

2019 - Issue One

Economic Dislocations of Young Adults in the Secular Age

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Economic decisions are part of every life at every age in every society. In modern industrial and urbanised societies, the most typical economic choices of young adults are sadly instructive about the non-economic flaws of these societies.

The economy that I am talking about is one of the basic axes of human experience. It co-exists in the human condition with, among other things, the life of the community, of worship, of the mind and of the heart. The distinctly economic life is two-sided: a continuing gift of labour which humanises the world, and a continuing receiving of goods and services to be consumed from that humanised world. Like all the other axes of humanity, this Great Exchange of labour and consumption is simultaneously private and social, virtuous and sinful, sacred and profane.

For people of all ages, economic life has changed significantly since the advent of modernity. On the labour side, the development of powerful machines has led to the toil of the mind supplanting the toil of the body. Labour increasingly takes place far from home, in factories and offices. Labour is increasingly organised in bureaucratic structures and divided into ever more specialised tasks. More recently, many of the traditionally feminine labours of care have become professionalised, while the labours of maternal love have been relegated to a secondary social status.

On the consumption side of the economy, humanity, at least the portion of humanity economically fortunate enough to live in relatively rich countries, has decisively conquered the traditional enemy: want. Even the relatively poor residents of rich countries enjoy a variety and quantity of consumption which would have been literally inconceivable to even the richest residents of any pre-modern society. There have also been many other more or less profound changes, from the mass consumption of consumer goods to the group consumption of education and, in infant day-care, of the fruits of the labours of love.

The economic transformations of modernity cannot be fully isolated from dramatic changes in all the axes of the human condition. While the directions of influence are the subject of lively debate, because the developments have been so rapid, the extent of the novelty is hard to deny. Of course, the human condition is in some sense unchanging in the fallen world—we are born, we suffer, we die; but contemporary people really are different. We expect to live longer, we rely more on science, we have abandoned divinely connected rulers for democracies and secular autocrats, we endorse previously condemned sexual practices, we often do not accept the existence of God or the truth of religion. We worry greatly about individual happiness and not so much about social duties.

These generalisations are obviously broad ones, but I think they are accurate enough to help us to think about how to describe and understand the typical economic behaviour of young people in the most

modernised societies: societies that are, far from coincidentally, also the most prosperous. There is no agreement on the predominant themes or even the predominant direction of the rising generation. Some cultural observers, both old and young, are pessimists, pointing above all to economic uncertainty.

On the labour side, they say, it is hard to get on the career path, youth unemployment rates are high in many countries, whilst in others young people are racking up remarkable amounts of debt. Highly educated young people often cannot find jobs that take advantage of their skills, or provide them with their expected social status. Poorly educated young people often cannot find jobs at all; at the very least, they cannot hope for the sort of steady and socially accepted labour which their grandfathers enjoyed. The results of this uncertainty in the labour market, conclude the pessimists, are delay, depression and dis-integration. Young adults are persistently unhappy about their jobs and they often feel no commitment to them. They are slow to “settle down” and start families of their own. I can sometimes summarise the negative labour story as a choice between cog and drift. You can become a cog in the bureaucratic production machine, doing work that is close to meaningless and suffused with boredom. Alternatively, you can drift around at the edges of the working world, working here and there and perhaps hoping to break through as an artist or just have some interesting experiences while you live in relative poverty outside of the normal, career-centred society.

There is a pessimistic consumption narrative to match the grim labour story. Young adults are overwhelmed by stuff: they often cannot afford what they want, crave things that they think will affirm their membership in some social set and get ridiculous pleasure from objectively trivial things, from fast cars to spa holidays. Many young adults seem unable to control their consumption, ending up obese or indebted. It is considered impossible to marry without owning one’s home and having a decent car. As for having children, do you have any idea how expensive they are? And of course these objects of conspicuous consumption so often fail to live up to expectations.

