

Christian, Marxist and Liberal ideas of work: the Polish experience in last 50 years

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When the Treaty of Rome established the European Economic Community (EEC), not all European countries had a chance to join it, since Central and Eastern Europe was controlled by the Soviet Union. This control was not only political, but, based on a communist ideology, it tended to shape the public and private life of nations and their citizens according to the model created by Karl Marx and his followers. The most important element of the communist system, its idea of work and production, was diametrically opposed to that of the liberalism and capitalism shared by the EEC and the USA, and, obviously, to the Christian culture of work.

When the Soviet Union collapsed 16 years ago, many post-communist countries switched to Western democracy and some of them became members of the European Union. However, there is a remarkable analogy between their present situation and that of the past. Just as communism had its different faces in different countries during the domination of the Soviet Union, so nowadays, the capitalism of the “old” members of the EU differs from that of its new members. The latter is squeezed between influential groups coming from the past (post-communist nomenclature) and the very aggressive “sharks” of the younger generations.

Work and production belong not only to the economic aspect of human life, but also to its ethical and cultural dimensions. People who have experienced two different or even antagonistic ideologies, like those of communism and capitalism, understand that in both cases, work and production can lead to an alienation, symptoms of which are easily observable especially in such areas as family life, national solidarity, spiritual

formation, and religious openness. The crisis of these values, leading to nihilism in some cases, cannot be cured by augmenting the effectiveness of work and production. Rather such a crisis urgently

demands a reorientation of European culture, one that will bring respect to each human being as a person, recognising that it is reductionist in a truly human society to think of persons as no more than “human resources”, and that openness to the Transcendent both in private and public life is essential. What seems to be the most dangerous threat to Europe today would be an atheistic technocracy, for which a human person matters only as a part of the process of production. From this point of view, capitalism and the communism do not differ from each other very much; though they are different on the level of effectiveness and methods, they are both materialistic and share the same idea of the human being as deprived of a soul. In such a situation, the role of Christianity has by no means reached its end in the history of Europe. On the contrary, it is a time to

reestablish the proper harmony between work, production and the most basic personalist values, the latter of which are not means (like work, production, and technology) but the real ends of human life, related to the ultimate end of human beings.

Half a century ago, in 1957, 12 years after the Second World War had ended and 4 years after Stalin’s death, the Soviet Union “calmed” the Hungarian uprising by force; the Polish uprising in Poznan was “calmed too”, with many victims, injured or even killed. Everywhere in the communist block the structure of the state was controlled mostly by people who were members of the communist party. What was the meaning of Marxism in the area of work for them?

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Marxism is called sometimes the last Christian heresy (J. Maritain). To understand Marxism we have to understand Christianity first. The Christian theology of work is based upon the opposition between Paradise, where there was no work, because man was the master of nature, which obeyed him, and all what happen after original sin. At that point, man was condemned to work hard, because, as a kind of penalty, nature was no longer under his control. However, different interpretations could be found among Christians as to what is the basic and ultimate meaning of work, here on the Earth, both for today, and for future salvation. Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox views on human work differ considerably. Some of these views were transformed into liberal philosophical theories, especially among Protestants.¹ Others were dominated by oriental civilizations where there is no eagerness to work at all, as in some Orthodox churches. The Catholic idea of work still seems to be alive in the Western culture, though more as a continuation of an old tradition and a moral obligation than as an officially accepted model of life.

When we ask for the meaning of work, we need to know what are its most important features and what is its aim. That work is hard and painful was noticed by all civilizations, something we can trace in the Indo-European etymology of words related to work (*uerg*, move something by force, *lab*, *leb* – weak, Indo-European; *ponos* – to make; *ergon* – an effort, Greek; *labor* - weak). Why is work hard? Why in face of work are we weak? There have been different religious or mythological explanations. Most of them are related to human faults or to sin committed in the past by our ancestors. But these answer the question “why” only as it relates to the efficient cause. We, as humans, need to know the final cause. Work – hard work – goes back to our ancestors, but what is the final cause of our work today? What is its purpose? We need to know this to make our life meaningful, rational, free and responsible. The positive side of human work after the original sin, is to rediscover our true nature and to join God. Work makes our human nature flower, and brings us closer to the Creator, God. That is why it is necessary for human beings to work, not only for the sake of producing tools or means which are necessary for our life, but also for the fulfillment and perfection of human nature itself, for its own sake.

