

## ***Pope John Paul II's Social Thought: Beyond Politics Or Ideology***

-by Jean Bethke Elshtain

John Paul II has consistently addressed a set of core themes in his writing and preaching: a dialectic of law and grace; the irreducible dignity of the human person; and, the interweaving of freedom and responsibility. The Pope's thought is often misunderstood and misrepresented by those who are determined to force his ideas into standard political or ideological categories. His ethics are neither capitalist nor Marxist: they are Catholic and social.

The basic themes of John Paul II's work were long ago struck: a dialectic of law and grace; the unique, irreducible dignity of the human person; the interweaving of freedom and responsibility. The nature of human freedom lies at the heart of the matter. This freedom is at odds with all subjectivist construals; hence, clashes with doctrines in which our own untrammelled placing of value is the criterion deployed to assess good or bad situations or states of existence or to refrain from making any such assessments at all. John Paul has long insisted that our cultures--our cultural being, if you will--do not exhaust our very selves; that there is a "something" that transcends particular, relative arrangements. That something is the human person. At the same time, however, particular cultures and ways of life have great value and we do well to honor and to recognize cultures in their plurality. Such cultures, or perhaps better put, our membership in such cultures is never a matter of placing us in an incommensurable particularity or linguistic universe by comparison to other cultures: this would constitute an instance of thorough-going subjectivism and the subsequent making of that subjectivism--here in a cultural or collective sense--an absolute. Cultures must try to expand their horizons of understanding; to translate their experiences one to the other. John Paul devotes a section in his most recent Encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, to this very theme, insisting that although "the proclamation of the Gospel in different cultures allows people to preserve their own cultural identity," at the same time "the church cannot abandon what she has gained from her inculturation in the world of Greco-Latin thought." At no point can any single culture become the sole "criterion of judgment, much less the ultimate criterion of truth. . . . The Gospel is not opposed to any culture, as if in engaging a culture the Gospel would seek to strip it of its native riches and force it to adopt forms which are alien to it." Cultures are not and must not be "diminished by this encounter."<sup>11</sup>

What are the languages (so to speak) available to make this project of understanding robust? Over and over again, John Paul speaks of human rights which rest, he insists, on an objective basis--they are not something arbitrarily invented because it just happened to seem a good idea, meaning that, at some future point, rights might just happen to make less sense so we will discard them with as much arbitrariness as we invented them. In document after document, speech after speech, homily after homily, encyclical after encyclical, John Paul links justice to respect for human rights and the attainment of justice, or some measure of justice, to aspirations for peace. Here his "World Day of Peace Messages" for 1998 and 1999, respectively, are instructive. In 1998 he argued that justice and peace "are not abstract concepts or remote ideals. They are values which dwell . . . in the heart of every individual. Individuals, families, communities and nations all are called to live in justice and to work for peace. No one can claim exemption from this responsibility."<sup>2</sup> It follows that "the marginalized, the poor, the victims of all kinds of exploitation" are of especial concern for they experience in "their own flesh the absence of peace and the terrible effects of injustice."<sup>3</sup> Each individual is called to enact projects in light of the claims of justice. But so are all political bodies singly and the international community collectively through its appropriate organizations and institutions. The Declaration of Human Rights is most often cited by the pontiff as a "solemn act" the effect of which was to formally recognize that *the same rights belong to every individual and to all peoples*.<sup>4</sup> In a way, one could read John Paul's account as a version of what philosopher Charles Taylor calls "the politics of recognition." In fact, John Paul reminds us that the Declaration uses the term "recognition" in speaking of the inherent dignity of persons and hence of their fundamental, inalienable rights. It is the concrete realization of this vision that presents an overriding challenge as the world enters the next millennium.

