



Faith, Work, and Economic Structures

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If the traditional counsels of faith concerning human work are not also brought to the economic structures which both create work and cause worklessness, those glowing and cautionary precepts are likely to take on a ghostly quality. Traditioned people may continue to write, preach, and career counsel in terms of personal and communal meanings of work. Others, with an equal show of right, may line up with whoever is lining up for more jobs, wages, or benefits. But all this can take place while economic structures themselves become such as render classical theological distinctions between work, action, and contemplation—or between the one call and the many callings—simply less and less applicable. Some judge that this is now the case.¹

I. FAITH AND EXISTING STRUCTURES OF WORK

In every age since the exodus from Egypt, biblical and Christian communities have felt constrained to give attention to structures of work. Sometimes they have sought reforms in the world of work; sometimes they have put new forms of working into the world. Always they have reminded themselves that work is of high importance to faith exactly because it is not all-important. Thus the early Christians took exception to the “leisure culture” of the ancients in accordance with which manual labor was assigned to slaves and political activity was reserved to free men, insisting for themselves that all should both work and be free. Augustine overruled certain occupations for Christian adherents—not only commercial painting where this required decoration of idols, and merchandising

¹Ivan Illich argues that “in the classical sense of Hannah Arendt, the social conditions for both labor and work have been destroyed.” Putting it the other way around, he says of John Garraty’s *Unemployment in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) that “the book exemplifies the futility of using modern concepts for historical research.” See Ivan Illich, *Shadow Work* (Boston: Boyars, 1981) 128, 135. Other critics speak of “systematically distorted communication.”

where success required a use of false weights in the presence of the God of truth, but also work in the stadium where pagan catharsis “let off much needed steam” and people went “only to grieve not to relieve”—while year after year he invented new forms of community and community-sustaining work. Certain of these structural innovations became regularized in the Rule of St. Benedict which required daily manual labor, activity, and contemplation on the part of all; and this became a cultural ideal to which even the nonreligious paid their respects by coming to join the monks for a time in their fields or shops.²

In a new secularizing day, Luther brought the disciplines of faith down from the monasteries into the streets in a way that was meant to heighten both the worldly struggle and the gift of grace. He used the word “calling” not only for the calling of the gospel but also for the daily occupation (which included non-wage-paying responsibilities like parenthood and citizenship), and neither the church nor the world has ever been the same. Nor did he leave the structures of work aside: he commended crafts and agriculture over commerce and warned that selling or lending for all the market will bear forgets the poor and “opens every door and window to hell.”³

Calvinists, especially the Puritans, saw a mark of God’s favor in vocational success. Since their delayed gratification facilitated reinvestment, they succeeded beyond their dreams. Godliness proved profitable in many things, as Reinhold Niebuhr put it in *The Irony of American History*, and the transition from Puritanism to Yankeeism was made. Continuing success on this untapped continent made it difficult to sustain criticism of emerging industrial structures of work. When public fears arose over possible overproduction and labor displacement, a happy resolution was found. Chauncey Depew declaimed in the Republican Convention of 1900 that “the surplus products of civilized countries in modern times are greater than civilization can consume” but thanked God that in opening the Philippine and Cuban markets the administration had averted the impending crisis. Not entirely satisfied, laboring groups fomented bitter disputes before and after the turn of the century. Those who dealt with labor asked what was happening to the work ethic. They did not always link that question with what was happening to the structures of work.⁴

The churches have not been silent with respect to emerging industrial structures. From *De rerum novarum* (1891) to *Laborem exercens* (1981), Roman Catholic pontiffs, Vatican II, and the bishops of the United States have pointed repeatedly not only to the achievements but to the casualties of industrial development and to the devastating effects of recurring unemployment on workers and worker communities. In addition to supporting labor organization

²Arthur Geoghegan, *The Attitudes towards Labor in Early Christianity and Ancient Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1945), 229f. But see Robert Grant, *Early Christianity and Society* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977) 77. Augustine, *Confessions* III.ii.2; III.iii.3. Robert Sorg, *Towards a Benedictine Theology of Labor* (Lisle: St. Procopius Abbey, 1951).

³These judgments and phrases are from Martin Luther’s “An Open Letter to the Christian Nobility” and “On Trading and Usury,” which appear in vols. 44 and 45 of *Luther’s Works* (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76).

