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WITH A FOREWORD BY JAMES V. SCHALL, S.J.

# Leisure

## The Basis of Culture

Including *The Philosophical Act*



"Pieper's message for us is plain...

The idolatry of the machine, the worship of mindless know-how, the infantile cult of youth and the common mind—all this points to our peculiar leadership in the drift toward the slave society.... Pieper's profound insights are impressive and even formidable." —*New York Times Book Review*

Ignatius

Josef Pieper's *Leisure the Basis of Culture* is among the most important philosophy books of the twentieth century. More remarkable still is the fact that the book's significance is greater today than when it was written more than half a century ago.

This edition features a new foreword by noted Jesuit scholar James V. Schall. It also includes Pieper's essay *The Philosophical Act*.

In *Leisure the Basis of Culture*, Pieper destroys common misconceptions about the idea of leisure and its relation to work. Leisure is not idleness, but an attitude of the mind and a condition of the soul that fosters receptivity to both physical and spiritual realities. The author points out that sound philosophy and authentic religion can be born only in leisure—a leisure that allows time for the contemplation of things, including the nature of God. Leisure has been, and always will be, the foundation of any culture.

The ancient and medieval philosophers, the author notes, understood the value of leisure. The modern world, on the other hand, has generally abolished leisure and has replaced it with the world of "total work." This has led to much of modern restlessness and despair.

Pieper warns that unless we recover true leisure—the ability for silence, contemplation and insight; for receptivity and intuitive openness to truth—and replace our frenetic amusements and relentless striving, we will destroy our culture and ourselves.

"Pieper has subjects involved in everyone's life; he has theses that are so counter to the prevailing trends as to be sensational; and he has a style that is memorably clear and direct."

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"This book is a gem. No other book its size will teach us so many true things about everything we need to know to understand what and why we are or about how to live a life worth living."

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"This book goes a long way towards a lucid explanation of the present crisis in civilization.... It should be read by anyone—and young people in particular—anxious to come to some conclusions about the nature of society."

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**Josef Pieper** was one of the most renowned and popular philosophers of the twentieth century. He wrote dozens of titles on all aspects of philosophy and living, including *Only the Lover Sings*, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas*, *Hope and History*, *In Defense of Philosophy*, and *In Search of the Sacred*.

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#### IV

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In the foregoing sections leisure was tentatively defined and outlined in its ideal form. It now remains to consider the problem of realizing its "hopes", of its latent powers of gaining acceptance, and its possible impetus in history. The practical problem involved might be stated thus: Is it possible, from now on, to maintain and defend, or even to reconquer, the right and claims of leisure, in face of the claims of "total labor" that are invading every sphere of life? Leisure, it must be remembered, is not a Sunday afternoon idyll, but the preserve of freedom, of education and culture, and of that undiminished humanity which views the world as a whole. In other words, is it going to be possible to save men from becoming officials and functionaries and "workers" to the exclusion of all else? Can that possibly be done, and if so in what circumstances? There is no doubt of one thing: the world of the "worker" is taking shape with dynamic force—with such a velocity that, rightly or wrongly, one is tempted to speak of demonic force in history.

The attempt to withstand this invasion has been made at a number of different points for some time past. It is even possible to lay down that certain forms of opposition are inadequate; for example the position—quite legitimate up to a point—called "art for art's sake", was an attempt to isolate the realm of art from the universal utilitarianism that seeks to turn everything in the world to some useful purpose. In our own day the real historical fronts still remain to some extent fluid, masked by backward-looking interim

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solutions. Among these are the return to "tradition" pure and simple; an emphasis on our duty as the heirs of classical antiquity; the struggle to retain the classics in the schools and the "academic" (philosophical) character of the universities—in a word humanism. Such are the designations of some of the positions from which a threatened and endangered body aspires to defend itself.

The question is whether these positions will be held and in fact whether they *can* be held. The problem is whether "Humanism" is an adequate watchword—adequate, not simply as a psychologically good rallying cry, as an effective summons to battle, but as a conception metaphysically sound and therefore ultimately credible, in the sense of providing a genuine source of power capable of influencing the course of history. ("Humanism", it should here be observed, has recently made its appearance in Eastern Germany, where it has become the fashion to speak of economic materialism as "humanistic"; and in France, an atheistic existentialism also claims to be humanistic—neither usage, what is more, is entirely without justification!) The real question is therefore, whether an appeal to "humanism" is adequate—in face of the totalitarian claims of the world of work.

