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The Human Ecology Of Social Justice

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Introduction

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. --Centesimus Annus, 39, 1991

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.

Moral ecology – or human ecology -- is a useful, and even necessary term for analyzing the preconditions for a free, just, creative and virtuous society. Such a society is constituted by three parts: a free, rights-based and interdependent political system, a free, creative and interdependent economic system, and a free and interdependent moral/cultural system. The most basic of these, 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 into a war of all against all. There are closed societies and open societies, decadent eras and upward-striving and cooperative eras.

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 its range of moral stories for its citizens to live out, for good or for evil. Some of the dimensions of moral ecology are suggested by the phrase of Robert Bellah, my teacher at Harvard, meaning the transmission by one generation to another of beneficent "habits of the heart." Here is the way Tocqueville himself put it:

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 customs 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 customs, but simply to point out such features of them as are favorable to the maintenance of their political institutions.

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

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do." Still others are caught in the motto of the University of Pennsylvania: "Leges sine moribus vanae" (Laws without mores are in vain). Where law takes root in pre-conscious habits, and citizens internalize it in their hearts 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 enough policemen to stop crime.

Thus moral ecology enlarges what Kierkegaard called "the ethical," so as to include its wider cultural dimensions. For the free and creative society, there are many moral preconditions. From another point of view, we can say 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 debilitate their own vitalities. Thus, moral ecology is a multifaceted term for analyzing the overall moral prospects of societies. 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? Are the cultural mores of each of these continents more predictive of economic decline or economic progress, of moral decadence or of moral awakening?

I would like to say more on the many methods of analyzing moral ecology. But my main assignment here is to set forth the proper meaning of social justice.

1. The Moral Ecology of Social Justice

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. In this context, mention should be made of the serious problems of modern urbanization, of the need for urban planning which is concerned with how people are to live, and of the attention which should be given to a "social ecology" of work. --Centesimus Annus, 38, 1991

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. During this same period the term social justice was given higher and higher prominence in the new secular profession of Social Work. 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 example, before social justice could be practiced there needed to be an era of widespread if not universal education. There needed to be an era in which economic and social

initiative was frequent. There needed to be an era in which freedom of association was common. Before the era of attention to associations, this was not possible. 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 – with its weak states – learning the skills of association was the only alternative.

In our new book Social Justice Is Not What You Think It Is, (Encounter Press 2015) Paul Adams and I discovered that the original social justice does not fall under the typology of ideals, utopian vision, state programs, one of the Eight Beatitudes, or other similar terms often given as its genus. Leo XIII emphasized the world he was looking for is "new" (rerum novarum). It was called into being by the new conditions of the late 19th century. Near the end of that century, Leo XIII noted that one of the greatest transformations of economic life in human history had taken place almost unnoticed.

For 1800 years the main language of Christianity was 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 Transformation 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 of infants, brothers and sisters formed the basis for speaking of God as Father, Jesus as Son, and Mary as Mother. The breakdown of family disrupted the normal language for speaking about God. Speech about God came to seem ungrounded in daily experience and 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. New forms of political life were opening up, and new sets of habits were needed. 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 brought 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.

In 1891, even though no example of a socialist state yet existed, Leo XIII began to fear socialism and its fundamental threat. In the nineteen seventies, in downtown Moscow I saw a huge neon sign, maybe twelve feet high: "Socialism is the abolition of private property."

Even though the world did not yet see a single example of socialism in any nation in 1891, Leo XIII offered thirteen reasons why socialism was against nature, would fail, and would unleash many evils [see RN]. 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 great Leviathan, the state with total power. Many other prominent intellectuals at the time, John Stuart Mill among them, were writing of the coming of socialism as a great step forward for human progress.

On the other side, Leo XIII feared very greatly the damage that the "excessive individualism" that certain currents in the West – liberal individualism, utilitarianism, 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 virtue (or set of virtues) to counter these two threats. The underlying 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 set forth the panoply of social virtues that would constitute that change. He was trying to describe a new set of virtues, rooted in every baptized person, that could transform the isolated individual into a social and political animal. Leo XIII later became known by the sobriquet "the pope of associations" (cf. Tocqueville's favorite analytic term, associations). Leo XIII held that in the new century individual persons needed to imagine, inspire, and direct new associations that would form an alternative both to atomic individualism and to the oppressive apparatus of an ever larger state. At first he did not have a name for this virtue.

In any case, Paul Adams and I were led by a preponderance of evidence to define the new virtue that Leo XIII was looking for, the new virtue given its canonical name by Pius XI – "social justice" -- as the virtue that enables individual persons to become social and political animals, in order that they might improve the common good. This new virtue gives them the skills needed to create new social and political associations, able to achieve social ends beyond those of the self and one's 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 imagine and to build worldwide benevolent organizations such as the Red Cross, the Boy Scouts, Doctors Without Borders, and many other international aid organizations. Such associations are expressions of social solidarity.

Many of the founding institutions of Social Work were founded in this way, too, for example Jane Addams' Hull Houses, Dorothy Day's Catholic Worker centers, and multiple organizations to help improve the lives of early immigrants in city 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.

2. Catholic Social Thought and the Profession of Social Work

It has turned out that there are many unexplored connections between Catholic Social Thought and the whole field of professional Social Work. Even for the most secular social workers, "social justice" was their primary slogan and dearest ideal. Lacking the powerful theological and philosophical background that recent Popes had given the term, secular experts left the term largely undefined. But it would not be wrong to say that most secular social scientists had in mind a vision of something like social democracy or democratic socialism, or something at least like the big-government programs of US President Lyndon Johnson. The social work ideal was clustered around an ideal of "equality."

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' lives 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 on their own 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 in the social texture of 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.

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," "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 real economic improvement from year to year. They do not demand economic "paradise" (they 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. In order to stimulate economic growth, they needed new economic habits suited to such growth. For example, many of them needed to learn how to become risk-takers, entrepreneurs, creative builders of 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. For how can there be family income unless there is also employment sufficient for families?

In short, they learned 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 money must be provided in advance both to pay laborers and to purchase the instruments and materials they 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, farm credit bureaus or lending services that provide guidance for new start-ups.

In short, in order to create business prosperity, an ecology of attitudes, practices and institutions favorable to the growth of 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. In this sense, creativity is one of the indispensable virtues included in the term social justice.

References

One of the first academic articles on the origin of the term "moral ecology" was by Allen Hertzke. ("The Theory of Moral Ecology," The Review of Politics, 60, pp 629-660. doi:10.1017/S003467050005083X).

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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