

**THE DIGNITY AND PRIORITY OF LABOR:  
REFLECTIONS ON *LABOREM EXERCENS***

**MICAH LOTT**

(forthcoming in *Comment Magazine*)

*2011 marked the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Paul II's encyclical Laborem Exercens, known in English as "On Human Work." Along with Centesimus Annus and Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, this encyclical forms the core of John Paul II's contribution to the development of Catholic social thought. In this essay, I explore some of the central ideas in Laborem Exercens. My goal is to make plausible some of its more obscure claims, and to show its relevance for Christian views of socioeconomic justice.*

As I write this, hundreds of thousands of British teachers and civil servants are on strike, in opposition to proposed changes to their pensions. In Greece, armored riot police have been firing volleys of tear gas into crowds gathered outside Parliament to protest a package of austerity measures designed to avoid defaulting on the nation's debt. In the long wake of 2008's financial crisis, people around the world are fiercely debating matters of working life and economic organization.

These debates are about more than finding the best strategy for achieving a common aim. Rather they reflect deep disagreements over proper *goals*: What kind of economy should we be aiming at? How should the burdens and benefits of labor be distributed? What is the proper task of political authorities in shaping the economic activity of citizens? Our answers to these questions depend upon how we understand the nature and purpose of human economics: What is the measure of success or failure for a human economy? What values, if any, should guide economic thought and action?

Despite their significance for our political disagreements, these deeper questions are frequently addressed only in slogans and sound-bites. In our public political cultures, basic assumptions are often little discussed and barely examined. Many well-meaning citizens, including many Christians, are unsure how to give a principled account of the nature and purpose of economics. Thus they either ignore these fundamental questions as too difficult to answer, or they uncritically adopt the views of a particular subculture or political party.

In this context, the primary documents of contemporary Catholic social thought are a rich and valuable resource.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on Scripture and Christian tradition, and informed by classical and contemporary philosophy, these encyclicals offer a wealth of reflection on the first principles of

---

<sup>1</sup> By "primary documents," I mean papal encyclicals and letters written by councils of bishops. For an excellent collection of these documents, see *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* eds. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992). In this essay, the citations refer to the page numbers in this volume. These documents are also available on the Vatican website: <http://www.vatican.va/>.

political and economic life. As their authors emphasize, the primary aim of these documents is not to give concrete policy advice. Rather they elaborate a basic framework for social and political thought. They explain the concepts that should orient our deliberation and action – concepts such as “human rights”, “the common good”, and “justice.” In this sense, the encyclicals are not the “last word” on the matters they address, but the “first word.” They provide a principled – but still developing and debatable – framework for social thought and action.

At the center of Catholic social thought is an understanding of *the human person*, made in the image of God, possessing freedom and dignity, and capable of finding ultimate fulfillment in relationship to other human beings and to the Creator. In *Laborem Exercens*, we find a detailed discussion of the human person as *worker*.

### **The Central Issue: Human Labor**

Near the beginning of *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul II declares that “human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question, if we try to see that question really from the point of view of man’s good.” (355) This is a big claim on behalf of work. Within modern Catholic social thought, the “social question” refers to the fundamental issues of social and political philosophy, and in particular to matters of distributive and economic justice: How should material goods be produced and distributed within a human community? What are the just forms of ownership, contract, or taxation? What are the basic rights of workers? What are the right and duties of political authorities in governing an economy?

John Paul II insists that the answers to these questions are rooted in a true understanding of human work. In turn, the key to understanding human work is grasping the special dignity of work. This dignity flows from the fact the worker is a free and rational being – “a person operating within a community of persons.” Beyond its usefulness, 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, that is to say, a subject that decides about himself.” This special value of work, based in the personhood of the worker, is “the fundamental and perennial heart of Christian teaching on human work.” (359)

So work is the key to the social question, and free persons are the key to work. This framework raises two questions. On the one hand, how does the dignity of human work(ers) provide concrete direction in matters of justice – i.e. given the ethical value of work, what kind of communities and economic policies should we strive for? John Paul II’s answer to this question centers on the principle of the *priority of labor over capital*. Before examining this principle, however, we should consider an even more basic question: How should we understand the claim that work has “an ethical value of its own”? What sort of value is this, and how exactly is it “linked” to the fact that workers are free persons?