Before we attempt an answer to this question, we must clear away a number of obvious misunderstandings, which have no doubt already arisen, by saying something about the social aspect of our problem. This is the reason for our excursus on the proletariat and deproletarianization.

#### Excursus on the Proletariat and Deproletarianization

It has already been explained that the term "intellectual worker" adds pointed expression to the claims of the world of work. But a modern German dictionary (Trübner's) main-

tains, on the contrary, that the relatively modern terms "intellectual work", "intellectual worker" are valuable because "they do away with the age-old distinction, still further emphasized in modern times, between the manual worker and the educated man."<sup>1</sup> Now, if that designation is *not* accepted, or at least only with reservations, it surely implies a certain conception of those social contrasts? The refusal to allow the validity of the term "intellectual worker" certainly means one thing: it means that the common denominator "work" and "worker" is not considered a proper or a possible basis upon which to bridge the contrast of the classes of society. But does it not mean something more? Does it not mean that the gulf between an educated class which is free to pursue knowledge as an end in itself, and the proletarian who knows nothing beyond the spare time which is barely sufficient for him to renew his strength for his daily work—does it not mean logically, from our point of view, that this gulf is in fact necessarily deepened and widened, independently of whatever subjective views and intentions may be at work? This objection is not to be taken lightly.

Indeed, on one occasion Plato contrasts the figure of the philosopher with that of the bánausos, the common working man. Philosophers are those

who have not grown up like serfs, but in quite different, not to say contrary, circumstances. Now this, O Theodorus, is the way of each one individually: the one whom you call a philosopher, is truly brought up in freedom and leisure; and goes unpunished though he seems simple and useless when it is a matter of menial offices, even though he should not, for instance, know how to tie up a parcel that has to be sent on, or how to prepare a tasty dish . . . ; the other way is the way of those who know, indeed, how to perform

<sup>1</sup> Trübner's *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Berlin, 1939).

has humanism been distorted to being a springboard to Trans-humanism?

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all these things well and smartly, but on the other hand do not even know how to wear their cloak like a gentleman, and still less how to prize the good life of gods and men in harmonious phrases.

This passage is to be found in Plato's *Theaetetus*.<sup>2</sup> It is to be noted that the Greek conception of the bánausos (the common working man)—as might easily be shown from the above quotation from Plato, means not only an uneducated man, a man insensitive to poetry and art, and with no spiritual view of the world, but furthermore a man who lives by manual labor as distinguished from the man who owns sufficient property to dispose freely of his time. Here, once again, does it not appear as though our thesis implied a return to the Greek notion of the common working man and to the social and educational conceptions of the pre-Christian era? Certainly not! Yet is this not implicit in the refusal to accept the term "work" (which, as has always been said, is supposed to be a term of praise) as applying to the whole sphere of man's intellectual and spiritual activity? On the contrary, in my opinion everything must be done, on the one hand to obliterate a contrast of this kind between the classes, but on the other hand it is quite wrong, and indeed foolish, to attempt to achieve that aim by looking for social unity in what is (for the moment!) the purely terminological reduction of the educated stratum to proletarian level, instead of the real abolition of the proletariat. What do we mean, fundamentally, by the words "proletariat", and "deproletarianization"?—It will be as well, in attempting to answer the question and to define the terms, to leave firmly aside all discussion of the practicability of "deproletarianizing", in order to answer the question purely "theoretically" and from the point of view of the principles involved.

<sup>2</sup> *Theaetetus*, 175f.

In the first place, a proletarian and a poor man are not the same. A man may be poor without being a proletarian: a beggar in medieval society was certainly not a proletarian. Equally, a proletarian is not necessarily poor: a mechanic, a "specialist" or a "technician" in a "totalitarian work state" is certainly a proletarian. Secondly, this, though obvious, has to be said: the negative aspect of the notion "proletariat", the thing to be got rid of, does not consist in the fact that it is a condition limited to a particular stratum of society; so that the negative aspect would disappear once *all* had become proletarians. "Proletarianism" cannot obviously be overcome by making everyone proletarian.

What, then, is proletarianism? If the numerous sociological definitions and terms are reduced to a common denominator, the result might be expressed in the following terms: the proletarian is the man who is fettered to the process of work.

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This still leaves the phrase "process of work" vague and in need of clarification. It does not, of course, mean work in the ordinary sense: the never-ceasing activity of man. "Process of work", here, means useful work in the sense already defined, of contributing to the general need, to the *bonum utile*. And so "process of work" means the all-embracing process in which things are used for the sake of the public need. To be fettered to work means to be bound to this vast utilitarian process in which our needs are satisfied, and, what is more, tied to such an extent that the life of the working man is wholly consumed in it.

