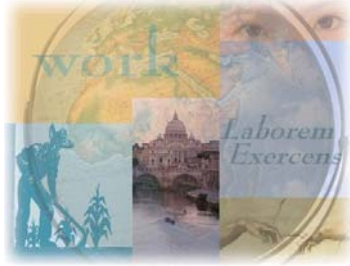


Work as Key to the Social Question

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



Work and Social Provision for the Poor in the United States

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In 1996, President Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (the “PRWORA”). Most Americans know this legislation simply as “welfare reform.” The PRWORA represents the most profound changes in social provision for the poor (commonly identified as “welfare” in the United States) in almost 70 years, and it has received enthusiastic support across the American political spectrum. It was heralded by President Clinton and representatives of both political parties as “an end to welfare as we know it.” One of the most dramatic changes that this legislation brought to the American welfare system was the creation of work requirements for certain recipients of public aid. In this paper, I will analyze work requirements in the reformed American welfare system in light of the social teaching on work presented by Pope John Paul II in *Laborem Exercens* (“*Laborem*”), and I will demonstrate how key premises used to justify work requirements as a central aspect of welfare reform in the United States diverge sharply from the theology of work presented in *Laborem*.

Since the mid-1930's, financial assistance to the poor in the United States has fallen into two fundamental categories. The first category of aid provides recipients with long-term benefits at a relatively high monetary level based on (1) the recipients past participation in the workforce; (2) a family relationship to a former worker, or (3) membership in a class of individuals specifically exempted from work. The second category of aid delivers assistance primarily in the form of services and subsidies, as opposed to direct cash payments. These programs tend to help underemployed or unemployed men and women and their dependent children. [1]

American culture has long clung to the notion, inherited from England, that the poor can generally be classified into two groups. The “deserving poor” are those who have earned the right, so to speak, to claim government benefits because they or some member of their family have enhanced the public good by engaging in wage labor. Work for wages is recognized as a legitimate contribution to the society and a laudable exercise in self-sufficiency that justifies paying support when, for instance, a male worker dies and his widow and minor children are left without an income. In this scenario, it is assumed that the appropriate choice for the widow is to remain at home to care for her children, rather than entering the workforce herself. Because she was legally married with “legitimate” children, the widow is excused from participation in the workforce and her benefits are calculated to encourage her to remain home and engage in socially-acceptable child rearing activities. Also in this category of the “deserving poor” would be elderly retirees, and those who are physically unable to work due to a condition outside of their control (physical handicap, mental illness).

It is the second group, the “undeserving poor,” that is the primary target of welfare reform. These are the people who are (1) physically able to work, but do not, and (2) those who engage in morally suspect lifestyles which make it difficult or impossible for them to work, such as women who bear children outside of marriage, and those who suffer from alcoholism or drug addictions. In terms of their affect on American views on welfare, the individuals in this group that generate the most negative attention are the unmarried mothers of young children. The stereotype of the “welfare mother,” or the “welfare queen,” has become an indelible part of the American consciousness and, despite its limited basis in fact, this stereotype was a driving force behind welfare reform. [2]

As opposed to the unfortunate widow or invalid, the unmarried mother receiving public assistance tends to be perceived as a the embodiment of moral decay and individual unworthiness. Not only have these women given birth to children outside of marriage, but they also require money from hardworking taxpayers to support their improvident lifestyles. Although Americans have a high degree of social tolerance for single-motherhood, this tolerance generally evaporates when the mother is on public assistance. Welfare reform has targeted this group of aid recipients in particular, by forcing more of these women to work, and by attempting to discourage out-of-wedlock childbearing.

