COMPETITION AND CO-OPERATION AT WORK

The Choices Before Us

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I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who stand in the line and haul in their places,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm
when the food must come in or the fire be put out.
'To be of use', Marge Piercy[1]

MOVING IN A COMMON RHYTHM. The image Piercy conjures up is not that of workers hunkered over their machines, moving synchronously to the dictates of computer and cog. It is of people standing tall, moving to a rhythmic beat of bodies and purpose. It is of people toiling together for themselves and for others to whom they are bound. Common purpose, common rhythm, common cause.

'A lament for days long gone', one might sigh. Few contemporary people would recognize themselves or their work in these terms. For all too many, work is performed 'over against', propelled by a competitive impulse. The garment worker works against the clock, inspired by quotas and payment by the piece; a company executive must 'outperform' to keep her job; a migrant worker accepts wages that are unacceptable to work long hours in dusty fields, for if he will not, another will.

Competition as norm

Competition is as familiar as the window we open to look upon the world. Capitalist societies are based on competition; companies compete for profits and workers compete for jobs. Capitalism is

> that economic system in which the price mechanism, working through supply and demand in workably competitive markets, provides the

> dominant mode of making economic decisions about what is produced, how it is produced, and in what way it is distributed.[2]

It has passed through several stages since its development in the eighteenth century, and has various contemporary manifestations, but a key tenet throughout is regulation by competition: 'Through competition among equals, price and quality will be maintained, and exploitation of one by another will be prevented'.[3] But do fair, competitive markets exist? The increasing concentration of economic power and the growing gap between rich and poor suggest not.

Competition *can* be a useful mechanism for achieving efficiency and regulating prices, for inspiring creativity and innovation. But this potentially useful mechanism can also be used as an instrument of repression. Employees are sometimes pitted against one another, under the requirements of quotas or the threat of job performance reviews; firms are constrained from raising wages or improving working conditions if increased costs result. Increasingly, competition is motivation not only for individuals and companies; entire nations are in competition for investment capital that moves freely around the world in an expanding global economy. A hermeneutic of suspicion must be applied when competition is elevated to an inviolable economic principle or 'erected into an overall individualistic philosophy'. Society is much more than a composite of autonomous, self-interested individuals engaged in voluntary economic exchanges.[4]

Questioning the norm: critiques and possibilities

Competition *is* as familiar as the window we open to look upon the world, but the window is dirty and cracked. There is a growing recognition that motivation by competition only is damaging both to individual bodies and to the corporate body. For individuals, the stress of competition can be physically and psychologically destructive. At corporate levels, policies of secrecy and competitive practices lead to information clogs, to lowered morale and to reduced productivity, resulting ultimately in inefficiency in organizations.[5] Globally, competition for jobs and resources has contributed to the devastation of entire resources bases, economies and peoples.

The common assumption of motivation primarily by competition is being directly challenged on several fronts. There is a growing consensus among feminist theorists and modern management analysts that competitive strategies are profoundly deficient. They call for a radical transformation of how we understand and undertake work, and elaborate the practical, strategic and ethical implications of work patterns of co-operation and collaboration.

Since the late seventies much feminist analysis has focused on the 'relational', examining female 'differences' and the traditionally considered 'feminine' qualities of 'nurturing', 'caring for' and 'working with'. Investigation into 'difference' is intended not to glorify female biological differences, but rather to challenge the convention of valuing traits and characteristics typically regarded as 'masculine' over and against 'feminine' values and virtues, with a view to finding a more humane model for both men and women and public life.[6]

Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan and Nancy Hartsock represent three different approaches to the investigation of relational dynamics. Chodorow, revising Freudian theory, claims that the psychodynamics of the family shape gender personality. Girls, because they identify with their mothers, remain interpersonally connected, whereas boys develop more discrete identities because their masculinity is attained through separation from the mother. In consequence, women generally live out of connective, relational self-structures while men live out of separative, self-enclosed self-structures.[7] Gilligan, building on Chodorow's work, has investigated the differing approaches of men and women to moral reasoning. Observations around children at play and studies into the processes of women's moral decision-making has led her to conclude that women's sense of self and of morality revolve around issues of responsibility for and care of others. Hartsock, in turn, theorizes from a Marxist materialist perspective, seeing the material basis of women's lives as constituent of women's consciousness. The lives and work of women differ structurally from those of men in significant ways. While many women work for wages, women's labour also includes household maintenance and often child-rearing, experiences of continuity and relation with others.

