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Lights and Shadows of Modern Labour

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Economists show remarkably little interest in any non-monetary dimension of economic activity. The professionals' laws of the market are not designed to deal with anything that cannot be assigned a price, so they can bring little insight into the distinct virtues and vices of modern labour. A much better starting point is the brilliant 1981 encyclical of Pope John Paul II, *Laborem exercens*. What follows is inspired by that document.

It might seem that modern work is always the same, so modern work is not essentially different from pre-modern work. After all, “work is a fundamental dimension of human existence on earth” (4).^[1] It is a way in which the “human family strives to make its life more human and to render the whole earth submissive to this goal” (27). None of that will change as long as we await the coming of a new heaven and a new earth. Until then, the human effort to dominate and humanise the earth will lose neither its glorious likeness to the Creator’s own work in the world nor the penalties of human sinfulness—toil, pride, greed and the rest.

However, the modern world is new and different in significant ways—“industrial development provides grounds for re-proposing in new ways the question of human work” (5). So much has changed. Our labour has more power over the world, thanks to numerous technological developments. Our lives of labour are mostly more organised, thanks to the developments of complex bureaucracies which divide, assign and co-ordinate work. We are more dependent on each other, as the long chains of production and trade and the sharing of knowledge and expertise create an increasingly global workforce. We are also more divided than in the past, as the difference between labour in the rich and the poor parts of the world has become more dramatic. We are more concerned with economic matters, as secularisation has dulled the popular appeal of more spiritual concerns. We are more likely to separate work from the rest of life, as impersonal organisations increasingly take on the economic roles once played by families and small communities.

What does all this mean for the dignity of work? Well, there are—as John Paul II used to say—light and shadows. I will start with the latter.

The Shadows

It is easy to tell the whole story of industrial development, including the changes in labour, as a tragedy. Technology—impersonal monster that spawns oppressive capitalism. Money and finance—debasing and destructive. Spiritual emptiness—everywhere. We moderns have abandoned the divine rest of the Sabbath, and just want to build ever-bigger barns. Modern labour fits right in—undignified in so many ways.

Modern labour dehumanises. In manufacturing jobs, “Man is...treated on the same level as the whole complex of the material means of production, as an instrument and not in accordance with the true dignity of his work...”(7). And these people working as ersatz machines are often poorly paid and badly treated.

Modern labour alienates in its bureaucratic excess. Many people, including highly paid skilled workers and senior executives, are deeply dissatisfied by their work. After all, “the person who works ... wishes ... to be able to know that in his work ... he is working ‘for himself’. This awareness is extinguished within him in a system of excessive bureaucratic centralization, which makes the worker feel that he is just a cog in a huge machine moved from above...” (15).

It deadens the spirit with its dullness. There are too many narrowly defined and monotonous tasks, bound by extensive and detailed rules.

Far too much of it is actually harmful to those who work or to those who consume the fruits of the work. Pornography feeds lust, as non-nutritious food exacerbates gluttony and many idle modern pleasures placate the spiritually slothful. All these socially harmful trades require many workers.

Far too much of it is at best only a little bit better than morally neutral in its effects. Marketing, finance and law, and the many businesses which support them, all thrive. They may do a little good, but there must be better ways to deploy most of their workers’ skills and energy. Electronic gadgets do some good, but they too often distract attention from more valuable activities. It takes many millions of people to produce them and their software.

Then there are the disordered social values shown by the pay and prestige of different occupations. Even most defenders of the value of financial activity would agree that many professionals in that field are overpaid relative to their contribution to the common good. Conversely, the vast majority of people who work at taking care of other people do relatively badly. The social undervaluation of caring labour, both unpaid and paid, is particularly hard on women, who do most of it. Even in medical care—generally considered an extremely valuable activity in modern society—the work of taking basic care of the ill is generally very poorly paid.

