

# Work as Key to the Social Question

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



## *Laborem Exercens*, Human Dignity, and Technological Control in the Workplace

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the impact of technologically enhanced control of workers in the modern, technologically mediated workplace. The paper discusses workplace privacy as an aspect of human dignity, and in consideration of the 1981 Papal Encyclical *Laborem Exercens*' position on work as an integral aspect of the human experience.

### **Text**

Social psychologist Everett Hughes has described the relationship of work and self as so instrumental in the life of humankind that we cannot begin to understand the human condition unless and until we make sense of the ways in which man comes to terms with his work. According to Hughes work indicates how people live out their lives, and how they perceive their destinies. So powerful is the work experience that it informs and shapes non-work relationships and attitudes. In fact, "...man's work is one of the more important parts of his social identity, of his self; indeed, of his fate in the one life he has to live..." (Hughes, 1951).

His Holiness Pope John Paul II addressed the salience of work in the human experience in his encyclical letter of September 14, 1981, entitled *Laborem Exercens*. In it

His Holiness calls work “key” to “making life more human” and that because of this salience, work “acquires fundamental and decisive importance” (Pope John Paul II, 1981, p. 3).

In his encyclical, His Holiness expressed concern over the impact of new technologies on the subjective experience of work: “...technology is undoubtedly man’s ally. It facilitates his work, perfects, accelerates and augments it...it is also a fact that, in some instances, technology can cease to be man’s ally and become almost his enemy, as when the mechanization of work “supplants” him, taking away all personal satisfaction and the incentive to creativity and responsibility...or when, through exalting the machine, it reduces man to the status of its slave” (John Paul II, 1981, p. 5). American Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau expressed a similar fear, that humankind had become the tools of its tools (Thoreau, 1854). Modern computer technology has progressed to the point where many contemporary writers are examining a work phenomenon known as the “electronic sweatshop” (see Garson, 1988; Howard, 1985; Brod, 1984; and Burris, 1993).

This paper will examine the potential for total technological control of workers, its significance for human dignity in the workplace, its impact on a sense of workplace community and worker commitment, and finally how *Laborem Exercens* can inform our analysis and thinking about these developments in the subjective experience of work. The paper concludes with a discussion of how technological control raises the value of the *vita activa* over the *vita contemplativa* through scrutiny and measurement.

## **Technological Control in the Contemporary Workplace**

Brown (2000, 1996) has enumerated the expansiveness of technological control available to management in the contemporary workplace. Contemporary workers may be subjected to computer aided pre-employment inquiries such as motor vehicle history reports (examining speeding and riving under the influence arrests), criminal history reports, credit reports, telephone usage pattern reports (examining 800 and 900 numbers called), magazine subscription reports (which could indicate religion, sexual preference, political orientations, etc), worker’s compensation claim histories, private investigative reports (which could entail clandestine surveillance and/or interviews with neighbors, etc.), psychological profiling and integrity testing. Most companies require a post-offer pre-employment physical examination which include EKG, chest x-ray, blood pressure readings, urine and blood samples, and in some instances genetic testing. Although seven states in the U.S. have ruled that genetic testing of workers is inherently discriminatory, growing numbers of employers in the non-prohibited states are testing to see if workers are genetically appropriate for employment. The idea is that workers that may indicate a “marker” for a potential catastrophic illness somewhere in the future may be denied employment in an attempt to contain future health care benefits costs. Of course a genetic predisposition for, let us say, adult onset diabetes does not mean the worker will contract the illness, and in fact may never get the disease.

The marker only indicates an above average potential for the illness.

Once hired an employee may be issued a “smart” ID card that tracks his/her whereabouts during the day, who the employee has been with (other card wearers) and for how long. Employees with smart cards must “swipe” in and out of areas in the company creating an electronic trail (one major company the author visited recently required ID card swiping for entry to employee bathroom areas). A recent advance in the smart ID card technology called Hygieneguard is in use in some hospitals, hotels, and restaurants in the United States. The ID card must be used to gain entry to the bathrooms (it times how long an employee is in there against a pre-determined standard), it also monitors if the employee washes his/her hands and if the appropriate amount of soap was dispensed in the process. Failure to meet predetermined standards illuminates a small red light on the wearer’s badge for all to see. The software also refers the incident to a manager for action.

Some organizations use “bioidentifiers” (such as fingerprints, voice recognition, or retinal patterns) for their employees to gain admittance to the physical plant and/or access to various locations or services within the company. At the office an employee’s computer strokes per minute may be monitored, email and voice mail may be monitored, and computer files may be reviewed without the knowledge or permission of the employee. Additionally clandestine closed circuit television monitoring and taping may be in place. CCTV technology has become a booming industry in the U.S. with companies spending in excess of \$2 billion on clandestine video equipment in 1996 alone (Frankel, 1996). Finally many employers monitor and regulate off-duty conduct such as hobbies, political activities, smoking and drinking habits (via random required urine testing), as well as eating habits of employees (via required cholesterol screening), and dating and marriage behavior to employees and competitor employees (for more information on this see Masters and Brown, 1994). Taken cumulatively, these technologically enabled activities have Orwellian overtones.

