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THE WORKER AS PERSON

By B. W. DEMPSEY, S.J.

Institute of Social Order

I.

The paramount being that is, in social life, is the individual human person. Unless there is first of all a good substantial individual person there is no use trying to have a good family member, a good citizen, a good member of any other association. The only way in which good husbands, good wives, good citizens come into being is through the realization of the individual human person that he or she must be such and by their setting out to become such. No one else can do that for them.

Therefore, "depersonalization of society" where it exists and to the extent that it exists is a mortal evil that cuts to the very heart of human associations and makes it impossible for them to attain their ends. Any society in which "depersonalization" is far advanced, not only fails of the purpose of that society, but also strips that society of all meaning and all good. Such a society not only fails to aid men to practice virtue and to develop into more perfect persons, but also places positive obstacles in the way of the development of virtue and perverts man's normal inclinations to good by directing them to wrong objects. A depersonalized society not only fails to do good, it does bad; and what good it attempts to do it does badly.

Individual human persons and such associations of human persons as a family, a firm, a vocational group, a civil society, international society, have rights; and they have them in order to develop as persons and in order to develop their personalities. If I prevent a person from doing everything, I depersonalize him by nullifying his rights; if I do every thing for him I depersonalize him by atrophying his rights.

The ultimate in depersonalization is slavery. I can be enslaved for your benefit or (supposedly) for mine. The result is the same—rights are not exercised, functions are not performed, habits are not developed, responsibilities not assumed. Personality languishes: a feeble and morbid generation emerges.

A state of "depersonalized" society may involve the failure on the part of persons to practice many virtues. Charity, natural and supernatural, personal and social, will obviously be missing.

Commutative and distributive justice would almost certainly be violated. But the social principles, the violation of which must be most conspicuous in a "depersonalized" society are two: the principle of social justice and the principle of subsidiarity.

The principle of social justice demands that each human person contribute whatever is necessary for the common good. Justice is a virtue; virtues reside only in individual persons. The common good ultimately can be promoted only by the action of those persons to whom the good is common. Where a society is depersonalized and thus perverted, this is due partly to a failure on the part of the leaders in society to provide for the common good; they have actually provided for the common evil. Parallel to this there must also have been a failure on the part of responsible members of the society to provide contributions of knowledge, leadership, encouragement, good will and the like in that period when issues became sufficiently confused to make the perversion of society possible.

Much more important than the principle of social justice, however, because less well understood and because so commonly violated that new violations cause no shock, is the principle of subsidiarity. All communities are subsidiary to, i.e. designed to serve, the concrete human persons who compose them; and all superior communities are subsidiary to, i.e. designed to serve, the inferior communities of which they are composed, and through these to serve the concrete human persons who are members of the least highly organized communities. The classical formulation of the principle may be paraphrased thus:

The essential purpose of all social activity is to assist individual members of the social body, not to destroy or absorb them. Therefore, to withdraw from an individual and commit to the community at large what the individual can handle for himself is wrong.

Equally, for a larger and superior organization to take over functions which can be efficiently performed by smaller, lower-ranking bodies is an injustice, a grave evil and a disturbance of right order.

Therefore, whenever a company, or a union, or a municipality, or one of the 48 states, or any "authority" like TVA, or the Federal government takes over a function which an individual could perform for himself or which a local community could perform for itself, it is depriving the members of such communities or the lower-

ranking communities of the opportunity for growth and development to which they have a right. Such members and such communities then, do not enjoy functions, do not perform functions for which they have the capacity. The community on the more highly organized level has failed to assist the members in their growth and development and has actually stunted their fulfillment so that they are lesser men.

Such violations of principle usually lie at the door of persons who, having little faith in the capacity of their fellows, believe that their fellows will be better off if decisions are made for them by superior persons like themselves. Or they are the fault of persons who want to control the larger funds of the big unit or to enjoy the power that goes with it. While such persons do wrong and seem to be the chief causes of the resulting evil, we cannot absolve the individuals who allow themselves to be absorbed. They violate social justice by failing to contribute to the common good, thus creating the condition in which the evil flourishes; and they violate the principle of subsidiarity by cooperating in the actions which make the violation of subsidiarity possible.

II.

Examples of such depersonalization in American conditions which are important to workingmen are not difficult to find. One is, in general conditions, the standardization of passive entertainment—movies, comics, TV, mass circulation magazines. Another exists in union organization policy and practice.

In theory, the union should be an ideal organization for the development of the capacities of its members, not only obtaining and insuring for its members a high and fair standard of living but making this achievement their own. Participation in union activities should in addition make the members intelligent masters of their own destinies, understanding the factors that govern their economic situation and living wisely and prudently within the framework of known facts with which they must cope. That this opportunity is not fully utilized is common knowledge. Union policy has strongly tended to larger and larger units, more and more closely held. Every effort has been made, not merely to ignore local and plant differences, but to obliterate regional differences which are based on pretty obvious facts. In certain cases union policy has seemed consciously to hasten the amalgamation even of producers.