Yet there is also an optimistic narrative of youth economics. Where labour is concerned, there is much to celebrate. There are more educational opportunities and more interesting and skilled jobs than ever before. There are more careers, more freedom to choose among them and more possibility to change career paths, even on a whim. The gains are universal, but they are especially large for women, who are no longer confined to the domestic sphere or a narrow list of jobs outside of the home. Now women are just as educated as men, can take on any job that men can, and are increasingly paid and promoted just like men. The optimists do not see any economic problem in people starting families later. It is a mostly a sign of just how good the paid labour-lives of today’s young women really are.

This optimism extends to the life of consumption. Why mock young people’s shopping and entertainment choices? Why exaggerate their angst about having and not having enough of the right things? Step back and see how good it all is. Young people today live in unprecedented comfort, can and do travel with unprecedented ease and can and do use their electronic consumption to overcome distance. Thanks to the internet, they live in big and usually supportive communities.

I am not going to adjudicate between the two sides: according to my judgement as a Catholic economist, both are right. What Pope John Paul II liked to say about modernity as a whole is true of the economic situation of the young. It is filled with **light and shadows**. Indeed, I think the modern saint’s judgement of the age provides the best way to understand what is happening in this part of young people’s lives. The economic life of the young is best understood as part of the whole modern turn.

Consider the erosion of horizons in so many aspects of the lives of today’s young adults. Many of them have little or no religious framework, little or no coherent sense of anything transcendental. Their

place in society is uncertain, because the constraints of heredity have been broken by the demand for self-defining freedom. The cumulative effect of several generations of exploring such freedom is often to leave these young adults with parents who are unreliable guides to the good life. And so, young adults have to make it on their own. That quest is made more difficult by the modern tendency to substitute a purely emotional happiness for the true, the good and the noble. This happiness often proves an inadequate lodestar, particularly in the realm of sexual love, which is typically very important to young adults.

I do not want to condemn everything modern—that would be not just unfair, but unrealistic. All I want to do is point out the relative appeal of economic accomplishments to young people. For them, other parts of life are likely to seem hard or meaningless: but the economic life is relatively straightforward. In labour, success is easy to understand and not that hard to achieve. Most modern jobs—both cog and drift—offer success by some standard that can make sense to a young person who is perhaps spiritually underdeveloped.

The fairly typical young person's desire to excel, often in competition with others, is given great and fairly safe sway. In many types of work, the goods of intelligence and friendship are genuinely promoted. The rules of employers are solid, reasonable and satisfying in comparison to the near-anarchy on the dating scene and the nearly uncontrolled emotional demands of many close relationships. When social signals are blurred by the erosion of class and the praise of individualism, the monetary rewards from employment are clear: they are, for the most part, something like just.

Under the circumstances, it is really not surprising that so many young people look to their lives of labour for meaning. It makes sense that the old aristocratic identification of leisure as the highest sort of labour has been replaced by a praise of long hours and extravagant commitment to the job, the team or the company. With families so often seen as unreliable, and so many heritages and traditions eroded, it is reasonable to move cities to keep a good job or get a better one. So far, it sounds as though the optimists are right about the contemporary relationship between young people and the economy. Their lives of labour really are pretty good, or at least good enough to help make up for losses and weaknesses in other parts of life.

However, there is a serious problem with this life-style, one which lurks behind many of the pessimists' harsh readings of the current situation. The problem is not that there is nothing actually good about labour in general, or modern labour in particular. One welcome development is the overthrow of the almost universal philosophical tradition of the West, and much of the East, about the value of labour. Contrary to that tradition, modern people have recognised that a life centred on labour is not animalistic, undignified or totally profane.

In this modern spirit, Christians have increasingly emphasised the labour of Jesus as a craftsman during his hidden years, as a sign of the transcendence inherent in the human stewardship of God's creation. Similarly, Christians can look to Mary to validate the inherently divine core in the physical labours of domestic love. For men and women, old and young, the holiness of the everyday is seen a wonderful sign of God's overflowing love for humanity.

