

# Work as Key to the Social Question

The Great Social and Economic Transformations and the Subjective Dimension of Work



## Work and its meanings

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That Pope John Paul II's contributions to the rich tradition of Catholic social teaching would be important, indeed remarkable, was evident with his first "social encyclical," *Laborem Exercens*, "On Human Work." In the tradition of his great predecessor, Pope Leo XIII, John Paul's powerful insight is that you cannot separate work and its meanings from anthropological concerns, that is, with a presupposition of *the dignity of the human person and in what that God-given dignity consists*. *Laborem Exercens* shares the basic assumption of Catholic social thought that God created human beings as brothers and sisters, not as enemies, and that God gave the earth to all equally to be cultivated. Various nations are communities who ought to try to achieve cooperation for the common good.

In contrast to such masters of Western political thought as Machiavelli and Hobbes, who assume worlds of enmity, treachery, manipulation, and conflict, or of Karl Marx, who presumed historically constructed eternal antagonism between two opposing classes one of whom was destined to disappear in a revolutionary cataclysm in order to make way for the classless society, Catholic social teaching begins from very different presuppositions and, unsurprisingly arrives at startlingly revolutionary conclusions by contrast to the power-machinations of Machiavelli, the mechanistic reductionism of Hobbes, and the econometrism and determinism of Marx. Despite their impoverished understanding of the human person, the perspectives of Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Marx have worked their way into much contemporary social science and academic discourse. Alas, it is also the case that, in secular institutions, certainly, but also to a certain extent in Catholic institutions of higher learning, the contrasting tradition of Catholic social teaching is not as familiar as it ought to

be. Indeed, Catholic Social Thought has been called a hidden treasure of the church.

Surely it is time to bring that treasure out of hiding and Pope John Paul II has helped to show the way. He demonstrates just how robust and compelling are the categories Catholic Social teaching offers us as we reflect on the many dilemmas currently facing modern, affluent, technological, consumer societies. He asks us to resituate our thinking and to come up with more generous and capacious solutions to our many social concerns and problems, from abortion and euthanasia to length of the work week, to medical insurance, on and on. Catholic social teaching resists all econometric and materialistic doctrines, whether utilitarianism, so-called rational choice models, functionalism, and structuralism that either obliterate the human subject or offer a reductionistic, thin treatment of the human subject because they fail to credit human agency and free will. As a result, their account of human motivation is very thin; indeed, in so-called rational choice models the claim is that our sole and *only* motivation for every activity we undertake is a narrow calculation of marginal utility. During the course of a debate with a representative of this school of thought I was told, for example, that “reading a bedtime story to a Grandchild” was, in principle, no different from trying to make a killing on the stock market—these are just two different ways people use to achieve an *identical end, namely, to satisfy the requirements of utility maximization*.

Thus many of the theories and models with which we now think and work are deeply flawed because they offer only a reductionistic account of the man or woman who is the subject of work. Who, then, is the creature who mingles her labor with a task? Pope John Paul II has urged us to consider that when we face another human being we find ourselves “pausing at the irreducible.” But dominant trends and tendencies in contemporary ways of thinking about work, workers, and the meaning of work do not pause at the irreducible. Instead, the requirements of their model of the person demand that people busy themselves every moment with utility-maximizing tasks driven by narrow self-interest. They do not pause in the presence of another because they do not believe human beings are irreducible. Indeed, in current technological society, we have gone further. We now confront the spectacle of human beings and human “reproductive materials” being “commodified” and entering the broad stream of commerce.

This may seem to take us rather far afield from *Laborem Exercens*, but I hasten to assure you that this is in fact not the case. Catholic Social Thought has long insisted that employees not be treated as mere “cogs in the machinery” and denied thereby “any opportunity of expressing their wishes or bringing their experience to bear on the work in hand, and keeping them entirely passive in regard to decisions that regulate their activity.... Work should be an expression of the human personality.” (This from Pope John XXIII). Critical

here is how we understand the human moral personality. If you believe, as the reductionistic accounts hold, that persons are the sum-total of their behavioral reactions to the multiple stimuli to which they have been subjected, the moral dimension of personality is lost. We are no longer beings capable of deep reflection on our selves; no longer driven with St. Paul to cry, “That which I would I do not; that which I would not, that I do.” Instead, we simply react when some stimulus impinges upon us.

