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The Philosophy of Work and the Future of Civilization: Maritain, Weil and Simon

In this paper devoted to Philosophy and the Future of Civilization, it may not be without some merit to reflect for a few moments on the philosophy of work and the future of civilization. Most people spend the great majority of the waking hours of their lives at work. The kind of work they do during these many hours and the attitudes they take toward that work impact profoundly on their development as persons, on the solidity of their sense of self and on the nature of the culture they produce in common. Not long ago Robert Bellah and a group of his colleagues, in a fascinating but deeply disturbing book called *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*,¹ drew a very disquieting portrait of what Christopher Lasch, in a review, called that "beleaguered, empty and minimal self," produced by contemporary American culture, a self that "retains only a tenuous grip on its surroundings and on its own identity."² Is it possible that this beleaguered, empty, minimal self has some relation to a rather generalized attitude toward work in American society today?

Three contemporary philosophers--Jacques Maritain, Yves R. Simon and Simone Weil--who either knew one another and the work they produced, or who shared a very intimate friendship, recognized the impact of a philosophy of work on the development of the individual human personality and the culture or civilization produced by a commu-

¹Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

²For a more extensive critique of such a view of the self see Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism* (New York: Norton), 1978.

nity of persons. I would like to reflect for a few moments on what seem to me to be fundamental ideas concerning work and civilization which Maritain expressed only indirectly and by implication in his essay "Exister avec le Peuple," in his book *Reflections on America*³ and in his very last essay, which he finished the night before he died, "A Society without Money," ideas which Yves R. Simon developed fully and explicitly in essays which were collected and edited by Vucan Kuic in 1971 in the book *Work, Society and Culture*,⁴ and which Simone Weil treated at length in her books *La Condition Ouvrière*⁵ and *Réflexions sur les Causes de la Liberté et de l'Oppression Sociale*.⁶ In April 1937 Maritain published an article "Con el Pueblo" in the Spanish periodical *Sur*. He felt that the miserable and hopeless plight of the dispossessed proletariat was more evident at that time in Spain than in any other country of the West. In June the French periodical *Sept* published this article under the title "Exister avec le peuple" along with others by François Mauriac and Etienne Borne, in a special issue devoted to the working classes. All of the contributors to the issue were of bourgeois origin and none of them had any immediate experience of proletarian existence. Mauriac's article was filled with passionate indignation over the injustices imposed on the proletariat by the rapacious bourgeois and with an anguished sense of responsibility, incurred by his belonging to the *guilty class*. Borne's article was full of exultation that the day of retribution had arrived and that nothing could stop the march of the proletariat toward the vindication of their rights; but for all the expressions of sympathy, solidarity and enthusiasm, it is not difficult to detect what a reviewer in *Esprit* called

a certain manner of speaking which certainly does not touch the profound realities involved but which, in a way that Catholics who

³Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1958).

⁴Yves R. Simon, *Work, Society and Culture*, ed. Vukan Kuic (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989).

⁵Simone Weil, *La Condition Ouvrière* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951).

⁶Simone Weil, *Réflexions sur les Causes de la Liberté et de l'Oppression Sociale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955).

live in a closed social milieu hardly realize, grates on the ears of those they wish and ought to win over.⁷

Maritain's "Exister avec le Peuple," however, was exceptional in that the author seemed to have been able vicariously to identify himself completely with a class to which he did not belong. It was perhaps his long and intimate association with Léon Bloy and Charles Péguy which made him capable of such an identification. He insisted that what was needed to win the working classes was not a *love of benevolence* but a *love of unity*, a love born of "co-naturalness" (as he would put it), of communion and compassion, in the real sense of those words.

If we love that living and human thing which we call the people, a difficult thing to define, I realize, as are all living and human things, but which is all the more real for that very reason, we will wish first and foremost to exist with them, to suffer and to remain in communion with them.

