

ONTOLOGICAL COHESION THROUGH LABOUR: THE SOCIAL ORGANISM OF ADAM SMITH'S COMMERCIAL SOCIETY

Dr. MEHDI MORCHID

Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra, Morocco

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that Adam Smith constructs labour not merely as an economic input, but as the ontological medium through which society coheres as a unified social organism. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the study analyses Smith's metaphorical conceptualisations of "labour" and the "labourer" in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), focusing on metaphors of interdependence, enhancement, benefit, competition and shared fate. By systematically mapping source domains such as organisms, machines, commodities, circulation, and art onto target domains associated with labour, production, and social relations, the analysis demonstrates how Smith frames labour as the force that binds different social actors into a single functional body. The paper argues that these metaphors reveal an implicit ontology of cohesion, in which social unity is organically generated through the division of labour and the pursuit of self-interest. The findings illuminate a conceptual and structural affinity between Smith's commercial society and Durkheim's notion of organic solidarity, showing that labour, for Smith, is not only productive but constitutive of social being itself.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Adam Smith, Social Ontology, Organic Solidarity, Émile Durkheim, Social Cohesion

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Scholarly narratives on Adam Smith frequently prioritise his economic propositions, market mechanisms, self-interest, the division of labour and the invisible hand while overlooking the metaphoric and ontological dimensions of his discourse. Yet, *The Wealth of Nations* (Smith, 1777) reveals a sustained reliance on metaphors that do more than clarify economic processes. These metaphors construct a vision of society as an interdependent whole, whose cohesion emerges through labour and exchange. This article contends that Smith's commercial society is metaphorically and conceptually structured as a social organism, and that labour functions as the binding medium through which this organism coheres. In Smith's text, society is not merely an aggregate of individuals pursuing private ends. It is an integrated body whose unity arises from patterned interdependence amongst different agents.

To uncover this conceptual foundation, the study employs Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), as developed by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and expanded by Kövecses (2010), to analyse Smith's metaphorical constructions of labour and the labourer. CMT holds that abstract domains of thought are structured by mappings from more concrete source domains. In Smith's writing, metaphors of organs, hands, circulation, machinery, species, containers, and arts serve as source domains that structure the target domain of labour. These mappings are not ornamental: they articulate assumptions about what society is and how it holds together.

The resulting claim is ontological. Smith's labour metaphors articulate a view of society whose cohesion is necessary, natural and organic, rather than contractual or mechanical. This finding aligns Smith's project with Émile Durkheim's notion of "organic solidarity," (Durkheim, 1997/1893, p. 96) wherein social unity in modern societies arises from interdependence rooted in the division of labour. The article demonstrates that Smith anticipates, at a metaphorical and conceptual level, a key Durkheimian insight: Differentiated functions do not fragment society. They bind it.

The sections that follow unfold as: a methodological clarification of CMT and its link to ontology, detailed CMT analyses of five metaphorical conceptualisations of the labourer in Smith and a synthesis arguing that these metaphors yield an ontology of social cohesion, placing Smith in conceptual proximity to Durkheim's view of the social organism.

2.0 METHODOLOGY: Conceptual Metaphor Theory and Ontological Reading

Conceptual Metaphor Theory posits that metaphor is a cognitive mechanism through which people understand abstract domains (TARGET) via more concrete domains (SOURCE) that structure reasoning through cross-domain mappings (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010). The method consists of four analytical steps:

1. isolating concordance lines containing metaphorical language,
2. identifying the source and target domains,
3. explicating cross-domain mappings and
4. interpreting the entailments of these mappings.

Because metaphors in Smith do not merely describe labour but define its role in the structure of social reality, an ontological reading is justified. When Smith depicts society as dependent on labour for its coherence, reproduction and functioning, he advances claims about what society is. Thus, metaphor analysis becomes a tool for accessing Smith's implicit social ontology where cohesion is generated through labour-mediated interdependence.

3.0 METAPHORICAL CONCEPTIONS OF LABOUR IN SMITH

3.1 Interdependence Between the Labourer and the Capitalist

Smith conceptualises the foundations of social life through metaphor. By presenting exchange as the basic condition of human coexistence, Smith frames society as an interdependent network rather than a collection of isolated individuals. The following concordance line illustrates how commercial activity becomes the organising principle of social structure.

Every man thus lives by exchanging, or becomes in some measure a merchant, and the society itself grows to be what is properly a commercial society. (Smith, 1977, p. 41)

Source Domain: exchange, trade, commercial network

Target Domain: human social relations and social structure

Cross-Domain Mappings:

Exchange → human cooperation

Merchant → every person as interdependent agent

Commercial society → society as a network of mutual dependence

Interpretation:

The metaphor frames society as intrinsically relational. To live is to exchange. Therefore, to exist socially is to depend on others. The labourer and the capitalist are not independent agents, but mutually conditioned positions within a relational system.

Ontological Function:

This metaphor establishes cohesion as foundational to being in society. The social organism exists only through labour-mediated interdependence.