“The welfare reform incorporated in this reconciliation bill saves families and promotes work . . . Under the congressional plan, welfare is, for the first time, converted to a work program. The proposal requires one member of every family on welfare to be working within 2 years. Lifetime welfare benefits are limited to 5 years (though exemptions for special hardships may be applied to as many as 20 percent of the families if necessary). . . The proposal also discourages out-of-wedlock childbearing. It allows States to cap benefits for those on welfare, ending bonuses for families on welfare who have additional children they cannot support.” [3]

The legislative history of the PRWORA makes it quite clear that much of the impetus for reform came from a need to punish the “undeserving” poor for their immoral lifestyles and

to set them on a path to socially acceptable behavior. “The welfare system contradicts fundamental American values that ought to be encouraged and rewarded: work, family, personal responsibility, and self-sufficiency. Instead the system subsidizes dysfunctional behavior.” [4]

At first glance, both the PRWORA and *Laborem* appear to recognize the importance of work in the formation of a person of virtue. For Catholics, however, the cultivation of virtue is not an end in itself, but part of an ongoing process of moving closer to God. *Laborem* develops this idea by linking work to a broader Christian concept of human dignity. John Paul II describes a “subjective” view of work that is inseparable from man’s creation in the image and likeness of God:

“ . . .the primary basis of the value of work is man himself, who is its subject. This leads immediately to a very important conclusion of an ethical nature: However true it may be that man is destined to work and called to it, in the first place work is ‘for man’ and not man ‘for work.’ [5]

In *Laborem*, this subjective view of work is contrasted with an “objective view,” which emphasizes the end products of work—things like money and technology—and tends to lead to a belief in the primacy of things over people. A particular shortcoming of this objective view of work is its inability to value work that does not produce a material good. In particular, work that has traditionally been important in the lives of women, such as raising children, participating in voluntary associations and religious institutions, and caring for the elderly, tends to be seen as economically unproductive.

Work requirements that have been imposed on unmarried mothers as part of welfare reform appear to be rooted in an objective view of work, and they raise serious questions about whether American society is truly able to see the poor as people of dignity. The PRWORA attempts to “reform” the undeserving poor by promoting a vision of work that is heavily focused on the need for these people to “pay their own way” in the most materialist sense. There is little appreciation for the possibility that these individuals may indeed be working, despite the fact that they are not earning wages, and that the work they are doing may have value. Many among the “undeserving poor” have made a rational choice not to pursue wage labor in an economy that would force them to work long hours for low pay. They can live a more dignified life on public assistance, engaged in the work of child rearing and leading lives that provide opportunities for rich human interaction, than would ever be the case if they were trying to support their families on a minimum-wage job. [6]

John Paul II recognized this situation when he argued that human dignity through work cannot be enhanced or protected unless some effort is made to evaluate how individuals are remunerated within a given socioeconomic system. [7] In *Laborem* he extends the Church’s longstanding argument for a just wage as an important means for “checking that [a socioeconomic system] is functioning justly.” [8] Furthermore, John Paul makes specific mention of the special needs of mothers who are raising children:

Experience confirms that there must be a social reevaluation of the mother’s

role, of the toil connected with it, and of the need that children have for care, love, and affection in order that they may develop into responsible, morally and religiously mature, and psychologically stable persons. It will redound to the credit of society to make it possible for a mother—without inhibiting her freedom, without psychological or practical discrimination, and without penalizing her as compared to other women—to devote herself to taking care of her children. . .” [9]

The PRWORA forces poor women with children to work outside the home primarily because the society is committed to a vision of personal autonomy that equates dignity with economic self-sufficiency. This view tends to ignore the fact that raising children is work (regardless of whether the children were born into a valid marriage). Because this work is unpaid it tends to require economic support from another source. In the best of circumstances, children have two parents and one of them can work to provide sufficient economic support for the family. The poor, however, rarely find themselves in the best of circumstances. Forcing a poor mother away from her children to work for wages most likely will not lift her or her children out of poverty. Furthermore, if she is to work, the public must often bear the cost of placing her children in daycare. The drafters of the PRWORA recognized this and allocated \$4 billion in additional federal funds to the states for this purpose. But are the children well served by this? Is the mother’s dignity enhanced because she now “works for a living” instead of relying on public assistance? She will no doubt continue to be poor, and she and her children now bear the additional burden of being separated from one another for most of the day.

