



# Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

## Issue Four

# Bourgeois Sabotage of Dignified Work

CHARLES PÉGUY

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Charles Péguy wrote *L'Argent*, an essay on money, for the *Cahiers de la Quinzaine* (“Fortnightly Journals”) in 1913. *Communio: International Catholic Review* presented a selection from this longer piece (no. 36 [Fall 2009]: 534–564), translated by Michelle K. Borrás, and has given permission to *Humanum* to reprint the excerpt that follows (p. 536–543). Péguy’s ideas have accompanied us as we navigated the theme of work this year: we have featured Péguy’s thought on **finding eternal meaning in our daily work**, on **children inspiring the work of their parents** and on **the surrender of sleep**.

If we live long enough to reach the age of the Confessions, if the many enterprises launched on all sides leave us space to write down the world we knew, I will try to portray a little of that which was, around 1880, this admirable world of primary school instruction. More generally, I will try to portray what was then all that admirable world of workers and peasants, to sum it up in a word, all that admirable people.

It was rigorously the old France and the people of the old France. It was a world where, when this beautiful noun was applied to it, this beautiful word, “people,” received its full, its ancient application. When we speak of “the people” today, we play at literature, and at one of the lowest kinds: electoral, political, parliamentary literature. There is no people any more. Everybody is bourgeois. Because everybody reads his paper. The little that remained of the old aristocracy, or rather, of the old aristocracies, has become a petty bourgeoisie. The old aristocracy has become, like the others, a bourgeoisie of money. The old bourgeoisie has become a petty bourgeoisie, a bourgeoisie of money. As for the workers, they only have one idea now, and that is to become bourgeois. That’s even what they call becoming socialists. The peasants are about the only ones who have remained profoundly peasants.

We were brought up in a wholly other world. One can say, in the most rigorous sense of the words, that a child brought up in the city of Orléans between 1873 and 1880 literally touched the old France, the old people, the people as such, that it literally participated in the old France, in the people. One can even say that it participated in this entirely, for the old France was still everything, and intact. The debacle was accomplished, if I may say so, all in one piece, and in less than a few years.

We will try to express it: we knew, we touched the old France, and we knew it intact. We were children of it. We knew a people, we touched it, we were of the people, when there was one.

The least worker of that time was a man of the old France, and today the most insufferable of Monsieur Maurras' [1] disciples is not by an atom a man of the old France.

We will try, if we can, to portray this. A most intelligent woman, advancing cheerfully toward her seventieth-plus year, said: the world changed less during my first sixty years than it has changed in the past ten years. We have to go further. We have to say with her, to say beyond her: the world changed less since Jesus Christ than it has changed in the past thirty years. There was the old (and biblical) age. There was the Christian age. There is the modern age. A farmhouse in the Beauce, even after the war, was infinitely closer to a Gallo-Roman farmhouse, or rather, to the same Gallo-Roman farmhouse, in its mores, in its status, in its seriousness, in its gravity, in its very structure and institution, in its dignity (and the same, at bottom, as a farmhouse of Xenophon), than it is like itself today. We will try to express it. We knew a time when, when a good woman said a word, it was her very race, her being, her people that was speaking. That was coming out. And when a worker lit his cigarette, what he was going to tell you was not what the newsman said in that morning's paper. The free-thinkers of that time were more Christian than our pious people today. An ordinary parish of that time was infinitely closer to a parish of the fifteenth century, or of the fourth century, let's say the fifth or the eighth, than a parish of today.

