

Theologies of Labor and the Limits of Capital

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THIS ESSAY FOCUSES ON HOW theological conceptions of the nature of human work relate to the material conditions of labor in late-capitalist economies. One might expect this relation to feature prominently in Catholic theologies of labor. Yet Catholic thinking about the meaning of labor, particularly in the reception of papal social teaching in North America, has insufficiently examined the ways in which the structure of work and property relations within capitalist production put pressure on and even undermine a theology of dignified labor. In other words, there is significant tension between normative theologies of labor in Catholic social thinking and the material conditions of labor under capitalism.

A most illustrative instance of this tension, and the subject of this essay, is John Paul II's 1981 encyclical *Laborem Exercens* on human work. In what follows, I delineate the encyclical's theology of labor and its complex relationship to capitalist property forms and social relations of production. After a brief review of the reception of *Laborem Exercens* within generally pro-capitalist circles, especially in the United States, I turn to the encyclical itself to sketch the contours of its theological vision of labor within the order of creation. Here, I aim to probe a set of tensions between John Paul's personalist account of the dignity of work and the shape and structure of work in capitalist modes of production, as it concerns the ownership of productive property, the alienation of labor, and the social relations between those who work and those who own. These tensions are immensely important and productive; while *Laborem Exercens* makes no attempt to resolve them systematically, the encyclical invites further reflection on which social, political, and economic conditions are necessary for its vision of dignified labor to be realized. More to the point, *Laborem Exercens* prompts consideration of whether capitalist production systematically inhibits such flourishing. I argue it does. In the latter part of the essay, then, I turn to a rather neglected reading of John Paul II's theology of labor—more radical, social, and explicitly anticapitalist than its North American reception—which pivots on this contradiction between the goodness of labor as a gift of creation and the dehumanizing forces of capitalism. Consideration of Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez's development of John Paul's theology

of labor reveals possibilities for extending the chief insights of *Laborem Exercens* in more liberating directions than those offered by the encyclical's pro-capitalist interpreters.

My argument is that Gutiérrez's reading and creative expansion of the chief insights of *Laborem Exercens*, especially his joining of John Paul's account of labor in the order of creation to a vision of the redemption and liberation of labor from capitalism, is at the same time more theologically precise and politically ambitious than the dominant stream of the encyclical's reception in North America. In this way, Gutiérrez offers an important vision of just and dignified labor for our contemporary moment in which the viability and moral status of capitalism is undergoing great scrutiny in Catholic theological discourse.

THE RECEPTION OF *LABOREM EXERCENS* IN NORTH AMERICA

The response to the publication of *Laborem Exercens* comprises a wide range of interpretations of the encyclical throughout global Catholicism.¹ In North America, the reception of and commentary on the encyclical has seen the predominance of those who explicitly advocate for the compatibility of the Pope's teaching with capitalist political economy² and readers who, assuming capitalist forms of production as given, see the encyclical as calling for reformist measures within them.³ Figures like Michael Novak understand the encyclical's praise of markets, defense of private property, and acknowledgement of the virtues of entrepreneurialism to demonstrate a clear embrace of American-style democratic capitalism.⁴ Others

¹ For a summary of the reception of *Laborem Exercens*, see Patricia A. Lamoureux, "Commentary on *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work)," in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes, OFM (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 408–410.

² See, for example, the essays in *Co-Creation and Capitalism: John Paul II's Laborem Exercens*, ed. John W. Houck and Oliver F. Williams, CSC (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1983); *Papal Economics*, Heritage Lectures no. 6, ed. Philip F. Lawler (Washington, DC: Heritage Foundation, 1982); Robert A. Destro, "Work: The Human Environment: *Laborem Exercens* (1981)," in *Building the Free Society: Democracy, Capitalism, and Catholic Social Teaching*, ed. George Weigel and Robert Royal (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 163–186; Maciej Zieba, *Papal Economics: The Catholic Church on Democratic Capitalism, from Rerum Novarum to Caritas in Veritate* (Wilmington: ISI, 2013), 42–46; Michael Novak, "The Pope's Brilliant Encyclical," *National Review*, October 16, 1981, 1210.

³ See, for instance, Ikiene Sentime, "*Laborem Exercens* as a Critical Notion of Workplace Spirituality," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 12, no. 1 (2015): 143–156; Thomas Kohler, "The Fragile Relevance of *Laborem Exercens*," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 6, no. 1 (2009): 185–207; and Gerald Beyer, "Freedom as a Challenge to an Ethic of Solidarity in a Neoliberal Capitalist World: Lessons from Post-1989 Poland," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 6, no. 1 (2009): 133–167.

⁴ Michael Novak, "Creation Theology," in *Co-Creation and Capitalism*, 17–18.

argue that the Pope's direct criticisms of capitalism reveal a failure to comprehend the nature of capitalist economies, even as the rest of the encyclical is taken generally to affirm the tenets of free-market capitalism.⁵ In short, aside from a few early reactions to the encyclical which acknowledged its potential radicality,⁶ *Laborem Exercens* has seen a decisively pro-capitalist reception in North America, aided by a close association, in the minds of many US observers, of the Pope with Ronald Reagan's crusade against communism. This reception has entailed eclipsing divergent readings of the encyclical, especially in Latin America, which interrogate the alleged congruity of capitalism and papal teaching.⁷

Debates about *Laborem Exercens* have been occasioned, in part, by uncertainty around some of the encyclical's key terms. In one of the most analytically rigorous commentaries on the encyclical, Daniel Finn examines the ambiguity of the terms "labor" and "capital," arguing that John Paul uses "capital" to refer on the one hand to "the small but highly influential group of entrepreneurs, owners, or holders of the means of production" and on the other to the machines, natural resources, and properties used in the processes of production.⁸ The former is a class of persons, while the latter refers to the material means of production. Finn rightly notes that conflicting interpretations of *Laborem Exercens* often come down to differing understandings of the terms "capital" and "labor," especially as they regard the Pope's main argument for the "priority of labor over capital" (no. 12). Left-wing commentators interpret the maxim in more traditionally Marxian

⁵ Maryann O. Keating and Barry P. Keating, "Economics as a Discipline: The Crossroads between John Paul II's Social Vision and Conservative Economic Thought," *International Journal of Social Economics* 25, nos. 11–12 (1998): 1790–1802.