For what John Paul calls "shadows" hover over all anniversaries of human rights. The world continues to be haunted by the specter of injustice in a variety of forms--in the realm of the spirit, of the rules of law, and of economic life. These shadows, in both theory or practice, challenge the *universality* of basic human rights and their *indivisibility*. John Paul voices explicitly his worry that there will always be those who will take advantage of any available occasion to "use the argument of cultural specificity to mask violations of human rights," including "the criticisms of those who weaken the concept of human dignity by denying juridical weight to social, economic and cultural rights."<sup>5</sup> By tethering rights together, John Paul is able to forge a critique that cuts across all extant societies, some (obviously) with more force than others depending upon the nature and the extent of violations. But none emerges unscathed including and, at times, especially the "cultures of consumption" of the developed or "super-developed" West. John Paul also uses the occasion of

this 1998 intervention to challenge the terms of contemporary globalization. His fears are clearly stated, namely, that the development of global economic forces will be uneven and will, therefore, lead to even greater disparity between haves and have-nots.

This is an old theme for Karol Wojtyła. In giving it a distinctive twist within the framework of Catholic social ethics, John Paul insists that globalization must proceed *without marginalization* and in recognition of a fundamental human *solidarity*.

The international debt question is an especial concern to John Paul and has been for years. He uses every appropriate occasion to discuss it. The argument is simple, namely, that the "heavy burden of external debt . . . compromises the economies of whole peoples and hinders their social and political progress."<sup>6</sup> This debt question, in turn, is linked to the "persistence of poverty" and to often extreme inequalities and a world in which "the immensely rich and the miserably poor" live side by side; in which the "have nots" are "deprived even of essentials and people who thoughtlessly waste what others so desperately need. Such contrasts are an affront to the dignity of the human person."<sup>7</sup>

We are drawn back full circle to that knotty question of the dignity of persons yet again. So let's flesh it out a bit. The heart of the matter lies in certain anthropological presuppositions that necessarily ground any sustainable human rights argument. The version of human rights in which the dignity of persons is the ground turns on a view of persons that clashes with any notion of a primordially "free" self, a notion that haunts the modern rights project. An "objective orientation to freedom", by contrast, is one that sees us--or so John Paul insists--as we are, as beings born to community, beings who are intrinsically, not contingently, social. There is in fact no claim to personal goods "which are prior to social relationships and obligations."<sup>8</sup> Rights are not so much individual claims against others as woven into a concept of community that sees the person as part of a whole. That whole, in turn, is not an indiscriminate social blob into which persons are submerged, but a way of construing our sociality that keeps alive our irreducible uniqueness and distinctiveness. Within this vision, commonality is on some level assumed and solidarity is an achievement consonant with the dignity of persons. We are more, much more, than the sum total of our preferences. The ends towards which rights tend cannot be evaluated absent a recognition that one must begin with some understanding of the human person. Acknowledgement of this starting point is critical. Otherwise John Paul's interventions become mysterious, even unintelligible--as I submit they are to a thorough-going pragmatist operating within a utilitarian framework exclusively. That John Paul's interventions cut dramatically against the grain of our own market-driven construals of self-sovereignty is strikingly clear. For the culture of

consumption--and this was the heart of his powerful critiques against Marxism and Marxist states as well--is based on a radically flawed anthropology.

This no doubt says too little but it is necessary to move on to the 1999 "World Day of Peace Message" which starts out, unsurprisingly, with the theme of the dignity of persons and then reminds us that we have before "our eyes...the results of ideologies such as Marxism, Nazism and fascism, and also of myths like racial superiority, nationalism and ethnic exclusivism. No less pernicious, though not always as obvious are the effects of materialistic consumerism, in which the exaltation of the individual and the selfish satisfaction of personal aspirations become the ultimate goal of life. In this outlook, the negative effects on others are considered completely irrelevant."<sup>9</sup> From this opening salvo, John Paul moves to discuss a plethora of fundamental rights grounded in the right to life and the right to religious freedom from which flow a basic right to participate in the life of one's community. Here democratic processes are lifted up and simultaneously criticized to the extent that these processes are consistently skewed and distorted in favor of a privileged minority. "In the context of the international community, nations and peoples have the right to share in the decisions which often profoundly modify their way of life," John Paul insists, here having in his sights the extraordinary fact that international monetary organizations, even as we speak, have the power to alter profoundly the internal political arrangements of a culture by withholding debt relief, denying loans, raising interest rates--an entire armamentarium of formidable powers.

