned income, but between warranted and unwarranted unearned income or other benefits.
[17] David Miller provides a defence of a version of desert as a basis for distributive justice.

individuals have some responsibility for their contribution, they do indeed have some responsibility. Thus, members of a democratically run team might be troubled if some members did not pull their weight while still drawing an equal share of the rewards, and feel that they did not deserve an equal share.

My point is that egalitarian theories of economic justice will never be very persuasive as long as they focus exclusively on distributive justice, ignoring contributive justice, for this omission allows people to believe that inequalities in distribution are a product of differences in contribution, as if individual contributions were simply a matter of individual motivation and effort, as if the distribution of work of different qualities were a reflection of genetic differences in intelligence, plus effort and aspirations. Where that understanding is not challenged, it invites people to object to any major equalisation of distribution on the grounds that this would not be fair because some contribute more complex and responsible labour than others, and hence supposedly deserve more, as if those inequalities in contribution were simply a product of individual decision, for which they might be held responsible.

Conclusions

The ideas I have been trying to assess and develop help us understand the injustice of class, by showing that is not only unequal distribution that matters, but inequalities in the availability of meaningful work. The corollary of sharing complex, interesting, rewarding tasks is of course that we share routine, tedious and unfulfilling tasks as well. Contributive injustice limits what some people can do and hence the extent to which they can develop their own abilities and find fulfilment, respect and self-esteem. Insofar as it indirectly shapes the contexts in which the next generation is brought up, it also tends to produce inequalities in abilities which appear to legitimise the unequal social division of labour that gives rise to contributive injustice (Bourdieu, 1984; 1996, Tilly, 1998).

Gomberg's conclusion about the division of labour and the reproduction of economic inequalities is that merely countering racism and class contempt in attitudes and behaviour will not have much impact on those inequalities, because they are partly a product of the structural scarcity of complex, good quality jobs created by the unequal social division of labour. Tilly makes a similar point:

> "Mistaken beliefs reinforce exploitation, opportunity hoarding, emulation and adaptation but exercise little independent influence on their initiation.....It follows that the reduction or intensification of racist, sexist, or xenophobic attitudes will have relatively little impact on durable inequality, whereas the introduction of new organizational forms....will have great impact" (Tilly, 1998, p.15)

Similarly, increasing access to education without increasing the number of opportunities (quality jobs) does not increase access to opportunity – it just intensifies competition, reduces the scarcity and hence the exchange-value of qualifications, and leads to demands for still higher qualifications. These are forms of intensification of the competition for goods that do not challenge the structure which creates the competition.

This argument may seem to have been an idealised one, but it appeals to existing principles and practices that are already present in certain limited spheres of activity. It can therefore claim to be an immanent critique, not merely external criticism (Benhabib, 1986). Liberals might regard the contributive justice argument as too tied to a conception of the good, but to accept an unequal distribution of different qualities of work is effectively also to accept a conception of the good. It is certainly not to

remain neutral with respect to different conceptions of the good (Gomberg, 2007, p.151). In addition to its normative interest, it also helps us achieve a better understanding of divisions of labour in capitalism, and how the social division of labour as Murphy terms it is neither natural nor a simple technical imperative but rather a contingent form of social organisation - one which plays a major role in the reproduction of inequality. In practice, it tends to be coexist and interact with other mechanisms, structures and forms of domination that are more commonly recognised in the existing literature on inequalities – with capitalist relations of production, gender, race, disability and other sources. However, precisely because it is irreducible to any of these, it deserves attention.

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