Before 'doing good' to them, and working for their benefit, before practicing the politics of one group or another, ... we must first choose to exist with them and to suffer with them, to make their pain and their destiny our own.⁸

Maritain looked on the people as "the great reservoir of vital spontaneity and nonphariseism...the reservoir of a new civilization." I do not know whether or not Jacques Maritain ever met Simone Weil in person. They did exchange two letters, I believe. It is hard to imagine that he was ignorant of what she was doing and writing in the early thirties, that is, in the years preceding his publication of "Exister avec le Peuple." If Maritain, as a member of the bourgeois class, was able in a very special way to *exist* vicariously with the working classes, Simone Weil, another member of French bourgeois society, was able to exist with them in actuality and in fact. We all know how this fervent and fragile young woman, this eminently impractical intellectual, in order to understand the plight of the worker, actually became one, how she took a painful and

⁷*Esprit*, Mar. 1, 1937, 935f.

⁸Jacques Maritain, *Raison et Raisons* (Paris: Egloff, 1947), 239-240 *passim*.

difficult job in a factory working before a huge furnace that belched fire from five holes, how she insisted on associating with the other workers, joining them for lunch in their bistros, accompanying them to the cinema, participating in their *fêtes populaires*, asking them to invite her into their homes, and dressing more simply than their wives; how she resolved to live on the income of the poorest workers and eat only what they ate, limiting herself at one time to five francs a day because that was the allotment passed out to the workers on strike in Puy, a practice which contributed to her poor health and eventually to her untimely death.

In "Exister avec le Peuple," Maritain tried to define the nebulous and equivocal term "people." He was careful, first of all, to distinguish *people* from *class*. It is rather, he said,

a community of the under-privileged...centered around manual work, characterized by a certain historical patrimony...of suffering, of effort and of hope...by a certain way of understanding and living out poverty, suffering and pain...by a certain way of being always the same ones who get themselves killed.⁹

The people, he maintained, cannot be equated with the *plebs* or *populus* of antiquity, particularly since Christianity added to it "the idea of the little people of God," "the poor to whom the beatitudes are promised." The nineteenth century had seen take place in the people, claimed Maritain, "a recognition...of the dignity of the human person in the worker as such," and the twentieth century had seen the people develop "the consciousness of a personality in a state of becoming, the condition necessary for the future flowering of a personalist democracy." He felt that Marx, in his obsession with the economic structure of society, was wrong to identify a class (the proletariat) with *the people*, having the former include the latter. Maritain considered this an unnatural inclusion, since for him only the broader concept of *the people*, not that of *class*, "is possessed of a primordial social value on a genuinely human level."¹⁰ Maritain lists some of the characteristics of the group he calls *the people*. They have no inheritance other than their lowly status, they are con-

⁹Jacques Maritain, *Raison et Raisons*, 241-242 passim.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 243.

demned to a condition of poverty (a condition, remarks Maritain, that was shared by many middle-class people of the thirties) and they subsist in a state of servitude and oppression.¹¹

Simone Weil and Yves R. Simon both attributed the same characteristics to the working class, but they did not find it necessary to distinguish between the people and the proletariat. Weil wrote that a whole generation of workers throughout the world is trapped in a life that does no more than vegetate, a generation that has become acutely conscious of the fact that it has no future, that it has no place in the universe. "We live in a time," she said, "that has no future. The expectation of what is to come is filled, not with hope, but with anguish."¹² In an article entitled "Condition Première d'un Travail non Servile," she wrote:

Every condition in which the worker finds himself of necessity on the last day of a period of a month, a year, or twenty years of effort as he found himself on the first day is a kind of slavery. And the reason for this is the impossibility for him of aspiring toward anything other than what he has or of orienting his efforts toward the acquisition of a good. His effort is directed solely toward staying alive.¹³

It is this slavery of condition, according to Yves R. Simon, which turns Maritain's *people* or the *working class* into the *proletariat*. Just as Simone Weil, he felt that if a wage-earner has no reasonable hope of escaping from his condition, even after twenty years of effort and even though he has the desire and capability of escaping, then, whether or not he is poor, he is a member of an enslaved proletariat. "This unique sociological entity appears," writes Simon, "only when the position of wage-earners becomes historically solidified in the economic system."¹⁴ For Simon, poverty is not necessarily implied in the proletarian condition, as it seems to be for Maritain; however, subjection and exploitation are.