⁴This connection is made in Daniel Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1978).

and public welfare, Walter Rauschenbusch warned that an industrializing society had “divested the laborer of ownership, therefore of capital, therefore of the means of production, therefore of the means of freedom in community, therefore of a means of grace.”⁵

These are enough reminders, perhaps, to suggest that in every age faith has clarified and activated itself with respect to prevailing structures of work. It may be asked, however, whether the churches have yet come to terms with all that is happening in this post-biblical, post-classical, post-medieval, postmodern world of work—and whether their faith will be clear and powerful again until they do.

A biblically warranted place to begin in this—as in other social matters—is with the poor,

not simply to do them good (that could prove merely self-justifying) but to stand with them and envision the future with them—as he did who, though he was rich, yet for our sakes became poor so that by his poverty we might become rich (this seems the point) in ways we do not ourselves define (2 Cor. 8:9). Certainly the limits of prevailing economic structures, at least in their present deployment, are to be discerned in the poor and dispossessed, especially in a time when there are more and more of them. In what follows our mind will be with these, even when we consider data gathered from other points of view.

II. THE NEW ECONOMIC STRUCTURES

“Unemployment” is a modern term. It entered public discourse during the 1890s and made its first entry into a lexicon with the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in 1911. To be sure, there had always been some workless and work-shy people, but now great numbers could find themselves suddenly displaced from wage-paying occupations even when there had been no natural disaster and when they wanted to work.

The new economic structures were a product, technically speaking, of fossil-fueled mechanization and capitalization. These pushed or pulled workers off the land: 70 percent of the work force became 7 percent. During the twenty-five years before the wave passed its crest in 1968, a full two-thirds of the nation’s farm families yielded to the machines, capital, and chemicals of agribusiness. That this phenomenon is now international may be seen in the new waves of displaced farm workers from below the border and in the numberless boat people afloat in the world.

Early migration to the cities was infused with a desire not only to secure a job but in time to open a shop of one’s own. But this possibility also gave way, especially in times of great wars, to costlier tools and corporate mergers. Industries not only merged; they also moved away or chose to do their expanding in suburban areas, neighboring states, in the sunbelt, or overseas. Many newcomers to the city found themselves unable to follow the jobs for reasons of race or poverty. Some recently displaced auto and steel workers have already been to Houston or to reputed “rurbian” developments and returned.

⁵Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1912) 342-50.

The structural response to industrial unemployment became increasingly a task of government. Woodrow Wilson called for this in his inaugural address. The Depression of the 1930s, falling between the wars, afforded convincing evidence of what Wilson had called “the consequences of great industrial and social processes which [people] cannot alter, control, or singly cope with.” Near the close of World War II, Franklin Roosevelt spoke of a “second bill of rights”: “We have come to a clear realization of the fact that true individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence.” This bore fruit in the drafting of a “Full Employment Act of 1945” and in actual passage of a less explicit “Employment Act of 1946” (the most widely discussed bill in history), in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948, and in the two Universal Covenants of 1966. The new tools to be employed by government in securing employment rights included fiscal, monetary, and spending measures which could moderate the boom-and-bust effects of business cycles, thereby assuring that there would never be another Great Depression, public assistance to the

cyclically unemployed, and a trump strategem which made government an “employer of last resort.” These mechanisms still walked in the Humphrey-Hawkins Employment and Balanced Growth Act of 1978 which projected a 3 percent national unemployment rate (4 percent if we counted youth) by the early 1980s and then, for all practical purposes, was laid to rest alongside Hubert Humphrey.

During recent decades it has become difficult to fit new facts into the familiar cyclical picture or to manage them with the familiar tool kit: business cycles have crested at much higher rates of inflation without putting people back to work, and have cooled to much higher levels of unemployment. It is always possible to rescue the official picture by speaking of a “new unemployment” caused by the influx of women and youth into the labor force whose unemployment is less serious because they are not primary breadwinners—though a closer look reveals that three-fourths of all working women are now single, heads of households, or living in families whose combined incomes fall below the austerity level set by U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, and more than half of black youth live in single parent families. It is also possible to look at the doughnut rather than the hole: in the late 1940s Henry Wallace foretold a nation of “sixty million jobholders,” whereas today total job slots number more than one hundred million. But this requires us to take a closer look at what has been happening to jobs themselves.

The employment story of the 20th century has been one of steady and relentless transformation from production of goods to performance of services. A 90:10 ratio in 1910 between jobs which procured natural resources or produced durable goods and jobs which performed increasingly diversified services in financial, governmental, professional, social, commercial, and cultural sectors became a 65:35 split in the late 1920s, a 50:50 split in 1949, and stands near 35:65 today—causing a simple (if unimaginable) projection of a 10:90 ratio shortly after the turn of the century. One third of the work force currently produces all the goods used or exported by this nation. North Americans may think of themselves as hard workers, but they have become soft workers two to one, and half of the latter work in not-for-profit occupations.