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To be tied in this way may be the result of various causes. The cause may be lack of property: everyone who is a propertyless wage-earner is a proletarian, everyone "who owns nothing but his power to work",<sup>3</sup> and who is consequently

<sup>3</sup> Pius XI, Encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*.



compelled to sell his capacity to work, is a proletarian. But to be tied to work may also be caused by coercion in a totalitarian state; in such a state everyone, whether propertied or unpropertied, is a proletarian because he is bound by the orders of others "to the necessities of an absolute economic process of production",<sup>4</sup> by outside forces, which means that he is entirely subject to economic forces, is a proletarian.

In the third place, to be tied to the process of work may be ultimately due to the inner impoverishment of the individual: in this context everyone whose life is completely filled by his work (in the special sense of the word work) is a proletarian because his life has shrunk inwardly, and contracted, with the result that he can no longer act significantly outside his work, and perhaps can no longer even conceive of such a thing.

Finally, all these different forms of proletarianism, particularly the last two, mutually attract one another and in so doing intensify each other. The "total work" State needs the spiritually impoverished, one-track mind of the "functionary"; and he, in his turn, is naturally inclined to find complete satisfaction in his "service" and thereby achieves the illusion of a life fulfilled, which he acknowledges and willingly accepts.

This inner constraint, the inner chains which fetter us to "work", prompts a further question: "proletarianism" thus understood, is perhaps a symptomatic state of mind common to *all* levels of society and by no means confined to the "proletariat", to the "worker", a *general* symptom that is merely found isolated in unusually acute form in the proletariat; so that it might be asked whether we are not all of

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

*spiritual not just political immunization*  
 us proletarians and all of us, consequently, ripe and ready to fall into the hands of some collective labor State and be at its disposal as functionaries—even though explicitly of the contrary political opinion. In that case, spiritual immunization against the seductive appeal and the power of totalitarian forms must, surely, be sought and hoped for at a much deeper level of thought than on the level of purely political considerations?<sup>5</sup>

In this context the distinction between the liberal and the servile arts acquires a fresh significance. In antiquity and the Middle Ages, the essence of the *artes serviles* was held to consist in their being directed, as St. Thomas says, "to the satisfaction of a need through activity." "Proletarianism" would then mean the limitation of existence and activity to the sphere of the *artes serviles*—whether this limitation were occasioned by lack of property, State compulsion, or spiritual impoverishment. By the same token, "deproletarianizing" would mean: enlarging the scope of life beyond the confines of merely useful servile work, and widening the sphere of servile work to the advantage of the liberal arts; and this process, once again, can only be carried out by combining three things: by giving the wage-earner the opportunity to save and acquire property, by limiting the power of the state, and by overcoming the inner impoverishment of the individual.

The phrase "servile work" strikes contemporary ears as extremely offensive—that is well known. Nevertheless, it

<sup>5</sup> Although in writing *Thesen zur sozialen Politik* (first published in 1933), I expressly limited myself to the consideration of political questions, and was therefore aware of the limitations of a purely political view, I now regard the essay as requiring completion at many points. It is surely characteristic of the generation formed between the wars that they expected in general too much from unadulterated politics.



would be a dangerous procedure to attempt to deny the "servility" of work. By setting up the fiction that work does not "serve" primarily for some purpose outside itself, we accomplish precisely the opposite of what we intended or pretended to accomplish. By no means do we "liberate" or "rehabilitate" the laboring man. Instead, we establish precisely that inhuman state characteristic of labor under totalitarianism: the ultimate tying of the worker to production. For the process of production itself is understood and proclaimed as the activity that gives meaning to human existence.

Genuine deproletarianization, which must not be confounded with the struggle against poverty (there is no need to waste words on the vital importance of *that*), assumes that the distinction between the *artes liberales* and the *artes serviles* is a meaningful one, that is, it must be recognized that there is a real distinction between useful activity on the one hand, the sense and purpose of which is not in itself, and on the other hand the liberal arts which cannot be put at the disposal of useful ends. And it is entirely consistent that those who stand for the "proletarianizing" of everyone, should deny all meaning to the distinction and try to prove that it has no basis in reality.