Should much of this sound suspiciously like democratic socialism or some variant of such, this is no surprise. John Paul's argument with socialism has always been that it was indefensible in theory as well as practice, not because there were no kernels of truth or noble aspirations imbedded therein but because this project was distorted given its flawed anthropological beginning point. How to salvage that serious "kernel of truth" about the terrible consequences of economic exploitation and misery? That was the challenge and within Catholic social ethics lay the answer. In fact, John Paul's concerns seem suspiciously "socialist" to many. In an article in *National Review* in 1989, political theorist John Gray complained that John Paul was the last socialist left standing, others having given up such a benighted view!<sup>10</sup> Gray correctly notes that in his great encyclical, *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul argues for the primacy of labor over capital, attacks the narrowness of the profit motive, and claims that both Western capitalism and Eastern Communism violate Catholic social ethics, including the fact that the "right to private property is subordinated to common use. . . ." "<sup>11</sup> Everyone has a right to a place at the "great workbench," including persons with disabilities. The measurement of productivity and the determination as to who is making a contribution *must not and cannot be exclusively that of a bottom line of profit*. Compounding

marginal utilities cannot tell us about how much it means to human dignity for an adult with Down Syndrome to be able to work, this despite the fact that his or her "output" may not equal that of his or her "normal" counterpart.

This is not the sort of stuff that sets Wall Street's heart racing, it may set its blood to pounding, but that is another story. So why the rap against John Paul as being so "conservative"? Much of this is a serious, even grotesque, misreading. But a good bit of it flows from the narrowness of the criteria deployed to determine where someone fits on the politics-as-usual spectrum. John Paul has long embraced what might be called a liberation theology, even as he has rejected what usually got called liberation theology insofar as it turned on a Marxist perspective that reduced the human person to a unit of productivity, a cog in the great machine, and, as well, preached class warfare and an eventual reversal of exploiter/exploited dramatically at odds with Catholic--and Christian--*shalom*, or visions of justice with peace, of a just peace. John Paul's ethics are neither capitalist nor Marxist: they are Catholic and social. There is such a thing as a "just profit" even as there is such a thing as a "just price."<sup>12</sup> We need not wait with bated breath for a presidential candidate to take this up as a rallying cry anytime soon!

As an aside in this regard, let me note that one of Karol Wojtyla's plays, written when he was in his early twenties, is "Brother of Our God", which tells the story of the Polish saint (canonized under Pope John Paul II), Adam Chmielowski. Chmielowski abandoned his perch in Krakow high society and became "Brother Albert" who devoted his life to the poor, although he rejected Marxist arguments and methods. But as commentators on the play, and any reading of the play, demonstrates: the Marxists get plenty of good lines and Brother Albert's struggle that leads to his rejection of Marxist theory and method is a real struggle, not presented as a kind of phony movement toward the correct position as something foreordained and inevitable.<sup>13</sup> The Marxist interlocutor accuses Brother Adam of mere sentimentalism. But Brother Adam insists that his anger is borne of love and responsibility; that, in fact, the Marxist solution contributes to the "disintegration" of the "powers" of ordinary folk whereas the way of love "transforms" and accomplishes much more.<sup>14</sup>

This way of love works its way within and between cultures, nations, and peoples. To the tough-minded realpolitiker who insists that such soft idealism has no place in thinking about matters of great moment like diplomacy and foreign relations, John Paul would say that it is precisely recognition of the workings of power and the existence of competing force fields that spurs tough-minded discussion of replacing logics that know only violent force or Machiavellian shenanigans with something richer, fuller, more faithful to human complexity and yearning for peace. In a 1997 address to the Diplomatic Corps, John Paul lifted up the workings of diplomacy and "sincere dialogue between equal partners, with respect for each other's identity and history,"<sup>15</sup>