But something happened on the way to the service society. During the 1970s, when schools and hospitals were absorbing fewer and fewer additional job-seekers, the new jobs (after discounting public service jobs which have since become frozen or cut back at every level of government) were overwhelmingly in just three areas, all of them relatively low paid: retail services (especially fast foods), auxiliary office services, and auxiliary health services. Since 1980 the growth rate in these three fields has also fallen, partly because of recession but partly also because of electronic frying baskets, new wiring for office personnel who (as seen in advertisements) now serve many bosses from a cleared desk, and deregulation in nursing homes where recreation directors are no longer required and patients are put to bed early with TV. The modest forms of employment growth which helped us through the 1970s may not go with us very far into the 1980s.⁶

For many worker families it now appears that the economy has turned some kind of corner. In the late 1970s average weekly earnings in real terms of nonsupervisory workers, and the median family income in constant dollars even after sending additional family members to work, fell below levels achieved early in the decade. Only three new jobs in ten, according to computations by Eli Ginzberg of the National Manpower Commission, could be called “good

jobs” in the sense of drawing salaries that would sustain a family; and the major source of these was public services, especially at local levels, which seem now foreclosed. A general downward drift of middle income, income dependent families (the sort who have no prices of their own to raise) has led analysts to write about a shrinking middle class. Piling up at the bottom of this drift are the people whom mainline journals describe by means of a strangely un-American sounding term, “the growing underclass,” who do not bother to put their foot on the first rung.

As for public assistance and the stratagem of last resort, there seems little public will at present for expanding these and, incumbents argue, little governmental capacity to do so. Meanwhile, opposition candidates are learning to speak along with certain labor leaders and economic theorists about a national “industrial policy” which would bring cooperative bureaucratic planning and finance to development of high technology enterprises and perhaps also to retooling of some basic industries, which might retrain displaced workers and put them to work on infrastructure if nothing else, which might help U. S.A., Inc., defeat Japan, Inc., in world markets, and (not least) might afford a campaign theme for 1984.⁷

⁶Findings are those of Emma Rothschild of Massachusetts Institute of Technology who reviewed them in “Reagan and the Real America,” *The New York Review*, February 5, 1981.

⁷1984! An Industrial Policy Study Group is chaired by Lane Kirkland of A.F.L.-C.I.O., Irving Shapiro of DuPont, and Felix Rohatyn who convened the Municipal Assistance Corporation during the New York financial crisis. Members of Congress have formed an Industrial Policy Task Force to prepare legislation. Among many writings joining this stream: Robert Reich, *The Next American Frontier* (New York: *New York Times*, 1983); Barry Bluestone and Bennett Harrison, *The Deindustrialization of America* (New York: Basic, 1982).

III. ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ACHIEVEMENT

People who live with the Word in the world are no more knowledgeable or experienced in economic and technological matters than others. But they do carry with them a memory of the Hebrew prophets whose first task in the promised land was to de-idolize a cultural ideology and ritual that had grown up around the work of agriculture to lend assurance that the grain would grow and the cows would calve. Today we give common credence and devotion to terms like “productivity,” “gross national product,” and “high tech” which are not always clearly defined but are trusted to stave off decline and bring a prosperous future.

There can be no objection to comparing units of labor with units of production, nor to the understanding that some level of productivity is required for survival in a competitive market. This notion takes on an exaggerated function, however, if we assume that investment should now run freely to wherever productivity is highest at whatever cost to actual communities. Against those who hold that productivity is the key to the future, a sober and patent prediction can be made: such a policy could succeed in considerable measure on its own terms without touching the numbers of the unemployed or reversing the decline of their communities.

There can be no objection to taking a measure of all the goods and services which are exchanged for money; but exception may very well be taken to using the resulting number as the criterion of economic and social achievement. GNP attaches to commodities not communities; it counts nothing unless it is sold. It does not count parenting (except where this has been turned into new services), gardening, fishing, or any of the informal exchanges on which stable families arid neighborhoods depend—any more than it counts losses when communities become disinvested through corporate decisions. GNP can be raised mightily, in fact, by the sale or

exchange of firms that will do no more and will perhaps do less as a result of the sale. It attaches to bad things as well as good: every serious automobile accident, every fully treated terminal cancer, causes this measure to go up. It assumes, finally, that there is a simple trade-off between sending productive jobs overseas and expansion of softer service in this country. (Here we say nothing about counting the effects on young Asian women overseas who forsake traditional communities for short-term pocket change in high health-risk conditions.)

