

# Just Working?

## Catholic Social Thought and the Dignity of Work

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*This is a lightly edited transcription. To hear a recording including the Q & A click [here](#)*

*Jon Cruddas MP was to give this lecture, but was detained at the House of Commons. Lord Glasman kindly stepped in and gave this talk off-the-cuff at the last minute.*

Thank you very much. So first of all, I want to thank Jenny for all that you do at Together for the Common Good and I really appreciate that we work together. And Jon Cruddas is my closest friend in politics so I am happy to do this.

I want to talk about Catholic social thought, and how it's an absolutely essential part of building a new politics. I'll begin with three reflections before I get into the heart of the matter.

### Catholic social thought

The first is that discovering Catholic social thought really transformed my world. It transformed my faith, and it transformed my politics, and particularly, the three encyclicals *Rerum Novarum*<sup>1</sup>, *Laborem Exercens*<sup>2</sup> and *Centesimus Annus*<sup>3</sup>. All that *Blue Labour*<sup>4</sup> is, is trying to articulate those at this moment. The idea that we are fallen beings, susceptible both to virtue and to sin, is an essential starting point. That the institutions that surround us are decisive in whether we go one way or the other, is vital. It's a Dominican thing. The idea that we're social beings. The Aristotelian inheritance, the idea that we find the meaning of life in our relationships and in our work, is absolutely fundamental. The articulation of the common good within that is central.

And here tonight in this room we have the old alliance of the Salvation Army and the Catholic Church. That was the very origins of the labour movement, in the 1889 dockers' strike<sup>5</sup>. And if you read the articles around that time, you will see the horror with which it was greeted - that the dockers should be paid. But what caused enormous outrage in the editorial pages and the letters pages of *The Times*, was that the Salvation Army, a Protestant organisation, was in alliance with Cardinal Manning, a Catholic, fronting it up. It was William Booth and Cardinal Manning. The idea that Protestant and Catholic could work together was genuinely greeted with horror. That's the radical nature of Catholic social thought.

Because it was Cardinal Manning, together with Bishop von Ketteler in Germany, who actually were the driving forces for *Rerum Novarum* and the birth of Catholic social thought.<sup>6</sup> So it's a source of enormous importance to me that the origins of Catholic social thought were driven in our politics, in our society, and are ours. And obviously, they've been madly neglected, but there really is no alternative than to return to excavate those origins. And that's particularly true, although I won't labour the point, so to speak, about my party.

## **Money has exercised dominion**

The second thing to say is that we are speaking here from the City of London. The City of London is the oldest continuous democracy, democratic city, self-governing city, in the world. Founded by the Romans, it has a very odd place because it preceded Parliament. In the Norman Conquest, the conqueror laid waste to the rest of the country, but he got to London and he stopped. And that was because the City of London had five thousand men in a militia standing at the gates waiting. He came friendly to London and didn't conquer it. He allowed English to be used, allowed common law in the courts.

The very origin of the pushback against the conquest, the whole concept of the ancient constitution, is rooted in the City of London. You can see this through its institutions: the Guildhall for example, where you won't be able to find a single worker. It's a banking association now, but it used to be a source of moral economy. So a hugely important self-governing city was entirely conquered by capital. It became the absolute, central address for the domination of capital within the framework of the maritime empire and the British Empire.

So it's important to remember what is outside the City of London. They call it "City" Hall, but it's the Greater London Authority. The City of London has 150,000 inhabitants and over 100 elected representatives. The GLA, by contrast, has more than 8 million people and 16 representatives. Central to this is to realise that we have lived through a period of time - and its roots are very deep - where money has exercised dominion. And democracy has been subordinated to that, and certainly, what Jenny refers to as the kingdom has been subordinated too.

## **Change of era**

And the third thing is, as Pope Francis has said, we're not living through an era of change, but a change of era. And I think we've got to take that to heart. Our politics may seem flat, mundane and technocratic, but the profundity of the change is very real. And we must get into position to understand that change, not to be overwhelmed by fear, and to be able to develop a politics that is commensurate to the scale of the changes.