For Marx and Engels work is also a way for

perfecting human nature. But what is human nature? For these philosophers (or rather: ideologues) human nature in its source is not strictly speaking human, but animal. It is due to the work performed in the social context that we become humans. Here, we are at the core of the controversy concerning the essence or the nature of man. Is human nature animal or human from the very beginning? Without work we are... apes, according to the Marxists. This clarifies why everyone, all the people, need to work, namely, to become human. But “human” does not mean to be a person, but only to be a member or a part of a society. Man does not transcend society in any of his acts. Work humanise animal nature; it is socialisation, not personalisation. It is society that has substance, metaphysically speaking, not the human being. The latter is only a part, an accident.

On the other hand, we have the liberal-protestant understanding of work: work is everything for every individual (Weber). It is his prayer and his destination (Beruff - vocation), leaving no place for leisure understood as an active, theoretical contemplation (*artes liberales*). As Marxism eliminates religion from the arena of human civilization, liberalism eliminates contemplation: work and fun are what makes up a human life.

Marxism reintroduces the biblical idea of the Paradise on the Earth, but in this case as an effect of human work. The final goal is not to work, but to control and subdue nature, all its powers and resources. We have to work hard now and to take a rest later – if not we ourselves, then, to be more precise, future generations. The individual does not mean very much, nor even the actual existing society. What matters is the future of humanity.

Human work is realized on the basis of property, the means of production, and social relations. Marxists claim that if man is an effect of work, then these three elements must be rearranged to achieve his true essence, if necessary by force. Property and the tools of production should not be private, but common, and society should be purified from the so-called upper classes (*bourgeoisie*, the nobles, aristocracy, middle class). To start the project in the countries colonised by the Soviet Union it was necessary to nationalise property, taking it away from private owners (nationalisation) and to organize work according to central plans and state institutions (centralisation).

From the ideological point of view, the practical consequences were as follows: the reality of work entirely contradicted the ideology itself. Instead of making people more human, work was made them more inhuman. The apotheosis of the working class was a ridiculous caricature. Imagine the monument of Caesar replaced by the factory worker. Ideology ended up with “sorealism” in art, which was a tragicomedy.² If work was so crucial to humanise apes, society was obliged to work. At the level of propaganda (which is an arm of ideology), officials emphasised that in capitalism there is unemployment, but in communism every one has work. In practice, to be employed was a necessary obligation, even for pregnant women and young mothers, with many negative effects for newborn children and family life. The right to work changed society into a labour camp. On the other hand, people realised that they could go to work and do nothing, just be in the office or in the factory and receive a salary every month with as little work as possible. The reality of work was the opposite of the communist ideology. Work was less and less conceived as an activity, stable, responsible and creative.

From the political point of view, the communist ideology was a tool for the Soviet Union to control all the nations which lived either in the SU itself or in the Soviet bloc. The conception of work was crucial: when people worked in the factories or institutions owned by the state (and were paid by the state), they were like army which could be ruled immediately by the communist party. The centralisation of work system was the basic element of this kind of totalitarianism. On the one hand, all adults were obliged to work, and on the other, they could survive only through the salaries for their work, because they were not allowed to have the private property that could give them relative independence. In reality, people were re-enslaved, being totally dependent upon the state.

From the economic point of view, work was

a part of the economic system, which was organised with more respect for ideology and for the interests of the Soviet Union than for economic realities. The Soviets did not pay for the ships constructed for them in Gdansk. In reality they constituted a kind of tribute. On the other hand, the cult of physical work (because the workers were a new chosen nation), lead to disrespect for intellectual work, which in the long term could bring more profit than physical labour. But because physical work was held in highest esteem, the intelligentsia was relatively poor, though what was worse, their creativity, even in the area of technology, was neglected. New projects, original patents were taken by the state and sold to the West.

From the anthropological point of view the false assumption that work makes an ape into a human being and that a man is only a part of the society, had its tragic consequences for the human being as such. Instead of being more and more human, people reversed the

hierarchy of values. Not that they started to be more and more similar to the apes, because that is impossible, but they started to lose the moral sense of personal responsibility for what they do. The moral relation included on both sides the subject of the work (who did it) and the correlate of the work (for whom is the work). Lack of personal responsibility in the sphere of work intoxicated the whole structure of man, showing how a system can deform members of society. Work covers at least 8 hours of a day; if it is done without moral responsibility, no wonder that the process of degeneration it begins overflows into the whole of human life.