⁶ For instance, Gregory Baum, "John Paul II's Encyclical on Labor," *Ecumenist* 20 (1981): 1–4. For a summary of the range of early responses to the encyclical, see Richard McCormick, "*Laborem Exercens* and Social Morality," in *Official Catholic Social Teaching, Readings in Moral Theology, No. 5*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist, 1986), 219–232.

⁷ In addition to Gutiérrez, whose perspective is considered below, see also Ricardo Antoncich, *Christians in the Face of Injustice: A Latin American Reading of Catholic Social Teaching*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1987), 84–143; Juan Luis Scannone, *Teología de la liberación y doctrina social de la Iglesia* (Buenos Aires: Docencia, 2011); and the essays in *Sobre el trabajo humano: Comentarios a la encíclica "Laborem Exercens,"* ed. Gustavo Gutiérrez, Rolando Ames, Javier Iguñiz, and Carlos Chipoco (Lima: Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones, 1982). The dissimilarity of interpretation between the encyclical's reception in the United States and Latin America itself poses questions about the meaning of social location, particularly within the structures of global capitalism, for thinking about the relationship of Catholic social teaching to capitalist economy.

⁸ Daniel Finn, "The Priority of Labor over Capital: Some Needed Extensions," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 6, no. 1 (2009): 19–20.

class-analytical terms, seeing in it a preferential option for the propertyless proletariat over the capitalist owning class.⁹ Neoconservative and other capitalist-friendly commentators understand “labor” and “capital” not in class terms, but as referring to the activity of work and the property forms of production, respectively. Thus, perspectives on the meaning of John Paul’s teaching about labor’s priority over capital range from seeing in it a simple moral teaching regarding the responsibility of owners of capital to their workers to a more radical questioning of the legitimacy of forms of private ownership not directly accountable to workers.

While critical of both left and right interpretations of the Pope’s teaching, Finn himself favors the latter’s eschewal of class terms, arguing that “John Paul does not directly relate the priority of labor over capital” to a conception of capital construed in terms of “those who own the means of production.”¹⁰ The teaching is concerned more with the moral responsibility of owners of capital to workers than with any sort of direct contestation of the right of a capitalist class to ownership of production. In Finn’s view, John Paul does not see the private ownership of production and its attendant class relations as inherently problematic. Antagonisms and inequalities between those who work and those who own can be justly adjudicated within the structures of capitalist property ownership. Production need not be owned or directed by workers themselves to ensure the priority of labor, Finn believes, as long as those who do own the means of production value and “respect the priority of labor over those instruments which they own.”¹¹ As he puts it elsewhere, John Paul agrees “with capitalists against socialists in the right of persons to own the means of production,” believing “private ownership of the means of production can be a service to workers” when it “serves the cause of work and workers.”¹² The problem of labor exploitation and inequality is thus registered as a moral problem, not a structural feature of capitalism inherent to the private control of the means of production. In reading *Laborem Exercens* this way, Finn endeavors to disentangle the private ownership of productive property, the utility of markets, and the legitimate place of self-interest in a free economy from neoconservative and neoliberal versions of capitalism which fail

⁹ See, for instance, Gregory Baum, *The Priority of Labor: A Commentary on Laborem Exercens, Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Paulist, 1982).

¹⁰ Finn, “Priority of Labor over Capital,” 22.

¹¹ Finn, “Priority of Labor over Capital,” 31.

¹² Daniel Finn, “Commentary on *Centesimus Annus* (On the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*),” in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching*, 437, 448. This responsibility of owners of capital to workers is detailed further in *Centesimus Annus*, no. 43, which Finn sees as “a far better explanation than ‘the priority of labor over capital’ that played so central a role in *Laborem Exercens*” (448).

to account for the priority of labor and the common good.¹³ The class division between those who work and those who own, Finn believes, can be justly ordered to the benefit of workers with the help of the state, civil society, and a robust juridical framework within which economic relations can be managed.¹⁴ Finn, then, agrees with neoconservative and neoliberal readings of the encyclical on at least this point, even as he dissents from their larger claims: dignified labor, of the kind John Paul describes, can be realized within capitalism's social relations of production and structures of property ownership. The problem with capitalism as it regards the priority of labor is not the private ownership of production but the moral failure of the owners of capital to be fully responsible to their workers.¹⁵

My analysis of *Laborem Exercens* questions this shared assumption and probes the pressures capitalist forms of production and property ownership put on John Paul's theology of labor. I argue the encyclical generates substantial tension between its normative theology of labor and the limits of capital, and so invites further reflection on that tension. This creative tension is, I suggest, inherent to the nature of papal social teaching itself which, as John Paul understands it, is primarily concerned with the ethical dimensions of economic life, not comprehensive economic theories. Papal teaching

¹³ See also Daniel K. Finn, "John Paul II and the Moral Ecology of Markets," *Theological Studies* 59, no. 4 (1998): 662–679.

¹⁴ Finn takes up one problem this defense of private ownership generates, namely, the question of how it might be morally permissible for owners of capital to "act in their own interest when that will cause direct harm to their employees" (Finn, "Priority of Labor over Capital," 24). How, in other words, can labor be given priority over capital when the owners' ability to terminate workers' employment at will plays such a central role in capitalist production? While he admits that it sits uncomfortably with John Paul's writings on the social obligations of owners, Finn defends the owners' need to dismiss employees in the interest of profitability because of its necessity for capitalist growth. For more on this debate, see Mark Repenshek and Becket Gremmels, "A Catholic Theology of Employment-at-Will," *Health Progress*, January-February 2015, www.chausa.org/publications/health-progress/article/january-february-2015/a-catholic-theology-of-employment-at-will.

