

Work as Key to the Social Question

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



The Nature and the Meaning of Work in our Global System: Laborem Exercens and Economic Thought

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Abstract

Over the past fifty years quite a few economists have shown a thorough interest in the documents of the official Catholic Social Thinking (CST) and have worked, even dialectically so, on the contents set forward in the said writings; they drew up reflections and provided clarifications acting either as individual Catholic thinkers, as people working in institutions, or as members of movements and groups. Therefore economists too contributed to a thorough debate, a composite corpus of reflections often to be found in literature, in the Catholic non-official social thought (CNOST), at times accompanied and followed by exacting and solid experience, thus appearing as efforts in turning into action the mediation between the Gospel and history drawn up by the CST. The economists' interest became particularly evident on the subject of Pope Paul VI' encyclical letter *Populorum Progressio* on the development of peoples (1967) and Pope John Paul II's encyclical letter *Laborem Exercens* on human work. (1981). In the last fifty years the economists' interest for the CTS came side by side with the CTS's special attention devoted to the work of social scientists and in particular of economists. This relationship between the CST and economic thought I believe to be of interest as well as pertaining to my specific profession. I will make a few brief comments on this, with a specific attention to the analysis made by the economists on: 1) the centrality of the meaning of *work as a valuable resource* that must not be wasted; 2) working capabilities as resources that are being employed for an objective, the satisfaction of needs; 3) the meaning and the value of time devoted to work when "being is at the service of having"; 4) work as valuable in itself, not simply in relation to praxis.

Text

Over the past fifty years quite a few economists have shown a thorough interest in the documents of the official Catholic Social Thinking (CST) and have worked, even dialectically so, on the contents set forward in the said writings; they drew up reflections and provided clarifications acting either as individual Catholic thinkers, as people working in institutions, or as members of movements and groups. Therefore economists too contributed to a thorough debate, a composite corpus of reflections often to be found in literature, in the Catholic non-official social thought (CNOST), at times accompanied and followed by exacting and solid experience, thus appearing as efforts in turning into action the mediation between the Gospel and history drawn up by the CST.

Economists were driven to follow this direction under the influence of what can be regarded as the last stage of a tradition that was already present in the economic culture and in the Western social catholic movement; it is the continuation of an interest that before then had been expressed as a vigilant preoccupation of Catholic intellectuals and politicians towards the novelty of the phenomena of “modern times”. It was a continuation but, of course, a renewed one.

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We are aware that the messages of the Popes and the official documents of the Church on social and economic issues are in themselves aiming at forming an ethical judgement on social and economic phenomena, a judgement that is to be expressed, indeed, in the light of the Gospel message and the tradition of the Church. However, it is historically proved that in some cases economic science seems to have “accompanied”, so to speak, the preparation of documents, in the sense that the Pope’s messages seem anxious to take strong roots not only in the Revelation, in the Tradition, in the social reflection and systemization carried out by the Church itself in the past, but also in the reference to scientific thought.

This is also particularly evident in the case of *Populorum Progressio* and *Laborem Exercens*.

It may seem trite to observe that economists are interested in dealing with the economic issues tackled by the CST, which, on the other hand, grasps the importance of referring to the scientific debate that is under way. Actually, to acknowledge this reciprocal interest is to take a useful hint to let one’s reflection follow various directions: those that, among other things, have to do with the comments on the pervasiveness of all that is

connected with economic activity and with the economic criterion in the evaluation of the events, of the actions, and sometimes also of the final objectives, or that have to do with the authority taken on by economic science in Western culture, or else the respect of the independence of scientific discourse, or the relation between social sciences, CST and CNOT.

But, above all, this can bring back to mind that the CST is founded within the principle of human perfectability and on the idea of progress, and therefore confides in the work of scientists and entrusts science with tasks and responsibilities that are inescapable for Christians.

There is one side to this relationship between the CST and economic thought which I believe to be of interest as well as pertaining to my specific profession. I will make a few brief comments on this.

There is no doubt that the attention that economists have been devoting in the past decades towards the social and economic arguments brought forward by the Catholic Church is also due to their acknowledgement of its authority.