## Production, Persons, and the Dignity of Human Work

John Paul declares that work is good for human beings, and indeed that through work a human being “achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed in a sense becomes ‘more a human being.’ ” (364) This is a very high view of work, and it runs counter to the common idea that we work to make possible the *other* activities in which we find our true fulfillment – spending time with friends, playing music, travel, worship. How, then, can this high view of work be justified?

To answer to this question, it is important to know what we mean by “work” or “labor.” However, nowhere in *Laborem Exercens* does John Paul II offer a precise definition of these terms. It will be helpful, then, to make some distinctions. We can distinguish three common, yet different senses of “work.” First, “work” can mean *activity* or *proper activity*, in contrast to inactivity or defective activity. If we say that the elevator is “not working,” we mean that it is not doing the thing it is supposed to do. Second, “work” can mean the specific *kind* of human activity that aims to produce and procure the necessary means of life. This is work in the sense of *economic* activity, as when we ask what someone does “for work.” Here, the activity of work is distinguished from those human activities which we value for their own sakes, and not for anything additional that they bring about. In this sense, activities of friendship, worship, and play are *not* work. Third, “work” can mean the *quality* of some activity, when that activity is done with toil or drudgery instead of ease and pleasure.

The primary topic of *Laborem Exercens* is work in the second sense, as human economic activity. However, this immediately suggests a puzzle about the claim that work has a value “of its own.” For economic activity is distinguished from other kinds of activities precisely insofar as it is useful for *something else*. Work is *productive* activity. Its *telos*, or purpose, lies in the *product*. This is not a “moral” claim, but a point about the structure of certain types of activity. For example, what makes an activity “house-building” is that it aims to produce a house. The reason we engage in house-building is for the sake of the *house*. The product is the goal that gives the activity its meaning and purpose. And something similar is true in the case of other productive activities like farming, cooking, ship-building, etc.

In light of this, it is easy to see how work can be good in the sense of being *useful* for bringing about necessary and good things. And we can even suppose that many forms of work will be pleasurable. But beyond this, how could work ever be valuable on its own, when we work precisely for the sake of something else? And yet, John Paul II declares that work is indeed good for its own sake:

[Work] is not only good in the sense that it is useful or something to enjoy; it is also good as being something worthy, that is to say, something that corresponds to man’s dignity, that expresses this dignity and increases it. If one wishes to define more clearly the ethical meaning of work, it is this truth that one must particularly keep in mind. Work is a good thing for man – a good thing for his humanity – because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed in a sense becomes “more a human being.” (364)

Work expresses and increases human dignity, because in work a human being expresses herself as a *person* – as a *free* and *rational* being. Unlike plants and non-rational animals, humans produce and procure the means of life through free activity. And this freedom introduces a distinct dimension of value to human work. For even in activities that aim at a specific product (e.g. house-building), human beings express themselves as free and rational beings.<sup>2</sup>

Thus for any given economic action, such as building a house, we may consider it in two ways. Insofar as it is a *productive* action, its *telos* is the *product*, and the action's success depends on whether or not the product is good. But insofar as it is a *human* productive action, it has value over and above the thing to-be-produced. Viewed along the dimension of human freedom, the action has special dignity as the embodiment of free and rational agency. Success along this dimension depends not upon the product, but whether the action embodies the right use of human freedom – on whether the rational will of the person is properly ordered.

To see this distinction, suppose that you undertake to build a house for me, out of neighborly concern. Just before the house is complete, it is destroyed by a forest fire. Insofar as your action is productive, it has failed to reach its goal; the fire frustrates your purpose and brings your efforts to naught. However, there is a goodness and dignity in your action that the fire does not erase. Because it is an act of neighborly concern, your action embodies an excellence of human freedom, a proper disposition of your will. Viewed as the expression of your freedom and self-determining rationality, your activity is not a failure but a success.