In such circumstances, the worker sees less connection between what he does and what he gets. The incentive to contribute to the common good by increased output is diluted. Since a single strong national union with a single strong national policy seems to be effective and to be the only thing effective, subsidiarity is weakened further and the locals lose their identity in a mass organization.

There is an area occupied jointly by the union and the plant where a great opportunity is lost. Social services and medical services must be where people are. Joint supervision of such services by union and company could give these services at low cost, on the spot, with good service by people known to the one being served. Thus could be avoided much of the frustration experienced in the organized social work of an agency in which the workingman has no voice; this, as Pius XII bitterly complains, reduces man "to a mere material of (a) society . . . transformed into an impersonal system and into a cold organization of force."

There are those who see in the mechanization of modern industry an inevitable and devastating anti-personal force. The relentless machine is seen as a heartless juggernaut crushing the human spirit to fit the flat, drab perspective of a robot. The industrial discipline to which the machine-paced worker is subjected is denounced as debasing and inhuman. First of all, man has been condemned to earn his bread in the sweat of his brow; and yet past ages have seen more sweat and less bread than typical American industrial workers experience. Secondly, there are without doubt some repetitious jobs, especially minute assembly work, which are both tedious and exacting.

On the other hand, there are persons who want precisely that kind of job, to know precisely what to do and when to do it, to do it often enough to be proficient and that's all. Finally, the industrial discipline can also be challenging, interesting and inspiring, especially when an able mechanic is furnished good tools and materials to work with. We must not forget that the farmer is weather-paced, season-paced and animal-paced with a tyranny that is at least as exacting as the industrial discipline. Some one has remarked that the present course of events in Asia is explained by the fact that a man who has piloted a bulldozer, as many Asians did for the first time during the recent war, can never again be an apathetic serf. In the day of serfs in Western Europe the horse

was the symbol of nobility and knighthood. Many American workers in the course of a day control more horse power than there was on the whole field of Agincourt. The process may sometimes be badly managed, but it is not inherently degrading.

A third example of depersonalization can be found in the company and plant. At the moment, there is great interest among certain more enlightened large companies in "human relations." This is good insofar as it is a recognition that a man is a person before, while and after he is a worker. It is also a recognition that the plant as a working community has thus far failed to provide the working person with those things a man wants out of a job besides a pay check. The first of these is acknowledgment that his presence in the plant and his actions have some importance. The second is the opportunity to use his judgment based on his knowledge and skill. Present concern over human relations seems to presume that these have been badly lacking in the past.

Actually, the course of the labor movement decades ago should have indicated to everyone that an enormous human potential was being wasted. Even those men who most hated and feared the labor unions should have recognized that the conduct of a union requires managerial skill of the highest order and that this skill was coming right out of the shops. As labor leaders like Henderson and Macdonald in England moved up to hold the highest posts for their country on national and international levels, there could be no possible question of the ability available in mines and shops. It is significant that except for the few who moved out and founded their own businesses, and those who did move up in their own companies, this talent found expression in the unions rather than in the plants where the shortage of managerial material was doubtless as great then as now.

Finally, in government—local, state and federal—we have taken our greatest steps toward depersonalization of the working person. The handling of unemployment, of relief and of social security has been highly depersonalized. All are essentially neighborhood problems, and in American law and practice were treated as such. The clearance of information and perhaps some nominal pooling of funds through federal underwriting of loans to poor states or communities in acute cases was probably justified. Instead of mobilizing and subsidizing neighborhood resources we have had vast national programs which inevitably reduce human beings to holes

in an IBM card and social security numbers. The plain man can see little connection between his payroll deductions and any definite amount of money that he is now or may in the future be entitled to receive. He regards the benefits as largely a wind-fall that political pressure is squeezing out of this vague and remote entity, "the government." As so often happens his instincts are right. Since social security payments go into general funds, all that the taxpayer has is a claim on future borrowing or inflationary capacity of the unsecured credit of the federal government. This, of course, by political channels he always had and will retain regardless of the bookkeeping and administrative expense.

You probably feel that this is not a very impressive list of depersonalized situations in American society or of depersonalizing factors. I agree that the indictment is not overwhelming. Actually depersonalization is not an urgent problem in this negative sense that great evils are already upon us. The real problem is the positive one. Why has not our economy and our society done a better job of handling the personal factor than it has? We have not known war as other countries have known it; we have not had institutionalized poverty as other countries have had it; we have not had a stratified social structure as other countries have had. Here there has been economic and social opportunity, and if we have slums they have had different occupants each generation. Why then is depersonalization a problem at all?

III.

What is the reason why depersonization has proceeded as far as it has in the United States, and at the same time why have we failed to progress far in the opposite direction when opportunity for such progress was present?

This is the real and important question of depersonalization in our country.

