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Human Ecology

Integrating Business and 125 Years of Catholic Social Doctrine
The Human Ecology of social justice

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The first and fundamental structure for “human ecology” is the family, in which man receives his first formative ideas about truth and goodness, and learns what it means to love and to be loved, and thus what it actually means to be a person.


No one denies that the moral climate of the place into which parents introduce their children may give an upward push — or a downward push — to their children’s ability to grow up with good habits, among good companions, in a culture that encourages the good and the beautiful. A sharp moral decline throughout the culture is deadly to children. President Obama says that global warming is the greatest threat facing our generation. But the moral ecology in which human beings live and move is more important for their well-being than the ecology of the biosphere.

My first assigned topic for today, however, is to answer the question, What is Social Justice? My colleague Paul Adams and I have scoured a dozen books on social justice, and not found an answer to that question. Everybody alludes to the term, virtually always without defining it.

In addition, the term “social justice” was called into being very late in Catholic history, only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. What delayed its emergence? What new developments changed the climate of the time enough to demand this new term? What other new terms had to be invented to explain what social justice means?

The need for something like “social justice” was dimly perceived by Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum*, “On the New Things” (1891). Then, “Forty Years Later” in *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), Pius XI took a first stab at defining this new concept. True enough, the first use of the term “social justice” occurred a century earlier in a book by Luigi Taparelli in Italy. From Taparelli, it entered into the background thinking of Leo XIII and finally Pius XI. Thus the question occurs: why did this term *Social Justice*, so crucial to contemporary papal social thought, arrive only at that time? Why did it not appear in earlier centuries? The clearest and soundest answer is that the human ecology necessary for the practice of social justice was not yet sufficiently developed. The ground was not yet prepared. Necessary institutions were not yet in place. The necessary definitions and distinctions had not yet been worked out. The climate was not yet supportive.

For social justice to be practiced there needed to be widespread education. There needed to be an era in which economic and social initiatives were frequent. There needed to be an era in which habits of free association were commonplace. Tocqueville wrote that at the time of the French Revolution there were not ten men in France capable of practicing the arts of association. In the quite different circumstances of North America, learning the skills of association was the only alternative. Tocqueville put it, when people in France needed help, they turned to “l’Etat” (the State). In Britain, when villagers needed help, they turned to the aristocracy. In the United States, Americans had to turn to one another.

When the first Americans landed at Plymouth Rock, there was no Holiday Inn waiting for them. If they wanted lodging, they had to build it themselves. If they wanted schools, they had to build them themselves. If they wanted
churches, there was no church from the ninth or sixteenth century for them to inherit. They had to build their own churches. Still two centuries later, my wife’s ancestors were among the first Europeans to move into the Iowa Territory, where the incredibly fertile soil had never been cultivated by a plow. One among this early family kept a diary, in which he constantly extolled the will of individuals. No doubt it did take individual courage for a man to move his immediate family away from all his relatives and from the protections of the East Coast. But what the diary most often wrote down were tales of how in one week the first arrivals came together to build a house and small barn for one newcomer, then another. And how during another week, they worked together to throw a bridge over the creek from which they got their water, then spent another month putting up an adequate church; and another to put up a school. In short, the early Americans were not individualists (as so many philosophers falsely imagine). Their main occupation was building communities. Americans build thousands of small communities across the American continent. They are among the world’s most accomplished communitarians, able to work singly and in small and large groups as needed. There was no state for them to turn to. They had to turn to each other.

By 1891, Leo XIII recognized two dead ends for the future of Christianity: extreme individualism on the one hand, and the extreme growth of the administrative state under Socialism on the other hand. In one sense, the whole Christian era was a communitarian era. It inspired a multiplicity of guilds, sodalities, fraternities and cooperative works of mercy. In one sense, it was even a forerunner and predictor of the era of association. The people of the early United States were in some sense the heirs of the communitarian village life of the Middle Ages.

Think of it another way. The eight Beatitudes of Jesus Christ radically changed the ancient world. Out of their inspiration were launched the world’s first hospitals, orphanages, clinics for various diseases, distributors of foods for the hungry, and even grammar schools and universities for raising the levels of popular education. In short, the eight Beatitudes raised the standards of what counted as “civilized.” The impact of the teaching of Jesus Christ on the direction of world history was enormous. That is why the Western calendar was for a long time divided into “Before Christ” and “A.D.,” meaning the years following upon the coming of the Lord.