¹⁵ To be sure, John Paul does see the affirmation of a right to private ownership of productive property entailed in the right to private property as such. *Rerum Novarum* and *Mater et Magistra*, he says, both affirm "the right to private property even when it is a question of the means of production" (*Laborem Exercens*, no. 14). Such would seem to suggest the Pope's endorsement of capitalist property relations. Yet, as I hope to make clear in what follows, what John Paul has in mind here is not so much the right of a class of owners to hold a claim to production in place of workers, but rather the right to non-state ownership of production. John Paul's affirmation of the latter, I suggest, permits and even encourages collective, shared, and democratic ownership and management of production, even as it opposes the collectivization of the means of production by the State. The principal matter, for John Paul, is that workers have a share in productive property, a right threatened by both capitalist class relations and overly Statist forms of collectivization.

offers moral insight and instruction applicable to a wide range of economic forms and philosophies. As John Paul writes in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*: “The Church does not propose economic and political systems or programs, nor does she show preference for one or the other, provided that human dignity is properly respected and promoted” (no. 41). Rather, the insight the Church offers in her social teaching is a “category of its own,” belonging not to the field “of ideology, but of theology and particularly moral theology” (no. 41). Thus, in *Laborem Exercens* and other encyclicals, John Paul’s criticism of liberal capitalism is a moral one, concerned with addressing its excesses and vices rather than affirming or rejecting it as a comprehensive ideology. Indeed, this is why the Pope praises certain aspects of Western capitalism (open markets, the value of entrepreneurialism, freedom of trade) as consistent with a moral economy.¹⁶ Nevertheless, it is capitalism’s relations of production and property ownership—the class division between those who work and those who own—that haunts the Pope’s account of dignified labor. For if labor is truly a *creative* act, as John Paul says, then to alienate workers from the objects of their labor by denying them ownership and direction of the means of production threatens to corrupt the very nature of work as a created good. What *Laborem Exercens* affirms in its careful theological description of work is that labor is an inherently social and participatory act of creative agency. But this is precisely what capitalist production undermines and systematically so.¹⁷ The encyclical’s theology of labor, I argue, has significant implications for thinking about political economy and property ownership, ones which the encyclical only gestures toward, inviting further reflection. My attention in what follows is directed, then, not so much to John Paul’s comments regarding the tendencies and dangers of various economic theories and ideologies, even as I reference these at times. Instead, I focus more narrowly on John Paul’s theology of labor itself and then take up the encyclical’s invitation to consider what kinds of political

¹⁶ See also *Centesimus Annus*, no. 42.

¹⁷ I should note at the outset that John Paul’s criticism of “capitalism” has in view a much larger reality than simply Western liberal capitalism. For him, capitalism is defined essentially by the denial of ownership and control of production to those who labor. “Capitalism” in this sense characterizes also forms of communism wherein ownership and control of production is entirely given over to the state. Call this “state capitalism.” My focus in this essay is primarily on the reception of the encyclical in North America, and the US in particular, and so considers capitalism primarily as a matter of private, non-state ownership of production. I do not directly consider John Paul’s critique of “state capitalism” (i.e., communism), as I take his rejection of this form of political economy, in line with the long tradition of papal Catholic social teaching, to be quite well known.

economic conditions would enable such a vision of labor to flourish.¹⁸

LABOR, CREATION, AND ALIENATION IN *LABOREM EXERCENS*

The central feature and chief contribution of *Laborem Exercens* to Catholic social teaching is doubtless John Paul's extensive delineation of the theological nature of human labor. Several dimensions of that theology are relevant for my concerns here: its grounding in a biblical theological anthropology and doctrine of creation, its personalist dimensions, and its relationship to forms of alienation, property ownership, and the material conditions of capitalist production. My aim is to disclose the tension between John Paul's eloquent theological vision of the goodness of labor and the lived reality of work under capitalism.

Recall that *Laborem Exercens* opens with a recounting of the Genesis creation narrative with a particular eye toward the place of labor in the original creation. In these paragraphs of detailed exegesis, John Paul locates his theology of labor primarily within the doctrine of creation, the centerpiece of which is his argument that the mandate to "fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28) by means of human labor is intrinsic to human persons being created in the image of the Creator (no. 4). Labor is a creative human act whereby persons participate in the divine labor of God's primal and ongoing creation. "Man is the image of God," John Paul writes, "among other things because he is charged by his Creator with subjecting and dominating the earth. In carrying out that mandate, man—every human being—reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe" (no. 4).¹⁹ As John Paul says at the end of the encyclical, "Man, created in the image of God, shares by his work in the activity of the Creator" (no. 25). This participatory quality of human labor is given not only in the goodness of creation but also in the Christological reality that God in Christ took the form of a Nazarene carpenter (Mark 6:3) and thus "belongs to the

¹⁸ While I occasionally make reference to John Paul's 1987 encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* and his 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, both of which concern questions of economy, labor relations, and property, it is *Laborem Exercens* that will be the main object of my analysis because of its extended and careful treatment of the nature of work and the theological dimensions of labor.

¹⁹ On John Paul's participatory account of labor and the "sacramental meaning of work," see Gerard Beigel, *Faith and Social Justice in the Teaching of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 92–94; and Lamoureux, "Commentary on *Laborem Exercens*," 394–398. John Paul uses the language of "subjection" and "domination" in *Laborem Exercens* without the sensitivity to the abuses of human labor upon the earth that he exhibits in later encyclicals. In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, for example, he develops the notion of "dominion" in more helpful directions tying it to the human vocation of "cultivation" (no. 30). For an interpretation of the Genesis mandate along these lines, see Daniel P. Castillo, *An Ecological Theology of Liberation: Salvation and Political Ecology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 68–72.