This authority comes from the fact that such arguments are not episodic, they are not unfounded, and they are not being constructed as a way of responding to contingent worries sparked by mayfly current events. They are in fact the continuing and necessary completion, in-depth analysis, clarification, and updating of the broad picture that had been outlined on the issue of the development of peoples from the second half of the Twentieth century; this outline was further enhanced by the social reflections of the Church, as well as - in the years following the Second World War - by the analyses of scientists on their new, fertile and even worrying aspects. The widening of the analysis of these arguments gave birth in the Sixties to particularly sharp pastoral documents and to a great number of publications on the issues of development and of economic gaps, the fruits of the scientific work of research departments world-wide.

Laborem Exercens follows the trail of the former. The specific argument of this encyclical falls within the project of defining the meaning of the development CTS unmistakably entered in the late nineteen fifties.

This thought went through numerous stages, as many as the documents, the congresses, the meetings, the debates, the occasional visits and trips of the Popes; as many as the grievous historic events and the unbearable facts of life we have witnessed, or have been actors or protagonists in; as many as the voices who have asked for forms of support and co-operation for better living conditions; as many as the projects and interventions conceived and carried out by private individuals and institutions in order to meet the inalienable basic needs of large parts of the world population.

Along this path the Church has confirmed in time that it stands at the side of the “working class people to comfort their hopes and grieves, to defend their rights and legitimate aspirations, to lead their way ...” but does not arrogate the authority to draw

practical conclusions from those principles; it acknowledges the freedom of discussion and dealing of the problems to those who are specifically competent on the subject. (G. B. Montini, 1960; trans. from Italian by the author)

Populorum Progressio became a milestone of this line of thought and many economists immediately grasped the richness of this theme. We, through the eyes of history, can now see how much it managed to pick up, we are now able to embrace the current wide and deep analyses on the subject of development and use the instruments conceived by economists in order to propose an ethical evaluation of the economic system of our times in the light of the Gospel. As a matter of fact this theme unwinds an overall argument on development, on the world's social question, on every human being who is a responsible protagonist of development and on the peoples that produce this development, but also deals with specific questions relating to salaries, emigration, needs and abilities.

At the same time it caused this appeal to resound outside the Church, and be heard by non-Catholic Christians, non Christians, men of good will: in short, all those who "heard the appeal of the suffering peoples."

Laborem Exercens reaps the ground motifs of Pope Paul VI's mandate. It does so when it states that "A man without a proper job is deprived of the conditions required to adequately develop his personal and social dimension". The social and personal dimension can in fact be developed through one's work since work develops every person's dimension, both man and woman, committed to help in the creation the world. Work develops each and every person's world and this happens simultaneously, in the sense that by working one pursues aims that are conceptually distinguished but inseparable in practice, under pain of creating a fracture between all the true dimensions of reality, which in fact are closely connected in everyone's life, under pain also of not taking into consideration the fact that the worker acts in a reality of which he is both the producer and the product, where the working conditions concretely go side by side with on the one hand with the choices for the employment of the offer in excess, on the other with the choices concerning the use of one's "free" and "non-free" time. It is a question of freeing work from its purely instrumental evaluation, to regenerate the world of work and understand its nature, which is to be regarded as human action guided by a spiritual power. What is relevant for those who work is that their effort is the undertaking fulfilled by a human being, that is to say by a person who thinks, wants and blends his real-life activity while referring to and even contemplating what he believes in; those who work have a right to confront themselves in their everyday life with everything they intimately believe in. The meditation on the importance of work with respect to the person continues in the teaching of John Paul II, who goes deeper into this subject by outlining the anthropological perspectives related to it, especially with *Centesimus Annus*. (Totaro, 2000)

The immediate reactions to this strong appeal have been on one side those of people who have expressed assent and praise, albeit repetitive at times and not quite as deep as the contents of the encyclical letter; on the other those of people who have expressed a critical interest, and on the other still, those of people who have slashed the encyclical, have criticised it, sometimes dismissing it completely, by accusing it - without appeal - of having

underestimated the role of the entrepreneur, of not having taken into due consideration the criterion of efficiency connected to the rationality of the employment of resources and factors, of not having clearly made a distinction between the capitalist and socialist systems, of having used populist tones and of accepting an anti-industrialist culture; with reference to this aspect, the encyclical is being accused of not having taken into due account the continuous and unbroken growth of both consumption and production and the unscrupulousness in business shown by modern industrial societies.

Clear evidence of these varied points of view are to be found in the survey made by the *Alfabeta* magazine on the interest shown by newspapers towards the encyclical on September 16-20; in the papers of a meeting organized by *La Civiltà Cattolica*, later published in the supplement no. 3177 in November 1982; in the third section of Spiazzi's book (1982), dedicated to *Annotazioni e critiche* (Notes and comments).