Depersonalization is the product, by action and reaction, of Marxist thinking. I am referring to that portion of Marx's thought and that type of thinking which looks to the state or "collectivity" as the sole effective agent for the removal of injustice and inequities. Such thinking has no respect for the human person, does not regard him as effectively free or intelligent and therefore looks to some superior force to push men around for their greater material good. Since in such thinking there is no good greater than

material good, economic productivity is enshrined truly as a new golden calf. Failures in productivity are regarded not as failures in the development of human personality, a loss of human capacity unreleased, but as crimes against the state.

The source of this kind of thinking is the acceptance of class conflict as a principle of social structure. And the principle of class conflict is practically accepted by many persons who certainly are not Communists and do not regard themselves as Marxists. Such persons are the explanation of such abuses as exist in this country and of our failure to use our opportunity to do far better.

The relation of class conflict to depersonalization is clear. If there is an irreconcilable conflict between two opposing economic camps, then obviously genuine peace, not merely an armed truce, can be achieved only by a force outside the two which will subordinate one to the other or coordinate the one with the other. And if the state does not step in with completely depersonalizing totalitarian methods, then the parties to the conflict have no choice but to take refuge in size. Bigger companies and bigger mergers face bigger unions and bigger labor federations.

The fallacy of all this, of course, is that it confuses economic factors with social classes as Marx did. There is a relative, not an absolute, opposition of interests between economic factors in a stagnant economy. This is quite without meaning in terms of class conflict unless economic factors and social classes are practically coextensive so that no capitalist works and no worker owns anything. Further, even if this extreme condition were fulfilled for some brief time in some place, to maintain it in the face of any economic progress would require terrific social forces of non-economic sanction to keep the classes from having their boundaries obscured. No such forces exist in the United States, and they are weak throughout the Western World.

To have business planning larger and stronger units to face larger and stronger unions and vice versa, and to have each turning to a larger and stronger federal government in the hope of having its hand strengthened against the other, is the road to depersonalization and to "the modern state . . . a gigantic administrative machine . . . a false and abnormal orientation of society." (Pius XII)

Americans instead of applying to business relations the Ameri-

can concepts which have proved so fruitful in other fields have imposed Marxian categories on recalcitrant facts. Time and space do not permit detailing the historical causes of this. That it is a fact needs only to be stated to be recognized. Terms like collective bargaining implying an abiding conflict of interests are in daily use by both sides to describe a process which might just as well be called joint budgeting. The clamor of business for a Taft-Hartley Act against labor monopolies was exceeded only by the clamor of the unions against "the slave labor act." Most people on both sides were aware of trends needing discipline. The area of agreement was much broader than the area of real conflict, but nobody presented the problem in those terms. So business associations strive to keep a united front and hold the line; and unions strive to divide and conquer like generals in a real war. Even a series of inflationary wage increases comes to be described as "rounds," like a prize fight.

Conflict, as a matter of fact, can and does and will exist now in one, now in another area of our economic activity. But class conflict as a matter of deep-rooted principle is nonsense. By European standards, the standards Marx had in mind, Americans are 95 per cent middle class. In Marxian and European terms this is a horrible damnation. But there is reason to hope, however, that our material life will be tolerable in this Marxian hell, and that the nation will survive.

May I be so bold as to point out that even the structure of our program has a hint of this Marxian roquefort in its salad. My topic, you may have forgotten, is to discuss the "Worker as Person." In a society where workers are or could be a well-defined social class, it might be possible to discuss the Person as Worker. But since personality is the ultimate seat of absolutely everything that gives a working person significance, to discuss the Worker as Person is not easy. And in America, the word "worker" as used in the historical Marxist sense of a class of persons opposed to owner-managers and to squire-landlords, has no real meaning. There are too many working farmer landlords and too many capitalists who put in a full day's work on the one hand; and on the other hand the worker owns too many homes, too much consumer capital goods, too much insurance anyhow. If we are to be realistic in America we must discuss the person working.

The American economy thus suffers from synthetic schizo-

phrenia. Our society should have an integrated organic unity without uniformity, functioning for the good of the whole. Instead, our economy has a split personality. Now a real schizophrenia is bad. The only thing farther removed from reality is a synthetic schizophrenia,—the illusion that you have one when you haven't. And that is the source of such depersonalization as we have; that is the reason for our failure to have progressed far in the direction of personal development and fulfillment for all persons involved in economic activity.

That false approach leads to the apparent necessity of larger and larger units. The larger and larger units must be preoccupied with "things"—cost, for example—not persons; they must more and more bring their ungainly problems to the highest civil authorities for umpiring, for judgment, for regulation, for punishments and rewards. The impossibility of the state doing these things competently is the great danger of depersonalization in American life.

Almost twenty-two years have passed since Pius XI stated about as flatly as can be done: "Now the primary duty of the state and of all good citizens is to abolish conflict between classes." We in the United States had by far the finest opportunity in the world, literally, to do this. We have not used the opportunity because we, as persons, all of us regardless of our place in relation to economic factors, have not practiced the virtue of social justice and have not resisted violations of subsidiarity. We are less perfect Americans than we could have been, and we are less perfect persons than we could and should have been. To that extent we have depersonalized ourselves, and let ourselves be more like the Marxian mass-man and less like socially responsible persons.