> These practices create a consciousness that is relational, contextual, integrative and life affirming, as opposed to the 'abstract masculinity' engendered by men's activities in the capitalist world of commodity exchange.[8]

Chodorow, Gilligan and Hartsock each provides an analysis of the centrality of *connection* in women's sense of self; our lives and work are part of a complex web of relations. These and other such revalorizations of attributes traditionally associated with women, and traditionally denigrated, are profoundly important in light of the negative consequences of the myth of the separative, autonomous self which has so shaped our understandings of the individual and the world. But a caution is in order.

> There is an explicit expectation or implicit assumption that cooperation, connection, and harmony are more likely to characterize the relations and practices of women than those of men . . . The problem with the assumption of cooperation as a norm of female relations in contrast to competition as the norm for male relations, is that the dualistic, dichotomized construction of reality which feminism seeks to transcend is, in fact, reinstated.[9]

If a view to finding a more humane model for both men and women and public life motivates research into norms and patterns of female relations, it is necessary to emphasize that co-operative, connected relations are *possible* for both men and women. As indeed they are. Gilligan's work on differing ethical styles, for instance, is not as rigidly gender-specific as it is often portrayed. Critics of Gilligan's *In a different voice* point out that differences in moral reasoning are most often linked not with sex but with class and education.[10] If, as Marilyn French suggests, differing moralities are not genetic, but cultural, that 'women and men – in general – have different moralities because they have different goals',[11] then it is precisely the question of goals that must be addressed. What kind of future *do* we envision? Our society has overemphasized the *agentic* ethic (self-protective, assertive, individualistic, pushing towards achievement) at the expense of the *communal ethic* (being at one with others, characterized by contact or union),[12] and suffered the consequences. The values of responsibility, connection and inclusion are precisely those needed to address the alienation that threatens interpersonal relations, public institutions and the global economy.

What feminist theorists are saying about the virtues of co-operation, collaboration and attention to social relationships is echoed by many contemporary management analysts, but from a different starting point and around a different set of concerns. The starting point is economic necessity: the need to stay competitive in a rapidly changing world, coupled with the growing recognition that employees are most effective when treated as respected, responsible human beings.

The face of the workplace is changing. 'Pressed by global competition and a fast-changing technology characterized by flexibility and innovation, companies are casting aside old-culture values.'[13] According to John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene, authors of *Reinventing the corporation*,

> we are entering a dynamic period when the economic imperative for a more competitive, more productive work force is leading us back to . . . humanistic values . . . [such as] trust, freedom, and respect for the individual.[14]

Bureaucratic hierarchies are giving way to more spiral arrangements that better facilitate communication in the new information society, into networks, hubs, circles and wheels.[15]

Sally Helgesen attributes at least part of the impetus for corporate restructuring to the influx of women into the work force. As companies restructure they need to find new organizational patterns and values. Women assuming positions of influence 'are countering the values of the hierarchy with those of the web, which affirms relationships, seeks ways to strengthen human bonds, . . . and gives means an equal value with ends'.[16] But again, a caution: differing values of hierarchy and web cannot simply be equated with differing male and female values. It is necessary to emphasize not stereotyped gender-traits but the question of goals and consequences. Company restructuring can be highly effective, and carried out by both women and men, as Helgesen's own examples illustrate.

In *The female advantage*, Helgesen considers the history of the Ford Motor company. Ford, near collapse in the early eighties, adopted a new orientation toward customer and quality. In the process of 'resurrecting itself', the company began dismantling its rigid hierarchical structure organized around 'competing and isolated fiefdoms', and instituted a participative team approach.[17] An employee involvement programme was established 'to get union stewards and plant managers past their antagonistic, "us-versus-them" presumptions so they could start talking to one another'. A training programme for the company's 'generals and colonels' focused on the need to break down the boundaries that divided management.[18] By the late eighties, Ford was earning record profits.

