
The End of Work

Theological Critiques of Capitalism

John Hughes

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Praise for *The End of Work*

‘Adam was expelled from the garden of Eden to till the ground in the sweat of his face, so the Bible says, leaving us with centuries of theological argument about how to relate the reality for so many people of work as toil, drudgery and effectively a curse, to the equally familiar experience of work as creative achievement and personal fulfilment. Post-Christian we may now be in Britain, yet in a society still reeling from de-industrialization, with unemployment endemic in certain quarters, with leisure activities expanding vastly, and so on, there is a rich and complex Christian tradition of thinking about the nature of work which John Hughes puts back on the agenda in this provocative book.’

Fergus Kerr, University of Oxford

‘John Hughes has written not about work but about the “end” of work. But this is the most far-reaching question imaginable in practical reason. To what end do we exert ourselves at all? What do we hope to achieve? Through a tour of reading in nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinkers that is as subtle and sympathetic as it is diverse and adventurous, he has shown us how the ancient struggle between the fine and the useful has been played out dramatically in the post-industrial West and holds the key to a great deal that we think of as modernity. Here is an exciting new voice contributing to the interpretation of our moral predicaments. I cannot imagine anyone putting Hughes’s book down without having learned something important.’

Oliver O’Donovan, University of Edinburgh

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The End of Work

Theological Critiques of Capitalism

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To my parents

... We don't know the ins and outs
how can we? how shall we?
What did our mothers tell us? What did their mothers tell them?
What the earth-mother told to them? But what did the queen of
heaven tell *her*? ...

The Wall, David Jones

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Foreword

This book considers the ‘problem of labour’ from a theological perspective. While it is obviously aimed at theologians concerned with how Christianity might engage in social criticism (particularly by building on recent interest in theological aesthetics to show the non-utilitarian roots of the British Christian Socialist tradition), it is also aimed at secular philosophers and political theorists who have in recent times shown a greater openness to the historical and theoretical connections between the Marxist tradition and Christianity. More specifically it seeks to draw attention to the potential contribution of neglected resources in romantic philosophy and theology to the reconceiving of the task of social criticism after the collapse of state-centralist utilitarian socialism in Eastern Europe. It is aimed at those of at least higher undergraduate level in these disciplines.

I begin with a survey of twentieth century theologies of work, contrasting differing approaches to the contemporary reality of work, and the relation between divine and human work. I go on to explore the nineteenth and twentieth century debates about labour under capitalism. Through a reading of Weber’s *Protestant Work Ethic*, I argue that the triumph of the ‘spirit of utility’ is crucial to understanding notions of modern work, and that this is bound up historically with an anti-theological agenda. In exploring Marx’s critique of labour, I argue that the very possibility of critique was premised upon a vision of unalienated labour which Marx derived from the quasi-theological traditions of German Romanticism. This critique was however compromised when these sources were suppressed in favour of the anti-theological prejudices of political economy, creating contradictions that have continued to haunt the Marxist tradition, as illustrated in the work of the Frankfurt School. The English Romantic tradition of social criticism, as represented by Ruskin and Morris, represents another critique of labour, which was more explicit about its theological presuppositions, criticizing contemporary labour conditions on the basis of a vision of true work as art, like God’s work in creation. Finally I turn to various twentieth century Catholic thinkers who supplement this aesthetic tradition with classical metaphysical categories which help them to think through the

nature of art and the relationship between utility and non-utility in work. Such a perspective enables us to see the ultimate nothingness of utility, and how non-utility can be not only defended against work, but also extended to transform work so that it participates more fully in divine work, and so becomes a liturgical offering.

Preface

Of the more concrete conclusions of this book, one of which I am particularly convinced at its completion is the claim that work is made more delightful by company and cooperation. Doctoral dissertations are in some ways negative illustrations of this, in that their tediousness often results from the reclusive existence encouraged by notions of originality and independence in research. No thought of course can be completely private, and fortunately the reality of doctoral work is greatly eased by the great cloud of those who accompany one along the way, whether intellectually or more broadly.