This subjection or enslavement, and the exploitation that accompa-

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Simone Weil, *Reflexions sur les Causes de la Liberté et de l'Oppression Sociale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 10f.

¹³*Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁴Yves R. Simon, *Work Society and Culture*, 100ff.

nies it, is not due solely for either Weil or Simon to the fact that the proletarian and his children have no hope of rising above their condition. It is due also to the very nature of the system in which he is trapped. Simon wrote:

The proletarians as a social class are defined by their position in the system of exchange and distribution known as the free market. Because labor in this system is a commodity bought and sold in the market, the working man becomes a sort of unit of exchange, and the community of the working people, as if by an enormous accident, becomes a distinct social class which, deprived of a functional share in the common good, develops a strong tendency toward secession.¹⁵

Since the central institution of the *laissez-faire* system is the free market where labor is just another item of merchandise, the sale and the price of which are determined by the so-called law of supply and demand, it is not surprising that a fundamental operating principle of the system is to keep labor lean and hungry. Both Maritain and Simon spent a good number of their most productive years at the same time in America. Maritain came here for the first time in 1933, returned regularly for lecture tours, and, with the fall of France in 1940, came to live in the United States, where, with the exception of the few years he spent in Rome as French Ambassador to the Vatican, he remained until his wife Raïssa's death in 1960. Simon lived and worked in the United States from 1938 until his death in 1961. Both were astounded by and expressed their enthusiasm for what they found here. In 1958, in his *Reflections on America*, Maritain expressed his admiration for a society which was for the most part classless and in which he saw the beginnings, but only the beginnings, of the ideal society he envisaged in his *Humanisme Intégral*.¹⁶ Simon shared Maritain's admiration. He wrote:

My friend Jacques Maritain, who is not a social observer by vocation, has written in his books on the United States that, generally speaking, there is no bourgeoisie in this country. The tendency to ape

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 104.

¹⁶Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America*, 51, 58-65.

the aristocracy in its capacity of leisure class appears here in the sort of person whom we call a *parvenu*, an upstart. In whatever may be called the real upper class in America, with the exception of an older and comparatively small section, there is no such tendency. The urge to conspicuous leisure is distinctly not American. Now, I think Maritain is right...The European middle-class attitudes, even today include a certain undervaluation of work, an inclination to dissociate work and culture and to set them in opposition to each other, and thus to consider freedom from work a praiseworthy evidence that the primary condition for culture has been realized....This is not a typical American outlook....The life of work and the life of culture are not so sharply separated. This means, all things considered, that there is no classical society in America, and perhaps there really never was one. Here, work has never been held in contempt or in irreconcilable opposition to culture. And that is also in part the reason why a distinct proletarian class has never come into being here.¹⁷

Simone Weil had no firsthand, intimate knowledge of life in America and perhaps shared some of the typical Old World prejudices which writers like Georges Duhamel and André Siegfried expressed concerning the brash, aggressive and shallow upstart civilization they found there. However, she felt it indispensable to try to describe, even in the vaguest of terms, the kind of civilization that might be considered desirable for the future, just as Maritain had tried to do in *Humanise Intégral* and in "A Society without Money." The center of this new civilization, she wrote, would be manual work:

...The most fully human civilization will be one which has manual work for its center, one in which manual work constitutes the supreme value. It has nothing to do with that religion of production which reigned in America during the period of prosperity, or which reigns in Russia since the start of the five year plan; for this religion has as its true object, not the worker, but the products of his work, that is, things not man. It is not because of its relationship with what is produced that manual work ought to become the highest value,

¹⁷Yves R. Simon, *Work Society and Culture*, 149ff.

but because of its relationship with the man who does the work; [manual work is] what each human being needs most essentially so that his life of itself may take on a meaning and a value in his own eyes....In our time what a marvelous fullness of life could we not expect of a civilization in which work would be so transformed as to exercise fully all human faculties and constitute the human act *par excellence*. It must, then, be found at the very center of culture.¹⁸