It is difficult to argue against the idea of toil-reducing servomechanisms and electronic memory devices. But something more is at issue when basic industries are let slide in order to shift investments to these, when masses of unemployed workers are told their future lies in retraining for jobs in high tech, or when schools imagine the acquisition of computer terminals will vastly improve their educational performance. Then it is time to introduce demystifying findings like those of Hemy Levin and Russell Rumberger of Stanford who conclude that occupations associated with high tech will account for no more than 5 to 7 percent of the new jobs created between now and 1990 and that most of these by far will be “simplified and routinized work tasks” which do not actually require a high school education, are low paid, and socially divisive. The

higher programming skills are not gained by punching keys and watching a screen but by writing on a sheet of paper to derive machine-tractable solutions to problems like plotting algebraic functions, solving simultaneous equations, finding means, medians, and modes, and (says one computer scientist) by acquiring “an absolute mastery of one’s native tongue.”⁸

There are, similarly, three social dogmas bearing on the location of industry that have achieved near-canonical status in American cities and now have the effect of self-fulfilling prophecies: (1) That city communities have a natural life cycle—they are born, they mature, they grow old, and they die—as strong populations move in with new tools and then move on, leaving the used space to lesser breeds with obsolescent tools. This picture was gained not from civics but biology, especially from Social Darwinism, though it is devoutly held by some who abhor the name of Darwin. It became enshrined in working documents of real estate associations until removed under threat of a lawsuit filed by the Justice Department in 1977. (2) That racial change in itself causes economic decline, some races causing a more rapid decline than others. (3) That the most viable and desirable communities are those having home places which are widely separated from work places.⁹

Such ideology is not separate from the present structures of work nor from the present distribution of worklessness. Like all ideology, it is not readily disproved; in fact dutiful researchers have documented every point over and over again. It can be resisted only on the basis of richer convictions concerning human beings and on the basis of initiatives taken within disinvested communities themselves.

IV. GUIDELINES AND STRATEGIES

Here, for inspection, are two guidelines which point beyond questions of ideology to questions of policy for recovering work in communities now suffering from high unemployment. They are both under actual consideration in such places. Each proposal is twofold.

- Measures to be pursued should be such as get resources through to people and

places in need without relying on trickle-down, especially resources which have an investment character that could give the people some stakes.

- They should serve to sustain households and communities rather than fragmenting them, and serve to activate people rather than leaving them passive and waiting.

⁸Henry Levin and Russell Rumberger, “The Educational Implications of High Technology,” available from Institute for Research on Educational Finance and Governance, Stanford University. Robert Kuttner, “The Declining Middle,” *Atlantic Monthly*, July, 1983. See also Carolyn Marvin, “Fables for the Information Age: Three Fisherman’s Wishes,” published by National Endowment for the Humanities and included in *Illinois Issues* (September, 1982) and other journals.

⁹A “human ecology” model was developed by sociologists at the University of Chicago during the 1920s and applied to real estate by professors in the 1930s. See Calvin Bradford, *et al.*, “Structural Disinvestment: A Problem in Search of a Policy,” available from Center for Urban Affairs, Northwestern University.

These intentions look beyond isolated good works which have failed in the past to alter downward trends—an employment service here, a new high school principal there, a housing project somewhere else. They seek from the outset to join considerations of work and community rather than leaving this connection an afterthought. They look toward neighborhood economies within a regional job market. They consider several sorts of work at once, not all of them wage-paying, including procurement and management of finance, promotion of enterprises both private and cooperative, strengthening of households and social groups, achievement of community-wide agreements, and even a sharing of revised cultural understandings of work.

Local parishes can prove—are proving—key. These retain an image of work, derived from the first pages of Genesis, as an active and disciplined relationship with the self, the earth, with others, and with the ends of life—all of which have gone astray and are only tenuously reclaimed, and none of which are assumed to be easy. They also know something from their own life about community creation and authorization, which is the most basic need in broader communities today. They have a practice of community-based interpretation, deliberation, and organization.