My debt of thanks must begin with my supervisors, with both of whom I have been unbelievably fortunate. It is difficult to find words appropriate for my gratitude to Catherine Pickstock: for inspiring me in my undergraduate years, for bringing light out of the initial chaos of my proposals, for being tireless in her detailed and regular reading of my work even from across the world and long after she had ceased to be my official supervisor, and most especially for generating the enthusiasm and joy without which this dissertation would never have been possible. Few people would be capable of following this act, yet when Catherine left on maternity leave, Jeremy Morris was brave enough to take over supervising this dissertation which seemed not quite to fit in the usual disciplinary boundaries. His historian's eye for detail and context, and knowledge of the nineteenth century, were crucial in the final year, while his breadth of intellectual interests meant that he in no way resisted the less historical, more philosophical direction of the argument. I could not have wanted more from either of them.

Among my companions along the way, special mention should be made of Matthew Bullimore, who shared with me the curious amphibious existence of being simultaneously a doctoral student and an ordinand; in addition to being the most frequent audience to my rambling thoughts and influencing my thinking in myriad ways over the years, he also provided me with more cups of tea during moments of tedium than I dare to recall. Others who have read sections of the dissertation and provided helpful comments and criticisms include Andrew Davison, David Grumett, Mark Berry, Alice Wood, Chad Pecknold, James

Lawson, Althea Pipe, Frances Arnold and my mother. More broadly I am grateful for the support and encouragement of my family, the extraordinary ‘redoubtable cell’ of John Munns, Anna Matthews, Rob Mackley, Russell Dewhurst and Andrew Davison, and of all my friends from Westcott House. From Emmanuel College, I would particularly like to thank Jeremy Caddick for all his help, and the Choir, especially Claire Cousens, Jen Spencer, Ben Martin and Rowena Bayliss, for brightening up the gloomier slog of the final year. Among my fellow graduates, I am particularly grateful for conversations with Karl Hefty, Adrian Pabst, Rachel Greene, Jim Walters, Brutus Green, Scott Moringiello, Ed Morgan and Ben Fulford. The finishing touches were put to this book after my ordination and I would like to thank my Vicar, John Henton, and the people of St David’s and St Michael’s for the support and friendship they have given me as I have made the transition to a different sort of work.

Among my longer-term academic debts I should begin by acknowledging John Milbank, who, in addition to being very generous towards me, has perhaps been my primary theological inspiration and with whom I often feel I am simply writing extended footnotes to his asides. Janet Soskice, Nick Adams, Pete Candler, Simon Oliver and Ben Quash all fuelled a passion for philosophical and political theology in the peculiar Cambridge style during my undergraduate studies. Tim Jenkins has also helped in a rather different way by keeping me ever-vigilant towards the dangers of aspects of this style! From my Oxford days I appreciated the distinct but related perspectives of Oliver O’Donovan, Bernd Wannewetsch and John Webster, which perhaps made me a *little* more self-critical in my Romanticism . . .

Cooperation is however no excuse for the abdication of personal responsibility, and the opinions and mistakes of this dissertation are my own. While I believe that theologians should consider all things in relation to God and so have no safe ‘ground’ to themselves, this nomadic and often parasitic existence involves a certain vulnerability. I am conscious that I have strayed across many different fields and authors, without really being a ‘specialist’ in any of them. Similarly, some may be dissatisfied by the fact that I have sought to address myself to a number of audiences with very different starting positions: secular social critics and theorists who regard religion as at best an irrelevance and at worst reactionary; Christian socialists, who seem to have lost sight of the distinctiveness of their social vision; and the Church more generally, which often regards social criticism as an optional extra.

While we may not live by bread alone, it certainly helps; and at the material level I am grateful for the support of the Arts and Humanities Research Board, the C. S. Gray and Gwyn funds at Emmanuel, the Newton Scholarship Fund, the Diocese of Exeter, the Ministry Division of the Archbishops’ Council, the Zelig Timms and Bernard Maitlock funds at Jesus College, the Cleaver Trustees, the Toc H and All Hallows Trust, and the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral.

Finally, if my thanks are to be more than flattery and vanity, they must find their meaning within the movement of total gratitude towards the One from whom we receive all things, and back to whom all our work is offered: *'quia per incarnati verbi mysterium nova mentis nostrae oculis lux tuae claritatis infulsit.'*

The Parish of St David with St Michael and All Angels, Exeter,
St Frideswide, 2006

*Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give
you rest.*

*Et ideo ipse solus est maxime liberalis,
quia non agit propter suam utilitatem, sed solum propter suam
bonitatem*

*Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil
nor spin.*

Introduction

Work in the Christian Tradition

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it

Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life . . . in the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken.