Though, in this particular text, Weil does not include intellectual activities in her concept of work, as Maritain and Simon are always careful to do, she does not exclude them. Elsewhere she bemoans "that degrading division of work into manual work and intellectual work which is the basis of our culture."¹⁹ All three, however, describe, either indirectly and by implication, or directly and explicitly, the characteristics of that *work* which will be the foundation and center of the new culture. The first characteristic of work is that it is a blessing, not a curse. This "human act *par excellence*" ennobles man, civilizes him, liberates him, and at the same time, draws him into a community of persons. Weil expressly rejects that "ancient and hopeless curse of Genesis which painted the world as a hard labor camp and work as the mark of man's baseness and slavery." Instead she goes so far as to maintain that "the notion of work considered as a human value is without any doubt the sole spiritual conquest that human thought has made since the miracle of Greece."²⁰

In Maritain's utopia, his "Society without Money," each qualifying individual would be required to work half the day, (four hours), either manually or intellectually, in the profession or trade of his choice in order to assure a free income at a common basic level consonant with his dignity as a person. This work Maritain called *requêtes de base* (basic requirements). The other half of the day people would still have to work, as it pleased them to do so, however, in what Maritain called *expansion de surcroît*, a term which I have translated as "life enhancement activities."²¹

¹⁸Simone Weil, *Réflexions sur les Causes de la Liberté et de l'Oppression Sociale*, 118ff.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 16.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 122.

²¹Jacques Maritain, "Une Société sans Argent," *Cahiers Jacques Mari-*

It is interesting that Scott Nearing, who died recently, made the same distinction in his book *Living the Good Life*. Anyone was welcome in the little community he founded, but in exchange for the necessities and comforts offered by the community, each member or visitor had to provide one half day of what Nearing called "bread labor."²² What is important for our present consideration is that Maritain makes no distinction between the kinds of work done during the two halves of the work day, as if the activities done as *basic requirements* were the *dirty work*, the effects of the biblical curse, and the *life enhancement activities* were nothing but play and recreation. In his "Society without Money," Maritain says, an intellectual who spends his mornings in his books or in teaching may choose vegetable gardening or cabinetmaking for his *life enhancement activity*; a bricklayer may want to spend his afternoons reading, painting, or playing music. In fact someone may decide to spend the whole day in the same work. In other words, all work can be *life-enhancing*, and the very concept of work loses the connotation of punishment.

In 1947, the same year that Maritain published his *Reflections on America*, Yves R. Simon, as his contribution to a symposium on work, delivered an address entitled, "The Concept of Work,"²³ in which he made exactly the same distinction that Maritain made in 1973 in "A Society without Money." I would suggest that Maritain borrowed the distinction directly from his friend. Simon had made this distinction as early as 1940 in an article in the *Review of Politics* entitled "Work and Workman: A Philosophical and Sociological Inquiry"²⁴ where he gave specific examples of what he called "activities of legal fulfillment" and "activities of free development."

I cultivate my garden to produce vegetables for my family: legal fulfillment. I cultivate my garden because I find, in doing so, an interesting and agreeable exercise: free expansion. A young girl practices piano two hours a day, according to the program imposed

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²²Scott Nearing, *Living the Good Life* (New York: 1970), 42ff.

²³Published in *The Works of the Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

²⁴Vol. 2, 1, 63-86.

on her by her mother: legal fulfillment. She sits down at the piano to play a tune she loves: free expansion.²⁵

Here Simone Weil ran up against a problem. Certain types of work, by their very nature, involve a high degree of effort, stress, or even physical pain, for example, the work done in steel mills and coal mines. How can the constraint, the coercion, the irksomeness and above all the pain associated with many forms of work, especially the work of *basic requirements, bread labor, or legal fulfillment*, be reconciled with the free development and expansion of the human personality that is supposed to be the result of this "human act *par excellence*"?