What I advocate is that is that we move from contract to covenant in the way that we think. That's the essence of the biblical political economy. And it's the very essence, I think, of Catholic social thought. That we recognise that we are bound to each other, in association, through thick and thin, and we need a much more durable institutional system.

Because capitalism is fundamentally based on the idea of contract, on the idea of an exchange between hands of equivalence. And what we've found is that leads to huge inequalities of power, huge inequalities of wealth. We need to resurrect more durable forms of association. London becoming a City would be a good place to start. It would be good to think about how our inheritance is distributed. Because the City of London has inherited all the ancient liberties, all the assets of two thousand years, while London as a local authority just has to make do with what it has.

## **The era of globalisation is coming to an end**

So when Pope Francis talks about not living through an era of change, but a change of era, we need to consider the new forms that we have to recognise.

The first is that the era that we have lived through since 1979 - let's give it a date and say that it commenced then - it's still not over but is definitely on the rocks. We could just call it an era of globalisation. Where technology knew no borders, no limits, that national borders were increasingly irrelevant, that there would be a free movement of capital, of labour, of goods, of services. We were supposed to think that this was all in the public interest. And that era is coming to an end.

I know that mental health is very much on people's minds, but when I talk about a "bipolar" world, I don't mean it in the mental health sense. I mean it in the sense that fundamental to globalisation was the idea that capital would transfer its assets to China and other areas in Southeast Asia. One of the great ironies of history is that the most successful enduring communist regime was the most hostile to labour. There were no free and democratic trade unions, that's disallowed. No freedom of religious association, that's also disallowed. But China could guarantee 24 hours' production without any disruption from strikes. That's what China could offer, with an educated workforce that did not participate in any way in the governance of the economy. So China offers the dream of frictionless returns to capital. And capital duly relocated to China.

## **Features of the new era**

When talking about the change of era, we can't ignore what happened with the Brexit vote, for example. And for me, the Brexit vote was fundamentally driven by the dispossession and abandonment of our working class. They had no real role in this [globalised] future. They were called lots of things. They were called the left behind. That was the nicer term. But essentially they were seen as an archaic remnant of a previous civilization.

When we talk about the change of era, the first feature of this new era is that it is now the case that the nation state will play a far bigger role in the economy than was previously thought.

Does anybody remember Covid? Does anybody remember what happened in this period? It was the first time in my living memory - you remember it only lasted for about six or seven weeks - what had been invisible to us, which was work - human labour, suddenly became visible.

Suddenly, there were those of us who could earn a living behind a computer screen on Zoom, and there were those who had to leave the house and do things for others, essentially, with their hands.

Those were truck drivers, those were shelf stackers, those were nurses in hospitals, who were who were dealing with the sick, those were street cleaners. Suddenly, remember, we started applauding people for going to work. I thought that was a very, very significant moment - that of course passed. But what it also revealed was the dependency on extended supply chains, and that we couldn't even make face masks, let alone respirators, let alone medicine. Suddenly, the incredible dependence on China for a very brief period became quite scary. So one of the effects of that has been - and it's long standing - is that the state will play a bigger role in the economy.

And the working class, far from being the left behind, the abandoned and the dispossessed, are now the decisive force in elections.

So the next election will be the contestation for what they call the "red wall" - the people who voted for the Conservatives in 2019, who Labour desperately need to vote for them at the next election. And that will be the essential battleground of politics. These places.

The important thing to recognise is that for globalisation, place didn't matter at all. You could participate in the economy from wherever you lived, due to the internet and technological changes.

But in politics now, place is very important, and this is our friend.

The growth areas in the economy are very much related to what you might call relational work. So there is a huge increase in people employed in social care - care for the old, and huge increases in people who work in schools, working as teaching assistants, working with people with mental health problems. In all those areas, even in the City at lunchtime, where people used to just get drunk and eat long lunches, you have personal trainers taking people for intense runs to keep their fitness up. A huge explosion.