‘Blessed indeed’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labours, for their works follow them.’

Work: begot in man by an animal need, and, at the same time, a tool by which to lift himself above animality. A hard bondage and a liberating force. Today still it remains marked by this ambiguous character.¹

Why write a book about work now? In recent years there has been a considerable number of books, by theologians and others, that seek to offer analyses and critiques of contemporary capitalism. Yet these books start from the presupposition that capitalism as we now know it is very different from how it was even 50 years ago. Talk of ‘late capitalism’ indicates an awareness of how the current economic order is marked by various features distinguishing it from the period of classical capitalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the withering of the role of the nation state, the globalization of finance capital, the emergence of international corporate monopolies with ever-increasing hyper-profits, the replacement of traditional manufacturing industry by information and finance as the driving engines of the global economy, an ever-increasing gap between the rich and the poor, spiralling debt, and the disabling of any opposition to this order by its absorption into the system.² Late capitalism, on this account, is more fluid, more virtual than what came before. It is defined more by consumption than production, by the apparently infinite stimulation of desire and exchange of

¹ Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), p. 149.

² See particularly, Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1999), and Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

signs that the market has become. In such a situation, writing about work seems decidedly passé. Mechanization and the out-sourcing of manufacture to third world countries with cheap labour markets has meant that work in the traditional sense of manual labour, as it was pictured by the philosophers of antiquity or the classical economists, has largely disappeared from view in Western societies, relegated to an invisible underclass. While there might be some interest in the changed working conditions that this new economic situation has produced for the educated Westerner (the need for greater flexibility and so forth), there is little sense that work might be the key to understanding our economic situation. The 'problem of work' sounds to contemporary ears to be a nineteenth- and early twentieth-century problem, compared with more contemporary concerns such as globalization, ecological crisis, the media construction of desire, and the economy of symbolic exchange. The situation of late twentieth- and early twenty-first century capitalism seems better understood through complex cultural-aesthetic categories than through narrowly economic ones.

Most of the authors I will be considering here are either nineteenth- or early twentieth-century writers. However it is my claim that the two traditions that I will be exploring – the Marxists and the British Romantics – have critiques of labour under capitalism that are sensitive to exactly these 'cultural-aesthetic' questions which have become prominent in more recent years. I will argue that these traditions, particularly when read alongside each other, point towards the 'aesthetic' origins of *any* critique of capitalism, and may help us to set forth a non-utilitarian socialism better suited to the problems of our own day. Furthermore, it is my claim that these 'aesthetic' roots of the critiques of capitalism are in fact a form of thinly disguised theology, more or less indebted to the Christian tradition. It is, therefore, my hope that this book might be of general interest to intellectual historians, political theorists and social critics, and that in particular it might alert them to the neglected role that theology has played in social criticism. On the other hand, I hope that theologians and the Church might engage in a deeper and bolder conversation with the traditions of social criticism which are, in some sense, products of the Christian tradition, rather than borrowing uncritically from them. Before embarking on this discussion, it is perhaps useful to give some sort of brief overview of the main elements of the views of work in the pre-modern Christian tradition.

Human work has been viewed as having a profoundly ambiguous nature throughout the Christian tradition. In the Scriptures apparently differing views lie side by side, and cannot easily be separated. It is an oversimplification, for example, to say that the Old Testament has a positive view of labour but regards it as purely this-worldly, while the New Testament is uninterested in 'secular employment', but has much to say about spiritual 'works'. Already in the traditions which make up the first two chapters of Genesis we see tensions: humanity is commanded by God to 'subdue' the earth and to have 'dominion' over all living