Work [wrote Weil] can be painful (even very painful) in two ways. Pain can be felt as a part of the victorious conquest over matter and over oneself, or as part of a degrading slavery. (There are intermediate stages, of course.) Why the difference? A difference in salary is surely involved, it seems to me. But the essential factor is certainly the very nature of the pain. This is a question that merits serious study in order to arrive at some very clear distinctions, and, if possible, classification.²⁶

Yves R. Simon tried to make such distinctions. He noted that work is by its essence a serious activity, not only because it is something that has to be done in order that man may live (producing food), or that he may live in a way consonant with his dignity (cleaning sewers and disposing of waste), but also because it has to be done in a way which is largely predetermined, that is, according to laws of its own (the laws of hydrodynamics, gravity, or mechanics). Work is done then, not only to fulfill personal needs and certain social obligations, but also in consonance with or in fulfillment of certain natural laws--that is, laws considered not as statutes, but laws considered in the broadest possible sense (hence his use of the term "legal"). Though he admits that work does not necessarily have to be irksome, nevertheless he is careful to insist that, since work is an activity invariably governed to a large extent by laws which the worker has no power to change, it must be acknowledged "that

²⁵Yves R. Simon, *Work, Society and Culture*, 25.

²⁶Simone Weil, *La Condition Ouvrière* (Paris: Gallimard), 1951.

there exists in work a permanent foundation for irksomeness." Simon rejects the use of the words "compulsion" or "constraint" which some writers use to describe this irksome aspect of work; the term he prefers is the one he invented: activities of "legal fulfillment." He feels that this term refutes the millennial utopianism of Marx and Engels, who, together with Fourier, "seem actually to expect that under certain specified social circumstances the very irksomeness of work will completely wither away and that work will no longer be work."²⁷ In other words, for Marx and Engels, work is not an activity of legal fulfillment, compulsion or constraint, but rather an activity of free development. Maritain, Weil, and Simon all reject this illusion.

Simon affirms categorically that "work is not, and can never be, an activity of free development."²⁸ In this very categorical statement, I do not think Simon is saying that work done in "legal fulfillment" can never be satisfying or contribute to the "free development," the expansion or the enhancement of the worker as a person. Simon, as a philosopher, is making a purely formal distinction. Work is a human act, the human act *par excellence*, says Weil. Every human act to be truly human must be informed by an intention; and the same human act, materially considered, can be formally either good or bad according to the intention that motivates it, and this is a very real distinction which applies to the human act of work. Simon gives a specific example of what he means. He wrote:

...Scientists...spend a good deal of their time working—that is, in activities of legal fulfillment. Scientific research...is such an activity—it is definitely work. But should we say that the scientist doing pure research is being "constrained"? This sounds rather awkward. Yet, if he is thought to be free of any constraint, is he still working?

Simon answers *no* to his first question and *yes* to the second because he defines work not as any kind of *compulsion* but as an activity of "legal fulfillment," a term which he feels gets him off any semantic hooks.²⁹ He cites the famous rocket-builder Wernher von Braun who said: "Basic research is when I am doing what I don't know what I am doing." Von

²⁷Yves R. Simon, *Work, Society and Culture*, 31.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹*Ibid.*, 23-32 *passim*.

Braun was not under any compulsion to choose scientific research as his avocation, and he was perfectly free to follow the direction of his research wherever it led him; yet, because he was under contract to NASA and was paid for his research, and because he did his research in conformity to and in fulfillment of the natural laws that govern bodies in motion, his research cannot be considered as an activity of free development, according to Simon, even if he would have done exactly the same thing for his own enjoyment without any contract or remuneration.