In many innovative companies, rigid hierarchical structures have been replaced by less formal, more participatory networking styles of management where people learn from and support one another. 'Implicit in such structurings is the notion of group affiliation rather than individual achievement as having the highest value.'[19] Moreover, in focusing on relations among employees and providing meaningful work, companies do good (act morally), but they also do well (profit economically).[20]

There is an obvious irony in the fact that in order to be competitive in today's economy, some corporations are experimenting with working co-operatively. Instituting co-operative styles of work simply makes good economic sense. But these quite practical results have quite radical implications. What has arisen at least in part as a response to an increasingly competitive global market stands in clear challenge to the principles upon which that market is built. To create a productive

community, 'we must unlearn the self-limiting assumptions about individual effort and authority that work *against* cooperation'. 'Team work is the quintessential contradiction of a society grounded in individual achievement.'[21]

From both management and feminist theorists come powerful critiques of styles of work that have proven inadequate, unproductive and ultimately dehumanizing.[22] But of course, such critiques are not new. These are merely the most recent manifestations of critiques of capitalism and its injurious effects that are as old as capitalism itself.

More than a century and a half ago Marx was writing in response to the misery that accompanied the Industrial Revolution: oppression, inequality, and the destruction of human values. A pivotal concern was the alienation of labour. Labour is alienated because the worker does not have control over the plan of work, the conditions of work, or the end result of the work performed. Marx's economic analysis, rooted in his concept of alienation, gives priority to labour, unlike liberal economic thought which grants primacy to capital over labour. 'There are entire economic treatises devoid of even the most remote reference to the worker and what the worker does . . . But Marx viewed work as worthy of our deepest respect.'[23] In fact, he transformed philosophical thinking about work through identifying the human person *as worker*. To be human and to work are inextricably intertwined. 'Both the process and the product of our work are the means by which we come to know who and what we are.'[24] Work has a bearing upon the forming, or deforming, of the human person. Our own humanization, becoming who we are, is dependent upon the humanization of the workplace.[25]

Marx's critique of the dehumanization of labour under capitalism has been echoed in many ways in Catholic social teaching.[26] Since the publication in 1891 of *Rerum novarum*, this teaching has addressed the condition of work and of workers in modern society. The understanding of work has evolved in the course of the history of the teachings, but constant throughout has been recognition of rights of workers, including the right to a voice, to a measure of participation in the shaping of the work process.[27] Since Vatican II, there has been a new appreciation for work, attentive to the global context and connected intimately with faith and justice. Recent teachings have emphasized work as central to human self-making and self-understanding. *Laborem exercens* (1981), the most extensive reflection on work in Catholic social teaching, shares Marx's insight that labour is central to human realization. The encyclical's call for the priority of labour is a call for work that is consciously and creatively shaped by the workers themselves.[28]

The contemporary challenge

Catholic bishops, Marx, management analysts and feminist theorists offer four quite different but fundamentally correlated critiques and revisions of ways of being and working. It is their *cumulative* effect that is compelling, and particularly pressing in a world that is increasingly competitive, and at a time when competition is increasingly threatening. The global economy is changing rapidly. Highly mobile international capital creates a climate in which cities, regions, even whole nations are made to compete with one another.[29] In 1982 the Canadian bishops reflected on structural unemployment and the increasing marginalization of large numbers of people that is the consequence of the transnational character of capital. The structural changes in the economy reveal a 'deepening moral crisis'.[30] More than a decade later the crisis is deeper still.

Biblical sources and resources: co-operation and co-creation

What wisdom does our biblical heritage offer? What images of work emerge? The first words of Genesis depict God at work, creating heaven and earth, land, sea and stars, and a wondrous profusion of life. The Creator-God then set before those created in God's own image all the marvels of the earth. 'And indeed it was very good' (Gen 1:1–31). Both accounts of creation portray 'labour as divine mandate; it is a stewardship to be exercised, a creative task to be performed'.[31] Work is mandated *before* the fall from grace: it is not a curse, but rather 'an expression of the human project of liberation, of its dignity and integrity. Through work, human life shifts from passivity to participation.'[32] Nonetheless, work does suffer under a curse because it has become distorted by sin (Gen 3:17–19). 'What should have been the sphere of human cooperation for the common good of all has become the scene of sordid self-seeking and ruthless conflict.'[33]