But it's completely disorganised. And it's contracted out. And it's low paid. Did you see the case yesterday, a teaching assistant got stabbed in a school playground. I was looking into it. It turns out that the teaching assistants aren't in a union, they don't have representation. So when we talk about the people that we really depend on, their wages have been pushed down and their training is extremely scanty. In Catholic social thought we do have the concept of vocation which is worthy of retrieval.

And because we are social beings - to go back to the Aristotelian inheritance - Catholic social thought gives incredible importance to association, to people associating with each other. We've seen the complete atrophy of association. But it is necessary for this to be resurrected in order for that dignity to be restored, and for people to be able to participate in their working lives, with dignity, and with some power.

So we've seen the emergence of a bipolar world. We've also seen the really strong emergence of a bipolar labour market, where there's extremely high reward for professionals, for finance, and for tech.

But when it comes to the substantial economy, or the real economy, the care we give to others, there's very low wage, very poor representation. And we've also seen - and this also needs to be re-thought - we've seen the abandonment of full employment as a goal of politics.

Ultimately, in our inheritance from the scriptures, work is a fundamental way in which we realise our creativity, our partnership with other people, and the transformation of our inheritance, the transformation of the world.

I used to get into a lot of trouble, in early Blue Labour days, and in the Labour Party, for publicly associating with the church, with faith. Because of course, "it's patriarchal, sexual abuse, it's just horrible." I used to say, yeah but at least people of faith don't think the free market created the world. That there is some prior and substantial inheritance. And I think that's worth remembering.

So why is it that I'm so wedded to Catholic social thought in terms of statecraft, in terms of the political economy? It's fundamentally because Catholic social thought is the most practical, secular guide to the problems that we have, and for how to begin to think of a political and institutional solution to them.

## Capital and labour

The first thing to understand about globalisation is it was fundamentally based on the fungibility and dehumanisation of labour. That any worker could be exchanged for any other worker. If you didn't have workers here, you could bring them in from abroad. I saw yesterday that the Dutch government fell because of issues relating to immigration. This low paid workers' disintegration of solidarity is a fundamentally important political topic.

The insight of Catholic social thought is that there is such thing as class, that there is a relationship between capital and labour, and that it says that labour is the living element. I can't stress enough how *Laborem Exercens* is the most profound work on human labour, on human work that has been written in the last hundred years. And it talks about the realisation of the person through their labour, the fulfilment of that. The relationships that are essential. The notion of a vocation which is passed on, an inheritance in relation to the dignity of the person.

And how capital is an enormous threat. Because what is capital? Capital is an accumulation of inherited wealth that has become committed to the highest return at the greatest speed. In other words, it's by definition exploitative.

So what is necessary is to have countervailing powers to that, powers that can retrieve and restore the dignity of the person and particularly of the worker.

The dignity of labour is vital, and that's achieved in Catholic social thought, as we have inherited it, through a concept of vocation. Vocational colleges are one aspect of that. And it's achieved through trade unions as necessary associations in order to limit the dehumanisation of the individual worker.

And in that, it teaches us something about sociability. Whenever I meet people and I ask them why they're doing what they're doing, and they say, "because I want to make a difference", my heart weeps, and it bleeds - because you can't do it on your own. You've got to do it through fellowship, you've got to do it through association, you've got to do it through building institutions, democratic institutions, with other people.

So that's the first and primary reason why Catholic social thought still believes in the value and importance of labour, of the human being. "Labour" is just another word for the human being.

Catholic social thought is concerned about the relentless exploitation of the human being, and the turning of the human being into a commodity. So this is where I see the contemporary political stage: in the period of globalisation, everything was a commodity. So I'll just give you some examples that we're living through now. Water: we just allowed our water to be privatised and subject to foreign ownership and prices. It's been commodified.