This is, I suppose, a very necessary distinction. However, I find it difficult to see how a human activity must be considered one of legal fulfillment simply because, as Simon puts it, "things have to be done according to laws of their own...(it does not matter whether these laws are recognized in theory or just empirically). In all cases, man while working deals with things according to their own laws."³⁰ So the compulsion, coercion, irksomeness, or legal obligation comes not only from without (social obligation) but also from within (a natural law). Simon distinguishes between himself who toiled at philosophy in order to support his family and Pascal's *honnête homme*, a seventeenth century gentleman of leisure and culture, who, when he philosophized, did not have to toil at it, but did so with ease and grace purely for his own enjoyment; but if all actions that "have to be done according to laws of their own" are by that very fact excluded from activities of free development, then the leisurely philosophizing of Pascal's *honnête homme* must be an activity of legal fulfillment too because he was just as much bound by the laws of logic and the principles of identity and contradiction as was Simon himself. Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier, the eighteenth century French gentleman of leisure, in his research on the combustion of air, was just as much bound by the laws of the composition of matter as von Braun was in his research by the laws governing bodies in motion. Simon's little girl who, as an activity of free development, sits down to play a song she loves is constrained to respect the laws of rhythm and harmony. I can readily see how any activity becomes one of *legal fulfillment* as soon as an obligation is imposed from without, either by society as a whole or by an individual, or is imposed from within by the purpose or end for the fulfillment of which the activity is undertaken ("I do something I have to do in order to..."); but I find it difficult to see how

³⁰*Ibid.*, 31ff.

an obligation imposed by a natural law residing in the thing or the matter which is the focus of the activity necessarily excludes that activity from the classification of "free expansion."

It may be precious distinctions like this that lead laymen to look on professional philosophers (and amateur philosophers like me) with condescending smiles. All this mountainous labor of distinction then has produced, not a mental mole, I hope, but the important point that work in itself is a blessing, not a curse. One man's work is another man's leisure. Any activity of itself can be a *life-enhancing* activity of *free development* and whatever constraint, irksomeness, or pain is involved, if freely and lovingly accepted, can be the occasion, as Weil says, of a "victorious conquest over matter and over oneself."³¹ The French poet Theophile Gautier tells the artist:

*Lutte avec le carrare
Avec le paros dur
et rare
Gardiens du contour pur*

(Struggle with the carrara, with the paros hard and rare, guardians of the pure line). "By the sweat of thy brow [it is written] thou shalt eat bread." Well, maybe so. But it was in sorrow and in pain that Flaubert brought forth his *Madame Bovary*, by the sweat of his brow Michelangelo carved his *David*, and by the sweat of my brow I grow flowers and vegetables. Who would wish it otherwise?

Another characteristic of work is that it is a social activity which draws man into a community of persons. Yves R. Simon calls this the primary and most salient feature of work.

In regard to work, [he wrote] I myself insist, first of all, that it cannot be fully defined without reference to society; an intelligible definition of work must have a social component.³²

Simone Weil waxes lyrical over this social component of work. The highest degree of happiness will be found, she wrote, in

³¹Simone Weil, *La Condition Ouvrière*, 122.

³²Yves R. Simon, *Work, Society and Culture*, 31.

... a life passed freely in a community of free people and consecrated entirely to a painful and dangerous physical labor, but carried out in the midst of fraternal cooperation.³³

For Simon this social component is based on more than a sense of solidarity among those who labor and suffer together. In America he found

...an historic and history-making striving toward a culture which is to be something serious, something marked by the same earnestness that presides over the life of work....American society is dominated, at least in its more valuable segments, by the psychology of the worker—that is, by a fundamental disposition characteristic of people who do something socially useful and who are dedicated to serious life.³⁴

Attributing this psychology of the worker to the Puritan work ethic Simon calls a perfect example of the abuse of a key idea in the explanation of history. Social utility, he says, is a metaphysical characteristic of work and is part of our philosophical understanding of work as a human activity. This is so because work by its very nature is never a terminal activity but always leads to something else;³⁵ it is directed primarily toward the transformation of physical nature for the good of man;³⁶ and what Simon means by *man* in this context is not an atomized individual, but man in the generic sense, that is, society as a whole.

Simon recognizes the difficulties and limitations arising from a too literal and absolute identification of work with the *useful* exploitation of *physical* nature for the *purposes of man*.³⁷ Such an interpretation would leave no ground to justify the activity of contemplatives, philosophers, pure scientists, or even politicians. Such activity has no place in "bour-

³³Simone Weil, *Réflexions sur les Causes de la Liberté et de l'Oppression Sociale*, 123.