On the dangers of denigrating motherhood, John Paul II was clear: “It will redound to the credit of society to make it possible for a mother ... to devote herself to taking care of her children ... Having to abandon these tasks in order to take up paid work outside the home is wrong from

the point of view of the good of society and of the family” (19). Conversely, “just remuneration for the work of an adult who is responsible for a family means remuneration which will suffice for establishing and properly maintaining a family and for providing security for its future” (19). Here, the pope is speaking about paying fathers enough to support a family, not the state reimbursing mothers for their labours of love. In Europe today, more than a few years of full-time unpaid motherhood requires substantial economic sacrifice. In the United States, the economic pain usually starts after a few months or even weeks.

One bad aspect of modern labour is the decline of some good pre-modern labour. Craft work has dwindled away; few artists can support themselves by selling their works; farming work is denied to many who would like it. The economic logic for these choices may be compelling, but there is also a social choice, a distressing one, to let economic logic take precedence over all other considerations. When an artist is paid to monitor social media references to a particular brand of consumer product, a job which cannot serve the social good as much as even a mediocre artistic creation, something has gone badly wrong.

Then there is the failure to do work which could be welcomed in society. Much valuable labour is not performed—from keeping public spaces beautiful and roads in good repair to taking adequate care of the weak and needy. The problem is not a shortage of workers, since far too many people are still unemployed, underemployed or unwillingly and unnecessarily idle. Nor is the problem exactly a lack of money to pay people for this work. Much valuable unpaid work is also not done or not done well. There are problems with poor organisation of labour within the economy, and deeper problems of poor social judgements about what goods should be pursued.

And the trends are discouraging. The dignity of workers is increasingly sacrificed for the convenience of employers. A renewal of the debilitating reliance of casual and unreliable paid labour is the most notable example. Also, the daily hours dedicated to paid work, which decreased for more than a century, have started to increase, particularly in some prestigious professions.

Finally, a subtle but important problem with labour in the modern economy is that people often expect too much from it. The modern turn to radical individualism and worldly concerns, hallmarks of the last four centuries, have left many people lonely and spiritually bereft. The life of labour is increasingly relied on as a principle source of personal connection and of transcendent meaning. And it is right that it be so. Labour has a real spiritual value because “man’s work is a participation in God’s activity” (25). The value is increased when jobs offer social and intellectual rewards, which many jobs today actually do. Still, work simply cannot offer the same spiritual opportunities as worship, beauty and love. Economic concerns are too worldly, economic communities are too shallow and, in this fallen world, toil and futility are inevitably too present for the life of labour to provide deep and lasting satisfaction. To ask labour to provide a substantial portion of the fullness and meaning of life is almost a sort of idolatry.

To the extent that work does provide meaning, it is often not the joyous self-actualisation craved by enthusiasts for career satisfaction. John Paul II’s understanding of the spiritual value of suffering (see his apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris*) influenced his appreciation of labour. The “glimmer of new life, of the new good” which shines out of work always comes “through toil—and never without it” (27). This wisdom is almost never recognised in the cult of meaning

through labour, so its followers, including many Christians, often put too much effort into chasing after a job which will always make them “happy.”

The Lights

All these bad things are true, and John Paul II surely knew about most of them. Still, his discussion of the “immense development of technological means” starts by calling it “an advantageous and positive phenomenon” (10). The subsequent qualifications are not significant enough to undermine his basic positive judgment. Technology, money, bureaucracy and even affluence can, and mostly do, promote great goods.

Most importantly, these modern developments allow workers to produce ample quantities of all the basic economic goods. Our work feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, extends lifespans, spreads education and heals a large portion of the ill. The work of only a small portion of the population is needed to reach all these once impossible goals. The rest of us are potentially left free to work on things that make society even better or make our own work lives more satisfactory.

The last is a modern speciality.

Of course, work always comes with sin and toil—we can never feel too good about it. However, modern work promotes our dignity better than pre-modern labour in several fairly important ways.