The Genesis texts point to the ambiguity surrounding work, but they also issue a challenge: to critique the processes by which work is distorted, and to transform them, i.e. to share in God's creative power. 'There is implicit in the myth an invitation . . . to be creative as God is – in other words, for all of humanity to become co-creators and co-workers with God.'[34]

Most of us respond inadequately to the invitation. Jesus did not. Although he referred specifically to work very seldom, he worked, and considered his work to be God's work: 'My food is to do the will of the one who sent me, and to complete God's work' (Jn 4:34). Jesus laboured for the kingdom, the arrival of which is signified in the transformation of

oppressive situations, the freeing of people from bondage and the re-establishment of community. His work, expressed in miracles, healings, forgiveness and calls to discipleship invariably expressed his concern with relationality, and embodied and extended community.[35] The reign of God is not 'merely a transformation of the inner person. It is also a restructuring of the visible, tangible relationships existing between human beings.'[36]

Jesus' life-work ended in his torture and death.

> If Jesus' death is seen as the consequence of his work, then the reconciliatory meaning of human work becomes clear . . . We may join him in understanding that work is the way in which we are personally involved in God's ongoing creation and the redemption of the world.[37]

Co-operation in creation and in the hard work of justice-making is not only a gospel *value*, it is a gospel *imperative*. An eschatological view of work sees the human race contributing to the new creation which God has initiated in Jesus.[38] To share in Jesus' work is to share his inclusive, transforming, redeeming vision, which includes at least this: that work is for reconciliation, for the integration of the entire human community, and is possible only through setting right what is wrong.

Transforming work

Reconciliation of human community requires the recognition that this community is a global one, 'precisely because we live in a world historical situation in which one geopolitical economy controls all people and our interactions with the rest of nature'.[39] Any understanding of work as co-operation – with one another and with God – must be an expansive one, one which includes recognition of the ties with the labour of others, especially the exploited labour of those in so-called 'Third-World' countries. But it is not sufficient simply to recognize that our work is tied to and dependent on the work of others, that our security is built on the insecurity of others, that the coffee over which we collaborate is 'costly' in human terms. A gospel vision requires response – the forging of alliances with auto workers in Mexico, domestic workers from the Philippines, Indian garment workers – and understanding together what human, humane work might be.

Styles of work cannot be discussed apart from just work – just working conditions and work for justice. 'It does not make theological sense to speak of work and employment without asking to what kind of societal project they belong.'[40]

> Reconciliation with the poor ultimately cannot be achieved apart from a transformation in our patterns of work. What do we want to produce?

> What do we need? What is the sociopolitical relevance of our work? . . . Good work reconciles us with the poor; if work lacks this dimension, then it still subscribes to the old order of an acquiescent society that has made of work a degraded exercise in profiteering.[41]

Work that fails to reconcile us with others contributes to isolation, individualism and the deterioration of human community. In contrast, good work is that which enables us to live together meaningfully and well. Creation stems from God's desire for relatedness. 'It follows that work is the place where relatedness, mutality, and interdependency become visible . . . Good work makes our relatedness visible to ourselves and enhances it.'[42]

The choices before us

The questions raised here about the respective virtues and failings of co-operative and competitive styles of work are not merely pragmatic. They are questions of vision, of hope, and of the very continuance of human life. Clearly we are at a crossroads.

> Our world is on the verge of self-destruction and death because the society as a whole has so deeply neglected . . . the work of human communication, of caring and nurturance, of tending the personal bonds of community.[43]

The choices before us are not simply choices between different 'styles' of work. They are choices between solidarity and enmity, life and death. 'Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live' (Deut 30:19).

NOTES

[1] Marge Piercy, 'To be of use' in Marilyn Sewell (ed), *Cries of the spirit: a celebration of women's spirituality* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), pp 172–3.

[2] *The Westminster dictionary of Christian ethics*, 1986 edition, s.v. 'Capitalism', by Robert Benne.

[3] Amata Miller, 'Global economic structures' in Michael Zweig (ed), *Religion and economic justice* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), p 169.

[4] Ronald Preston, *Religion and the ambiguities of capitalism* (London: SCM Press, 1991), p 42.

[5] Marilyn French, *Beyond power: on women, men, and morals* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985), p 423.