Let’s take up the heart of the anthropological matter, for it is his rich reflections on the dignity of the human person that distinguish the thinking of Pope John Paul II. The Holy Father always pauses at the irreducible as he discusses persons and their God-given dignity in his many encyclicals, homilies, and other writings. He begins *Laborem Exercens* with the insistence that work distinguishes human beings from the rest of creation whose activity for sustaining their creaturely lives cannot be called work. Human work is the heart of the social question. How are human beings to live and to work together? Human beings are called to be responsible stewards. Human work *from the very beginning* is transitive: it begins with the human subject and is then directed towards external objects. It is, therefore, vital to look at work in two main senses: in the *objective sense*, defined as the whole set of instruments man uses for work but, even more importantly, in the *subjective sense*, with man (meaning all human persons, male and female) as the subject of work. Human beings are intentional beings who realize their humanity in and through work. It follows that *the primary value of work cannot be measured in simple economic terms but in the fact that the one doing it is a person.*

On this, John Paul is clear: “The sources of the dignity of work are to be sought primarily in the subjective dimension, not in the objective one.” This is a profoundly radical claim in our materialistic age. The Holy Father perceives a threat to the right order of values in all forms of *economistic thought* that reduce human beings to economic calculations and calculators. This happens in rigid profit systems and in state socialist systems—wherever and whenever human beings are placed on the same level as the material means of production, treated, that is to say, as instruments. It was such treatment that originally prompted worker revolts and labor organizing, efforts to fight against the degradation of man as a subject of work. For work is essential to human dignity. It makes family life possible. Currently, the nature and pressure of work, the loss nearly everywhere of any notion of a just wage or living wage, means that, by definition, family life is more difficult—especially when people have absorbed the messages that come at them day and night from the wider cultural surround telling them that buying, getting, acquiring is the highest form of human pleasure and achievement.

The meaning of work to, and for, the subject is thereby distorted: rather than helping the

subject to sustain community, even at the most basic level of the family, work's meaning as acquiring, striving, and competition pits the individual worker, male and female, *against* the needs of those fragile human persons who need them most—their own children—even as they comfort themselves that they are providing amply for what it is their children really *want*. Yet we know, given studies commissioned by several of the task forces I have served on, that, if given a chance to indicate what they want, children consistently say they want more time with, and more guidance from, their parents. They want more, not less, discipline, and so on. Many children have a sense of lostness and they know in part what they are losing as they see adults abandon them to their own devices given the pressures of work-life. As Pope John Paul II puts it in *Centesimus Annus*, “It is not wrong to want to live better; what is wrong is a style of life which is presumed to be better when it is directed towards ‘having’ rather than ‘being,’ and which wants to have more, not in order to be more but in order to spend life in enjoyment as an end in itself.”

Let me return to parsing *Laborem Exercens* for a few moments and then I will use the themes of the encyclical as a critical tool to examine some very troubling developments that involve turning the human body itself into a commodity. John Paul's arguments against class conflict—by contrast to workers' solidarity—are too well known to need any elaboration here. He resists violence as a method for social change. He further presumes that state ownership of the means of production did not preserve human beings from exploitation. Why? The heart of the matter lies in the anthropological question. Econometrism by definition *misdescribes the subject and cannot offer a compelling account of either the meaning of work to, or work for, the human person*. John Paul assumes the priority of labor over capital but there his resemblance to Marxism ends, for the socialization of work as a solidaristic imperative is a far cry from the deadening obliteration of both human individuality and any possibility for solidarity that occurs when a powerful centralized force enforces collectivization from the top-down. Collectivization and socialization are not synonymous. Thus, John Paul's call for the socialization of work is a call away from both rampant individualism or collectivism. Property rights are real but are not absolute and must be subordinated to a common good. John Paul calls for creative labor-management alliances, worker sharing in management and profits, democratization of the workplace—this not so much in the interest of enhancing the bottom line of profit but of offering to the worker a broader, richer set of possible meanings of his or work for the person working.

At this juncture, Pope John Paul II introduces his powerful metaphor of the great work bench of human life. Every worker has a right to his or her place on the great work bench and to the tools he or she requires for independence. This extends to those who are now all-too-often not given a place at the great workbench, for example, persons with physical and

mental disabilities. But they our brothers and sisters in Christ and their time at the workbench is a source of meaning, purpose, and satisfaction for them, too. By all means, the power of a centralized state that erodes associational forms of life must be checked. (In other words, the principle of subsidiarity is presumed and elaborated on.) John Paul writes: “We can speak of socializing only when the subject character of work is ensured—when on the basis of work each person is fully entitled to consider him or herself part owner of the great workbench.”

Consider, now, a disquieting trend in modern bio-technological culture: the commodification of life and the stuff of life itself. Human beings, human body parts, and human “reproductive materials” have become products to be bartered, bought, sold, and wrangled over in courts. Who “owns” the embryos? Who has a “right” to the eggs or sperm? Does a surrogate mother who carries a child for money have a right to see that child after she has given birth and been paid? What about the current move to create so-called “therapeutic embryos,” a soothing way of trying to divert our attention from what is going on, namely, the explicit creation of embryos in laboratories for the intended purpose of destroying them and using their stems-cell lines for research?

In our era one of the “signs of the times”—and Pope John Paul II asks us repeatedly and urgently to learn to read the signs of the times—is the spectacle of human beings themselves, or parts of the materials of human persons necessary to create other persons (sperm, eggs), being put up for sale. If the general argument against reducing man solely to an object of work—turning him into a cog in the machine, making of him just another tool—pertains, surely this argument holds with even greater force when one considers current developments that go a step further and turn the human being into a thing-being-made. This commodification of the human person comports with certain popular modes of social, historical, and literary analysis that hold that human beings are entirely constructed—that there is no “Being” in human being. This radical constructivist project proceeds along several tracks simultaneously, including the econometric one on which I have been concentrating.