It's because of this that we risk being extremely unjust toward Michelet [2] and all those of his race, and what is even more serious, being extremely *ununderstanding* of Michelet and all those of his race. Of being unintelligent. When today we say, "the people," we are cutting a figure, even a rather sorry figure, and even a figure that is altogether vain, I mean to say a figure within which we can't place anything at all. And moreover a political figure, and a parliamentary figure. But when Michelet and those of his race spoke of the people, it was they who were in the reality itself, it was they who spoke of a being and who had known this being. Now, that being, that people, is the same one we also knew, it's the one in which we were brought up. It's the one that we knew still in its full functioning, in all of its life, in all of its race, in all its beautiful free play. And nothing could be foreseen; and it seemed that it would never end. Ten years later, there was nothing left. The people set out with a vengeance to kill the people, almost instantaneously, to suppress the very being of the people, a little like how the family of Orléans, a little less instantaneously maybe, set out with a vengeance to kill the king. Everything we are suffering from, by the way, comes from Orléans: an Orléanism of religion; an Orléanism of the republic.

This is what we would have to show in the Confessions. And try to make visible. And try to make understood. All the more exactly, all the more preciously, and if we can all the more

uniquely, because we will never see it again. There are innocences that cannot be recovered. There are ignorances that fall away absolutely. There are irreversibles in the lives of peoples as in the lives of men. Rome never returned to being straw huts. Not only, on the whole, everything is irreversible. But there are *ages*, irreversibles properly speaking.

Would you believe it, we were nurtured in a cheerful people. At that time, a workplace was a place on the earth where men were happy. Today a workplace is a place on the earth where men complain, hold grudges, beat one another, kill one another.

In my time, everybody sang. (Except me, but I was already unworthy to be of that time.) In most of the trade guilds, they sang. Today they grumble. At that time, one earned so to speak nothing. The salaries were of a level we can't imagine. And yet everybody ate. There was in the most humble houses a kind of ease we have lost the memory of. At bottom, one didn't count. And one didn't have anything to count. And one could raise children. And one raised them. There wasn't this kind of frightful economic strangulation we have now, that every year gives us another turn of the screw. One didn't earn anything; one didn't spend anything; and everybody lived.

There wasn't this economic strangulation of today, this scientific strangulation, cold, rectangular, proper, neat, flawless, implacable, wise, shared, constant, comfortable as a virtue, where there is nothing to say, and where the one who is strangled is so obviously at fault.

We will never know how far the decency and the exactitude [*justesse*] of soul of this people went; such a finesse, such a profound culture will not be found again. Nor such a finesse and care in speaking. Those people would have blushed at our best tone of today, which is the bourgeois tone. And today everybody is bourgeois.

Would you believe us, and this comes down to the same, we knew workers who wanted to work. They hadn't a thought but of working. We knew workers who in the morning hadn't a thought but of working. They got up in the morning, and at what hour, and they sang at the idea that they were leaving for work. At eleven they sang going to supper. In brief, it's always Hugo; and it's always to Hugo that we have to return: *they went, they sang*. To work was their very joy, and the deep root of their being. And the reason of their being. There was an incredible honor of work, the most beautiful of all honors, the most Christian, maybe the only one that stands. This is, for example, why I say that a free-thinker of that time was more Christian than a pious person of our day. Because a pious person of our day is bound to be a bourgeois. And today everybody is bourgeois.

We knew an honor of work exactly the same as that which in the middle ages guided the hand and the heart. It was the same, preserved intact underneath. We knew this care pushed to the point of perfection, equally in the whole, equally in the tiniest detail. We knew this piety of the *work well done* pushed, maintained to the point of its most extreme demand. All during my childhood, I saw chairs being woven with exactly the same spirit and the same heart, and the same hand, with which the same people cut the stone for its cathedrals.

What is left today of all that? How did we make, of the most hard-working people of the earth, and maybe the only hard-working people of the earth, of the only people maybe who loved work for the sake of work, and honor for honor, and in order to work, this people of shoddy workers. How were we able to make of it this people that at the workplace directs all its

attention to not lifting a finger. This will be one of the greatest victories in history, and no doubt the only one, of the bourgeois intellectual demagoguery. But we have to admit that it counts. This victory.

There was the Christian revolution. And there was the modern revolution. These are the two we have to count. An artisan of my time was an artisan of it didn't matter what Christian time. An artisan of today is no longer an artisan.

