NEITHER CAPITALIST NOR MARXIST
Karol Wojtyla's social ethics

Jonathan Kwitny

Romuald Kukolowicz, now in his seventies, is the son of Polish Catholic intellectuals. In 1953, he was working as a clerk. At the time, Poland was firmly part of Stalin's Soviet empire. During World War II, Kukolowicz had done work as an underground printer. Some friends from those days, now students at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, approached him, raving about a young professor whose lectures on Catholic ethics and communism were inspiring and ought to be published. Did Kukolowicz know anyone who could do it?

Kukolowicz found an underground printer in Lublin. His friends arranged for him to pick up the manuscript from the professor—Father Karol Wojtyla—at a convent in Krakow. As the manuscript was typed, edited, and published, there were more meetings between Kukolowicz and Wojtyla, but little small talk. "When I saw him it was always [to discuss] what to publish and how," Kukolowicz remembers. "It was a very strict conspiracy."

Some 250 reams of printing paper were stolen by the members of this "conspiracy" from the state institutions where they worked. A World War II press was used that required each page be rolled by hand over a typed matrix. Kukolowicz calculates that his friends had to press some 112,750 sheets of paper separately to make the book. It was published in two volumes, the first in 1953, the second the following year, with only 200 to 250 copies in each edition—loose pages in an envelope, to be bound, if desired, by the recipient. Copies went to priests who taught students in all the major cities of Poland. "They weren't given [directly] to students because of the need for secrecy," Kukolowicz says. "Police agents infiltrated the classes. If the security forces found such a book in your apartment, you would be subject to ten years in prison."

The work, called Catholic Social Ethics, is nowhere described in Kalendarium (the official diary of John Paul II's life up to his pontificate) or any other available literature; Kukolowicz's is the only copy I have encountered. The Vatican confirms his story. To my knowledge, this is the book's first public disclosure, and it belies much that has been written in the West about Wojtyla in recent years portraying the pope as an ally of free-market Western politicians.

Bishop Tadeusz Pieronek, now secretary of the Polish episcopate but in 1954 a student in Wojtyla's social ethics course at the Jagiellonian, remembers being stunned to learn that Father Wojtyla had written a manual, several copies of which were passed around at the school. "It was impossible to publish a manual in those days," Bishop Pieronek explains. "All printers were registered by the government. Even typewriters were registered, but authorities allowed you to type. The university had a library, but the books were not accessible to the average reader. You can't imagine how libraries looked. Till the 1980s, whole lists of books were banned."

As a priest in the 1970s, Pieronek visited Cardinal Wojtyla for dinner and found parts of that old manual on a bookshelf in the dining room. "We learned about capitalism for the first time from Wojtyla's text," Bishop Pieronek recalls. "He tried to explain each system."

Catholic Social Ethics reinforces the notion that Wojtyla was a Thomist rather than a phenomenologist; it asserts at its inception that Aquinas's natural law "allows theories of ethics" to be stated with "scientific" precision. It also shows that by age thirty-three, Wojtyla had adopted unreservedly both the welfare-state economic ideas and the courage of Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski, the Polish primate. No longer a novice or small-parish priest, Wojtyla instead marked himself in this book as a serious, innovative thinker with his eye on the world.

"The main task of the Catholic social ethic is to introduce the principles of justice and love into social life," Wojtyla wrote in the first volume, on politics. Tracing economic history from feudalism to the industrial age, he endorsed the Marxist notions of a working class and a class struggle. But he stressed that class should be among a person's secondary loyalties. Primary was the family, the success of which depended on its "close cooperation" with the church and the state. "The nation, as the natural society, must be respected," he wrote, but "the common good demands" a balance between "loyalty to the nation...and, on the other hand, avoidance of overzealous nationalism."

Government had "a superior function" that was "very useful in achieving the common good of society." Its power "comes directly from society, indirectly from God." Wojtyla condemned "individualism," a word that he and other
European scholars used to refer to unregulated capitalism. "Individualism and totalitarianism," he declared, "remain opposed to the principle of correlating the individual good and the social good, which Catholic ethics accepts."

"Justice and love" must govern international relations as well, he wrote: "War is evil. It should be avoided even as a last resort to restore justice between countries, because it may result in even greater evil and injustice than it combats." His statement on war went significantly beyond other current Catholic teaching, which allowed war if all else failed. Although many anti-Communists would later try to co-opt Wojtyla into their military policies, he condemned war unequivocally in 1953, even as a means to correct injustice, because he believed it tended only to create new injustice. (He did not, however, dispute Catholic teaching that violence could be used to repel violent attacks.)

In a chapter on Marxism, Wojtyla saw beyond the system that tyrannized his own life and into the issues that would later present themselves to him as pope. He wrote:

The relentless materialism in Marxism contradicts Catholicism, [which] sees man as spirit and matter in one,[and which] proclaims the superiority of the spirit....Ethics is...the science of spiritual good, such as justice or love, that provides the material activities of human beings with specifically human values. This gives ethics primacy [over materialism] in economics or biology.