insisting that there could be no exception to this rule; that little places and peoples with no strategic significance must have their place at the table. To this end, a richer international law must be worked at, one that is more than a "law of war and peace," as vital as such laws are. Violating a fundamental premise of neo-realism that domestic and international relations are so different in kind that the presuppositions that sustain order and domestic peace and tranquillity have no place in the anarchic system of relations between sovereign states, John Paul insists that there is a *raison de system* as well as *raison d'etat* as the *point d'appui* of state behavior and, moreover, that this *raison de system* should be guided by principles of justice, solidarity, and other juridical norms. Here he recalls the ancient notion of a *jus gentium* that must be beefed up and made robust in the next millennium. The world's growing interdependency should be built up on a foundation of dignity and justice rather than exploitation of the socially and politically weakest, a point struck powerfully in the encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*.<sup>16</sup> And John Paul calls, as well, for more creative embrace of the possibilities of forgiveness in the international arena--interestingly enough this could be seen as an insistence on developing Hannah Arendt's tantalizing but underdeveloped claim that forgiveness is the most important political contribution of Jesus of Nazareth to politics.<sup>17</sup>

A politics of forgiveness is impossible, however, to the extent that fear of difference prevails and "expresses itself in a narrow and exclusive nationalism which denies any rights to 'the other'" leading, in turn, "to a true nightmare of violence and terror."<sup>18</sup> John Paul steers a principled course between overly rigid universalisms that give little scope to the expression of differences in the form of national and cultural loyalties and, by contrast, harsh particularisms that deride any possibility of a universal order featuring some measure of solidarity in recognition of fundamental commonalities. His 1995 United Nations Address is a lucid case in point. John Paul begins with a strong articulation of "universal human rights rooted in the nature of the person," the very hallmark of this papacy. He then moves to remind his audience of the fact that modern totalitarianisms are "first and foremost, an assault on the dignity of the person, an assault which has gone even to the point of denying the inalienable value of the individual's life."<sup>19</sup> Making a rather Tocquevillian move, the Pontiff speaks of human freedom as a force that cannot be quieted, an aspiration that cannot indefinitely be quashed with the revolutions of 1989 a case in point. He segues next into territory that makes strong universalists queasy, namely, "the rights of nations." Note that he speaks of "nations," not states, and quite knowingly so, as what he wants to emphasize is not the juridical right of sovereignty so much as the cultural right of representation that can take a variety of forms. Scoring those "lethal doctrines" of the twentieth century that taught the "inferiority" of some nations who were deemed "other," he argues that the eloquent claims of the rights of persons imbedded in the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 must now be extended to the rights of nations.

Why so? Because the "problem of nationalities" will not go away. Indeed, powerful forces of globalization often spur a "powerful re-emergence of ethnic and cultural consciousness, as it were, an explosive need for identity and survival, a sort of counterweight to the tendency toward uniformity. This is a phenomenon which must not be underestimated or regarded as a simple leftover of the past. It demands serious interpretation and a closer examination on the levels of anthropology, ethics and law."<sup>20</sup> Here, too, John Paul would lift up the slogan of his papacy--Do Not Be Afraid!--for the expression of these identities need not usher automatically into a crushing, narrow nationalism but might well, and ideally should, give rise to a strong yet appropriate and limited love of one's country.<sup>21</sup> Why take this tack? Precisely as a way to face a basic and unavoidable reality of human existence, namely, the tension between the "particular and the universal" that "can be considered immanent in human beings." No amount of wishful thinking or ingenious philosophy or imperial politics or chauvinistic nationalism will make this conundrum disappear. For by "virtue of sharing in the same human nature people automatically feel that they are members of one great family as is in fact the case. But as a result of the concrete historical conditioning of this same nature, they are necessarily more bound in a more intense way to particular human groups. . . . The human condition thus finds itself between these two poles--universality and particularity--with a vital tension between them; an inevitable tension, but singularly fruitful if they are lived in a calm and balanced way."<sup>22</sup> Illustrative of the conditions are: self-determination with international civil society; individual rights and the right of cultures to express their understandings of their own expressions of humanity, the results of their own struggles to express the mystery of our humanity. To "cut oneself off from the reality of difference--or, worse, to attempt to stamp out that difference--is to cut oneself off from the possibility of sounding the depths of the mystery of human life."<sup>23</sup> There are philosophies that short-circuit this mystery given their inadequate and distorting anthropologies (utilitarianism is cited as a case in point) and such philosophies cannot serve as the basis of either a defensible particularism or a generous universalism.

