Would you argue that Fordism was a good idea or a bad one?

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Based on Taylorism, Fordism is a manufacturing philosophy, which aims to achieve higher productivity through the efficiency of standardising the output; breaking up the tasks into smaller deskilled ones and using conveyor assembly lines. It was devised by Henry Ford around 1903 and 1926, and has been used long since due to its efficiency, which popularises mass-production. This philosophy (Fordism) was derived from Taylorism, a scientific management theory, by Frederick Taylor, who broke down large tasks into smaller ones and assigning a specific job to a worker who had the ability to complete it. Fordism broke this down even further so that each job required no skill at all. However, although Fordism was hugely popular in its time, it could be argued that it was not sustainable with the fast changes of the modern demands and so no longer a good idea today.

The main benefit of Fordism is that it allows mass production by breaking the tasks down. The tasks were deskilled tasks and the employees did not have to think. In essence, they were many parts to a machine, which built cars one screw at a time. The difference between Taylorism and Fordism in this aspect is that specific jobs did not need to be assigned to people with specific abilities, whereas Taylorism required specific skills. A huge number of people were required for this to work and since the jobs required very little skill, many people were employed. Furthermore, as the organisation became more successful, they paid the workers a higher wage, from $2.34 per day to $5.00 per day, not only to keep workers satisfied but also that they could afford to buy these mass-produced cars. By mass-producing, the cars were cheap enough to be bought by working class people; not only that, but by giving his own employees a higher wage meant that this was a realistic opportunity for the working class, thus Ford was able to sell more of the cars being produced. From hundreds of cars being sold per year in 1908 to millions of cars being sold by 1925, it is clear that mass-production is a benefit both economically and socially. The social benefits being, a decrease in poverty, reduced class divide and a more homogenous society. Due to that fact, other countries such as Germany, Italy and even the Soviet Union implemented Fordism, as it was uniform and if calculated correctly, boosted the economic scale of many necessities.

There are two main drawbacks of Fordism, both of which cost a large sum of profits from the organisation; the first one being that the work was monotonous. As workers did the exact same job day in and out, they became bored; the employees started disliking their job (despite the high salary) and often avoided work as well as quitting their job. With both the turnover rate and absence rate being exceptionally high, profit was lost, a key issue of producing efficiently. The focal reason for this was that the employees worked in harsh conditions – they were not treated like individuals, but rather like machine parts, pushed to meet demands with no room for stalling. It encouraged them to organise unions and hold strikes, which was extremely disruptive for a precisely scheduled assembly line. In 1941, this was the case, when UAW held a huge strike that Ford was unable to turn a blind eye to. The employees were also often left with no useful skill after working for Ford, as their single deskilled task was not adaptable to any other job. The second drawback is that the assembly line was so rigidly organised and planned that it was difficult to adapt to changes. When customers wanted more choice and options, Ford was unable to meet the demands as a change in the assembly line disrupted mass-production, which cost the company an immense amount of money. The rivalling company at the time, General Motors were able to surpass Ford on this aspect, as people no longer just wanted an affordable mass-produced car, but one that suited them.

Beyond this era, in the 1960’s post-Fordism came about. People did not want material possessions as much as better service and so the rate of mass-production saturated. Social classes also had a far softer divide with many people in the working class being able to afford more opulent luxuries than before, even more so than some middle class people. At this point, many wanted a range of products with different preferences for style and function; black was no longer the standardised colour. As technology advanced, machines were able to do many jobs that the employees were doing before, so a huge number of workers were no longer required, and since there were fewer workers, fewer managers were needed also. It is clear in recent years that the benefits of Fordism do not outweigh its weaknesses.

Undoubtedly Fordism was well structured to create an efficient assembly line, which increased productivity so that cars could be mass-produced. Furthermore many issues that occurred were tackled very well, such as the bored workers having a pay rise so that they themselves could afford cars. However the inflexibility of this was a huge concern to both workers and cost of the organisation itself, Fordism was also not sustainable due to many changes in the following years after the war. The argument presented suggests that although Fordism was very successful at the time and so was a good idea, it was unsustainable and had weaknesses both during its time of success and after. Ultimately implying that it is no longer a good idea but a bad one today.

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