What really became clear was the existence of two different ways of interpreting the *L. E.*, quite distant from one another: one aiming at showing the Church teaching's concern about the *culture of ends*, mainly working on the level of anthropological and ideal reference values; the other permeated by a *culture of reality*, whose prior concern is to take account of the facts: two different perspectives, revealing different aims in dealing with social issues. The former runs the risk of remaining in the abstract, if the examples drawn from the historical context which are being used to strengthen the argument turn out to be mere illustrative suggestions; on the other hand, the latter is liable to fall into a superficial pragmatism.

Probably this is precisely the point: the CST in its official documents draws from reality, then it sends back to her the reflections on what it has drawn in terms of ideas and events, and entrusts men of good will (first and foremost the Christian community) to continue this analysis and the insight on the situation in order to establish relations between the statement of values (whose validity is meta-historical) and the historical context where these values try to find expression.

This is precisely the reason behind the greater importance that non-immediate reactions, those which are most thought over, which result from reflections, and the analyses and the works that take into account the complexity of matters, have with reference to the formation of culture and of the CNOST, too: a complexity of events, positions and elements where insight is needed to make evaluations on the elements of reality, to adopt lines of behaviour, to come up with actions that interact with the concrete context, with what happens, is invented, is sought, and is suffered in the world.

It was a question of assessing how actual processes are referred or referable to the Christian image of man/woman.

The further efforts of those who have analysed the *L.E.* in depth resulted in the clear emergence of some elements, such as:

1. The centrality of the meaning of *work as a valuable resource* that must not be wasted

because it is one of the basic elements of existence, because it is an element which gives dignity to human personality, and because its objective is always the enhancement of the human being. Under this perspective people are not identified with operational processes, neither with just their individual nature, as each human being holds a dialogue with historical forms: his dignity is reaffirmed in time through his relationship with objects, people, structures, as he expresses his nature through work. In this sense work is a precious resource not just for the worker but for his working environment. As cardinal Martini wrote a month after the publication of *L.E.*, we must have a clear picture of what the human being is in real life, i.e. a persona “entering a solid relationship with the personal history of all men”, who enters “a relationship with the lively mutability of historic forms”, so that “the message that is being forwarded is not disproportionate with respect to the variety and mutability of the problems affecting work”. To consider work as what causes man to encounter the world (Lévinas, 1971), as the capabilities of people for functioning in their society, implies that societies be evaluated and quality of life be measured in terms of targeting people’s functioning capabilities (Nussbaum, 2001). Since the Seventies, economic theory has endeavoured in proving whether this theoretical path is practicable or not: the actual opportunity to exercise certain functions and make a choice on a basket of goods whose importance lies in some of their characteristics, is indispensable in order to guarantee the possibility of producing, exchanging and holding rights. It is sufficient to recall the debates that have accompanied the publication of the works of Amartya Sen to this day, starting from *Collective Choice and Social Welfare* (1970), through *Commodities and Capabilities* and *Well-being, agency and freedom* (1985), up to *Capabilities and Well-Being* (1996), and the comparison between promoting functioning capabilities and functioning prospects. This debate has to do with the fact that work is considered to be a resource and that therefore it is not irrelevant from the point of view of economics whether it is performed with industry, skill, passion or not, thus feeding associative relationships with others and, through these, also between humanity and the earth, generating satisfaction (this belief had already been expressed in the *Mater et Magistra*). It is not irrelevant in the sense that the conditions under which work is performed are not only this but also a “reward” which the market does not value: they are significance relevant to the work that is being performed, because of the meaning that work has for those who perform it, of absolute importance from the point of view of economics but which don’t find an explanation through the market. There are in fact situations which do not emerge through the market mechanism, whereas there are incentives offered through the market which have nothing to do with the actual characteristics that are being evaluated by the price system. Today John Paul II considers that :“The market as an exchange mechanism has become the medium of a new culture”..., ... the logic of the market has an “intrusive, even invasive, character”, ... the “market imposes its way of thinking and acting, and stamps its scale of value upon behaviour”.(27 April 2001) We may think of the frustration, of the insignificance that is generated by unemployment and that unemployment benefits are not able to cancel. On the other hand, it is not only in payment that lies the dignity of work. This broad spectrum of comments is fully reflected in the work of economists towards the definition of the concepts of “poverty”, “poor”, and “needy”; the turning point in the analysis of these phenomena is well documented by entries in the major Encyclopaedias between the

Seventies and the Eighties: the expression “relative poverty” appears (International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences, 1972), and so does the consideration of inequality in terms of income, property, health, education,...(Palgrave, 1987), defining wealth in multidimensional terms, as the sum of people’s capabilities to take part in social life. Each of these entries makes reference to the scientific works on these topics by Townsend (1973), Sen (1976), Harberger (1980), Scandizzo-Knudsen (1980), Brandt (1980) Cripps-Griffith (1981), etc...