3.2 The Enhancement of the Labourer’s Performance

Smith presents labour as a productive force that can be intensified, refined and perfected through technological and organisational means. The concordance line below illustrates this conceptualisation:

The productive powers of the same number of labourers cannot be increased, but in consequence either of some addition and improvement to those machines and instruments which facilitate and abridge labour; (Smith, 1977, p. 456)

Source Domains: machine, instrument, technology and material object

Target Domain: labour and the labourer

Cross-Domain Mappings:

Machines and instruments → external enhancers of human capacity

facilitate → reduce friction and difficulty

abridge labour → a material mass that can be shortened, compressed or made smaller

Interpretation:

Labour becomes thinkable as an optimisable material process. To “abridge” labour metaphorically compresses it into a manipulable object, implying greater control and efficiency. The machine/labour synergy casts the labourer not as a fatigued body but as a generator of productive force whose output can be amplified. Similarly, Smith’s famous metaphor of the division of labour relies on a material image where labour is a uniform whole that can be divided into smaller, more manageable parts. This imagery recurs in the following concordance line:

Into other arts the division of labour is naturally introduced by the prudence of individuals... (Smith, 1977, p. 930)

Here, “art” reframes labour as a skilled, crafted practice rather than drudgery while “division” treats labour as a divisible mass. The source domain of art entails skill, intentionality and refinement, mapping these qualities onto the target domain of labour.

Ontological Function:

This metaphorical cluster positions labour as a dynamic force within the social organism. Machines, repetition, specialisation and prudence are the organism’s tools for self-improvement. The organism does not merely have labour. It improves itself through labour, reinforcing cohesion by increasing mutual usefulness. The more specialised and efficient each part becomes, the more it depends on every other part, deepening organic interdependence.

3.3 The Labourer as a Recipient of Benefits

Smith also frames labour as a pathway to real and moral improvement, conceptualising the labourer as a beneficiary of a system that rewards effort. Consider the following concordance line:

The real recompense of labour, the real quantity of the necessaries and conveniences of life which it can procure to the labourer, has... increased... (Smith, 1977, p. 114)

Source Domains: reward, nourishment, provision and sustenance

Target Domain: wages, labourers’ well-being, social outcomes

Cross-Domain Mappings:

recompense → reward for merit, not mere transaction

procure → labour as a means of access to life itself

Interpretation:

The labourer is metaphorically cast as a recipient of social nourishment. The system does not merely extract labour. It feeds, clothes and sustains the worker. In another concordance line, Smith metaphorises labourers as a “species” whose basic maintenance must be secured:

...the lowest species of common labourers must everywhere earn at least double their own maintenance... (Smith, 1977, p. 101)

The source domain of “species” invokes biological imagery. A species must be maintained for the organism, society, to survive. The metaphor of “maintenance” also evokes machinery and living systems simultaneously, blending organism and mechanism in a shared logic whereby labourers must be maintained because they are the life-function of the organism.

Ontological Function:

These metaphors assign labour an ethical and reproductive role in the social organism. For the body to endure, its parts must be nourished. Cohesion here is not only functional but moral. If labour sustains society, then society must sustain labour. This reciprocity becomes part of the organism's ontological structure.

3.4 The Labourer as a Competitor

Smith conceptualises the labourer as a competitor within a naturally emerging market, where individuals strive to advance their conditions through exchange. The following concordance line foregrounds competition as an inherent feature of economic life:

A competition will immediately begin among them, and the market price will rise more or less above the natural price... (Smith, 1977, p. 85)

Source Domains: marketplace, rivalry, scarcity and auction

Target Domain: labour and labour relations

Cross-Domain Mappings:

competition → rivalry for advantage

market → behavioural arena with rules and stakes

price → value of labour defined relationally

rise/ fall → dynamism and fluctuation as natural states

Interpretation:

This metaphor frames labour as a commodity entering a contest of valuation. The labourer is not a passive victim of circumstance, but a market actor whose agency is exercised through rivalry, skill, education and strategic positioning. Smith reinforces this imagery by describing labour shortages as a "scarcity of hands," a metaphor that objectifies labour into a tangible, tradable element tied to bodily capacity. In another concordance line, he notes:

There could seldom be any scarcity of hands, nor could the masters be obliged to bid against one another in order to get them. (Smith, 1977, p. 104)

Here, "hands" stands for labour-power, and "bid" invokes the auction-house logic of competitive valuation.

Ontological Function:

Competition produces differentiation without disintegration. In the social organism, not every part performs the same task, nor do all cells have equal strength, but the organism remains unified. Competition is therefore not antithetical to cohesion. It is the mechanism through which functional diversity is produced, sustaining interdependence and collective advancement.