Now what is commodification? Commodification is the process through which something that was not produced for sale is turned into a commodity that's for sale on the open market. So the human being, obviously, is a miraculous expression of love. But in the labour market it's treated as a commodity. Water is a necessity of human life: absolutely central in the Bible - the heavens, the Earth, the prayers for rain. But now it's a commodity. Heat. Energy.

All these things within globalisation were considered best organised within the private sector, best organised through markets, best organised through prices. And now we're reaping the whirlwind of all of this.

## Concepts for renewal

But Catholic social thought does not say "nationalise". It does not say "centralised" state ownership. Catholic social thought has a much more sophisticated approach to how power is organised, and I would like to go through that now.

A central concept in Catholic social thought - it's not only that the human being has dignity (and that the labourer is to be respected as a partner with capital in the organisation of the political economy, and not subordinate - when I say partnership that's a reciprocal relationship between capital and labour), there is also a second principle in Catholic social thought that is equally significant: subsidiarity.

Subsidiarity is about decentralised power - that power should be exercised at the lowest level commensurate with function. In other words, that place still matters, that association matters. And so Catholic social thought opens up space for thinking about how we can have locally organised civic trusts, responsible for water and energy. We used to have them - remember the water boards?

But things changed. After 1945 until 1979 was the period of the centralised state. When the failures of that grew, beyond the control of the politicians, that's when we entered the period of globalisation, which would take us from 1979 to now.

So now in our politics, we have to find a different way. And I think Catholic social thought opens that way. And the importance of decentralisation, of subsidiarity, of local participation in the governance of the economy as well as politics, are absolutely vital.

So in Catholic social thought you have the status of the worker, subsidiarity and decentralisation.

And then you have solidarity, which is about the responsibilities that we have, the obligations that we have, to each other as bound by association. And all the different forms of voluntary and involuntary associations are vital. But that ultimately means that there also has to be a redistribution from rich to poor in fundamental ways. This doesn't mean that the poor don't have responsibility, they do: for their good work, for their effective work, for participation. But solidarity is the third concept that binds people together, in covenantal association.

And then there's a fourth concept: the stewardship of nature. The idea that the free market did not create the world. That we have an obligation to treasure creation itself.

Because if you think of it like this, then capitalism is something quite nuts: capitalism wishes to see the commodification of creation - of creation itself. And you can see that in the aggressive resistance to any form of faith, in the economy or in politics. Because they wish to absolutely own creation, and to dominate creation.

And so the resistance to that comes from human association. *Laborem Exercens* and *Centesimus Annus* are absolutely superb about this.

And looking at my lot (the Jewish tradition), from Leviticus 25 to 35, in the Bible it says that when you lend, you must keep the person company. *Kesef talve* is the Hebrew. That this is not a transactional relationship between the lender and the lendee, but this is a way that you create relationships.

But the existing system, the banking system that we have leads far more to the disintegration of relationships. There is no obligation when it comes to reciprocity between the rich and the poor, or between the bank and the customer. So this is the reason why the human person has to be put first.

This is the paradox I always say: that citizenship will be redeemed by faith. That rationality alone cannot uphold this. There's much more to say about this. But I will move to the conclusion.

## **Where we are now, as people of faith**

We have to recognise the stark realities of where we find ourselves, in terms of people of faith, where we are. Our voices are increasingly marginalised in politics and within the economy, but not as marginalised as the poor.

There's a huge crisis at the moment in the party system. I sense no enthusiasm, anywhere, in relation to any agenda that could conceivably take us in a different direction. I think it's our responsibility to develop those things.

It's vital to understand how desecrated the human being has become within the prevailing system. In the economic system, the human being is treated completely as a fungible commodity. In the welfare system, treated as an isolated unit and a cost.

We need to take seriously the disintegration of the traditional institutions. I will say here to the Salvation Army and to the Catholic Church, if you were to have support for the dockers now, how many people would come? The reality is tens of thousands of people walked out to protect the dockers and to uphold the dignity of labour.