creatures, we are given the task of ‘tilling and keeping’ the garden, and then after the primordial disobedience we are told that our labouring for food will be characterized from now on by ‘toil’ and the ‘sweat’ of our face.³ Work in some sense seems to be inseparable from the nature of humanity in its aboriginal goodness, yet this seems not to be necessarily the same as the work that is characterized by toil and struggle. The people of Israel continued to know this twofold character of work in its life and its imagination: in the slavery of the people in Egypt, in the vision of the promised land as so abundant as to require minimal effort in cultivation, in the Wisdom writers’ account of the vanity of work, and in their condemnation of idleness, in the prophetic polemic against the fabrication of idols, and in the account of cultic liturgical work as ‘Spirit-inspired’.⁴ The institution of the Sabbath provided a profound focus for such thinking, relativizing the ultimacy of labour beneath a higher reality of rest. In the Sabbath the resting from ordinary labour was linked with the deliverance from slave labour in Egypt, and even more dramatically with the divine rest from creation on the seventh day.⁵ This latter point already introduces the question of some sort of analogy between human action and *God’s* action, which will remain a crucial albeit difficult feature of the tradition since. Other texts throughout the Old Testament speak of *God’s* formative and redemptive ‘works’ and also of the analogy between human artisanship and divine creation, the ‘work of his hands’.⁶ In the New Testament Christ himself uses many images of labourers in his parables, while at the same time, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount, he appears to have more to say about the

³ Genesis 1:28 (*kbsb* and *rd* – from the Priestly tradition), 2:15 (*shmr* and *bd* – from the Yahwist tradition), and 3:17 (*tsbwn*). For overviews of the perspectives on work in the Bible, see: Paul Beauchamp, ‘Travail: Théologie Biblique’ in Jean-Yves Lacoste (ed.), *Dictionnaire Critique de Théologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002) and Alan Richardson, *The Biblical Doctrine of Work* (London: SCM, 1952), especially pp. 25–9 for the views in Genesis. I am also grateful to Diana Lipton for conversations on the meaning of these texts.

⁴ Exodus 1:11–14 (*sbl* and *bdb*), Deuteronomy 11:10–11, Ecclesiastes 2:1–18 (*ml*), Job 7:1–11 (*tsb*), Proverbs 6:6, Isaiah 40:19, Exodus 35:31 (*ml’kh* here). For detailed philological analysis, see G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringren (eds.), *The Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975-); particularly vol. VIII, pp. 325–31, for *ml’kh* and its primary sense of work as skilled artisanship, including cultic crafts, but also its later linking with manual labour through opposition to the Sabbath; and vol. X, pp. 376–405, for *bd* and its wide range of meanings from slavery, through agricultural work and royal service, to cultic ministrations.

⁵ Deuteronomy 5:14–15, Exodus 20:9–11, Genesis 2:1–3 (*ml’kh* is used of human work in all three cases, and an analogy between divine and human *rest* is made in the latter two cases, while only the Priestly author in Genesis uses *ml’kh* of both divine and human work in this context).

⁶ For example, Psalm 8:3, 9:1, 19:1, 26:7, 40:5, 66:5, 78:7, 86:8, 92:4, 104:24, 111:7, 145:4, where the most common words used are *p’l* and *m’sb*, for which, see: Botterweck and Ringren (eds.), vols. XI, pp. 387–403, and XII, pp. 38–44; Jeremiah 18:3–6 (*ml’kh* again), Isaiah 64:8, Job 10:8, Genesis 2:7 (*ytsr*). On the divine ‘work’ of creation, see Richardson, pp. 14–16.

liberation from toil and labouring, and a pronounced hostility towards trading and the accruing of riches.⁷ John and Paul have more interest in spiritual works and their relation to the works of God, while Paul also has a strong critique of those who think they will be saved by the works of the law, and strict warnings for those who will not work to support themselves.⁸ Finally Christ's controversial teaching about the Sabbath can be seen as an extension of the Old Testament view of cultic work to provide a radically new liturgical foundation and goal to all activity, although this is to pre-empt our journey somewhat.⁹

For various reasons, whether of class or eschatological expectation, the early church afforded little reflection to physical labour, other than to condemn idleness and certain specific occupations, although they continued to develop notions of spiritual work. With the rise of asceticism this tradition developed into an elaborate reflection on the links between prayer and physical work, as seen for example in the Rule of Benedict.¹⁰ During the same period Greek notions of the philosophical life as founded upon *otium*, leisure, began to enter into Christian thinking, finding their fullest expression in the Scholastic account of the supremacy of the *vita contemplativa* over the *vita activa*, and the justification of the existence of entire non-labouring classes in the monasteries in terms of their contribution to the work of prayer, which was also the *opus dei*, God's work.¹¹ Meanwhile the tradition of 'spiritual works' had developed into a vast and often corrupt system of the bartering of human labour with God. The Reformation overturned much of this perspective by rejecting the monastic life and the priority of contemplation as idleness and paganism. Luther's insistence upon justification by grace