Because human beings are *persons*, all of our productive activities – all of our *work* – can and should be *more* than simply the procuring and providing of useful goods. The same activity that is, viewed from one angle, valuable for its result rather than its own sake can *also* be, viewed from another angle, an activity that is valuable for its own sake. Thus the mechanic's act of "fixing a car," or the nurse's act of "preparing a bandage," may *also* be the activities of "loving one's neighbor" or "serving the common good."

Indeed, all human work is an occasion for the exercise of justice, charity, and creative participation in the activity of God. Thus human work is never *mere* work. For the ultimate end of human work is participation in a *community* of persons, both human and Divine. As the Second Vatican Council declares in *Gaudium et Spes*:

[L]abor comes immediately from the person. In a sense, the person stamps the things of nature with his seal and subdues them to his will. It is ordinarily by his labor that a man supports himself and his family, is joined to his fellow men and serves them, and is enabled to exercise genuine charity and be a partner in the work of bringing God's creation to perfection. (211)

---

<sup>2</sup>That John Paul II is always focused on this dimension of work helps to explain his otherwise implausible statement that "Only man is capable of work" (352).

## The Priority of Labor and the Rights of Workers

Granting the dignity of human work, what are the implications of this for socioeconomic justice? In *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul II addresses this question by appealing to the principle of the priority of labor over capital. This principle states that within an economic system, the working persons are of primary importance, and everything else is subordinate to them. Because human workers are free persons, human labor is valuable over-and-above the goods produced. Human work possesses a special dignity – it is of *final*, rather than merely instrumental, value. In contrast, the objects produced, or the tools used to produce them, have a secondary and conditional value. Capital – “the whole collection of the means of production” – is merely a means, an instrument in service of human labor. Workers are the *ends*.

The priority of labor, based in the personhood of workers, grounds the fundamental *rights of workers*. To work is a *duty* for human beings. Work is something to which we are called by God, something necessary for fulfilling our humanity, and something by which we serve our neighbor. But not every sort of economy shows proper respect for human labor. Some economic arrangements exploit, or marginalize, or degrade their workers. If humans are to work in a way that respects the dignity of human work – in a way befitting the value of persons – then an economy must be arranged in a certain way. Workers rights specify such minimally acceptable economic arrangements. These rights clarify what workers are due from their employers and from political authorities, in light of the dignity of human labor and the justice owed to workers as free persons.<sup>3</sup>

The fourth section of *Laborem Exercens* spells out the fundamental rights of workers. Among the core rights of workers is the right to a just wage, sufficient to secure basic goods for oneself and one’s family. Indeed, John Paul II insists that “a just wage is the concrete means of verifying the justice of the whole socioeconomic system and, in any case, of checking that it is functioning properly.” (378-9) Other rights include: the right to find work, to have security in the case of unemployment, the right to rest, and the right to form unions, and the right to affordable healthcare – “medical assistance should be easily available for workers and that as far as possible it should be cheap or even free of charge.” (379)

The priority of labor also implies a limit on the right to private property, especially with private ownership of the means of production. The means of production have the status of instruments whose purpose is to *serve* labor. Thus “the only legitimate title to their possession – whether in the form of private ownership or in the form of public or collective ownership – is that they should serve labor and thus by serving labor should make possible the achievement of the first principle of this order, namely the universal destination of goods and the right to common use of them.” (371)

---

<sup>3</sup> “In short, the modern vocabulary and grammar of rights is a many-faceted instrument for reporting and asserting the requirements or other implications of a relationship of justice *from the point of view of the person(s) who benefit(s) from* that relationships. It provides a way of talking about ‘what is just’ from a special angle: the viewpoint of the ‘other(s)’ to whom something (including, *inter alia*, freedom of choice) is owed or due, and who would be wronged if denied that something.” John Finnis *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford University Press: 1980) 205.

Moreover, if capital is to serve labor properly, then the means of production must be “socialized.” As John Paul II understands this term, “socialization” does not rule out private ownership. Nor is state ownership of the means of production sufficient to guarantee that they have been socialized. Rather, the point of socializing the means of production is for workers to have part-ownership of, and responsibility over, the productive process. In this way, the activity of work more fully expresses the freedom and creativity of the working person, and this befits the special dignity of human labor. Thus the priority of labor over capital implies that the means of production should be, as far as possible, brought under the control and creative freedom of the workers themselves.

