

Simone Weil on Labor

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Simone Weil has been defined as a genius, extraordinary, an enigma. Her name evokes images of an assembly line factory worker, an intense philosophical thinker, a teacher, a leftist fighting in the Spanish Revolution, an emaciated young woman suffering from tuberculosis, a critic of Marx, and a mystic. Whatever the image, the woman is one. In some ways the striking nature of her character puts her on a par with a figure like Catherine of Siena. This is not to say that Weil is a saint; she was not even Catholic,¹ and contrasts between her and Catherine are equally striking. In many ways, however, Weil's short life mirrors something of the greatness and mystery of Catherine who had lived almost six hundred years earlier. Both witnessed to an unmistakable "humanness" which necessarily includes a radical awareness of the supernatural.

Both embraced life in its totality, dedicating their lives wholeheartedly to others: Catherine to the Church; Weil to the worker. Both literally spent themselves in their service of others, dying prematurely in their early thirties.² And both were determined women who courageously dialogued with powerful men: Catherine – the pope and cardinals; Weil – Trotsky and "capital". Both left a lasting impression and message for the world.

Fundamental to Weil's message was the dignity of the human laborer, and a study of Weil's message on labor necessarily incorporates the intensity of the woman who took a leave of absence from teaching to enter the French labor force from 1934-1935. This decision grew out of her personal philosophical and political principles, and the experience further influenced her thought and subsequent

political involvement and writings. Thus, this study will develop chronologically, first addressing her initial

teachings regarding labor, then moving to her diaries written during her months of labor in French factories, and concluding with her later views on labor.

The Early Writings

Simone Weil is one of numerous intellectuals who in the 1920s and 30s dedicated themselves to defending the oppressed laborer.³ For Weil intellectual defense was insufficient, and she believed the primary error of intellectual activists and reformers was their lack of firsthand experience. She sought to avoid this error, but initially the high rate of unemployment due to the Depression prevented her from fulfilling her desire. Instead, after receiving her diploma she took a position teaching in a girls' lycée. Her teaching position did not restrict her from entering into the society of the workers. This she achieved by frequenting the bars where workers drank, contributing to unemployment funds,, being involved with workers' unions, participating in workers' demonstrations, lecturing to miners at a Workers' College, and writing articles.

Her writings of the early 1930s reflect her early pro-Marxist leanings, particularly her agreement with Marx's teaching that the workers' revolution would reunite intellectual and manual labor, a unity destroyed by capitalism.⁴ But she also criticized Marx, calling Communism a "messianic attitude of mind which generally never goes with science, and which is quite mythological," since its

ultimate goal of man's total freedom "of law, of the state, of any kind or restraint" was perpetually delayed.⁵

In her view, modern labor had made man a slave of machines. No longer was man master over nature, since nature now dominated man "through the machine," and those who were the masters of the machines had become "masters of men and of nature."⁶ She acknowledged the efforts made on the behalf of workers: Ford Motor Co. in America had workers share in company benefits; socialist parties had established work councils; some countries had established workers' syndicates; Russia had simply driven out the capitalists (only to replace them with bureaucrats). But Weil criticized these "palliatives" for providing little true benefit and instead called for "transformation of the means of production."⁷

The Factory-Worker: December 1934 – August 1935

Weil's understanding of the need for transformation deepened during her months of formal immersion in factory life. This was no mere physical experience for Weil; it engulfed her entire being. She became a slave like all the other workers. In her diary written during this period, she notes that it nearly broke her. Her health had never been good; she suffered from migraines, and during these months required leaves for one week and later one month due to illness. But she wondered how anyone but the physically strong could survive the daily anguish, the weight which one felt upon waking, the monotony of the work and yet the care one must have working with large machines which was both difficult and dangerous⁸, and the ever-present fear of "the orders" of management. For far beyond the physical pain and suffering of the factory worker, the true agony lay in the destruction of the worker's personal dignity. When she entered the factory, Weil noted that she became a member of the class of people who do not count in the eyes of anyone; one who is nothing

and therefore has only to submit in silence. This humiliation was the most unbearable suffering.