At this point we must leave off our story, a work in progress for this pilgrim pope. In a touching letter on "Pilgrimage to Places Linked to the History of Salvation," John Paul expresses his prayerful hopes for the Jubilee Year, a strong personal desire to visit "spaces" marked by holiness. The only way to touch such spaces is to move about, to travel in time, through space, to those sites where God has "pitched his tent." This generous, peaceable movement through space, calling to all persons of good will to rise to the occasion of the millennium with hope and with trust, calling for the next millennium to be not

one of force but of persuasion, is not only a powerful image of John Paul's papacy but itself models how pilgrim people should think about and embrace their ongoing sojourn over the face of a torn and troubled globe, but one sanctified and redeemed by Christ's Incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. As he frequently does, John Paul especially offers up his calls to pilgrimage to "young people, before whom life is opening up like a journey full of surprises and promises."<sup>24</sup> One can only fervently hope that just a bit of this generous vision will be vouchsafed.

---

### Notes

1. *Fides et Ratio*, *Origins* 28, no. 19 (October 1998): 336 (Chapter 6)
2. "From the Justice of Each Comes Peace for All," World Day of Peace, 1998, *Origins* 27, no. 28 (January 1998): 467.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Toward a Christian Theory of Human Rights," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 9 (Fall 1980): 278.
9. "Respect for Human Rights: The Secret of True Peace," *Origins* 28, no. 28 (December 1998): 489.
10. John Gray, "The Last Socialist?," *National Review* 41 (June 1989): 27-1.
11. Ibid., 29. Gray is quoting from Par. 14 of the encyclical. See also John Paul's "Homily in Havana's Plaza of the Revolution," *Origins* 27, no. 33, (February 1998): 545-548, in which he criticizes "capitalist neo-liberalism which subordinates the human person to blind market forces and conditions the development of peoples on those forces. From its centers of power, such neo-liberalism often places unbearable burdens upon less-favored countries" (p. 547).
12. See Jonathan Kwitny, "Neither Capitalist Nor Marxist: Karol Wojtyla's Social Ethics," *Commonweal* 124 (October 1997): 17-21.
13. See Jonathan Luxmoore, "The Pope's Left-Wing Hero," *The Tablet* 251 (September 1997): 1186-1187 and the play itself in *The Collected Plays and Writings on Theater*, trans. by Boleslaw Taborski. The author is listed as Karol Wojtyla. The book was published by the University of California Press in 1987. "Our God's Brother" is on pp. 147-266.
14. Dialogue cited from p. 210, 229-230.
15. "What is Essential for a New Law of Peace," speech to the Diplomatic Corps, *Origins* 26, no. 32 (January 1997): 524.
16. Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, On the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* (Boston: St. Paul Books and Media, 1991). See also "The Common Ethical Foundation America Needs," Address to Diplomats (in Mexico), *Origins* 38, no. 34 (February 1999): 607-608.

17. See Jean Bethke Elshtain, *New Wine and Old Bottles* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1998), especially the Epilogue and John Paul II in Sarajevo, "Replacing the Inhuman Logic of Violence with the Constructive Logic of Peace," *Origins* 225, no. 44 (April 1997): 713-715.

18. "The Fabric of Relations Among Peoples," UN Address 1995, *Origins* 25, no. 18 (October 1995): 297.

19. *Ibid.*, 295.

20. *Ibid.*, 296.

21. On the theme of what I call "chastened patriotism," see the concluding chapter of Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

22. *Origins*, op. cit.

23. *Ibid.*, 297.

24. "Pilgrimage to Places Linked to the History of Salvation," *Origins* 29, no. 8 (July 1999): 128.