How to renew that association? How to renew the relationship with the poor is essential.

And we have to look at the menace. The menaces of poverty, the other menaces. I know some of you remember Covid, but does anybody remember the financial crash of 2008? That was something. I think that was the beginning of that move that led to Brexit. That was the beginning of the disaffection with the prevailing consensus. But we have plenty of work to do to establish an alternative consensus.

The menaces are also about surveillance, about compliance, about bank accounts being terminated because people don't like the politics of the person who holds them. You know, we are seeing a really strong system of corporate control that that needs to be resisted.

## **The resurrection of society**

We can no longer think about the economy as separate from politics.

What we have witnessed in the era of globalisation is two things. The first - which is obvious - is the increasing power of the market. That the market has increasingly penetrated into all aspects of life, that the price system is the dominant system for the allocation of resources and goods, that there is a commodification of human social life. But equally, there's been an increase in the power of the state: that the state is the other institution, not only in terms of coercion and enforcement, but also in terms of welfare. So you have a very strong market, and you also have an increasingly strong state.

But what has disintegrated in all of this is the third aspect, which is society. So you could say that the principle of the market is contract and the principle of the state is redistribution (move taxation to the centre and then out again). The principle of society - which is reciprocity - which is relationships - has disintegrated.

So any agenda coming from Catholic social thought has to put association at the very heart - the restoration no less - or you could even be melodramatic and call it the resurrection - of society. Now, that's really hard work.

You asked me earlier about Grimsby, about building a community organisation in Grimsby. I'd like to say it's a very nice place, but it's a very tough place. And the reason I chose Grimsby was because it has the lowest levels of literacy, it has the highest levels of abuse and neglect within its public institutions.

And I thought that "the least of these" have to lead. This is another really fundamental principle that I took from Catholic social thought that we will find leadership from the unexpected places. From the most abandoned places. And we're beginning to see that. We're building a community organisation there.

And the whole goal of it is to restore society. It's not to stand for any elections. It's not to run businesses. It's just to hold the political and economic powers and the principalities to account through relational power. That's the idea of what we're doing there. And to restore that old alliance between the church and labour.



That's why I mentioned Cardinal Manning. That's why I mentioned William Booth. That's why I mentioned the dockers. Because that was also a time where the state and the market were completely dominant. And society itself restored some balance. So I think we can take some inspiration from that and recognise the importance of organising.

## Why the dignity of work is central

But to return to the theme of tonight, central to Catholic social thought and central to the politics is to restore the dignity of the worker, through association, through vocation.

I tried to give this talk tonight without talking too much about stats, because I found that if you mentioned stats people tune out. But I'll give you two.

The first was published by Michael Lind who is a American economist, who's very sympathetic to the work that we're doing. If you look at Britain and you look at the United States over the last 50 years - and I refer you to a report in American Compass<sup>7</sup> - over the last 50 years, real wages have increased about 1%. If you look over that time, corporate profits have increased by 185%. I don't really think I need to say too much more in relation to this.

But when we're talking about a common good, we're not talking about the domination of labour. We're not talking about unions running the country. We're talking about a restoration of some reciprocity in the rewards of the working life and in the way those are distributed.

There is another statistic. In 1979, when I went to university, 7% of people went to university, and 50% of people had an apprenticeship. Now - because God likes to mock us - 7% have an apprenticeship and 50% go to university. The absolute atrophy of respect for skilled labour.

And this is linked to all the other things that people talk about. All these things are rooted in the lack of a recognition of the fundamental importance of work in the reproduction of society, in the reproduction of relationships within society, and the sense of justice within that. That all contribute, and that all benefit.

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<sup>1</sup> [Rerum Novarum](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Laborem Exercens](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Centesimus Annus](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Blue Labour: the Politics of the Common Good](#)

<sup>5</sup> [The Great Dock Strike of 1889](#)

<sup>6</sup> [The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Rebuilding American Capitalism](#)