Work requirements as an attempt to reform welfare in the United States fall short because they are based on an extremely materialist view of the role of work in the lives of individuals. They also assume that the personal autonomy one derives from living off of wages earned from one’s own labor can not be balanced or outweighed by the benefits of being available for other tasks, such as caring for children or the elderly. Work requirements force poor people, who typically have few marketable skills, into a labor market in which it will be difficult to earn a living wage. Overall, the reform legislation relies on heavily on stereotypes of the poor that are rooted in racist caricatures and other unrealistic stereotypes of poor people. In contrast, *Laborem* provides of view of work and of the human person that would suggest a different kind of welfare reform, one that encourages paid work when that work can sustain a dignified life, and one that seeks to promote in the poor virtues that would allow the them lead meaningful, socially productive, and dignified lives even if they choose not to participate in the labor force. Unfortunately, American culture is so wedded to equation of value with material goods and money at all social levels that it is hard to imagine how the lives of the poor could be seen by the broader society in a way that is any less focused on this subjective understanding of why we labor.

Endnotes

[1] Kathleen A. Kost & Frank W. Munger, *Fooling All of the People Some of the Time: 1990's Welfare Reform and the Exploitation of American Values*, 4 Va. J. Soc. Pol'y & L. 3, 13-14.

[2] Welfare reform, and the social discourse accompanying it, has been deeply influenced by the tortured history of race relations in America. Since the 1960's, as the nation has focused more attention on African-American poverty, more middle-class Americans began to see welfare as a handout to unruly, socially dysfunctional minorities in the cities. This perception was created in part by the "spatial isolation of black Americans... achieved by a conjunction of racist attitudes, private behaviors, and institutional practices that disenfranchised blacks from urban housing markets and led to the creation of the ghetto." Douglas S. Massey & Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* 83 (1993). Today, the face many Americans have affixed to welfare recipients is that of an unmarried African-American mother with multiple children (from different fathers) living in poverty in a large city. See Mimi Abramovitz, *Under Attack, Fighting Back: Women and Welfare in the United States* (2000). This image persists despite the fact that the majority of welfare recipients are white (although the African-American, Latino, and Native American populations have higher overall rates of poverty). Much of American poverty occurs in rural areas, and is less visible than the poverty afflicting minorities concentrated in urban ghettos. See Francis X. Clines, *Nation's Economic Boom a Faint Echo in Appalachia*, N.Y. TIMES, July 5, 1999, at A7. Widely held stereotypes of the poor are indicative of the effect race has had on American welfare and poverty law. Stereotypes of the poor as welfare mothers and ghetto dwellers also contribute to the perception that members of the nation's minority communities are primarily responsible for the social ills associated with poverty. Stereotypes of the poor as welfare mothers and ghetto dwellers also contribute to the misperception that members of the nation's minority communities are primarily responsible for the social ills associated with poverty.

[3] H.R. REP. No. 104-651, at 5 (1996), *reprinted in* 1996 U.S.C.A.A.N. 2183, 2186.

[4] *Id.* at 2185.

[5] *Laborem Exercens*, para. 6 (Sept. 14, 1981) *reprinted in* CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT; THE DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE (David J. O'Brien & Thomas A. Shannon eds., 1998) [hereinafter: *Laborem Exercens*].

[6] The federally-mandated minimum wage in the United States is currently \$5.15 per hour.

Assuming a forty-hour work week for fifty weeks of the year, a worker at this salary would generate an income of \$10,300. According the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, in 2001 the poverty threshold for a family of three is \$14,630.

[7] Laborem Exercens at para. 19, supra note 5 at 378.

[8] Id.

[9] Id. at 379.