Perhaps the most profound innovation is a far greater social appreciation of the value of many kinds of work which were long considered undignified. Skilled factory workers, manual labourers, workers performing tasks traditionally considered impure—the status of all of these has been elevated. Even some traditional women’s jobs—nurses, teachers and office workers—now receive a bit more respect. The Catholic Church has endorsed the modern upgrade. The veneration of St Joseph the worker was followed by the Second Vatican Council’s declaration that, even “the most ordinary everyday activities” are a “participation in God’s activity” (*Gaudium et spes*, 34).

More tangibly, there is much less body-depleting toil, thanks to new technologies. In comparison to all pre-industrial economies, far fewer people die from labour accidents, suffer infirmities from overwork or are made ill by pollution. Overall, the effluents of industry are much less damaging to health than the smoke from poorly vented fires which most women used to inhale during their daily labour.

In these countries, there is also much less cruelty to workers, thanks to a new attitude articulated in a thick net of labour laws and regulations. There have been declines in working hours (despite their recent lengthening), increases in the years spent in the relative leisure of study and retirement, improvements in workplace safety and greater protection from bad air, inadequate hygiene and even uncomfortable desks. Bullying from bosses, once so standard as hardly to be noticed, is now usually considered poor practice. The shaming of sexual abusers of

the last few months is a typical welcome modern development. Behaviour which was widely considered unattractive but unavoidable may soon be unacceptable.

Many jobs are more alienating than ever, but much new labour is actually more fulfilling. Certainly, too many workers still act as quasi-machines, but an increasing portion of work requires skill, flexibility and some psychological acuity. The move of most of the population from lifelong and isolated daily toil at subsistence agriculture to changing careers in organised enterprises, often in collaboration with a wide variety of skilled fellow workers, has increased the portion of jobs which offer significant amounts of somewhat meaningful personal interactions with colleagues and customers. In the past, only a tiny number of priests, scholars and merchants worked at intellectual labour or enjoyed professional networks which extended past a small local community. Now many more jobs are set in global networks and require the highest intellectual skills. The extension of the average number of years spent in education and the expansion of scientific research allow far more people to make more use of their intellectual gifts. Some less intellectually complex work has also become more challenging in good, life-fulfilling ways. Workers who get bored can often change jobs or careers. Further education, a soul-livening process, is encouraged.

Even the shadow of social disrespect for maternal and other domestic labours hides some light. Parents frequently have more time to dedicate to the labour of caring for their children. They often have more knowledge about how to provide good care. The decline of domestic drudgery is an undoubted gain, even if much of the freed-up time is used poorly.

The life of labour cannot be separated completely from the life of consumption, so the rewards of work—the consumption of goods and services allocated in exchange for labour—have to be considered in thinking about the goodness of modern labour. Those rewards have increased so much that the typical pattern for the poor in every pre-modern society—desperate toil, barely enough consumption goods to survive—has all but disappeared. Instead, there is a rich mix of comforts, security and opportunity.

Finally, the life of labour also cannot be separated from the life of leisure. Leisure, the worldly extension of the divine Sabbath, is essential to human fulfilment. It is time that can be dedicated to the transcendental aspirations which daily labour can never satisfy. Both the time available for leisure and the richness of available leisure activities have increased greatly, thanks to the productivity of modern labour. There are weekends, holidays, school breaks and the possibility of gap years and sabbaticals. There are more opportunities for education, there is more access to the wide world of natural beauty and human accomplishment and there are more facilities to perfect the body and enlighten the soul. The possibilities of good leisure are often ignored, but rich societies are mostly free enough for any worker to take them up.

Lights and Shadows

It is not true that for every negative of the modern age there is an equal and corresponding positive. On the contrary, the gains and losses from our centuries-long experiment with new thinking are asymmetrical and generally incommensurate. Despite this caveat, I will still hazard a judgment about the changes in the economy. There are significant negatives—I have listed a

fairly long list for labour and could provide similar enumerations for production, consumption, allocation and the environment. However, there are many and, in my judgment, probably more significant positives.

