

Huang Zongxi, Rousseau and Smith: From Good Government to Division of Labour

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In reviewing the history of China, one can easily name a number of tyrants. It is therefore not surprising that Huang Zongxi suggested at his time so revolutionary a set of ideals targeted at the emperor on how to rule a country and what measures to implement.

In *Waiting for the Dawn*, Huang states that when people live together, there is always someone who “[does] not think of benefit in terms of his own benefit but [seeks] to benefit all-under-Heaven, and who [does] not think of harm in terms of harm to himself, but [seeks] to spare all-under-Heaven from harm.”¹ These, according to Huang, are the qualities that a king or the leader of a country should possess. In an ideal case, the multitude in a country or state is the master, while the king or the leader is only the “tenant” who is supposed to work conscientiously and painstakingly to serve the people.

What is valuable about Huang’s proposal is that, it is not just a plan of government for the ancient kings, but may serve as an exemplary blueprint for modern-day leaders as well. From the time when Huang proposed the

¹ Huang 91.

plan to the present day, despite the long period of history that has elapsed (around three-and-a-half centuries) and however large the increase in the complexity of human society and of many aspects of life, the role of a leader is invariably to ensure the well-being of the people by, as Fan Zhongyan² puts in his famous line, “feeling worried before all-under-Heaven starts to worry, and feeling happy after all-under-Heaven has rejoiced.”³

Having so said, it would be apt to provide a contemporary example to illustrate how a leader may fail to achieve this, and how he only “extracts the very marrow from people’s bones, and takes away their sons and daughters to serve his own debauchery.”⁴ Zimbabwe, a South African country, is known for its human right abuses and ever-crumbling economy, with the country suffering from a hyperinflation of 89.7 sextillion (10^{21}) percent (as of 14 Nov 2008)⁵ and serious unemployment. What is more appalling is that, the President, Robert Mugabe, and the First Lady, Grace Mugabe, live in extreme luxury. Instead of devising urgent plans to salvage the country and getting through the hard times with the people, they build lavish villas and purchase world-class Mercedes-Benz limousine, among other extravagant acquisitions. The wife goes on regular shopping sprees despite the catastrophic poverty of the common people. This whole picture matches very well with what Huang describes as a tyrant.

Therefore, an important prerequisite for maintaining the social and economic well-being of a country is a good leader who does care for the

2 范仲淹。

3 In Chinese: “先天下之憂之憂，後天下之樂而樂”。

4 Huang 92.

5 Hanke, “New Hyperinflation Index (HHIZ) Puts Zimbabwe Inflation at 89.7 sextillion percent.”

people and serves them wholeheartedly. For Huang, the ideal government is one that is *for* the people, but Jean-Jacques Rousseau takes it further to argue for a government that is also *of* and *by* the people. In his book *The Social Contract*, Rousseau places great importance on the general will of the populace, or the Sovereign, as he calls it. A perfect society would be one which is controlled by this general will, and the government, which is separate from the Sovereign, is only responsible for executing its will. This idea is different from Huang's proposal—while Rousseau believes that in that the multitude are entitled to participate in politics, Huang only favors a virtuous king to rule over them. In other words, Rousseau advocates a form of government that is by the people, or democratic, as our present-day understanding would call it. Rousseau begins the Social Contract by stating that “man is born free,” but “everywhere he is in chains.”⁶ Therefore, by entering this Sovereignty, one, “while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before.”⁷ This, according to Rousseau, is what the social contract is for.

Rousseau's political proposal does have its legacy in the modern world. Today, democracy has become the name of the game in many countries. With democracy, people are entitled to active participation in politics, and to freely elect those whom they trust and on whom the political power can be conferred. This means a way to effectively monitor the government because by voting, people can decide who is capable and thus who can represent them in the government, and take down those who are no longer “worth their salt.” Ideal as it may sound, democracy does not come without

6 Rousseau 10.

7 Rousseau 18.

a cost. It has taken its toll in places like Europe where, for example, the unemployment rate stands high and all-encompassing social welfare often turns out to encourage regular labor strikes. The same is true in the United States and Canada where good social welfare and healthcare systems contribute to national deficit every year.