But what Leo XIII was looking for was a still more complex “new things.” He did not seek a utopian vision, but something practical. It was not a set of new ideals, but a method for actually doing new things and altering the world. It was not simply a description of the current conditions of society. It was a set of practical habits for changing those conditions. It was not just a list of state programs, but rather an alternative to metastasizing state programs. He was seeking to put effective limits on the State.

All this was because in 1891 Leo XIII noted that one of the greatest transformations of economic life in human history had taken place almost unnoticed. The agrarian age that had lasted from the beginning of time suddenly gave way to a new age of invention, discovery, and urbanization. For 1800 years the main language of Christianity had been agrarian—seeds and tares, olive trees, sheep and goats and shepherds, figs, grapes, the mustard seed, wheat and wine, and fishing nets. The work in which nearly all Christians had for centuries been involved was agricultural.

Now, quite suddenly, impelled by rapid population growth, people everywhere were fleeing from agriculture to seek work in the new urban world, a world at first of small industries but becoming gradually larger. This Great Trans-
formation had severe effects upon family life. No longer were most Christians living on family farms on which the whole family worked together in the fields. Now more and more fathers went to jobs in industry or small crafts in the burgeoning cities. Wives, when they worked, worked separate from their husbands, and children separately from their parents.

In the old days, family was the main habitat for the teaching of Christian revelation. More deeply than that, the bedrock experience of being fathers and sons, mothers and infants, brothers and sisters formed the basis for speaking of God as Father, Jesus as Son, and Mary as Mother. The breakdown of family suddenly made speech about God seem ungrounded in daily experience, even unreal. Moreover, growing up in a farm family and growing up in an early industrial center inculcated rather different moral habits and outlooks. The “moral ecology” of farm life is not the same as that of fending for oneself in a city. The new economy of the Great Transformation presented the church with new crises in learning afresh how to explain itself.

Furthermore, in the political sphere, for centuries Christians had learned to conduct themselves as subjects of lords, kings, and emperors. Now new forms of governments were being formed — republics, democracies, civil societies. These new forms of political life were made new sets of habits necessary. Where being a political “subject” inculcated habits of obedience, the new order inculcated habits of personal enterprise, initiative, and self-starting leadership. New habits of public persuasion and self-organization were suddenly in demand. The Great Transformation awakened new forms of life in both the political and economic order. But it also brought forth a new culture. As traditional ties weakened, new makers of dramatic narratives, poems, epics, stories — in a word, the makers of symbols, the formulators of ideas, and the inventors of new social narratives — began to play more formidable roles. Competing ideologies promoted by new forms of communication — loud speakers, the radio, eventually television — came into being and created new worlds of social consciousness.

By 1891, Leo XIII had begun to fear a radical threat creeping up on the Church and the whole texture of liberty everywhere. It was the fundamental threat of the socialist movement: “The Essence of Socialism is the abolition of private property.” (In the 1980s, I saw this very slogan on a large neon sign, maybe twelve feet high, in downtown Moscow.) No private property, no escape from total state control. No opening for preaching the Gospel or even printing home Bibles. In 1891, the world had not yet seen a single example of socialism in any nation. Yet Leo XIII already spotted thirteen reasons why socialism was against nature, would unleash many heretofore unseen evils, and would fail [see RN #4-19]. The abolition of private property would strip the Church — and every other association and institution — of its means of communication and its ability to act on its own. Leo began to dread the coming of the unlimited state. He was more prescient than many other prominent intellectuals at the time, who were writing of the coming of socialism as a great step forward for human progress.

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But Leo XIII also feared the opposite damage, the “excessive individualism” that liberal utilitarianism and relativism were introducing into the moral stream. Thus, he anxiously sought a new social force to oppose both totalitarianism on the one side, and the isolated nuclear individual on the other. He knew the Catholic people would have to learn a new set of virtues to counter these two threats. The overarching task would be to turn the old-time “subjects” of kings and lords into newly-formed “responsible citizens” in a new republican/democratic form of polity. He was looking for a way to identify the precise social virtues (different from the virtues of ancient Greece and Medieval Europe) that would constitute that change. First of all, he had to transform the isolated individual into a social and political animal able to work toward the common good on his own. Through these efforts, Leo XIII later became known as “the pope of associations.” After all, Alexis de Tocqueville had already written in Democracy in America that “the first law of democracy” is the habit of forming associations.1