But Weil did not ignore the benefits of her time in the factory. She noted that the experience had given her the sense that she had no rights of any kind, and that she must be careful not to lose this knowledge; she had gained the ability to be morally self-sufficient, "to live in this state of latent and perpetual humiliation without feeling humiliated in my own eyes"; and to "enjoy intensely every moment of freedom and friendship"; she had experienced "a direct contact with life."⁹

Mature Writings on Labor: 1935 – 1943

The uniqueness of Weil's physical labor in the factory, as noted by George Abbott White, is that she "entered into its jaws and spoke of necessity from the belly of the beast."¹⁰ "Necessity" had deep meaning for Weil, a meaning which encompassed God and nature, but managed to preserve obedience while stripping necessity of slavery. As she wrote in her notebook, "Necessity is the will of God."¹¹

As a limited being who is not God and does not create himself, man is bound by necessity, yet, in his freedom man can recreate the gift he has been given, forging "that very thing that he suffers"¹². Man, by his labor could transform his flesh and blood into the fruits of his labor. Labor was not a beast of its very nature. No, manual labor, Weil would argue, could be either "a degrading servitude of the soul or a sacrifice."¹³ The determining factor was the relation that existed between man and his work. This relationship was founded in the very nature of reality and an even deeper relation that defined human freedom – the relation between thought and action.

Thus technology is a two-edged sword, possessing the capacity to add to man's freedom by liberating thought, giving man time to think and to create; or, as in the case of the assembly

line, it could brutally destroy the relationship between thought and action, enslaving man by monotony to a passive state which allowed little intervention of thought. Still, the fault did not lie with the machine, but in its use.¹⁴

To protect human freedom and the dignity of the laborer, Weil called for a revolution, but not that which Marx proclaimed which would end in same problems which it sought to destroy – man as slave. Weil’s revolution did not abolish human labor, but properly ordered it according to human freedom. Man was not fed to serve the machine, but the machine must remain at the

service of man – all men. To do this each laborer must see and understand the fruit of his labor, for man could no longer remain a means to “production”, for one can only bear the monotony of human labor if the light of eternity illuminates it.¹⁵

To change the plight of the worker by preventing the workers’ suffering was an incomplete effort. True transformation of labor demanded that capital, political leaders, and nations desire the workers’ “joy”. For as Weil argues, if man’s vocation is to reach joy through suffering, then the workers are better situated than any to reach this vocation in its true form.¹⁶

NOTES

¹ Some argue that Weil’s strong Catholic leanings actually resulted in her being baptized shortly before her death on 24 August 1943.

² While some would claim that both Catherine and Simone Weil died of anorexia, Anne Freud argues that Weil showed none of the psychological problems associated with anorexia. Her arguments are equally applicable to Catherine of Siena.

³ A short list might include: Trotsky, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, George Orwell, or Hannah Arendt, though Weil questioned whether the likes of Trotsky, and Marx before him, ever submitted themselves to manual labor.

⁴ T. Nevin, *Simone Weil: Portrait of a Self-Exiled Jew* (Univ. of N.Carolina: 1991), 12.

⁵ S. Weil, *Lectures on Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Price (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1978), 143. [Originally written by Weil in 1933-1934 for a course at the lycée].

⁶ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁸ Weil notes that one morning a woman had a large amount of hair torn from her scalp by a machine. By the afternoon she was back at work in spite of what she suffered, and her even greater fear. S. Weil, “Journal d’Usine” in *La Condition Ouvrière* (Gallimard: 1951), 47.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁰ G. White, “Simone Weil’s Work Experiences: From Wigan Pier to Chrystie Street” in *Cross Currents* (1981): 148.

¹¹ S. Weil, *Cahiers in Œuvres Complètes*, Vol. VI (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 373; Cf. Nevin, 125-147.

¹² S. Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce* (Paris: Plon, 1950), 203.

¹³ *Pensées sans ordre concernant l’amour de Dieu* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1962), 21.

¹⁴ S. Weil, “Expérience de la vie d’usine” in *La Condition Ouvrière*, 251-252.

¹⁵ *Pensées sans ordre*, p. 16.

¹⁶ Weil, “Condition première d’un travail non servile” in *La Condition Ouvrière*, 273.