But, he added, "the goal of these thoughts is not to criticize Marxism entirely." He explicitly embraced Marx's essential theory that "the economic factor...explains, rather substantially, the different facts of human history....Criticism of capitalism—the system of exploitation of human beings and human work—is the unquestionable 'part of the truth' embodied in Marxism."

In 1993, John Paul II would provoke mocking headlines when he criticized Poland and other post-Communist countries for accepting pure market economics from the West and thus abandoning the "grain of truth" in Marxism. Although many thought the pope was reversing himself, he was in fact using almost the same words he had used forty years before in class lectures and in his book, and had been using ever since.

Wojtyla separated Marx's analysis of economic exploitation, which he largely accepted, from Marx's solutions, which he rejected. "The Catholic social ethic," he wrote in 1953, "agrees that in many cases a struggle is the way to accomplish the common good. Today...a class struggle...is the undeniable responsibility of the proletariat." Not only is class-conscious revolution compatible with Christianity, he argued; it is sometimes necessary to Christianity. What is incompatible is Marxism's subjugation of the individual human spirit to a grand economic design after the revolution.

In Catholic Social Ethics, Wojtyla set down rules for social struggle that are strikingly similar to those that would be enunciated less than a decade later by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in the United States. Wojtyla and King each believed the struggle should be aimed at persuasion, not at violent, Marxist-style upheaval. Wojtyla wrote:

Demonstrations, protests, strikes, and passive resistance—all these are means of class struggle that need to be considered appropriate. The struggle for rights, after exhausting all peaceful means...is a necessary act of justice that leads only to the achievement of the common good, which is the goal of social existence....

It is clear that from the view of the ethical assumptions of the Bible, such a struggle is a necessary evil, just like any other human struggle....It is also evident from the Bible that struggle itself is not the opposite of love. The opposite of love is hate.

A struggle in a specific case does not have to be caused by hate. If it is caused by social and material injustice, and if its goal is to restate the just distribution of goods, then such a struggle is not [hatred]....Social justice is the necessary condition for realization of love in life....

Many times Jesus Christ has proven that God's kingdom cannot be achieved in man without a struggle....Achievement of social justice in one element of achieving God's kingdom on earth. Wojtyla made a major distinction between revolution within a country and international war—though in some ways, the distinction seems paradoxical:

Revolution causes much more damage than war, because the unity of the natural society—the nation or state—is much greater than the international unity of humanity that gets torn in war....Hatred for those who are close to us is much more dangerous and inflicts much more damage than hatred for people who are further removed.

Yet, war, he said, isn't permissible and isn't likely to improve conditions. Revolution, though best avoided, is permissible and can improve conditions.
Can the opposition that brings down [an unjust] government surpass all the damage that was caused by an armed struggle, and thus make the revolution ethically justified? The answer is yes...

It can be accepted that the majority of the people who have taken part in revolutions—even violent ones—have acted on their convictions, in accordance with their consciences....

Such a struggle is a necessary evil. Although it does not have to be an act of hatred...such a struggle undoubtedly provides an opportunity for acts of hatred....One can hate negative characteristics of human beings. But one cannot hate the human being himself....

Marxism...does not see any other way to solve the burning social issues....Catholicism sees the possibility of solving...social issues by evolutionary means. The struggle of the oppressed classes against their oppressors becomes the stimulus for the evolution to proceed faster....

The class struggle...grows stronger when it meets resistance from the economically privileged classes. Pressure from the class struggle should bring appropriate changes in the socioeconomic system.

Although Marxism saw struggle as inevitable and desirable, Wojtyla goes on, “Catholicism cannot accept struggle as the principal ethical dictate....Regardless of all the factors that set people apart in society...there exist deeper factors that foster unity and solidarity.”

Wojtyla’s biggest problem with Marxism, though, wasn’t its advocacy of struggle but its opposition to the institution of private property. Grappling with this forced him to think through, perhaps for the first time in print, what Saint John of the Cross had said about material wealth. The question must have crossed Wojtyla’s mind before: If Saint John, about whom Wojtyla had written a dissertation in Rome in 1948, had been right about abandoning physical property, why weren’t the Communists right about it? The answer, Wojtyla decided, lay in distinguishing worthy ideals from practical possibilities. Marxism, he wrote, sought a classless society. To achieve this order, one must get rid of private property because it is the only source of class opposition....

While the church clearly sees and proclaims the need for reform of the socioeconomic system, it does not consider necessary a radical upheaval in attitude toward property....The re-creation of the socioeconomic system may be achieved while maintaining the institution of private property, and should be based on the enfranchisement of the proletariat.

Wojtyla’s rationale for private property differed from that of free-market theorists, and what he wrote about it makes for fairly explosive reading in the 1990s: “The church realizes that the bourgeois mentality, and capitalism with its material spirit, are contradictions of the Bible. According to
the tradition of... monastic/religious life, the church also can appreciate the idea of communism....Communism, as a higher ethical rule of ownership, demands from people higher ethical qualifications."