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vidualism and to the oppressive apparatus of an ever larger state. These were the clues that led Paul Adams and I to define the new virtue that Leo XIII was looking for and to which Pius XI had given the canonical name “social justice.” We define social justice as the virtue that enables individual persons to become social and political animals, in order that they might improve the common good.² This new virtue gives free citizens the skills needed to create new social and political associations, enabling them to achieve social ends beyond those of the self and one’s own family. This new virtue, in other words, enables citizens to work together for the common good of a local neighborhood or village, or perhaps the larger city, or the still larger province or state, or even the whole nation. Even further, this virtue enables citizens to build worldwide organizations, such as the Red Cross, Doctors Without Borders, nongovernmental organizations to fight AIDS and other pestilences, and international aid organizations against hunger, the ravages of war and terrorism, sexual slavery and trafficking. Such associations put solidarity into worldwide effect.

In sum, to counter the unprecedented growth of state power during the nineteenth century, the world was discovering again the multiple, flexible, inventive associations that give civil society its inner power.

2. CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT AND THE PROFESSION OF SOCIAL WORK

Meanwhile, outside the Church the term social justice was being given higher and higher prominence in the new secular profession of Social Work. The earliest institutions of Social Work grew, like social justice itself, from the principle of association: Jane Addams’ Hull Houses, Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker centers, and multiple organizations to help improve the lives of early immigrants in American slums. So also, labor unions and parent-teacher associations at public schools – all were created in a certain independence from the State by imaginative and courageous founders of civic associations.

Yet even today many connections between Catholic Social Thought and the whole field of professional Social Work remain unexplored. Even for the most secular social workers, “social justice” has been for some years a primary slogan and dearest ideal. Lacking the powerful theological and philosophical background that recent Popes had given the term, secular workers have let the term drift toward the left: that is, toward visions such as social democracy or democratic socialism, or something at least like the big-government programs of US President Lyndon Johnson. The social work ideal has frequently clustered around “big government” and the tricky ideal of “equality” (carefully unmasked by Leo XIII in RN).

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However, from early on, the field of social work was disciplined by an intense effort to study what actually “works” to make clients’ lives better. The goal of social work is not to make social workers feel better about themselves. It is to make their clients more skillful in solving problems on their own. Social workers are dedicated to results, not feelings. They soon enough discovered that it is not much help to do everything for those they wished to help. If they only did that, then as soon as they left for other work the lot of their clients would be exactly what it was before. No, their practice needed to be aimed at helping their clients learn new skills that would empower them as political and social activists who could improve their lives with the help of their families and friends and become agents of their own independence. In this way, and after many experiments about how to achieve such empowerment, social workers came to codify “best practices” for their profession. It is reassuring that by way of practical experience, professional social workers have come into considerable practical harmony with Catholic theories of social justice.

To recapitulate, Leo XIII’s new concept of social justice is aimed at healing a huge fissure running through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It aims to cure atomic individualism by teaching individuals habits of association that enable them to act effectively as social and political activists. On the other side, it aims to inspire a more creative form of social institutions than the impersonal administrative state. It restores the centrality of social humanism and the creative capacities of the human person. It sparks the fires of invention and the astonishing new initiatives of creative associations.

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3. THE HUMAN ECOLOGY OF THE FREE AND VIRTUOUS SOCIETY

In the socially potent tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas, the dynamism of social justice springs from a *virtue* – a habit, a learned disposition, a tendency that transforms lonely individuals into political and social agents of considerable creativity and power. But it also raises questions of how much the human ecology of pre-democratic societies needs transformation. For example, during the fall of Communism, the initial cry was for “liberty” and “democracy.” In just two or three years, however, those who sought political freedom soon discovered that they needed economic growth first. For in practice, real people demand tangible economic improvement from year to year. They do not demand economic “paradise” (they had had enough of those empty promises under socialism), but they do want to see real, even if incremental economic progress.

But then those who sought modest economic growth in their families made a further discovery. To stimulate economic growth, they needed new creative habits. They needed to learn how to become risk-takers, entrepreneurs and builders of new small businesses. All around the world today, there is an extraordinary demand for enough jobs to provide for all those willing and able to take them. How can there be family income unless there is also employment sufficient for families?