3.5 The Shared Fate of the Labourer and the Capital Owner

Smith acknowledges tensions between labourers and capital-owners. Yet, his metaphors ultimately emphasise shared dependence and mutual vulnerability. The first concordance line frames their relationship contractually:

What are the common wages of labour, depends everywhere upon the contract usually made between those two parties, whose interests are by no means the same. (Smith, 1977, p. 98)

Source Domains: contract, negotiation, transaction and measurement

Target Domain: wage relations and class relations

Cross-Domain Mappings:

contract → reciprocal obligations

two parties → symmetrical agents entering agreement

interests → directional motivations that must be reconciled

Interpretation:

While Smith admits differing interests, the contract metaphor frames conflict as regulated and containable, not destructive. This controlled tension mirrors how opposing forces within an organism can still function harmoniously. Smith then develops a more organic metaphor that moves beyond contract and introduces shared vulnerability:

The liberal reward of labour... is the natural symptom of increasing national wealth. (Smith, 1977, p. 108)

Here, the nation is metaphorised as a body, wealth as its health and wages as symptoms, diagnostic indicators. If wages are symptoms, then labour is part of a circulatory or vital system. Health metaphors imply holistic interdependence. If one part suffers, the whole body suffers. Finally, Smith insists that machines, capital and land are inert without labour:

The most useful machines and instruments of trade will produce nothing without the circulating capital which affords the materials... and the maintenance of the workmen... (Smith, 1977, p. 370)

Source Domains: machine, maintenance and circulation

Target Domain: labour and production

Cross-Domain Mappings:

machines → organs or tools needing activation

maintenance → nourishment and care

circulating capital → lifeblood-like flow enabling function

Ontological Function:

This metaphorical cluster culminates in the idea of shared fate. Capital cannot produce without labour; labour cannot produce without capital. They are organs of one social body, coordinated through the circulation of labour and value. Conflict is real, but not final. Cohesion is the deeper substratum.

4.0 LABOUR AS THE CIRCULATION OF THE SOCIAL ORGANISM

The preceding metaphorical clusters of: interdependence, enhancement, benefits, competition and shared fate converge into a single ontological image: labour as the bloodstream of the social organism. In Smith's commercial society, labour circulates through production, distribution and exchange, enlivening each "organ" by connecting it to all others. Without labour's circulation, the organism becomes inert.

Circulation implies several ontological entailments:

Continuity → Labour must flow constantly.

Distribution of vitality → All parts must receive its benefits.

Feedback → Conditions in one sector affect the whole.

Dependence on pathways → Institutions are arteries of value.

Vulnerability → Blockages represent crises.

These entailments align with Smith's metaphors of "maintenance," "recompense," "species," "scarcity of hands" and "national health." Labour, through circulation, is what binds plurality into unity. The society Smith describes is not merely a system of exchanges but a living unity of differentiated functions. Thus, at the ontological level, labour is not ancillary. It is constitutive of social being. It is the medium through which cohesion is materially and morally realised.

5.0 DURKHEIM AND ORGANIC SOLIDARITY

This ontological vision resonates with Émile Durkheim's account of "organic solidarity" in *The Division of Labour in Society* (Durkheim, 1997/1893, p. 96). Durkheim argues that in modern societies, cohesion arises not from sameness, but from functional differentiation and interdependence. Just as organs in a body have distinct functions, yet share a common life, social cohesion emerges when individuals depend on one another through specialised roles. Smith anticipates this logic, metaphorically and conceptually. First, both thinkers reject the idea that modern society is held together by force or by a mere social contract. Smith's metaphors frame cooperation and exchange as natural and spontaneous while Durkheim insists that solidarity is organic rather than contractual. Second, both ground cohesion in functional necessity. Smith's division of labour makes individuals useful to one another while Durkheim argues that functional complementarity produces moral obligation. Third, both attribute

cohesion to circulation. For Smith, labour and exchange circulate the means of life throughout society. For Durkheim, the circulation of social currents and reciprocal needs sustains solidarity. Finally, both produce an implicitly moral sociology. In Smith, the labourer is entitled to “maintenance” and “recompense” because the organism must care for its parts. In Durkheim, solidarity entails moral duties rooted in interdependence. Thus, labour is not only productive, but is the generator of moral and structural cohesion in the social organism.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS

The findings advance three implications:

Ontological: Smith’s metaphors reveal that society is an interdependent organism constituted through labour. Being-in-society is relational and circulatory, not individualistic or mechanistic.

Moral: Cohesion entails obligation. If labour is the bloodstream of the social organism, then society must sustain the conditions of labour, not for charity, but for ontological necessity.

Economic: The market is not a battlefield, but a circulatory system where competition functions like regulated tension in a living body. Economic health, like biological health, depends on balance, flow and systemic care.

7.0 CONCLUSION

This article has shown that Adam Smith metaphorically constructs labour as the circulatory force of a social organism, through which modern commercial society coheres. Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the analysis demonstrated how metaphors of exchange, machinery, benefit, competition and shared fate map concrete source domains onto the abstract target of labour. These mappings reveal an ontology of cohesion wherein interdependence is the condition of social being.

By aligning this metaphorical ontology with Durkheim’s organic solidarity, the study repositions Smith not as a theorist of atomistic self-interest, but as a thinker of relational being and organic cohesion, whose metaphors anticipate modern sociology. Labour, for Smith, is not merely an economic category. It is the bloodstream of the social organism, the medium through which society lives.

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