2. Therefore, working capabilities are resources that are being employed for an objective, the satisfaction of needs; this latter is undoubtedly a positive aspect of industrial society, though John Paul II in his *Centesimus Annus* (36d), underlines that it does not always correspond to the building of a “life-style in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments”(C.A., 36d; Costa, 2000); as for the effectiveness in reaching this objective, it cannot be guaranteed just by the market mechanism, first and foremost because only those who have something to spend can access the market, and also because not everything that meets people’s needs is placed inside it. From the economic perspective this means considering work like the *place*, the dimension in human life that has to do with the employment of surplus and giving a crucial role to those who decide over this employment, which is addressed towards the production of income in order to satisfy people’s needs as well as to the production of goods for the same objective. By taking this perspective one underlines that the problems of workers are not only a question related to economics but also a political matter: a matter of responsibility towards workers, non-workers and of responsibility on the part of those who work.
3. If work in itself gives dignity to the human being up to the point of increasing the “value” of the worker as a person, if – in other words – being “takes place” in reality (Totaro, 2000), and if work is the employment of the time and skills that are available, then the economist cannot but ask himself questions about the meaning and the value of time devoted to work when “being is at the service of having”. These questions cover topics such as the frequent overlapping of working time, not necessarily paid, with leisure time; such as whether or not one is in control of working time; such as redefining the meaning of the relationship between “master” and “servant”, between work and ownership, and therefore new bases for the analysis of the meaning of alienation. (Duchini, 1983). These are questions that economics tried to answer at the beginning of the Eighties because technological development at the time was seen as a general reality, and the technological and organizational aspects of work as key elements of the social question: they would allow decentralisation and this would mean that the worker could hope for more independence and be freer to choose between work and leisure. Those who responsibly make decisions regarding their work are people seeking their freedom and all workers should be put in the position of being able to bring to the surface a unrestricted line of conduct to show free behaviour whether their environment is economic well-being or whether they are operating in situations where their indirect employer denies this and other fundamental rights, especially because he is unable to deal with working problems in an innovative way while harmonising

production and training (Dell' Aringa, 1983). It should be stressed that the promises technology makes to workers are simultaneously the subject of psychological conditioning and paired with ambiguities. In his teaching John Paul II looks broadly, continuously and with preoccupation at the alliance between technology and human life and at the role of technology as a factor of economic progress, and at the same time at the phenomena of the re-settling of economic structures that were characterized at first by complex systems and later by distributed systems, at unemployment and the inevitable re-training, and at the consequences on the work of those employed in terms of subjection. The computerisation process, in fact, deeply marks change because it does not consist in the mere use of information technology but it accompanies the restructuring of industrial societies with effects on the life of companies, systems and even people. (Pontarollo, 1983) In brief, if work is not to be alienated it must embrace personal values especially.

4. There is one final comment that we feel must be made and that directly affects us: *L.E.* is also about intellectual work. The teachings had previously made explicit reference to this aspect of human activity: work is in fact valuable in itself, not simply in relation to praxis. The specific underlining made in 1981 is about the fact that an intellectual dimension is present in any type of work, which is valuable because it is human effort that is transferred in doing and not in producing.

On the other hand, a few years earlier Karol Wojtyła, during a conference held in Milan's Catholic University on the "problem of culture through human "praxis" ", stated that: "whatever man does through his act, whatever its effect or resulting product, he at the same time always produces himself, whatever the way". Today Wojtyła himself talks to us about every man's aspiration to reflect Truth by discovering little truths, through a work that looks out on the non-cognisable, on the principle whose perception we must cultivate in this world; and mentions the words of one of the Fathers of the Church: "So when you are in your field and contemplate your estate, bear in mind that you too are Christ's field and take care of yourself as you do with your field." (November 12th 2000)

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