In short, the world is learning that jobs cannot be created in just any social ecology. You cannot increase employees without increasing the numbers of new job creators. For this, fairly cheap and reliable funds must be available to borrowers. Before any new jobs can be created, a certain amount of capital must be advanced both to pay laborers and to purchase the instruments and materials they will work with. The mother’s milk of economic creativity is borrowing. It is crucial to have accessible and protected sources of such funding – for example, from farm credit bureaus or other down-to-earth lending services that provide guidance for new startups.

In short, in order to create business prosperity, an ecology of attitudes, practices and institutions favorable to the growth of small businesses must be cultivated. As the old song puts it, “Nothing comes from nothing. Nothing ever could.” Attention to the ecology of economic growth is indispensable. Meanwhile, learning the “habits of the heart” congenial to producing prosperity from the bottom up is a moral enterprise. The phrase “habits of the heart,” made current by my teacher at Harvard, Robert Bellah, gave a new impulse to developing the larger concept of “moral ecology.” But of course “habits of the heart” is a phrase that arose first in Tocqueville.3

After Bellah, moral ecology – or human ecology – has become a useful, and even necessary term for analyzing the preconditions for a free, just and creative society. Such a society is constituted by three parts: a political system, an economic system, and a moral/cultural system. The most dynamic of these three systems, without which neither of the other two can be made to work, is the moral/cultural system. This is the system that gradually inculcates in children how to live under the rule of law, practice the habits of self-government, and zealously exercise human rights to economic initiative and creativity. The moral/cultural system surrounds us and all our actions, inspires us to achieve noble deeds or (when it has gone bad) degrades us.

This third part is called moral/cultural because it entails more than “ethics” narrowly construed. It involves the social interdependencies and institutions that give a culture its moral climate, its ethos, its dominant national narrative, its pantheon of moral heroines and heroes, and the accessible range of moral stories for its citizens to live out.
Other dimensions of moral ecology are suggested by Tocqueville’s maxim: “There are many things the law allows Americans to do that their religion does not permit them to do.” Still others are caught in the motto of the University of Pennsylvania: “Leges sine moribus vanae” (Laws without mores are in vain). Where laws are internalized as “inner policemen,” policemen on the streets may be few and lightly armed. Where law is not internalized in human hearts, there are often not nearly enough policemen to stop crime.

In brief, the term “moral ecology” reminds us that for the free and creative society to function well, there are many moral preconditions. We have learned, for example, that socialism (as in the Soviet Union) built around itself a distinctive moral ecology, quite different from the moral climate and the moral habits inculcated by free societies. Still deeper, should the moral ecology of the free societies deteriorate into moral relativism, they would cut their own windpipes. Thus, moral ecology is a multifaceted term for analyzing the overall moral prospects of societies.

For instance, what is the moral ecology of Europe today? What is the moral ecology of the United States? What is the moral ecology of Sub-Saharan Africa as of this decade? What is the moral ecology of the 53 Muslim nations on this planet? Are the cultural mores of each of these groupings more predictive of economic decline or economic progress, of moral decadence or of moral awakening?

Let us close with another quotation from St. John Paul II the Great:

Although people are rightly worried — though much less than they should be — about preserving the natural habitats of the various animal species threatened with extinction, because they realize that each of these species makes its particular contribution to the balance of nature in general, too little effort is made to safeguard the moral conditions for an authentic “human ecology”. Not only has God given the earth to man, who must use it with respect for the original good purpose for which it was given to him, but man too is God’s gift to man. He must therefore respect the natural and moral structure with which he has been endowed.

— Centesimus Annus, 38, 1991

END NOTES


3. Here is the way Tocqueville himself defines “habits of the heart”:

I have previously remarked that the manners of the people may be considered as one of the great general causes to which the maintenance of a democratic republic in the United States is attributable. I here use the word manners with the meaning which the ancients attached to the word mores; for I apply it not only to manners properly so called—that is, to what might be termed the habits of the heart—but to the various notions and opinions current among men and to the mass of those ideas which constitute their character of mind. I comprise under this term, therefore, the whole moral and intellectual condition of a people. My intention is not to draw a picture of American manners, but simply to point out such features of them as are favorable to the maintenance of their political institutions. (Democracy in America, trans. Henry Reeve, 273)

REFERENCES


In the past, I have many times tried to describe various aspects of the reality of moral ecology. See for instance:


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