Needed to create a working community today are not simply gifts or grants, which are sporadic, nor even loans, which are terminal and costly, but longer term investments that make development possible. This requires interpretation. For people with churchly memories the word “investment” recalls a practice of “investiture,” of dressing people up with authority and resources for the future. “Disinvestment” would then mean stripping people of authority and resources—in the case of a redlined neighborhood, saying that this community should be left to die. (Chrysler Motors was regarded as “too important to let go.” But what of city neighborhoods which are as populous as many cities and which are “let go” at great and continuing cost to the public purse?) Such communities are learning to say that what’s needed now is “capital not charity, co-workers not caseworkers.” Churches are able to say in addition to this, that money which flows simply to where there is the greatest short-term rate of return is mammon and not means.

Local parishes can and do press for review of denominational investments, including those of pension funds, out of concern for a more faithful and hopeful prudence. They can seek deposits for locally committed financial institutions. (South Shore Bank in Chicago, a pioneer in

such commitment, was purchased with the help of funds from religious bodies and continues to receive its largest development deposits from religious orders.) Similar support can be sought for local investment corporations which assemble capital from a variety of sources, including the sale of low priced shares to neighborhood residents, as well as for finance development corporations and other adaptable measures at state and national levels. “Limited Partners” (an arresting term!) can be sought for particular syndicated projects. On a wider scale, the “Enterprise Foundation” created by James Rouse conveys low interest loans and outright funds to people-owned projects. Millard Fuller’s “Habitat for Humanity” affords interest free and profit excluding loans with an explicit reference to Exodus 22:25.

Following are some activities which churches and neighborhoods have been led to undertake in conjunction with reinvestment strategies. All are in metropolitan Chicago.

- A network of 30 city and suburban congregations devoted to helping youth in seven city parishes develop career goals, skills, and opportunities finds itself turning to youth-owned cooperative enterprises conducted on church premises. A similar cluster of congregations dealing with high school dropouts helps start a window repair firm in a local industrial incubator building with a first contract for 850 windows in that building.
- A church based union of unemployed workers, organized in conjunction with a food pantry, forms a firm capable of performing certain services under contract with the city.
- A community organization—including nine congregations of various denominations and two union locals in a strategic port area where 20,000 jobs have been lost in steel and related industries—now joins with a labor research group in surveying the displaced labor force, disemployed facilities, and prospective regional markets. It looks beyond present emergency services to future collaborative advocacies and redevelopment.¹⁰
- Community and agency leaders from 30 neighborhoods consult with other cities, then prepare two ordinances for the city council which would require hiring a proportion of city residents in all publicly assisted development projects on the basis of a “first source” agreement and a proportion of neighborhood residents in projects for their own areas. A similar mayoral order by Kevin White of Boston was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1982.
- Other city initiatives begin to suggest themselves: linking the efforts in employment and training with those of economic development; doing city business with banks that lend in their own communities and offering bid incentives to firms that do local hiring; an industrial development corporation to collaborate with neighborhood planning boards and industrial councils, and perhaps even take equity positions in potentially viable enterprises that are unattractive to the private sector.
- A neighborhood recycling center which began 14 years ago as a volunteer drop-off site in a church parking lot is now a multi-service resource recovery operation in three neighborhoods with buy back sites in four, and a public information

exchange. Every day they come, 200 marginal residents who gain by this means a daily meal and libation, including entire Asian families who combine this work with subsistence gardening. More than 23,000 tons of materials have been diverted from the city's waste stream to productive firms, saving taxpayers \$1.5 million in disposal costs and postponing a looming crisis when landfills are full. For the first time, the city has awarded funds for new sites which will be spun off to local residents in one year.

- A civic energy commission makes a nine month study resulting in recommendations that could shave \$1 billion off the annual \$4 billion expendi-

¹⁰A similar study in Detroit industrial areas sees the possibility of 100,000 new jobs in production of energy hardware: Dan Luria and Jack Russell, *Rational Reindustrialization* (Detroit: Widgetripper, 1982).

tures for energy in the city through conservation work and create 22,000 to 30,000 new jobs during the next decade. Initiatives at the neighborhood level could link this with community economic development. Early responses by local parishes, some of them hands-on, can help bring this to pass.

Religious communities are virtually alone in teaching that work must come to an end in a “rest” that is different from “resting up” or patronizing leisure industries. Here theological differences have practical consequences. The gods of Herodotus and Lucretius did no work at all but reclined in pleasurable languor or at most in contemplation.

Those who find the work of God in the work of Christ are invited to a different sort of rest: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me...and you will find rest to your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28). Here is a rest to be found not through cessation or diminution of struggle but through engagement with Christ in the right kind of struggle. To be engaged in the right struggle—that is a cup of cool water in the desert of ambiguous work and resulting burnout. One place of that restful struggle today is with the growing dispossessed in their efforts to recover work for community.