### **From Orwell to Foucault**

In his now classic negative utopian novel *1984*, George Orwell described the impact of total control on the individual: “...There was of course no way of knowing whether you were being watched at any given moment...It was even conceivable that they watched everybody all the time...You had to live – did live, from habit that became instinct – in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in total darkness, every movement scrutinized” (Orwell, 1949, pp. 6-7). Is this purely fiction, or are workers manifesting these kinds of behaviors in today’s technologically mediated workplace?

Many authors have written about the impact of modernity and technological innovation on the individual, Jacques Ellul (1964), Marshall McLuhan (1962), and Lewis Mumford (1934) being among the most prominent. They, among many others, talk about how technology alters the understanding of self in the world, contracting things such as time and space, and changing firmly held constructions about human existence. Brown (2000)

attempted a synthesis of some of these writers in trying to understand the impact of the technologically mediated workplace on self and personhood.

Erving Goffman (1961) has described total institutions such as asylums in his work. These types of institutions exercise total control over their inmates by preventing individuals from screening self from the gaze of those in authority. Michel Foucault (1979) describes similar attempts in total institutions such as prisons and asylums. He calls the concept “panoptic power,” or the power to see all. He adapted this from Jeremy Bentham’s eighteenth century panopticon concept. Bentham argued that control and submission to authority could be maintained if the inmates believed that their behavior could be observed at any time without their knowledge or consent. Therefore the power of authority is known but unverifiable, therefore shaping behavior to that desired by those in control.

Foucault has moved this concept into modernity and describes its impact on individuals: “...to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its affects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary” (1979, p. 201). Therefore, “the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment: but he must be sure that he may always be so” (op. cit.). In this way “He is seen, but he does not see: he is the object of information, never a subject of communication” (Foucault, 1979, p. 200).

Giddens (1991) and Goffman (1959) both write about the necessity for individuals to be able to draw a distinction between the self that they themselves know and the self that they show to the outer world. When the individual loses control over who, how, and when the inner self can be scrutinized by the outer world, it can seriously disrupt feelings of ontological security, and cause existential anxiety.

If we return to the breadth and depth of incursions into self in the technologically mediated workplace, it can be seen that what the social psychologists have written about society in general, may be applied to the modern workplace. For instance, Giddens (1991) articulates the shame and guilt that emanate from concern about exposure of the inner self to outside scrutiny when contrasted with the idealized self we hold inside. Often this leads to feelings of guilt and shame over the self “that I am” rather than the “self that I want to be.” This kind of exposure of the individual can have a highly detrimental impact on feelings of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Lasch (1984) describes how individuals attempt to defend themselves against feelings of victimization and powerlessness common to modern society. Calling it “narcissistic survivalism,” he argues that modern society has begun to engender in individuals’ behaviors formerly only observed in extreme situations. Behaviors such as selective apathy, emotional disengagement from others, a renunciation of past and future (living one day at a time), are attempts to protect a core “minimal self” in dire straits. Attempts at narcissistic survivalism “...have come to shape the lives of ordinary people under the ordinary conditions of a bureaucratic society widely perceived as a far-flung

system of total control” (Lasch, 1984, p. 58).

The defense mechanism the individual employs to accomplish this narcissistic survivalism Lasch calls contraction of self. Because of the invasiveness of living in a modern, technological society: “Under siege, the self contracts to a defensive core, armed against adversity. Emotional equilibrium demands a minimal self, not the imperial self of yesteryear” (Lasch, 1984, p. 15). Generally, this is manifested through adapting and conforming behaviors demonstrating compliance to the demands of the outside world in an attempt to protect the core “minimal self.” This blurs the frontiers of self and the outside world and creates more feelings of vulnerability for fear of exposure and discovery of self by those in authority.

Goffman (1959) writes about a similar type of defense mechanism he calls “image management.” The individual, again attempting to protect the inner self, presents the perceived socially desirable response in a given situation, masking the inner self from view of those in authority. Thus what is offered as self to the outside world is really driven by the situation and is a blend of self and context, again blurring the boundaries of personhood. An extension of this behavior is “anticipatory conformity.” In this defense mechanism image management is taken a step further. Rather than waiting and reading the situation for the socially desirable response, the individual so internalizes the behavior norms that the conforming behaviors are presented *in anticipation* of the demand. Erich Fromm (1968) links this type of conforming behavior to loss of privacy: “If all private data are transformed into public data, experiences will become more shallow and more alike. People will be afraid to feel the ‘wrong thing’...” (p. 47). Fromm (1969, p. 266) extends this line of thinking: “compulsive conforming in the process of which the isolated individual becomes an automaton, loses his self, and yet at the same time consciously conceives himself as free.”