‘working world’” (no. 26). The “Gospel of work” spoken of throughout the encyclical is good news because “he who proclaimed it was himself a man of work” (no. 26). Labor belongs to the identity of Christ as his earthly trade, but also because the activity of the Logos in the work of creation is the first and preeminent instance of labor.

Insofar as labor belongs to humankind by virtue of its creation in the divine image, the encyclical argues, the goodness of labor is found in its capacity for cooperation and communion with others, first with the Creator, but also with fellow laborers. As a “mark” of humanity, work is an aspect of the social nature of the *imago dei*. It is “the mark of a person operating within a community of persons,” the Pope announces in the encyclical’s opening paragraph. This sociality of labor “constitutes its very nature,” he goes on to say, for work is an activity of participation and communion. John Paul then develops the implications of this critical insight throughout the encyclical. The inherent sociality of work is the theological basis for the right to labor unions (no. 20) and the right to employment (no. 18), the heart of the Pope’s theology of solidarity (no. 8), and the backdrop to the encyclical’s condemnation of conceptions of labor as a depersonalized commodity to be exchanged on markets or “sold” to employers (no. 7). The social nature of labor also frames the meaning of alienation in John Paul’s theology. For labor to humanize, rather than dehumanize, it must be a site of genuine participation in common action, decision-making, and determination with others in the processes of production and work. This cooperative dimension of labor was given in humanity’s vocation in the garden of creation, which was “shared from the beginning by a couple” and “therefore fundamentally social” in nature (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 29). Thus, just as John Paul commends democratic political formations for their ability to broaden the arena of political participation and allow for persons to cultivate their capacities for civic engagement and accountability,²⁰ so too does he extol participatory forms of labor which allow workers to exercise agency, creativity, and cooperation with others in common activity (no. 14). In John Paul’s theological construal, work is a form of social activity ordered to communion with others (no. 20). The Pope’s insistence on the social nature of work is the basis of his advocacy for forms of worker control and economic democracy, the “joint

²⁰ In *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul continues the affirmation of democratic participation articulated in Pius XII’s 1944 Christmas radio message. With reference to that address, John Paul writes: “The Church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate.” He advocates for what he terms “the ‘subjectivity’ of society” through “the creation of structures of participation and shared responsibility” (no. 46).

ownership of the means of work,” “associating labor with the ownership of capital,” and other aspects of worker self-directed forms of production which ensure that “each person is fully entitled to consider himself a part-owner of the great workbench at which he is working with everyone else” (no. 14).²¹ Informed by the same traditions of workplace democracy and worker self-determination that inspired the Solidarity movement in Poland, which burst onto the world stage the year prior to the publication of *Laborem Exercens* and whose successes John Paul celebrates in *Centesimus Annus* (no. 23), the encyclical envisions participatory forms of labor as manifesting the ends and purposes of work given by God in creation.

Grounding the activity of labor in the human person’s constitution as *imago dei* is also the basis of John Paul’s delineation of the “objective” and “subjective” dimensions of labor (no. 6). Regarding the former, labor’s “object” is the created world which, when subjected to human labor, manifests goods, services, art, etc. Yet, it is the subjective dimension of labor that is the encyclical’s chief concern—the laboring subject and her or his personhood. Only the *human*, John Paul writes, can properly be said to labor, for the human person is “a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself, and with a tendency toward self-realization” (no. 6). This is the personalist quality of the Pope’s theology of labor. Because labor is a means of cultivating one’s humanity, John Paul considers freedom, agency, and the authentic exercise of control over one’s laboring activities to be the most important qualities of dignified work. The moral nature of labor is “linked to the fact that the one who carries it out is a person, a conscious and free subject, that is to say a subject that decides about himself” (no. 6). The priority of this subjective dimension of labor over the objective dimension “conditions the very ethical nature of work” (no. 6). Thus, “the basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done but the fact that the one doing it is a person” (no. 6).

The criteria distinguishing dignified from dehumanizing labor thus refer primarily to the subjective rather than objective dimensions of work. While some critics have seen this turn toward the subjectivity of labor to entail a neglect of the objective conditions of work and prioritizing of an “inner” experience of labor,²² this is a misunderstanding of John Paul’s personalism. The subjective dimension of labor concerns not interiority or private feelings of

²¹ See also *Centesimus Annus*, no. 43.

²² See, for instance, Stanley Hauerwas, “Work as Co-Creation: A Critique of a Remarkably Bad Idea,” in *Co-Creation and Capitalism*, 49–50; and John Hughes, *The End of Work: Theological Critiques of Capitalism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 18–23.

fulfillment but the very public realities of freedom and participation in the activity of work. Does a person's work enable self-realization and perfection or inhibit it?²³ To inquire into the subjective dimensions of labor is to interrogate the nature of persons' relationships to the objects of labor, the social relations of production, and the material conditions under which persons labor. Do these facilitate or undermine workers' capacities for freedom, agency, and self-determination in their laboring activity? Put theologically, following John Paul, do the conditions and structures of production allow for labor to be a truly *creative* activity? Creativity does not here refer to a quality of artistic or craft work as opposed to, say, manual labor or service work. Rather, creativity is the fundamental structure of all labor that is free and personal, in which one is an authentic agent with respect to deciding about the objects and conditions of one's labor, and in which one exercises direction and determination of productive activities with others. In short, labor manifested in its intended creative form allows the worker to be "a true subject of work with an initiative of his own" (no. 15). According to John Paul, the worker longs for this kind of self-directive power and creative agency in labor: "Using all the means of production, he also wishes the fruit of this work to be used by himself and others, and he wishes to be able to take part in the very work process as a sharer in responsibility and creativity at the workbench to which he applies himself" (no. 15). To participate in dignified, creative work leads the worker to desire "not only due remuneration" for labor, but, even more, that "within the production process, provision be made for him to be able to know that in his work, even on something that is owned in common, he is working 'for himself'" (no. 15).²⁴ For work to be humanizing, it must be creative in this sense. One must be able to truly recognize one's work as one's own and oneself as possessing authority, agency, and real determination over production. To reflect the divine activity of labor, one must be a true *subject* of work.