⁷ Matthew 20:1–16, 6:24–33 (*kopia*), 11:28 (*kopiontes*), et al; cf. Matthew 19:24, 21:12–13, et al. For *kopos* and its derivatives, see Gerhard Kittel (ed.), *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-), vol. III, pp. 827–30.

⁸ For example, John 5:17, 6:28, 9:4, 14:12, 1Corinthians 3:9–13, 9:1, 12:6, 16:10, Ephesians 2:10, Romans 3:20–4:6, 11:6, Galatians 2:16, 2Thessalonians 3:6–13. In the majority of these cases the less negative *ergon* and its derivatives are used, for which see: Kittel, vol. II, pp. 635–53. The Johannine usage in relation to divine works was probably building upon the Septuagint translation of the Psalmic *m'sh* with *ergon*, while Paul's usage seems more indebted to post-exilic and Rabbinic language of works in terms of the keeping of the law. See also Richardson, pp. 30–48.

⁹ Matthew 12:5, John 5:17, 7:22; cf. Beauchamp: 'L'agir quotidien rejoint le service liturgique, non finalise par le produit: "...le jour du sabbat, les prêtres dans le Temple violent le sabbat sans être en faute". Cet ordre nouveau n'est ni un état, ni a proprement parler une fin à atteindre, mais un commencement posé.'

¹⁰ See St Augustine, 'On the Work of Monks', in Philip Schaff (ed.), *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), and St Benedict, *The Rule of St Benedict*, trans. Cardinal Gasquet (London: Chatto and Windus, 1936).

¹¹ See e.g., St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. The English Dominican Province (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1963), IIa IIae, q. 182. In the Greek philosophical tradition, Plato and Aristotle already regarded work in ways we might call 'proto-theological', by linking it with ontological teleology; see Kittel, vol. II, p. 636.

not works led to the depreciation of any talk of 'spiritual works', while analogical relations between human and divine work were equally suspect. Secular occupations might be allocated by God, but their goals were entirely this-worldly.¹²

It was however in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that the rise of industrial labour and a new consciousness of the condition of the 'working classes' produced much reflection, from within and without the Christian Church, on the problem or nature of labour. Here, especially in the political economists and in Marx, work becomes a serious subject in its own right, and we can begin to discern what might be called 'ontologies of labour', theories which attempted to understand the very nature of labour, and often to make sense of humanity and society through these labour-theories. This is the situation to which most modern theologies of work seek to respond. They normally seek to offer some theological ontology of labour, linking divine and human work, and then to draw some conclusions from this to apply to the practical problem of labour. This problem of labour is primarily then a *modern* one, although as we will discover, we cannot ignore the views that preceded it if we wish to understand it fully. As we shall see, most contemporary theologies of work seem to simply respond to the modern debate about the problem of labour, treating it as a given, and not always a terribly critically considered given (chapter 1). Theology is then brought into conversation with these debates as an external other. My approach here by contrast will be to enter a little more deeply into these debates and to interrogate their inherent relation to theology. It is my contention that these debates did not emerge in a theological vacuum, but were themselves driven by quite specific, albeit complex, theological and anti-theological currents. Only when these are grasped can theologians properly engage with them. In the subsequent chapters I will seek to show that modern work under capitalism can be understood as characterized by a spirit of utility which is at heart anti-theological (chapter 2). I will then argue that even secular critiques of modern labour are founded upon an awareness of the ambiguity of labour, of its potential to transcend utility as well as serve it, which is at heart theological (chapters 3 and 5). Finally I will develop a critique of utility based upon a theological-aesthetic vision of the analogy between human work as art and God's work (chapters 4, 6 and 7).

¹² Jean-Yves Lacoste, 'Travail: Théologie Historique' in *Dictionnaire Critique de Théologie*.

What must we do to be working the works of God?

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