In this beautiful honor of the trade, all the most beautiful, all the most noble sentiments converged. A dignity. A pride. *Never to ask anybody for anything*, they said. See what ideas we were raised in. For to ask for work, wasn't to ask. It was the most normal, the most natural request in the world, not even a request. It was to put oneself in one's place in a workshop. It was, in a hard-working city, to put yourself quietly in the place of work that was waiting for you. A worker of that time didn't know what it was to beg. It's the bourgeoisie that begs. It's the bourgeoisie who, in making them bourgeois, taught them to beg. Today, in this very insolence and this brutality, in this sort of incoherence that they bring to their claims, it is very easy to perceive this gnawing shame, to be forced to ask, to have been led, by the events of economic history, to beg. Oh yes they ask something of somebody, now. They even ask everything from everybody. To demand is still to ask. It's still to serve.

Those workers didn't serve. They worked. They had an honor, an absolute honor, as is proper for honor. A stick for a chair had to be well made. It was understood. It was the first thing. It didn't have to be well made for the salary or in return for the salary. It didn't have to be well made for the patron or for the experts or for the clients of the patron. It had to be well made itself, in itself, for itself, in its very being. A tradition, come, risen from the depths of the race, a history, an absolute, an honor demanded that this stick for a chair was well made. All the parts in the chair that were not seen were exactly just as perfectly made as the parts that were seen. This is the very principle of the cathedrals.

And still it's I who have thought about it so long, I the degenerate one. For them, in them, there wasn't the shadow of a reflection. One worked well.

Being seen or not being seen wasn't the point. It was the very being of the work that had to be well done.

And an incredibly deep sentiment of what today we call "a sporting man's honor," but which at that time was everywhere. Not only the idea of handing over the best, but the idea, in the best, in the good, of handing over the most. Not only to him who made the best, but to him who made the most of the best, it was a beautiful, continual sport of all hours, which penetrated life itself. Which was woven through it. A boundless disgust for work done badly. More than a lordly scorn for him who worked badly. But the idea never even occurred to them.

All honors converged on this honor. A decency, and a finesse of language. A respect for the home. A sense of respect, of all respects, of the very being of respect. A so to speak constant ceremony. Besides, the home was still very often the workshop and the honor of the home and the honor of the workshop were the same honor. It was the honor of the same place. It was the honor of the same hearth. What became of all that. Everything after getting out of bed in the morning was a rhythm and a rite and a ceremony. Everything was an event; sacred.

Everything was a tradition, a teaching, everything was handed down, everything was the most sacred routine. Everything was an elevation, interior, and a prayer, all the day long, sleep and waking, work and the little bit of rest, the bed and the table, the soup and the roast, the house and the garden, the door and the street, the yard and the doorstep, and the plates on the table.

They said laughing, and to annoy the priests, that *work is prayer*, and they didn't think to have expressed it so well.

So much was their work a prayer. And their workshop an oratory.

Everything was the long playing out of a beautiful rite. They would have been very surprised, these workers, and what would have been, not even their disgust, their incredulity, how they would have thought we were joking if we told them that a few years later, at the workplaces, the workers,—the craftsmen—, would officially propose doing as little work as possible; and that they would consider this to be a great victory. Such an idea, for them, supposing they could conceive of it, would have struck a direct blow at themselves, at their being, it would have meant questioning their capacity, since it would have meant supposing that they would not do as much as they could. It would be like supposing that a soldier would not be victorious.

They, too, lived in a perpetual victory, but what a different victory. How much the same and how different. A victory of all the hours of the day in all the days of a life. An honor equal to it didn't matter what military honor. The same sentiments as the imperial guard.