[6] Susan Faludi, *Backlash: the undeclared war against American women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991), pp 325–6.

[7] Josephine Donovan, *Feminist theory: the intellectual traditions of American feminism* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1985), pp 109–112.

[8] *Ibid.*, p 89.

[9] Rosalind Sydie, 'Scientific research and feminist critiques: cooperation and competition as contested terrain' in Dawn Currie (ed), *From the margins to the centre: selected essays in women's studies research* (Saskatoon: Women's Studies Research Unit, University of Saskatchewan, 1988), p 163.

[10] Faludi, *Backlash*, p 331.
[11] French, *Beyond power*, p 482.
[12] Judith Jordan, 'Empathy and the mother–daughter relationship' in *Women's growth in connection* (New York: The Guildford Press, 1991), p 28.
[13] Sally Helgesen, *The female advantage: women's ways of leadership* (New York: Currency and Doubleday, 1990), pp xviii–xix.
[14] John Naisbitt and Patricia Aburdene, *Re-inventing the corporation: transforming your job and your company for the new information society* (London: Futura Publications, 1985), p 2.
[15] *Ibid.*, p 30.
[16] Helgesen, *The female advantage*, p 52.
[17] *Ibid.*, p 144.
[18] *Ibid.*, pp 144, 146. The fact that a woman was instrumental in instituting many of these changes does not 'prove' that what was being instituted are 'female values'.
[19] *Ibid.*, p 48.
[20] See Al Gini, 'Meaningful work and the rights of the worker: a commentary on *Rerum Novarum* and *Laborem Exercens*', *Thought* 67:266 (September 1992), p 236.
[21] Marvin Weisbord, 'Team work: building productive relationships' in W. Brendan Reddy and Kaleel Jamison (eds), *Team building: blueprints for productivity and satisfaction* (Arlington Va: NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science and University Associates, 1988), p 35.
[22] It is significant that these critiques come from very different sources – those immersed in the competitive market system, and those traditionally marginalized from it.
[23] Dorothee Soelle, with Shirley A. Cloyes, *To work and to love: a theology of creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p 70.
[24] Gini, 'Meaningful work', pp 232–3.
[25] See Philip Chmielewski, 'Economic participation: the discourse of work', *International Philosophical Quarterly* 30:3 (September 1990), p 334.
[26] There are, of course, widely divergent analyses in Marxist and Catholic social thought, and numerous critiques of Marxism and socialism in the teachings. Well into the second part of this century all forms of socialism were rejected in Catholic social thought.
[27] The call for collaborative work structures is undermined by the fact that many of the documents which issue such a call are formulated without meaningful collaboration or consultation. Can a body which is defined by its exclusiveness be credible in its call for inclusiveness? I am among those who think not. Nevertheless, the call for participatory work structures is valid.
[28] Joe Holland, *Creative communion: toward a spirituality of work* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), p 13.
[29] John Raines, *Modern work and human meaning* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), pp 8–9.
[30] 'Ethical reflections on the economic crisis' in E. F. Sheridan (ed), *Do justice! The social teaching of the Canadian Catholic bishops* (Sherbrooke, Quebec: Éditions Paulines and the Jesuit Centre for Social Faith and Justice, 1987), pp 402–3.
[31] Gregory Baum, 'Toward a theology of work', *The Ecumenist* 27:6 (September–October 1989), p 92.
[32] Soelle, *To work and to love*, p 72.
[33] John O'Grady, 'The biblical doctrine of work', *Chicago Studies* 28:1 (April 1989), p 70.
[34] *The new dictionary of Catholic spirituality*, 1993 edition, s.v. 'Work', by Edward Sellner.
[35] See Beverly Wildung Harrison in Carol Robb (ed), *Making the connections: essays in feminist social ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), pp 16–18.
[36] Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the crossroads* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1978), p 44.
[37] Soelle, *To work and to love*, p 112.
[38] O'Grady, 'The biblical doctrine of work', p 75.
[39] Harrison, *Making the connections*, p 245.
[40] Baum, 'Toward a theology of work', p 95.
[41] Soelle, *To work and to love*, pp 107–108.
[42] *Ibid.*, p 96.
[43] Harrison, *Making the connections*, p 12.