One can conclude that no system alone is flawless and perfect. However, if we consider Huang's and Rousseau's plans again, despite their difference in the point of focus, their combination—Huang's meritocratic plan to complement Rousseau's democratic plan—can make a better solution. For example, though a democratic government allows a free electoral system, politicians, in order to gain support from a certain sector, always makes many promises to members of that sector but overlook those from other sectors, giving rise to an uneven distribution of social resources. An example is that labor parties always put forward policies to secure the interest of laborers, while conservative policies aim to protect interests of the upper class or business people. With the kind of leader which Huang advocates, however, he will endeavor to ensure everyone is treated fairly irrespective of their social class, as "all-under-Heaven is not one's possession, but all's"⁸, or "of the people." In this way, justice for all can be achieved as much as possible.

In addition to an ideal and stable political environment, a certain degree of economic prosperity is needed for people's well-being. One of the factors contributing to such prosperity, according to Adam Smith, is the practice of division of labor. In *The Wealth of Nations*, the Scottish economist shows that "the greatest improvement in the productive powers of labor . . . seem[s] to

8 The original reads : " 天下非一人之天下 · 乃天下人之天下".

be the effects of the division of labor.”⁹ His discussion is indeed convincing with the famous example of pin-making, and with the reasons he provided to explain why specialization leads to increased productivity: increased dexterity, time saved in moving around between tasks and mechanization. Though Smith’s discussion is not from a macroscopic point of view, it is remarkable that division of labor actually applies to the whole world, where, for example, Japan and Germany specialize in electronics and heavy industry, Malaysia in rubber production, Silicon Valley in IT, etc.

However, by specialization, one always produces more than one needs. And as they specialize in producing one or a few products, they naturally need an external supply of what is not produced. In other words, producing large quantities is not truly “productive” unless the surplus ends up in hands which need it and value it. It is thus significant that Smith also points out that the advantages of division of labor can only be fully realized when people co-operate, i.e. when they exchange.

Convincing though Smith’s discussion is, he does not go on to expound how to effectively divide labor—is the division arbitrary and random or based on some kind of criteria? That is to say, in what way should labor be divided so as to truly raise productivity to a potential maximum? Bringing this question into today’s economics, the concept of “comparative advantage” can be an answer. Imagine on an isolated island, there live two men, one of whom is young, strong and fast in working while the other is old, weak and slow. The young one has an absolute advantage in producing goods (or generally, carrying out economic activities) while the old man has an absolute disadvantage. However, the young man will not take up

9 Smith 128.

all modes of production; they will still specialize and exchange. Although the young man has an absolute advantage in all productions, he would only produce those items in which he has a comparative advantage, and so would the old man. In this way, the total productivity is higher when both men specialize than when only the young man produces. Using economic terms, comparative advantage is the advantage to produce something at a lower opportunity cost than other producers. Given limited resources, a country must specialize, and specialize only in the production of items in which it enjoys the highest comparative advantage.

However, things are always multi-faceted and division of labor is not without its drawbacks. Some such drawbacks have already been extensively discussed, such as over-dependence of one production on other kinds of production, monotony on the workers' part and their increased occupational immobility, among others. But as for how it affects human character, one can say it encourages the shirking of responsibility. Imagine how annoying it would be when sometimes you make an inquiry or complaint to department A of the government, but only end up having this department saying it is not their job and directing your problem to department B, and again department B shirking and passing the problem to department C, and so on. People think they only specialize in one area of work and so do not concern themselves with other areas at all. The famous linguist Noam Chomsky has remarked, "(Not) many people get to the point hundreds of pages later, where he [Adam Smith] says that division of labor will destroy human beings and turn people into creatures as stupid and ignorant as it is possible for a human being to be."¹⁰ Division of labor is of course useful to

10 Chomsky 20.

us in many ways—it has been applied extensively from manufacturing to administrations in virtually all occupations—but still it should not be taken to the extreme in any case, where everyone works in isolation and is devoid of communication with or knowledge of their fellows.

The three classics discussed above have generally offered some good advice on how people's justice and economic prosperity can be achieved. Yet, it is important that today's leaders or authorities do not follow them blindly, but take their true meanings and incorporate them into the contemporary world with necessary modifications. It is in this sense that these classics are truly of great value to us.

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