And consequently or together with these all the adjoining or connected beautiful sentiments, all the derived and filial beautiful sentiments. A respect for the elderly; for parents, for familial relations. An admirable respect for children. Naturally, a respect for women. (And we have to mention it, because today it's this that's so lacking, a respect for women on the part of women themselves.) A respect for the family, a respect for the home. And above all a proper taste and a respect for respect itself. A respect for the tool, for the hand, that supreme tool.—*I'm losing my hand at work*, the old men used to say. And that was the end of everything. The idea that one would be able to damage one's tools deliberately wouldn't even have seemed to them the ultimate of sacrileges. It wouldn't even have seemed to them the worst of follies. It wouldn't even have seemed monstrous to them. It would have seemed to them the most extravagant of suppositions. It would have been like talking to them about cutting off their hand. The tool was only a hand that was longer or harder (nails of steel), or assigned to a more particular task.

A hand that was made for oneself, expressly for this or for that.

For a worker to damage a tool, for them, would have been, in that war, the conscript who cut off his thumb.

One earned nothing, one lived on nothing, and one was happy. There was no question of handing oneself over, on top of all this, to the mathematicians of sociology. This is a fact, one of the rare facts that we are aware of, that we have been able to embrace, one of the rare facts we can testify to, one of the rare facts that are incontestable.

Note that today, at bottom, doing nothing at the workplaces doesn't amuse them. They would rather work. They are not of this hard-working race for nothing. They hear this call of the race. The hand that itches, that wants to work. The arm that gets bored doing nothing. The blood that

flows in their veins. The mind that races ahead and that by a kind of anticipated covetousness, by a kind of preemption, by a genuine anticipation, takes hold in advance of the finished work. Like their fathers, they hear the silent call of the work that wants doing. And at bottom, they are disgusted with themselves, with damaging their tools. But see, the very fine gentlemen, the ones who know, the bourgeois explained that this was socialism, and that this was the revolution.

For we can't say it often enough. All evil came from the bourgeoisie. All aberration, all crime. It was the capitalist bourgeoisie that infected the people. And they infected it precisely with the bourgeois and capitalist spirit.

I use the term capitalist and gross bourgeoisie deliberately. The working-class bourgeoisie, to the contrary, the petite bourgeoisie has become the most unhappy class of all social classes, the only one today that really works, the only one that consequently preserved intact the worker's virtues, and for its recompense the only one that really lives in misery. It alone held out, we ask by what miracle, it alone still holds out, and if there is some sort of recovery, it's because this class will have preserved the statute.

Thus the workers did not at all keep the worker's virtues; and it is the petite bourgeoisie that kept them.

The capitalist bourgeoisie, on the other hand, infected everything. It infected itself and it infected the people, with the same infection. It infected the people doubly; both the bourgeoisie in itself remaining itself; and through the renegade portions of itself that it injected into the people.

It infected the people as antagonist; and as schoolmaster.

It itself infected the people, in itself and remaining itself. If the bourgeoisie remained not so much maybe what it was than what it had to be and could be, the economic arbiter of sale value, the working class asked only to remain that which it had always been, the economic source of sale value.

We can't say it often enough, it's the bourgeoisie that began to sabotage things, and all sabotage had its birth in the bourgeoisie. It's because the bourgeoisie began to treat human work as stock value that the worker, too began to treat his own work as stock value. It's because the bourgeoisie began perpetually to trade stock with human work that the worker, too, by imitation, by collusion and compromise, and one could almost say by an understanding, began continually to trade stock with his own work. It's because the bourgeoisie began to practice perpetual blackmail on human work that we live under a regime of stock exchanges and the blackmail that are called strikes: thus disappeared the notion of the fair price, about which our bourgeois intellectuals talk themselves hoarse, but which had been no less for all that the enduring foundation of a whole world.

*Charles Péguy (1873–1914) was a notable French poet, essayist and editor.*

[1] Charles Maurras (1868–1952), director and co-founder of the royalist journal, *L'Action Française*, the mouthpiece of the radically integralist political movement of the same name.

[2] Jules Michelet (1798–1874), a French historian who published a work entitled *The People* (1845).

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