Some haters of the modern spirit might find this praise unpalatable. Such critics are certainly right to condemn all the dire effects of the empty modern promises: the separation of freedom from God-given truth, the idolisation of human power and the denigration of gratitude and spiritual sacrifice. Still, discernment is necessary. The modern spirit is misguided, but not without its virtues. In the culture, as in each person's heart and mind, the results of its triumph are always a mix of "lights and shadows", as John Paul II said in his discussion of the modern attitude towards the dignity of human life in *Evangelium Vitae* (28).

It should not be surprising if the light predominates in economic parts of life. After all, the modern spirit is nothing if not worldly, technical (even technocratic, to use a favourite word of Pope Francis) and universalist. The worldliness has led to ever greater attention to the work of human hands. The technical excellence has ensured that this work is ever more productive. And the universality—the vision of all people being essentially equal in this world and not only in the eyes of God—has encouraged a social revaluation of manual labour and a Christian-friendly appreciation of the striving for excellence in all sorts of labour.

The modern contribution to the economy, including the life of labour, were long in coming. The industrial revolution followed the intellectual, artistic and political revolutions (although it preceded the sexual revolution), and in the first few generations of industrialisation, the new labour was predominantly wretched. In retrospect, though, I think it is clear that the modern spirit is actually fairly well-suited for economic life, which is the most material and least spiritual of all human activities. The tendency of critics of modernity to focus only on economic harm—the genuine depredations of consumerism, profit-hunger and economically smothering governments—seems to me misguided. The modern economy, including the life of labour, still has many shadows, but there are far darker patches in many other parts of modern life.

Still, my praise is lukewarm, and comes with a crucial qualification. The shift of attention which has on balance made labour better has inevitably been accompanied by lesser respect for spiritual matters, including spiritual labours. The inevitable result has been a deterioration in those domains. Labours of love, labours of worship, labours of artistic creation—all seem either devalued or distorted by the modern spirit. Those losses are part of the curse of the modern turn from God, and they stain modern labour.

My conclusion for the long term is mixed. If societies ever turn again to favour more spiritual values, many substantial reforms of labour practices and attitudes will ensue. However, many current practices and attitudes could be carried almost unchanged into this putative better epoch. There is no reason to abandon the new-found excellences. The ability to use God-given human skills and knowledge to extract more of the potential flourishing of the divine gifts hidden in created nature has undoubtedly been encouraged and stained by the modern "Titanic" desire to take absolute power of nature, but the results—supporting far more God-loved and potentially God-loving human lives with more adequate nutrition, better health and far more education—suggest amidst the shadows of sin is the light of a worthy obedience of the divine command to till the earth. There is no reason to give up on such modern gains as more

interesting and highly productive labour, the dignified treatment of all workers and the richer lives of labour for women.

Such dreaming of a spiritual renaissance may help frame the more urgent question of how work should be approached right now in developed economies. The question can be asked both politically and personally. For the moment, political reflection is unlikely to be fruitful. While the problems of labour identified in this article are broadly recognised, there seems to be almost no desire in society to endorse the sort of policies which might actually address them.

Personal decisions about labour are different. We have some freedom to make unpopular choices about our own labour. We can look for jobs that bring out the best in us, including our ability to toil for the sake of the good, and that promote goodness in the world. We can also recognise that objectively more valuable work may bring in less money (or none at all, for “stay-at-home” mothers) and less social prestige—and still make the necessary sacrifices to take the better part. We can look for labour that is meaningful, serving others or producing beautiful things. We can found, work at or consume the products of organisations which support the dignity of their workers. We can use our economic life to mitigate, rather than to amplify, the alienation which so much of the modern world promotes.

In short, we should be grateful for the many opportunities for fulfilling and helpful provided by the modern economy, but not blind to its many weaknesses.

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[1] All references are to sections of *Laborem exercens*.