For example: nowadays we find respected professors in the law and the academy arguing for a free market in nearly everything, including human babies. The argument is that the old-fashioned method of adoption is a clumsy way to allocate the resource of babies. Far more efficient, they claim, would be a market in which those with babies to sell would advertise these babies, listing their qualities and asking price, and the babies would go to the highest bidder. Even those who find such suggestions troubling are so tangled up in the dominant language of social construction and absolute freedom of choice as the apex of what it means to be human, that they can only offer a weak reminder along these lines: It may be

superstitious to value babies, but we do arbitrarily place a value on them. (Note that babies, small human persons, have no dignity and value in and of themselves in this way of thinking.) Probably we shouldn't permit baby sales because babies cannot *choose*, opines one critic who, absent any concept of the dignity of the human subject, can only treat the issue of baby selling as a dilemma about *consent*. But then, this critic continues, if we forbid baby selling maybe we must forbid adoption, too, because the babies, being below the age of consent, are not consenting in that case either.

Missing altogether in this colloquy is the distinction to be marked between turning a human infant into a commodity to be bought and sold to the highest bidder and a human infant offered as a gift to a couple who, from hospitality and the desire to succor one who would otherwise not have a home, welcome a vulnerable child into the home. John Paul II is surely right, noting in *Centesimus Annus*: "A given culture reveals its overall understanding of life through the choices it makes in production and consumption. It is here that the *phenomenon of consumerism*—[a phenomenon that, as we have seen, now extends to human infants and human body parts]—arises. In singling out new needs and new means to meet them, one must be guided by a comprehensive picture of the person which respects all dimensions of his being and which subordinates his material and instinctive dimensions to his interior and spiritual ones. If, on the contrary, a direct appeal is made to human instincts [as in advertising pitched at children]—while ignoring in various ways the reality of the person as intelligent and free—then *consumer attitudes and lifestyles* can be created which are objectively improper and often damaging to the person's physical and spiritual health."

How important it is to hear such messages, although how they are received in those societies in which econometrism runs rampant, is an open challenge. One final example of this way of thinking is a system of "costing out" the worth of a human life. It goes like this: You require two scales, one called DFE (Discounted Future Earnings) and the other (WTP) Willingness to Pay.) The former scale "values a person's life by projecting the value of lifetime earnings lost because of premature death or disabling injury, and then discounts into present dollars to adjust for future inflation." The second metaphor literalizes those surveys in which people conjure abstractly with what they think life and health are worth. Put these together and we have a value we can assign to life.

Problematic? More than that, surely, for those of us committed to the irreducible dignity of human persons. For one recognizes immediately the pernicious potential implications of such a scale. It might be, for example, that a person with disabilities whose DFE is next to nil is costing society, and his or her death would yield a "net benefit." This may seem far-fetched, but it should not. Given the emphasis on cost-cutting, given the startling rise of a new eugenics enterprise under the rubric of "positive genetic enhancement," we find

ourselves yet again in a situation in which some sorts of bodies in their external appearance are accorded more social value than other sorts of bodies. We are in danger of a new *biological fundamentalism* as a measure of human worth. Fighting these powerful interests will not be easy, especially not in the civic idiom that prevails in my own country, the United States, where everything begins and ends with the language of choice. But fight we must or we will wind up in a world in which a small elite may find it no longer necessary to work—they can live off the largesse accumulated through the labor of others; a sizeable minority is declared unfit for useful labor and simply a drain on society; and the vast majority would be somewhere in-between struggling to understand how it ever came to this. How could we allow this to happen?

That is why John Paul II's criticisms of economism and materialism are more relevant now than they were in 1981 when he issued *Laborem Exercens*. His emphasis on the human person as the subject of work; on the relationship between work and human dignity; and on the "personalist" argument of the true meaning of work, namely, that when one works in common one always works for oneself. This self is a complex relational being who, John Paul insists, is an artist of sorts fashioning out of the materials of his or her life a vision that involves "sharing in the activity of the creator."

I do not know if we have a fighting chance of keeping alive and even restoring some or all of the complex, powerful elements of Catholic Social Thought, here embodied in the pathbreaking encyclicals of Pope John Paul II, especially *Laborem Exercens*, although I have drawn as well on *Centesimus Annus*. Years before he assumed his pontificate, John Paul II as the philosopher Karol Wojtyła wrote in 1976:

"The present age...is a time of great controversy about the human being, controversy about the very meaning of human existence, and thus about the nature and significance of the human being...This aptly describes the situation in Poland today with respect to the whole reality that has arisen out of Marxism, out of dialectical materialism, and strives to win minds over to this ideology....After nearly thirty years of ideological debate in Poland, it has become clear that at the center of this debate is not cosmology or philosophy of nature but philosophical anthropology and ethics: the great and fundamental controversy about the human being." (From "The Person: Subject and Community," p. 220)

That great and fundamental controversy animates Catholic thinking about the social question as reflected in, and refracted through, the great Encyclicals of this pontificate.