Poland was an exception in the communistic bloc, because it was possible to hold private property in land. One third belonged to small peasants farmers (farms larger than 50 hectares were nationalised), and small private enterprises (crafts) were allowed to exist as well.

When communism collapsed the process of re-privatisation started. In practice the most successful beneficiaries of this change were ex-communists who sold the factories or banks to the

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capitalists from the West or bought them up themselves for a song. Indeed, the process of transformation from communism to capitalism, from socialism to liberalism, which has been taking place in the post-communist countries seems to be one of the most unjust processes in the history of Europe. The breakdown of the communist system was good news for... communists themselves! They controlled the situation, because they were organised (with a few million members of the communist party), changing only the façades, changing their name from communist to socialist, while the most prominent of them kept money in Swiss banks in numeric accounts. They were prepared for a change, or, to say it more precisely, they prepared this change.

How did this breakdown of the communist system affect the work of ordinary people? People were rather poor, but the possibility to work on your own, and to go abroad to work, opened new perspectives and new resources of energy and creativity, especially among those in the younger generation. This is the process we are experiencing now. Those who want to work, can work – if not in his own country, then he can go abroad. But work is not everything. Migration affects family life in many negative ways, since the members of the family are separated for too long a time. Money cannot solve all problems, even if it is necessary for life. Members of the family should live together, but the new open market of the EU gives too many opportunities for people to live alone, following up better and better opportunities for work. Because of this, more and more people will be homeless, alone, frustrated, and pessimistic, workaholics without the hope of being really happy.

In Central and Eastern Europe we have more and more opportunities to work, and work is more creative, more responsible and much better paid than it was during the communist occupation. However, we should not forget the negative aspects of this basically positive development, where damage may be done to the basic values of human life, like the family, or one's homeland, religion, and one's moral and intellectual maturity. Although one might have the impression that these values do not mean too much for the socialist and liberal technocrats of the European Union, those who care mostly for the effectiveness of work, these values continue to mean a lot for poor people, who long for the warmth of family relations and the depth of religion. They also mean a lot for the

intelligentsia, which is also relatively poor, but which, especially in the humanities, appreciates the meaning of philosophy and art in human life.

This is why we, as genuine humanists, need a continued reflection upon the place of work in the civilisation of a new Europe, in our family life, in social relations and national responsibility, in the life of the Church, and also in our universities that seem to be losing their independence and respect for the truth. Work cannot be isolated from the basic values which are real European values, including family, patriotism, religion, the true and the beautiful. But for some ideologies, like communism or liberalism, work is a crucial tool for changing the principles of our Christian civilisation. This is why our Eastern and Central European experience of communism can be very instructive for people from the West, who sometimes seem to be very naïve about the real ends of liberalism. In reality, it is a kind of "socio-liberalism", sharing the same ideas in the sphere of ultimate values (or rather, antivalues) as communism. The conception of work in society cannot be isolated from the principles of the whole civilisation upon which society is based. Work is not an end in itself, and neither is effectiveness nor progress. Work has to retain its existential and personalistic dimension in order to be a really human act. The tragic situation of the people who lived under communism for so many years gave them the opportunity to understand the real meaning of work, not reduced to its economic dimension. Nowadays, they fight for better and better work, but they still appreciate family life and religion deeply, both of which have given them real help both in the past and now.

In the last 50 years, Poland shared more or less the influence of the most important ideologies of the 20th century, all of which have been trying to replace religion by promising a "New Paradise" on Earth. This experience is very instructive, especially for those who do not want to lose the most basic values of human life and who do not want to be manipulated or seduced. In analysing the place of work in human life, we cannot reduce it merely to its economic dimension. We need to have a larger perspective, in order to be able to see that the battle between different ideologies and civilisations is still on, that is, the battle for shaping human beings through work.

NOTE:

¹ M. Weber, *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London 1992.

² “Socrealism”, or “socialist realism” was a kind of “politically correct” art, imposed from 1932 onwards in the USSR by the Union of Soviet Writers, and later applied in Poland. It aimed to be optimistic about

communism and “educational” in transmitting a positive communist ideology. It was realist in the sense that it adhered to artistic techniques of realism. It was quite unrealistic in the way it portrayed the lives of people living in the communist regime (happy and free).