Careful thinking about this appeal to the structure of labor as creative action has been lacking in the encyclical's reception and commentary, as has serious reflection upon the forms of participatory, worker-owned, and self-directed productive enterprises correlated to it. For John Paul, however, a theology of labor in the order of creation

²³ "Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man *not only transforms nature*, adapting it to his own needs, but he also *achieves fulfillment* as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes 'more a human being'" (*Laborem Exercens*, no. 9).

²⁴ Note that, throughout this section of the encyclical, authentic ownership and direction of productive property are not associated with individualist forms of private ownership but with social and democratic ones, what might be called social ownership or worker ownership.

is directly tied to these questions of property ownership and the social relations of production. Pro-capitalist readers far too often extract the encyclical's affirmation of the right to private property from its larger argument about worker power and shared action. In *Laborem Exercens*, the right to property is directed not toward a defense of capitalist ownership but rather to the socialization of production in which workers direct and control the means of production "in common" (no. 15). To be sure, the Pope's argument for private ownership is set against the collectivization of all industry in the State, but it by no means affirms liberal capitalist property forms. When John Paul appeals to Aquinas's defense of private property, it is for the purposes of advocating for laborer *access* to ownership of productive property against excessive bureaucratic centralization—a reality embodied in our day by neoliberalism just as much as, if not more than, communist states.²⁵ That workers are due rightful ownership of and directive power over the property they labor upon is the reason for widely dispersing ownership of the means of production into the hands of workers. Rather than being a matter of the moral responsibility of owners of capital to their workers, then, the "priority of labor over capital" concerns the very structure of the social relations and property forms of production, signaling a clear preference for democratic and worker-owned forms of production.²⁶ For John Paul, the dignity of labor consists in the capacity of workers to act creatively in it, to possess real agency in and power over their labor. Because dignified labor entails such a relationship to the object of one's labor, the encyclical defends the right of workers to own the properties on which they labor. Yet, because dignified labor is also inherently social, ownership of production and productive property is most fully possessed when owned, shared, and directed *with others*. For this reason, John Paul's comments about the superiority of cooperative ownership of the means of work, the need for socialization of certain industries, and the importance of "associating labor with the ownership of capital, as far as possible" (no. 14), are not inconsequential suggestions but clear applications of the heart of his theology of labor, which is cooperative activity, common agency, and

²⁵ On neoliberalism's anti-democratic nature, see Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn: Zone, 2015); and David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁶ In my view, Gregory Baum is right to suggest that the central concern of the encyclical on this point is not so much *ownership* of capital but its *use*. For Baum, the Pope's concern for capital to serve labor is a preference for labor and the laboring class, rather than the managerial or owning class, to exercise power over the use of capital (Baum, *The Priority of Labor*, 24–25). See also the discussion of worker-owned and worker self-directed enterprises in Richard Wolff, *Democracy at Work: A Cure for Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2012), 117–122.

shared action.²⁷

Within this construal of labor indexed to the doctrine of creation, the Pope also considers labor's distortion and degradation. Throughout John Paul's social encyclicals, the consistent way of naming the disfiguration of labor is "alienation,"²⁸ which includes two basic dimensions. First, alienation entails a separation of the person from the fruits of her or his labor. The worker desires the "fruit" of work "to be used by himself and others" (no. 15). Already in *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul had written of the experience of alienated labor, wherein the product of one's laboring activity is "not only subjected to 'alienation,' in the sense that it is simply taken away from the person who produces it," but also "turn[ed] against man himself, at least in part, through the indirect consequences of its effects returning on himself. It is or can be directed against him" (no. 15). Gustavo Gutiérrez comments on this passage in an essay considered below, referring to alienation as a reversal of labor as "dominion" over the earth. Whereas genuine dominion *joins* the laborer and object of labor in a more profound unity, he writes, "'alienation,' the worker's loss of the fruits of his work, leads to the subjection of the human person to the things produced by that person."²⁹ In *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul speaks of this alienation of the laborer from the fruit of her or his labor as the transformation of labor into "merchandise" (no. 7), what might be called the "commodification" of labor. Later, in *Centesimus Annus*, he refers to Leo XIII's and John XXIII's similar concerns about those who labor on land from whose ownership they "are excluded" and thus "reduced to a state of quasi-servitude," subjected to "inhuman exploitation" (no. 33). In these forms of alienated work, labor is transformed from an authentic act of the person—an "*actus personae*" (no. 24)—to a marketable commodity. As a commodity, labor is extracted from the laborer in exchange for a wage, rendering labor into depersonalized "labor-power" to be sold on a market to owners of capital.

This inversion of primacy, setting "things" over "persons," as John Paul puts it, is the second important aspect of alienation and follows from the first. *Laborem Exercens* refers to this as a "reversal" of the

²⁷ In this, John Paul is following a theme of papal social thought reaching back at least to Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) which recognizes cooperative and social forms of labor as most conducive to the dignity of work.

²⁸ On the notion of alienation in John Paul's writings and his understanding of "participation" as the key antidote to alienation, see Dean Edward A. Mejos, "Against Alienation: Karol Wojtyła's Theory of Participation," *Kritike* 1, no. 1 (2007): 71–85.

²⁹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Gospel of Work: Reflections on *Laborem Exercens*," in *The Density of the Present: Selected Writings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 15.