However, the old traditions were not entirely wrong. Even the most spiritually fulfilling life of labour cannot provide the fullness of life to which God calls each person. Not even the best career can provide a real substitute for the richness of divine and human love, for the true, the good and the beautiful. Labour can be more ennobling than wise men may have once thought, and modern labour overall may provide more opportunities for human excellence than pre-modern labour, but no labour can, on its own, bring order to restless hearts or make sense of suffering.

In short, the results of the modern striving in labour can never be completely satisfactory. It is this inevitable ontological failure—labour’s limited potential for transcendence—rather than, say, wage injustice or poor vocational training, which explains why modern labour excites so much discontent. The young are especially vulnerable to this disappointment, because in their inexperience they are particularly likely to ask more of labour than it can possibly deliver.

The excesses of both the young cog and the young drifter are testimonies to this inadequacy. The hyper-dedicated cog hopes to be able to work hard enough to drown out the roar of spiritual emptiness. The hyper-detached drifter is refusing to ask for what is available because he or she knows or intuits that it will never fully satisfy. Both end up losing out on the genuine but moderate good which modern labour really does promote.

Similarly, young women who put their careers before motherhood often expect too much from the former. However, young women who want to labour at nothing but motherhood, seeing housework and all paid work as unfortunate if sometimes necessary distractions, are often disappointed. For some, of course, motherhood is an all-encompassing vocation, but many still yearn for something “more”. Perhaps a latent frustration with the inevitable limits to what this labour can offer leads some mothers to transcend it through “helicopter parenting”, promoting the perfect success of their children.

For millennia, philosophers and religious teachers have cautioned young and old alike about the strict limits to the goodness of a life of consumption. The increased modern appreciation for the goodness of everyday life has perhaps revealed some new depths to this side of economic life. Modern technologies provide new opportunities—often not taken—to humanise the world more thoroughly by creating more beautiful objects and spreading more widely the lifestyles of elegance and refinement which were once limited to a tiny group of aristocrats. The ready accessibility of travel allow more people to witness the wonders of the world, both as God made it in raw nature, and in the artworks and monuments which humanity has wrought out of it.

However, the traditional warnings against excessive desires still hold—whether the consumer good in question is food, clothing, housing, creature comforts or leisure. A few people have argued that there is redeeming spiritual merit hidden in the immoderate consumption of mind-altering drugs, and others make the same sort of claim for extreme fitness, mind-numbing entertainments and thrill-seeking leisure experiences. But their case is not persuasive.

I think many young people do try to squeeze out as much of the genuine goodness of consumption as they can. The careful attention to food, décor, holiday planning and various ways of “having fun” often demonstrates a commendable striving for the good and the beautiful. However, excesses are hard to avoid when attention is being paid to worldly things and experiences rather than to the transcendental excellences— friendship, family and love —which these consumption activities can support but not supplant.

To understand why many young people search so eagerly for treasures which cannot satisfy, we need to once again ponder the relevant competition. Just as the excessive dedication of young careerists to the excellence of labour often betrays a desperate search for more meaning than labour can possibly provide, the craving for consumer pleasures may betray—just as philosophers and religious teachers have always said—an inner emptiness. Young people who earn and yearn to spend as much as possible are courting spiritual disaster. Those of us who are old enough to have seen what money can and cannot buy may find ourselves frustrated by the naïve enthusiasm that many young adults express for economic accomplishments and satisfactions. I often find myself telling people not to fuss so much about their careers, not to wait until they are sure of economic security to get married and have

children, and not to worry about not being able to afford this or that consumer good or service.

I try, though, to think the best. I recognise that the dedication to excellence at work does provide valuable goods and services, as well as supporting many fine communities of labour. The striving for professional success is often accompanied by a concern for justice or an appreciation for truth and beauty. The concern for excellence in consumption counters the tendency of mass production to settle for mediocrity. Most important of all, whilst the desire to find a higher meaning in the economic life may be misguided in many ways, it nonetheless reveals one of the finest attributes of youth: the restless, energetic, imaginative and idealistic striving for higher things.

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