To take an example: the distinction between the liberal arts and the servile arts runs parallel with the terms: honorarium and wage. Properly speaking, the liberal arts receive an honorarium, while servile work receives a wage. The concept of honorarium implies that an incommensurability exists between performance and recompense, and that the performance cannot "really" be recompensed. Wages, on the other hand (in the extreme sense in which they differ from an honorarium), are intended as payment for the specific work performed, without consideration of the needs of the worker. It is significant that those members of the

intelligentsia who are imbued with "working-class" ideals refuse to recognize this distinction between honorarium and wages. To their minds, only wages exist. In a sort of manifesto on the situation of the writer in society today,<sup>6</sup> in which literature is proclaimed a "social function", Jean-Paul Sartre announces that the writer, who has in the past so seldom "established a relation between his work and its material recompense", must learn to regard himself as "a worker who receives the reward of his effort." There, the incommensurability between the achievement and the reward, as it is implied and expressed in an "honorarium", is declared nonexistent even in the field of philosophy and poetry which are, on the contrary, simply "intellectual work". By contrast a social doctrine steeped in the tradition of Christian Europe would not only hold firmly to the distinction between an honorarium and a wage, it would not only hesitate to regard every reward as a wage; it would go further and would even maintain that there is no such thing as a recompense for a thing done which did not retain in some degree the character (whether much or little) of an honorarium, for even "servile" work cannot be entirely equated with the material recompense because it is a "human" action, so that it always retains something incommensurable with the recompense—just like the liberal arts.

And so it comes about, paradoxical though it may seem, that the proletarian dictator Stalin should say: "The worker must be paid according to the work done and not according to his needs",<sup>7</sup> and that the encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* which has for one of its principal aims the "deproletarianizing" of the masses, should assert that "in the first place the worker has the right to a wage sufficient to support himself

<sup>6</sup> Published in the first number of *Les Temps Modernes*.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Stalin in a public statement made in 1933.



and his family."<sup>8</sup> On the one hand, there is an attempt to restrict and even to extirpate the liberal arts: it is alleged that only useful, "paying" work makes sense; on the other hand, there is an attempt to extend the character of "liberal art" deep down into every human action, even the humblest servile work. ~~The former aims at making all men into proletarians, the latter at "deproletarianizing" the masses.~~

There is, however, a fact which from the vantage-point we have now reached must be strikingly clear and significant, and it is this: whereas the "total work" State declares all un-useful work "undesirable", and even expropriates free time in the service of work, ~~there is one Institution in the world which forbids useful activity, and servile work, on particular days~~, and in this way prepares, as it were, a sphere for a non-proletarian existence.

Thus one of the first socialists, ~~P. J. Proudhon~~ (whom Marx dismissed as a "petit bourgeois")<sup>9</sup> was not so far wrong in beginning his work with a pamphlet on the celebration of Sunday, the social significance of which he expresses in the following words: "On one day in the week servants regained the dignity of human beings, and stood again on a level with their masters."<sup>10</sup> And in the introduction to his little book, Proudhon gets very near to the heart of the matter when he says, "Discussion about work and wages, organization and industry, which is so rife at present ought, it seems to me, to start with the study of a law which would have as its basis a theory of rest."<sup>11</sup> It is true that the full

<sup>8</sup> *Quadragesimo anno*, 55ff.

<sup>9</sup> P. J. Proudhon, *Die Sonntagsfeier, aus dem Gesichtspunkt des öffentlichen Gesundheitswesens, der Moral, der Familien- und bürgerlichen Verhältnisse betrachtet* (Kassel, 1850).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vi.

meaning of this "theory of rest" is not open to one who, like Proudhon, examines it exclusively "from the point of view of public health, morality, the family and social conditions." And here is something to be examined more closely.

Let us begin by summing up what has already been said in this excursus: If the essence of "proletarian" is the fact of being fettered to the process of work, then the central problem of liberating men from this condition lies in making a whole field of significant activity available and open to the working man—of activity which is *not* "work"; in other words: in making the sphere of real leisure available to him.

This end cannot be attained by purely political measures and by widening and, in that sense, "freeing" the life of the individual economically. Although this would entail much that is necessary, the essential would still be wanting. ~~The provision of an external opportunity~~ for leisure is not enough; it ~~can only be fruitful if the man himself is capable of leisure and can, as we say, "occupy his leisure"~~, or (as the Greeks still more clearly say) *skolen agein*, "work his leisure" (this usage brings out very clearly the by no means "leisurely" character of leisure).

"That is the principal point: with what kind of activity is man to occupy his leisure"<sup>12</sup>—who would suspect that that was a sentence taken from a book more than two thousand years old, none other than the *Politics* of Aristotle? What, then, ultimately makes leisure inwardly possible and, at the same time, what is its real justification?

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 8, 3 (1337b).