### **The Error of “Economism” and the Task of Governments**

John Paul II labels as “economism” the outlook that fails to recognize the dignity of work and the priority of labor. Economism considers human labor “solely according to its economic purpose.” (369). Thus economism regards human workers merely in terms of their productive potential, and it looks upon human labor “as if it were just an element like any other in the economic process” (370). On this view, human labor is treated like any other *commodity*. It may be bought and sold like any commodity, and it may have greater or lesser economic value.

John Paul II notes that the error of economism was disastrously played out in the industrialization of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. During this time “what was mainly seen was the possibility of vastly increasing material wealth, the means, while the end, that is to say man, who should be served by the means, was ignored.” (370) The resulting social order was an attack upon human labor and working people.

In fact, in America during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the error of “economism” was explicitly and widely endorsed by economists, politicians, preachers and business owners. Labor was seen as a commodity which the worker could sell in exchange for wages. It was argued that the fairness of the labor market lay in the fact that the exchange was based in a *free contract* between workers and capitalists. Indeed, the freedom to contract was extolled as a great advance for the worker, moving beyond an older system in which workers were dependent upon and subordinate to their masters. Thus Edmund James, an economics professor at the University of Pennsylvania in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, argued that:

[F]inally, in the nineteenth century, the old relation is abolished entirely and the status is converted into a contract. This mode of treatment converts the laborer into an independent human being on the same footing exactly as the master, and secures to him, nominally at least, perfect freedom in disposition of his time and labor, which form the commodities which he has for sale.<sup>4</sup>

According to the contract ideology dominant in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (and still influential today), the justice of labor contracts concerns only whether the agreement is made freely, without force or fraud, and whether each party upholds his end of the bargain. Given that these conditions of

---

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Amy Dru Stanley *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 75.

agreement are met, the resulting arrangement cannot be considered unjust or exploitative, no matter the terms of remuneration agreed upon.

It was precisely this “pure contract” view of economic justice that Leo XIII addressed in *Rerum Novarum* in 1891: “Wages, we are told, are fixed by free consent; and therefore, the employer when he pays what was agreed upon has done his part, and is not called upon for anything further. The only way, it is said, in which injustice could happen would be if the master refused to pay the whole of the wages, or the workman would not complete the work undertaken.” (31)

While Leo XII accepted the practice of wage-labor based on labor contracts, he rejected the “pure contract” view of what made contracts just: “Let it be granted, then, that, as a rule, workman and employer should make free agreements, and in particular should freely agree as to wages; nevertheless there is a dictate of nature more imperious and more ancient than any bargain between man and man, that the remuneration must be enough to support the wage earner in reasonable and frugal comfort. If through necessity or fear of a worse evil, the workman accepts harder conditions because an employer or contractor will give him no better, he is the victim of force and injustice.” In insisting upon the right to a living wage, and other workers’ rights, John Paul II stands squarely in the tradition of *Rerum Novarum* and subsequent Catholic social thought.

As the quote from Edmund James suggests, both “economism” and John Paul II’s own view can appeal to the *freedom* of workers to support their positions. The difference, however, is that freedom within economism is simply the freedom to contract to sell one’s labor as a commodity. But given the priority of labor over capital, such “freedom” must be seen as misguided. For it is the “freedom” to treat one’s own activity as if it was just another *thing* to be bought and sold. In reality, however, one’s own activity belongs to a different and greater order than any commodity, for that activity is itself an *embodiment of freedom and rationality*. Thus no matter how “free” contracts might be according to a formal criteria, if their terms violate the basic rights of workers, they are in reality an *assault upon human freedom*. For workers’ rights specify how labor must be conducted if the freedom and dignity of workers is to be respected. To allow “free contracts” that violate basic rights is thus to justify (in the name of “freedom”!) arrangements that frustrate the very activity that is the true end and purpose of work – the free labor of the human person, in her efforts to “subdue the earth” as a rational being.

