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Review of Radical Sufficiency: Work, Livelihood, and a US Catholic Economic Ethic

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***Radical Sufficiency: Work, Livelihood, and a US Catholic Economic Ethic.* Christine Firer Hinze. Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2021, paper, 349 pp., ISBN-978-1-64712-026-9.**

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Christine Firer Hinze has written a complex and detailed book about the quality of life in the United States based on the Catholic viewpoint of the common good of all in society and on the principle of solidarity which holds that we are responsible for the well-being of others. The background of her book is Catholic social teaching going all the way back to Pope Leo XIII (1810-1903) and developed at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and elaborated in great detail by Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and now Pope Francis. The book, however, is not a study of the official teachings of these Popes on the problems of capitalism, about which much has been written, but instead a very specific study of the lives and working conditions of various social groups in the U.S. especially from the late 1970's, which was the end of a period of great prosperity for all, up to the present moment. The current time period includes the great crash of the economy in 2008 due to financial speculation and more broadly the deindustrialization of the economy by globalization which has hollowed out the middle class. It led to a polarized society wherein the loss good paying jobs triggered resentment and even social unrest on the part of the non-elite workers. Research has shown that many of these workers voted for President Trump. For many, the American dream is gone, and the loss leaves a bitter memory of a time when dedication and hard work could still mean the achievement of a respectable and stable life with some security and at least a few luxuries beyond food, clothing, and shelter, what Msgr. Ryan would call in his day "reasonable and frugal comfort".

An important part of her work is a power analysis, often neglected in official teachings, which looks at distorted and deeply ingrained value judgments and practices which exist between social groups (both race based and class based) and which are examples of collective bias or what is also called structures of sin. These entrenched value judgements and prejudices, often against Blacks, Hispanics, and immigrants in general, work to entrench socio-economic inequality, exploitation, and exclusion. Elite groups within society act so as to maintain their economic status and block others from moving up the economic ladder. To express this simply, there is in no way a level playing field for all children born into American society since the education system is segregated by race and by class with schools funded very unequally in different localities. Hinze does not discuss schooling at length in the book, but it is a well-known component of the problem of inequality of opportunity. Early in the book she raises the important issue of false consciousness occluding an understanding of structural dynamics. People are simply and to some extent willfully blind to the living conditions of others in the society to include living under racism and under classism and to conditions which are denigrating and shame inducing. The philosopher and theologian Bernard Lonergan, who is mentioned briefly, would point to a lack of religious conversion where the eye of love would be willing to see these sad realities and take responsibility for changing them. The eye of bias by contrast turns away from what is painful to see and rationalizes it or blames the victim for the system. Bias becomes entrenched in administrative and

bureaucratic systems which ignore that the real world of the working class is not the same as the world of the affluent classes who have resources and connections to power.

As a way of trying to frame the question what a decent and worthwhile way of life is for families, Hinze uses the term “radical sufficiency” drawing on the teaching of the priest economist Msgr. John A. Ryan (1869-1945) which came in the context of the great progressive era of the administration of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, in some ways a golden age of workers rights, and itself a response to the suffering of the Great Depression in which millions were thrown into poverty. Msgr. Ryan thought a great deal about what a family living wage would be for the male bread winner of his era, one in which the father was the prime support of the family. He also was concerned that workers have protection against sickness, disability and old age in the form of either a chance for personal saving or a pension. His idea of sufficiency included that some possibility would exist for children to be given some extra support in light of their talents so as to fully develop as persons, for example, violin lessons. In addition, he believed that unmarried females should be paid an individual living wage. Hinze is careful to note that unmarried young women were often trapped in the brutal and dangerous conditions of sweatshop labor. Her extensive footnotes point to the social history in which all of this was occurring. She also notes that the provisions of Roosevelt’s New Deal were strenuously opposed by a coalition of Christian ministers and businessmen who were against Social Security, corporate taxation and welfare, and that by the 1950’s the famous evangelical preacher Billy Graham was preaching against things like social welfare and unions.

Part of the status of workers in Ryan’s view was that they should have some say in the running of a business and ideally participate in some form of profit sharing. Ryan saw unionization as a necessity and believed that the state should pass and enforce laws that would provide a universal minimum living wage. Ryan did not believe that market forces or the beneficence of employers would naturally result in a living wage. He was clear that these economic rights were based on the God given dignity of the human person and that, in the Christian view, unlimited pursuit of material gain was unethical. Ryan’s thoughts on sufficiency and status were similar to those that important labor leaders like Samuel Gompers (1850-1924) were advocating.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of Hinze book discuss livelihood through the significant determinants of gender, race and class. I comment on only parts of these. As we have hinted at above, the living wage campaign of Ryan still had its focus on the white male worker and did not give sufficient attention to the role of women in care work, to racial discrimination or to the dynamics of class conflict. In her effort to radicalize Ryan, Hinze must bring his concerns into the world of the contemporary family which usually has two wage earners, and which must include the experiences of minorities and immigrants.