³⁴Yves R. Simon, *Work, Society and Culture*, 113.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 109.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 113.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 45.

geois industrialist liberal society with all its emphasis on individualism and private rights" [says Simon]³⁸ or in contemporary philosophy, because neither recognizes "the goodness of things that have nothing to do with social utility."

Contemplative life can easily be justified in Aristotle's philosophy, because he has an idea of the good that is not merely useful but is better than useful, because it is desirable in itself, because it is an end in itself.³⁹

Yet, Aristotle does judge the citizen according to his contribution to the common good.⁴⁰ For Simon it is clear that

...one cannot be alive and active, healthy, trained, educated and protected, at least most of the time, without incurring some sort of obligation to society, the proper repayment of which might well be in activities that are socially useful. In the ethic of the worker, this proposition has the rank of the first principle.⁴¹

What is the consequence of this first principle? asks Simon. The consequence is another essential characteristic of work. To be a truly human and humanizing activity, work must have as its object, as its purpose, not profit, not self-aggrandizement, but service. The subordination of profit to service is the proper, the civilized relationship.

...the real wealth produced by work is above all destined to serve [wrote Simon]; profit is but a counterpart of service, a result annexed to the essential product of labor activity.⁴²

Weil bemoans the reversal of the roles of service and profit in modern culture.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 44.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 54.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 42.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 121.

[This] reversal consists in the fact that signs..., money and symbol of credit in economic life, take on the function of realities of which the real things [services] become the mere shadows.⁴³

This concept of the priority of service requires an understanding of human nature and of what is good for man, an understanding of the difference between genuine and illusory human needs. The sole purpose of the market place is not to give the public what it wants: bread and circuses, even if that is all it wants. Weil insists that only those things should be produced which are needed for human consumption, and among them she includes the useful and the agreeable, provided, of course, that there is question of true usefulness and pure pleasure.⁴⁴ A solution to the problem of work and wealth, service and profit depends on the recognition of what many economists, according to Simon, want to leave out of the picture altogether, namely, the possibility of a discrepancy between human desire and genuine human need.⁴⁵

This concept of service brings us to a final essential characteristic of work: *Arbeit macht frei*, work shall make you free. Despite its cynical placement in crooked letters above the entrance to the Auschwitz death camp, this ancient dictum announces a profound and important truth; but it is only true work, Weil's human activity *par excellence*, not servile work or slave labor, that liberates man. Subjection and exploitation, as we have seen, and not poverty, are the essential characteristics of that work which enslaves the proletariat. For both Weil and Simon, work liberates man only to the degree that intelligent choice enters into his work, intelligent choice with regard to the *kind* of work he does, the conditions under which he works, and the *end product* of his labor. Maritain praises the American labor unions, as he knew them, for their role in beginning the immense and difficult task of humanizing the industrial capitalist regime.⁴⁶ Their efforts toward the reform of the conditions of labor, particularly in the area of compensation, enabled the worker to put aside

⁴³Simone Weil, *Réflexions sur les Causes de la Liberté et de l'Oppression Sociale*, 130.

⁴⁴Simone Weil, *La Condition Ouvrière*, 234.

⁴⁵Yves R. Simon, *Work, Society and Culture*, 124.

⁴⁶Jacques Maritain, *Reflections on America*, 58ff.

enough in savings to enable him to choose another kind of work, if he so desired. For Weil and Simon, and also for Pope John Paul II, this intelligent choice must extend as well to the organization and management and to the *end product* of his work.