“order of work,”³⁰ wherein labor becomes simply “an impersonal ‘force’ needed for production” (no. 7). The reversal is, more specifically, a reversal of labor’s normative structure as defined in the order of creation: “Man is treated as an instrument of production,” rather than its “effective subject” and “true maker and creator” (no. 7). If these latter descriptions name the participatory nature of labor in its created structure, wherein persons reflect and join in divine labor by being proper creators and makers themselves, then alienated labor names the inverse of this. The human person not only loses her or his status as *subject* over the processes and products of labor; the person actually becomes an *object* in labor, a mechanism within the processes of production. Alienation is the loss of creative capacity, dispossessing the worker of meaningful agency, self-determination, and control over the means and activities of production. Theologically construed, this kind of commodified labor is an instance of de-creation rather than co-creation.

Finally, and crucially important for the purposes of this essay, John Paul gives material and historical specification to this notion of alienated labor as a deformation and “reversal” of labor’s created structure. “Precisely this reversal of order,” he says, “whatever the program or name under which it occurs, should rightly be called ‘capitalism’” (no. 7).³¹ This is, in my reading, the most radical statement the encyclical makes, and it is important to delineate what exactly the Pope means by it. Importantly, the encyclical does not take capitalism to be essentially defined by the use of markets, the legitimate pursuit of profit, or non-State ownership of the means of production. All of these the encyclical affirms as political economic realities distinguishable from capitalism *per se*, and John Paul elaborates further their significance for a “market,” “business,” or “free” economy in *Centesimus Annus*. Rather, capitalism names a particular form of *production*, an arrangement of labor and the property forms structuring that labor which denies workers ownership of and control over the means of production. The capitalist property form, as the Pope understands it, is defined by its denial of ownership and direction of production to those who labor, a feature belonging to both capitalism and Statist collectivism alike (no. 7). The Pope understands liberal capitalism’s assigning of ownership to a minority

³⁰ Later, John Paul reformulates this as alienation’s “reversal of means and ends” (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 41).

³¹ Novak argues that the encyclical is mistaken on this point, “accepting a Marxist view of early capitalism” and thus failing to understand the substantial difference between “slave labor” and “free labor” (“Creation Theology,” 20–22). Novak’s criticism entirely misses that John Paul’s condemnation of capitalist production is a direct outworking of his personalist theology of labor, creation, and freedom, as I have been detailing, rather than the adoption of a Marxian definition.

capitalist class and communism's preference for the bureaucratic State's ownership of production to both be manifestations of the basic error of capitalism, for they both deny workers their right to ownership and direction of production. The theological problem of capitalism, whether manifested in liberal or collectivist forms, is that in it the worker "is not treated as subject and maker" of work (no. 7), the condition of which, I have been arguing, is participation in direction and ownership. The important point here is that the encyclical understands capitalism, in its essential structure, to entail a separation or alienation between laborer and the fruits of her or his labor, as well as the absence of meaningful self-determination over the conditions, nature, and ends of such labor. Capitalist production, in the terms delineated above, is *de-creative*, alienated labor. Its essential character is a reversal of labor's normative structure as determined in creation.

My purpose in detailing this theology of labor in *Laborem Exercens* is to disclose the basic tension at the heart of the encyclical between labor as a creative act of free persons and the systematic alienation of labor under capitalism, as well as to identify the places where John Paul gestures toward forms of labor beyond the limits of capital. What the Pope defines as labor alienation is, in fact, the essential form of capitalist production. Thus, while John Paul refuses to condemn certain ancillary features of capitalist political economy, such as markets, his theology of labor leads the reader to see alienation and exploitation at the very heart of capitalist production. To be sure, John Paul does not develop the implications of this seeming incompatibility between a theology of dignified labor and capitalist production within the encyclical. Instead, his advocacy for just wages, incorporation of labor into management, profit-sharing, and other moral admonitions are offered as ways of humanizing a fundamentally distorted labor relation. *Laborem Exercens* does invite further reflection upon what kinds of property forms and social relations of production might facilitate the vision of labor it proposes. Moreover, it opens up space for imagining the overcoming of labor's systematic disfiguration by capitalist production—what we might call labor's *redemption*. To pursue this, I turn now to Gustavo Gutiérrez, who joins the encyclical's creation theology to an account of labor's liberation through anticapitalist struggle.

LIBERATION AND THE REDEMPTION OF LABOR

One of the important gifts of Gutiérrez's reading of John Paul II is his attention to and acute understanding of the constraints placed upon labor by capitalist production, what Gutiérrez understands to be the corruption of the created goodness of labor by sin. In contrast to much of the reception of *Laborem Exercens* in the United States, Gutiérrez grasps the essential tension I have been disclosing between the Pope's

theology of labor and the limits of capital. Because of this tension, he deems it necessary to join John Paul's vision of labor in the order of creation to an account of the redemption and liberation of labor from sin, an account he had already been developing in the 1971 first edition of *A Theology of Liberation*, enabling him to receive *Laborem Exercens* within a liberationist framework and supplement the Pope's teaching with a vision of participation in God's redemption of work through anticapitalist struggle. Gutiérrez develops this account of labor in the order of creation and redemption in several key sections of *A Theology of Liberation*³² and two important, though often neglected, essays on John Paul's social encyclicals.³³ His account of anticapitalist class struggle appears in an important section at the end of *A Theology of Liberation*, which Gutiérrez redrafted in the revised edition of the book after the publication of *Laborem Exercens*.

A central theme running throughout *A Theology of Liberation*, which the book shares with *Laborem Exercens*, is the dignity of labor. Like the encyclical, Gutiérrez develops a theology of the goodness of human work in personalist terms, identifying labor as the social activity wherein persons realize their human capacities through shared productive activity with others. "Only in this way," he writes, "do persons come to a full consciousness of themselves as subjects of creative freedom which is realized through work."³⁴ Like John Paul, Gutiérrez grounds his vision of labor in the doctrine of the *imago dei* and the Genesis mandate to "subdue the earth," and he emphasizes the centrality of freedom for the right exercise of one's laboring capacities.³⁵ Labor is a participation in God's creative work, as humans steward and make use of the goods of the earth.³⁶ However, Gutiérrez writes, labor is a genuine participation in the creative work of God "only if it is a human act, that is to say, if it is not alienated by unjust socio-economic structures."³⁷ This point, implicit in John Paul's writing, was sometimes obscured by the Pope's desire to affirm all forms of labor, even the most mundane or onerous, as dignified. One must be careful, Gutiérrez insists, not to name labor good and dignified when it is deformed and degraded by alienation and oppression. Doing so risks sanctifying forms of exploitation.

³² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, revised ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

³³ The essays are "The Gospel of Work: Reflections on *Laborem Exercens*" and "New Things Today: A Rereading of *Rerum Novarum*," in Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Density of the Present*, 3–38; 39–56.

³⁴ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 168.

³⁵ Gutiérrez, "The Gospel of Work," 13–15.

³⁶ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 158.

³⁷ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 101. See also Gutiérrez, "The Gospel of Work," 6–7.

Moreover, while Gutiérrez affirms the Pope's principle that capital cannot be opposed to labor (*Laborem Exercens*, no. 13), he nevertheless points to the plain fact that, within capitalism, capital *is* opposed to labor, and structurally so, insofar as labor is instrumentalized in production processes directed by and benefitting the owners of capital.³⁸

Likewise, alienation is the central concept Gutiérrez uses to describe the disfigurement of labor's created structure under sin. He construes alienation in scriptural terms as the undoing of creation, a dehumanizing estrangement from one's laboring activity. Gutiérrez refers to the prophet Isaiah's announcement of Israel's future redemption from the oppression of Babylon to describe this undoing of alienation: "They shall build houses and live to inhabit them, plant vineyards and eat their fruit; they shall not build for others to inhabit nor plant for others to eat ... My chosen shall enjoy the fruit of their labor" (65:21).³⁹ For Gutiérrez, alienated labor is characterized chiefly by the inability to exercise control and self-determination over one's labor, the demand to give one's labor to another as a commodity.⁴⁰ Alienation in this sense, he writes, is a "perversion" of labor's created structure, "and usually a structural one."⁴¹ He thus refers to Israel's slavery in Egypt as "alienated labor," the systematic restructuring of labor under bondage to become an instrument of oppression rather than freedom.⁴² For this reason, Israel's liberation from Egypt is not only a political act of God's salvation but an economic redemption as well. God rescues Israel from alienated labor in order to gift God's people with dignified and socialized forms of labor ordered to the building up of their common life. Exodus is the redemption of Israel's labor.

This complex thematizing of labor in the orders of creation, sin, and redemption provides an important development of *Laborem Exercens's* theology of labor, which was indexed primarily to the doctrine of creation. For Gutiérrez, creation and redemption, though conceptually distinct, must always be held together so that liberation is seen as intrinsic to creation, lest one naturalize forms of unfreedom in the created order.⁴³ For Israel, "liberation from Egypt" was always

³⁸ Gutiérrez, "The Gospel of Work," 31–33.

³⁹ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 97.

⁴⁰ Gutiérrez, "New Things Today," 54.

⁴¹ Gutiérrez, "The Gospel of Work," 16.

⁴² Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 88.

⁴³ A similar point has been made by Stanley Hauerwas in his criticism of *Laborem Exercens*, arguing that the encyclical "reflects an implicit but continuing reliance upon the natural law presumption that creation *itself* furnishes sufficient grounds for universally relevant moral assessment," and thus neglects the importance of Christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology for ethical reflection. See Hauerwas, "Work as Co-Creation," 43–44. See also Hughes, *The End of Work*, 18–23.

“linked to” and seen as “coinciding with creation.”⁴⁴ Redemption is an act of “re-creation,” directed to the restoration of the created structure of human life from its effacement and disfiguration by sin.⁴⁵ Israel’s liberation from Egypt is thus ordered to the re-creation of a flourishing community through labor: “The Exodus is the long march towards the promised land in which Israel can establish a society free from misery and alienation.”⁴⁶

Moreover, God’s action of liberation is—importantly—a participatory activity. In the Exodus event, Gutiérrez maintains, salvation, “totally and freely given by God,” incorporates the human activity of self-liberation into the divine action of redemption.⁴⁷ The Exodus experience is “paradigmatic” of human salvation in exactly this way.⁴⁸ Just as labor participates in the divine activity of creation, so the struggle for liberation is a participation in the divine activity of redemption in which God re-creates the conditions for just and flourishing forms of work, life, and community. In light of this, liberative struggle must make certain decisive and “historical judgements” regarding where and how God’s redemption is taking concrete manifestation, which Gutiérrez sees *Laborem Exercens* as inviting.⁴⁹ In the current world order, Gutiérrez argues, the redemption of labor must entail the overcoming of capitalist structures of production. “One cannot support just any solution to the problem,” he writes. “Every effort to resolve it must begin at that root”—the “real conflict” between labor and capital existent in “their relationship to the productive process and specifically to the ownership of the means of production.”⁵⁰ In the language of *Laborem Exercens*, capitalism is the “reversal” of creation’s order of work, the “most gigantic and systematic perversion of the values of work.”⁵¹ God’s liberative redemption of work is a reversal of this reversal, a liberation from capitalism.⁵²

The implications of Gutiérrez’s joining John Paul II’s creation theology to an account of liberation can hardly be overstated in terms

⁴⁴ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 90. Earlier, Gutiérrez writes of the Bible establishing a “close link between creation and salvation,” one “based on the historical and liberating experience of the Exodus” (86). Eschatology also figures in this relation, distinguishing the kind of salvation realizable in history from the full consummation of redemption manifest only in the eschatological kingdom of God. See Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 121–139.

⁴⁵ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 89.

⁴⁶ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 89.

⁴⁷ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 91.

⁴⁸ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 90.

⁴⁹ Gutiérrez, “The Gospel of Work,” 22.

⁵⁰ Gutiérrez, “The Gospel of Work,” 32.

⁵¹ Gutiérrez, “The Gospel of Work,” 22.