How, then, can we best secure free and dignified work for all? Might the rights of workers be best secured by reducing government intervention and leaving matters to the “free market”?

In *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul II decisively rejects this free market optimism. Rather the task of crafting laws and policies to ensure justice for workers rightfully belongs to the government – and, given the economic interdependence of states, to inter-governmental agencies. The state must conduct a “just labor policy,” and the fundamental criteria for a just labor policy is securing respect for the rights of workers. John Paul II shows no sympathy for the idea that governments can best secure worker’ rights by simply getting “out of the way” and trusting the market alone to bring about socioeconomic justice:

The attainment of worker's rights cannot however be doomed to be merely a result of economic systems which on a larger or smaller scale are guided chiefly by the criterion of maximum profit. On the contrary, it is respect for the objective rights of the worker – every kind of worker: manual or intellectual, industrial or agricultural, etc. – that must constitute the adequate and fundamental criterion for shaping the whole economy, both on the level of the individual society and state and within the whole world economic policy and of the system of international relationships that derive from it. (376)

### **The Measure of Economic Success**

We are now in a position to see why our view of human labor has profound implications for the sort of economy we should be aiming at.

Given the freedom of the human person, human work is never *mere* work. Given the priority of labor over capital, the success of a human economy is never *mere* economic success. The true measure of a successful economy is *not* how many goods are produced. Nor is the measure producing the most goods for the most people. For a firm, or a society, may be “economically successful,” in the narrow sense of producing a great amount of material goods, even when the labor that brings about these goods is not carried out in a truly free, creative and dignified manner. In this case, the economy fails precisely *as a human economy*.

To say this is *not* to impose an “external” moral standard upon economics. To see this, consider a system of house-building that produces a huge number of houses that are uncomfortable and miserable to live in. No matter how many houses it produces, such house-building is defective by the internal standard of house-building, and not some “external” standard. For the *point* of house-building is to produce dwellings that serve the human good. Likewise, the *whole point* of a human economy is to serve the human good, and thus an economy that denies its laborers human fulfillment fails by the internal standard of a human economy.

In *Centessimus Annus*, John Paul II makes this point in terms of *alienation*. Both personal and societal alienation occur when we fail to respect the principle of the priority of labor over capital. The root of alienation is the “reversal of means and ends” – making the human person, who is the true end of economic activity, into a means for material gains.

[A]lienation is found also in work, when it is organized to ensure maximum returns and profits with no concern for whether the worker, through his own labor, grows or diminishes as a person, either through increased sharing in a genuinely supportive community or through increased isolation in a maze of relationships marked by destructive competitiveness and estrangement, in which he is considered only a means and not an end. (470)

Clearly alienation may infect an economic order, even if it produces an abundance of material goods for the alienated workers within it. Thus the measure of a successful economy *cannot* be gross domestic product, or even levels of real income for individuals. For such standards do not assess the central element of any economy – the quality and character of human work.

As people supportive of human good, we should recognize that the ultimate standard of a human economy is not the “stuff” it generates, but the *lives* of the persons within it.<sup>5</sup> In approaching contemporary debates about economic policy, our guiding question should be: Does this economic arrangement respect the dignity of persons within it, by enabling them all to flourish as free and creative beings? We should resist attempts to talk about “the economy” in a way that abstracts away from workers and their *activity* of labor. We should always keep in view the special *dignity* of labor, beyond its productive effects. We should emphasize the *basic rights* of human workers, as the ultimate standard for an acceptable economic order.

As Christians, we have special reason to emphasize the rights and dignity of labor, against all forms of “economism” in thought and policy. For we are “the church of the poor,” called to be in solidarity with the weak and the oppressed. It is a form of oppression when the basic rights of workers are ignored for the sake of profit and material gain. However, it is a form of service to God and neighbor when we pursue an economy respectful of the full dignity of free human persons, made in the image of the Creator.

---

<sup>5</sup> In focusing economic questions on human flourishing – on what people are actually able *to be* and *to do* - there is much in common between Catholic social thought and the “capabilities approach” of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen. See, for example, Nussbaum’s book *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001)