Chapter 3 brings us into discussions by feminist economists who focus on the absence of concern for the care work needed to raise children and maintain a family in many discussions of living wage and of economic fairness. The fact that care work (childcare, cooking, cleaning and so on) is unremunerated and is considered to be unskilled means that it is often neglected. Summarizing the work of economist Raina Antonopoulos, she notes the author’s conclusion that unpaid care work “entails a systematic transfer of hidden subsidies to the rest of the economy that go unrecognized imposing a systemic time tax on women throughout their life cycle”. While middle

class women suffer from being “time poor”, lower class women have the additional burden of being “resource poor”. On the international level, women leave their own children to become care givers in other countries thus creating a “care drain”.

Chapter 4 defines racism as pervasive part of American culture and history which is in significant part the legacy of the slavery era and the Civil War era. Racism manifests itself as a belief in the superiority of the white race and the entitlement of white Europeans to control of politics and cultural expression. Racism manifests itself in a spectrum of ways from overt violence toward Blacks to fear and distrust of minorities who are considered to be inferior and thus unworthy of fair treatment. Historically, racism manifested itself in terms of inferior school systems, discrimination in the housing market, and more broadly barriers to wealth accumulation and social mobility on the part of the Black population. More sensationally it manifests itself in the killing Blacks by police and the use of excessive force to subdue Black people who in anyway question the orders of police. Modern policing has its origins in the slave patrols which were created to capture enslaved people and control their mobility. The killing of George Floyd by officer Derek Chauvin which was caught on camera brought outrage and was so graphic that it was difficult for the white population to ignore but it was only one example of a process which occurs in the U.S. on a daily basis. Still, many Whites reject the idea that Blacks are treated unfairly by police and are subject to traffic stops and searches in a disproportionate way.

Chapter 6 addresses the consumer lifestyle of luxury-based consumption and the desire of the middle class for positional goods which signify social status as one of comfort and convenience. In this mentality the people should consume as much as they can since an abundance of material goods beyond what is necessary is believed to bring happiness. The basic needs of those who do not have the necessities of life are only a marginal consideration in this view.

Chapter 7 is titled “A Radically Sufficient Economic Order”. Here Christine Hinze has done an excellent job of pulling together the characteristics of American society which prevent us from having a decent standard of living for all. I cannot discuss all of the detailed changes which she suggests. The problem is that we have a weak sense of social solidarity and there is evidence, which she references, that racism is part of that. In general, the society she envisions would be something like Swedish socialism where workers receive much better treatment and are more protected. She needs to at least mention the changes in the tax structure which would be needed to effect this. Right now, the wealthy pay a relatively low rate and are eligible for many tax breaks which are not available to workers. Also unaddressed is the Federal budget much of which is spent on the military. Because of this tremendous military spending, as shown in the Brown University Costs of War project, there is much less money left over to be spent on social goods like supporting childcare or increasing social security spending or offering health care to all. There is much opposition to increasing the minimum wage to a decent level which would have to be at least 15 dollars per hour and more likely almost 20 dollars per hour. Childcare workers currently are paid as little as 9 dollars per hour to give an important example. American workers in recent decades have lost most of their unions which means that they cannot demand higher wages and better working conditions. The Covid pandemic revealed that so called “essential workers” in the retail sphere and in factories were much more likely to die of the virus since they were unable to work from home and avoid exposure. Hinze could reference the fact that legislators are often influenced by wealthy donors and by Wall Street which prevents worker friendly legislation from being

passed while often allowing the banking and finance sector to loosen regulations even after the 2008 crash. Many left economists believe that government has been captured by these corporate oligarchs and their supporters.

Much recent writing in economics sees the country as more of an oligarchy than a democracy, for this reason. Many would say that both political parties are heavily influenced by Wall Street and that, unlike in Europe, there really is no socialist party as an alternative. Workers coops and a possibly Universal Basic Income are among the ideas that Hinze offers as alternatives to the hyper-capitalism of U.S. society. It seems fair to say that Hinze has offered some solutions and a great deal of excellent research, but that the American public would have to undergo a radical change of mentality for these things to happen. Our social history since World War II is very different than that of Europe. Probably only a real and prolonged social crisis could provoke these needed changes. The suffering caused by the pandemic may have increased empathy on the part some, but others have fallen into conspiracy theories and false narratives which destroy the social fabric and may even lead to a fascistic authoritarian leader coming to power in the wake of the Trump era. It is not clear whether solidarity or a hate-filled polarization will win out. Climate change will necessitate more social cooperation to cut consumption, but this too may provoke opposition and a rejection of science.

This book is a well researched analysis of what steps would be needed to create a decent and worthwhile life for all American citizens by prioritizing social solidarity and compassion.