These types of anticipatory conformity behaviors have been documented in the new high-tech work environment (see for example, Zuboff, 1988; Garson, 1988; Howard, 1985; or Burris, 1993). Zuboff traces anticipatory conformity behaviors in the technologically mediated workplace to protection of the inner self: “Anticipatory conformity is a tactic for avoiding the dread associated with the possibility of shame. It accepts visibility and adapts to it by producing behavior that minimizes the risk of unwanted discovery” (Zuboff, 1988, p. 345).

### **Workplace Privacy and Human Dignity**

Bloustein (1964) argues that privacy is an essential part of human dignity. If the frontiers of self are made involuntarily penetrable to scrutiny by those in authority, the individual loses a sense of uniqueness of self, and one’s autonomy is destroyed. It follows, therefore, that human dignity cannot be maintained in the face of this onslaught. Benn (1978) argues similarly that privacy is essential to human dignity. He states that honoring a person’s privacy is tantamount to honoring them as human beings. If privacy is not

respected, the individual is forced into inauthentic social exchanges to keep the “veil” in place. This forces individuals into social exchanges predicated on shame and fear of discovery that is inherently disrespectful to the individual as a human being.

It seems clear that privacy in the workplace is an integral part of respecting the human dignity of all workers. Marx (1985) articulates the attributes of the new workplace surveillance technologies. They:

- conquer distance, darkness and physical barriers,
- transcend time, yielding records easily stored, recalled, matched, combined, and communicated,
- broaden the base of surveillance,
- are chiefly concerned with preventing violations, reducing risk, and uncertainty,
- often co-opt those being watched into becoming active partners in their own surveillance, and
- have low visibility or are invisible and increasingly depersonalized.

Halcrow (1996) perceives this kind of personal invasiveness in the employer-employee relationship as a salient threat to worker freedom. He states that this kind of technological control in the workplace gives power to the employer to destroy personal privacy as we have come to know it. The clear implication of this is that whole classes of employees will be subjected to the unblinking and constant gaze of their employers’ workplace surveillance.

### ***Laborem Exercens* and Human Dignity in the Workplace**

His Holiness John Paul II’s encyclical *Laborem Exercens* is quite clear about the role of work in human experience: “...work bears a particular mark of man and of humanity, the mark of a person operating within a community of persons...man’s life is built up every day from work, from work it derives specific dignity...the Church considers it her task always to call attention to the dignity and rights of those who work, to condemn situations in which the dignity and those rights are violated, and to guide the above-mentioned changes so as to ensure authentic progress by man and society” (Pope John Paul II, 1981, pp. 1, 2).

On the subject of technological control of workers on the order of magnitude described in the paper above, the encyclical is equally clear: “...there is no doubt that human work has an ethical value of its own, which clearly and directly remains linked to the fact that the one who carries it out is a person, a conscious and free subject...a subject that

decides about himself” (Pope John Paul II, 1981, p. 6). In fact, human dignity in work is a moral obligation: “All this pleads in favor of the moral obligation to link industriousness as a virtue with the social order of work, which will enable man to become, in work, ‘more of a human being’ and not be degraded by it, not only because of the wearing out of his physical strength...but especially through damage to his dignity and subjectivity that are proper to him” (Pope John Paul II, 1981, p. 9).

The fundamental and paramount importance of human dignity in the workplace is clearly articulated in the encyclical: “The human rights that flow from work are part of the broader context of those fundamental rights of the person” (Pope John II, 1981, p. 16). The impact of technologically enabled panoptic power in the workplace seems to violate all that has been said above.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Fortunately, some writing is beginning to appear calling for worker dignity, spirituality, and sense of community in the workplace (see for instance, Rayman, 2001; Sennett, 1998; Hartman, 1996; Chappell, 1993; and Renesch, 1992). However, technologically mediated panoptic control over workers is a growth industry. Software, hardware, and service companies are growing by leaps and bounds. Surreptitious surveillance of workers on and off the job is expanding rapidly, rather than diminishing. What does this mean for thoughtful people regarding the human experience of work?

Ultimately this road of technological control and surreptitious surveillance will lead to the eradication of the *vita comtemplativa* through panoptic forms of behavioral control. This in turn destroys a sense of community in the workplace via alienation of the worker from an authentic sense of self, and from a sense of spirituality at work. The fundamental question in this is one of human dignity and respect for the boundaries of personhood. Obviously, technological control in the workplace is not going away, therefore the key question becomes one of informed and enlightened management of this new power in the work relationship.

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