⁵² Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 55–56, 65–67.

of their impact on a theology of labor. Exactly where *Laborem Exercens* manifests the greatest tension, Gutiérrez redirects the encyclical's theology of labor toward liberative ends. To labor with God, "to continue creation" through work, Gutiérrez writes, "is worth nothing ... if it does not contribute to human liberation."⁵³ Moreover, by thematizing God's redemption of labor in terms of anticapitalist struggle, Gutiérrez concretizes John Paul's own acknowledgement of the need for a "struggle against an economic system" bent on "upholding the absolute predominance of capital, the possession of the means of production and of the land, in contrast to the free and personal nature of human work" (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 35).⁵⁴

To close, then, I wish to consider Gutiérrez's reflections on the nature of the struggle of labor for liberation, the redemption of labor. In the fifteenth-year revised edition of *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez made a significant revision of an important section near the end of the book. Originally titled "Christian Fellowship and the Class Struggle" in the book's first English edition published in 1973, Gutiérrez redrafted this controversial section under the title "Faith and Social Conflict." While the first edition "gave rise to misunderstandings" concerning Gutiérrez's conception of class conflict, antagonism, and the meaning of Christian love, in this 1988 revision he claims to have "rewritten the text in the light of new documents of the magisterium and by taking other aspects of the subject into account."⁵⁵ The result is a theological construal of anticapitalist struggle articulated through the language and theology of *Laborem Exercens*, particularly its section on the conflict between labor and capital. In Gutiérrez's reading of the encyclical, conflict is not a historical or ontological necessity but a "social fact" generated by the structures of capitalist property ownership.⁵⁶ Because of the contingent, material basis of this conflict—the real "opposition of persons," embodied in the class structuring of labor and capital—its resolution entails a restructuring of the capitalist property relation.⁵⁷ To make concrete the "priority of labor over capital," then, entails not a moral reform of the relationship of owners of capital to their workers, but rather a structural transformation of the social relations

⁵³ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 90; see also Gutiérrez, "The Gospel of Work," 29–30.

⁵⁴ While *Laborem Exercens* expresses disapproval for a form of class struggle overdetermined by ideology and commending the use of violence (no. 11), John Paul does not dismiss labor struggle as such, even when it "takes on a character of opposition towards others" and a highly conflictual form (no. 20). It is this kind of "struggle for social justice" and "the just good" (no. 20) that Gutiérrez develops in anticapitalist terms.

⁵⁵ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 156.

⁵⁶ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 157–158; Gutiérrez, "The Gospel of Work," 32.

⁵⁷ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 158–159.

of production. In short, the “priority of labor over capital,” in Gutiérrez’s reading, demands the abolition of capital as a privileged owning class. Where John Paul II commended enterprises of joint ownership between labor and capital and worker involvement in management and decision-making regarding the use of capital, Gutiérrez goes a step further. In order for capitalism’s alienations to be overcome, the class structure of capitalism must be abolished. For work to be a creative act of the person, workers must be able to call the fruit of their labor their own, to own and direct the productive property upon which they labor in cooperation with one another. Indeed, Gutiérrez sees that participation in the direction and use of capital absent real ownership does not fully overcome capitalist alienation. Use *and* ownership of capital, in Gutiérrez’s view, belong together in the hands of labor.

Such a restructuring of labor relations and property ownership, however, is clearly at odds with the interests of the current owners of capital. The owning class will not voluntarily abolish itself or relinquish its absolute hold on capital, and so workers must engage in contestation. Gutiérrez proposes, then, a theological account of conflict and class struggle, ordered to the common good and motivated by love, which sees the abolition of the class structure as participation in God’s redemption of labor.⁵⁸ Capitalism, Gutiérrez maintains, makes enemies, antagonistic social relations embodied in and perpetuated by persons’ “relation to the ownership of the means of production” and the conflicting interests they generate.⁵⁹ To love one’s enemies under capitalism, then, means “taking a position, opposing certain groups of persons”—namely those who possess capital against labor—in order to seek their “conversion.”⁶⁰ The conversion of capital to the common good, on Gutiérrez’s terms, entails the concrete restructuring of property ownership and the transfer of the means of production into the hands of workers. Such is the redemption of labor *and* capital. The class struggle of workers against the capitalist class—even one, as John Paul II said, which entails “an aspect of opposition”—does not intend to “eliminate the opponent,” but rather to seek their conversion to the common good (*Laborem Exercens*, no. 20).⁶¹ For Gutiérrez, anticapitalist struggle is an expression of “evangelical charity”—the universal love Christians are called to extend even to class-enemies, in order to seek their

⁵⁸ I develop a theological account of conflict along these lines in Nicholas Norman-Krause, “Political Theology and the Conflicts of Democracy,” (PhD Thesis, Baylor University, 2021).

⁵⁹ Gutiérrez, “The Gospel of Work,” 31–32.

⁶⁰ Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 159–160.

⁶¹ See Gutiérrez’s comments in *Theology of Liberation*, 250–251, n. 62.

reconciliation.⁶²

CONCLUSION

I have argued that *Laborem Exercens* develops a theology of labor within which the contradictions and alienation of capitalist production come into view as a moral and theological problem. Whereas the encyclical simply dramatizes the tension between a theology of dignified, creative labor and the limits of capital, Gutiérrez theologizes a way beyond it, imagining the redemption of labor from the sins of capital. For Gutiérrez, labor's redemption is wrought by God's saving action, manifested in the historical struggle of labor to seek the conversion of capital to the common good. The struggle for liberation, even in its most contentious moments, is ordered to the realization of dignified, social, and just forms of work and production, a practice of labor not determined by the limits of capital.⁶³ 

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⁶² Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 156, 159.

⁶³ Many thanks to Matthew Whelan, Alessandro Rovati, the two anonymous reviewers of this article, and the community of scholars that is *New Wine, New Wineskins*, for their invaluable comments on this essay.