...It is necessary [wrote Weil] that the worker keep ever present in his mind the directing conception of the work he is carrying out, in such a way as to be able to apply it intelligently to continually changing particular situations...It is necessary also that all the notions made use of in the course of work be clear enough that the worker can recall them in their entirety in the blink of an eye.⁴⁷

Weil reproached the present industrial system with subjecting workers

...in growing numbers and to an ever greater degree to a form of work which permits them to carry out the necessary gestures with no idea of their connection with the final result.⁴⁸

The less workers have the possibility of such intelligent choices, the more they have the sense that their destiny is predetermined and that they are no longer in control of their lives. Simon finds a philosophical basis for the necessity of intelligent choice in the workplace in Aristotle's definition of art. Noting that Aristotle obviously refused to include the skills of the artisans of the Acropolis in his definition of art because of the contempt with which manual labor was looked upon in his society, Simon maintains that work, as well as art,

...is the ability to perform operations relative to the things to be made....In so far as a skill is an art, it comprises a grasp of the relation between the means and the end; art [or work] thus involves an apprehension of universal necessities 'in a true course of reasoning.'⁴⁹

⁴⁷Simone Weil, *Réflexions sur les Causes de la Liberté et de l'Oppression Sociale*, 103.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 127.

⁴⁹Yves R. Simon, *Work, Society and Culture*, 147ff.

Paradoxically, for Weil one of the sources of freedom in work is, as has been pointed out, a conscious and loving submission to the laws of the universe by which the worker achieves a victorious conquest over matter and over himself.⁵⁰ She says that Francis Bacon's remark that "Man commands nature by obeying it" is "all that is needed to define true work, the kind of work that makes man free to the very degree in which it is an act of conscious submission to necessity."⁵¹ These then are the main characteristics of that work which, according to Maritain, Weil and Simon, must be the foundation and center of the new civilization. What if today Maritain and Simon returned to America where forty years ago, with enthusiasm and admiration, they recognized a society which had taken its first steps toward the realization of an integrally humane civilization?

What would be their reaction in the face of a society where the "little people of God," especially the Blacks, the Hispanics, and the elderly, find it harder and harder to escape from their lowly state, and deprived of any functional participation in the common good, tend more and more to drop out of that society, where the capacity and willingness of that society to exist co-naturally and in compassion with the poor who have the beatitudes promised to them, but who receive nothing of the promised trickle from the wealth amassed by the classes above them, can be measured by the growing problem of homelessness and the obscenity of the scandals at HUD; where, if we are to believe Bellah and the people he and his colleagues interviewed, the object of work is more and more, not service or personal satisfaction, but money, profits, and steady progress up the corporate ladder to economic power; where a new ruling class has come into control, the *arbitrageur*, whose object, pure profit, has nothing to do with production or service (someone has noted that with the hostile take-over of Nabisco huge profits were siphoned off from an enterprise newly encumbered with enormous debts, but that not one more Oreo cookie was produced, where the products of work are subordinated to profits, reality to the signs of reality, the irreality of the latest sign being indicated by the very name invented for it by its proponents — junk bonds; where small-scale production, whether in factory or on the farm, is systematically *annihilated* by huge diversified conglomerates

⁵⁰Simone Weil, *Réflexions sur les Causes de l'Oppression Sociale*, 122.

⁵¹*Ibid.*

and agri-business; where truly productive jobs are farmed out to a lean and hungry proletariat in under-developed countries to cut costs and maximize profits at the expense of the indigenous working classes, where the object of advertising and marketing is not only to fulfill a need but also to create illusory needs; but why continue?

I suspect that if Maritain and Simon returned to America today, they would have difficulty recognizing it as the America they loved and admired in the fifties. Simon wrote:

Once [civilizations] are cut off from the principles [of work] which make up the deep life of the soul, the blossoming externals of culture can only bring about a vacuum in which some kind of devastating frenzy is likely to develop.⁵²

He warned:

The immediate task before us, therefore, appears to be the development of a theory of culture centered not on leisure but on work in the broadest sense, 'including moral, social, and intellectual, as well as technical and manual work.'⁵³

If his warning is not heeded, if the trends pointed out by Bellah and his associates, trends which have become even more obvious in the last eight years, continue in their present course, the America we have known in our youth may well be unrecognizable in the America of our grandchildren.

⁵²Yves R. Simon, *Work, Society and Culture*, 186.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 185.