After a subsection headed "The Objective Superiority of the Communist Ideal" (the text of which I was unable to obtain), Wojtyla noted,

At the present state of human nature, the universal realization of this [Communist] ideal...meets with insurmountable difficulties. Private property is suited to human nature. The goal that should be pursued is to achieve, in the system based on private property, such reforms as will lead to the realization of social justice. The class struggle leads to this....

Revolution is not the doom of society, but at most a punishment for specific offenses in socioeconomic life. Wojtyla wrote that "ethical evil is caused" not by those wishing to rebel but "by those factors of the socioeconomic system that have spawned the need for a radical movement."

The second volume of Catholic Social Ethics was more specifically concerned with "rebuilding the economic system [and] defining the many moral obligations of owning and using property." Its premise was: "Because private ownership of property is ethically good if the property is used appropriately, individual owners and especially the state should carefully watch its use." Regarding labor, Wojtyla again rejected strict free-market doctrine, returning instead to the ideal of the Polish poet Cyprian Norwid (1821-83), that "work cannot be treated as merchandise." Regarding capitalism, Wojtyla said,

An economic enterprise based on capital is ethically justified if it contributes to social prosperity. But if its main goal is to maximize the profit of the owner, then it is ethically wrong....

The entire tradition and teaching of the church is clearly opposed to capitalism as the socioeconomic system of life, and as a general value system.

The exchange of goods complements the economic process....Therefore it is ethically justified, like production, so long as it does not lead to unjustified, speculative profits....A just profit depends on a just price for merchandise, which is determined by using an appropriate value theory. Determination of the price is a function of society....

[Because] money... is very important in the socioeconomic process...the state should supervise monetary and credit policies for the good of the whole society. Wojtyla said that collecting interest on loans "is ethically justified, given the current state of the world’s economy." But he said interest rates should be limited not by what the market will bear but by ethical considerations.

Wojtyla was very concerned with pay. "The profit gained...
from work in the form of compensation is the main factor in the just division of the income of society,” he wrote. And “the just solution to the problem of pay is the principle of family pay.” He has championed the “family pay” concept ever since, arguing that the size and needs of a worker’s family should influence the amount of wages or salary. While this idea was somewhat Marxist (Marx said, “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs”), Wojtyla rejected the determination of compensation by need alone. “In determining family pay,” he wrote, one should consider the economic state of the enterprise and of the whole country. An entrepreneur has a right to a reasonable, moderate profit, considering both his own work and his financial investment...for example, for renting land....

The common good is best achieved when individual members of society evenly attain material prosperity. So we must strive to limit luxury and excessive wealth.

The society must use all ethical means to save its members from poverty and lead them to prosperity. Rather than allying him with market capitalists, these views ring closer to those of supporters of “liberation theology,” a Catholic movement that Wojtyla would later encounter in Latin America, which sought to redistribute capital. After several years of close reading of Wojtyla’s published words as both priest and pope, I cannot cite an instance of his saying anything to contradict what he wrote in Catholic Social Ethics.

Richard Alleva

JUST BUSINESS
‘In the Company of Men’ & ‘The Game’

Near the conclusion of Neil LaBute’s debut feature film, In the Company of Men, a woman, in tears and rage, slaps a man once, very hard. There is no other physical violence in the movie, yet Company is such a precise little study of well-channeled hate and disrupting love that, by the time that blow is delivered, you feel like a witness to a massacre. We have been told that love is stronger than hate. Perhaps that’s true, but surely it is also true that love forces us to grow and growth is confusing and painful, while hate lets us curl up in the shell of ego, that all too cozy refuge. No slap, however hard, can crack that shell, or be but the faintest protest against love betrayed and tenderness despised. This seems to me the final, powerful import of a small and powerful film.

Two thirty-something executives, former college buddies Chad and Howard, are staying for six weeks in a nameless city to oversee some changes in a branch of their company. While discussing their recent romantic setbacks with women, they decide to avenge their sex by separately dating a young woman (good-looking but appraised by Chad as vulnerable because of her deafness), making her feel like a love goddess with two men under her thumb, and then abruptly dumping her. Naturally, things do not go precisely as planned.

I don’t know if Neil LaBute has read Les Liaisons Dangereuses or seen one of its several screen adaptations, but his story progresses along the same narrative lines: a cold-blooded sexual intrigue enmeshing an innocent; civil war between the intriguers when one of them falls in love with his victim; finally, an unmasking of evil that brings as much pain to one of the predators as to his prey. My one major criticism of LaBute is that he does not allow the character of the more ruthless schemer, Chad, to expand within his evil the way Laclos amplified the malevolence of the Marquise de Merteuil in Liaisons. There is an O. Henry twist near the end of Company that injects another dose of grimness into an already mordant film, which is fine, but that also too cleverly pinpoints Chad’s sadism as a mere characteristic of the ruthless business world.