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Material Wealth or Wealth of Time and Culture? Lessons from Australian Aboriginal Economy for Catholic Social Teaching

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Abstract: This paper will explicate ways in which Aboriginal Australian economy can inform, augment, and vindicate Catholic social teaching and related scholarship on work, the use of technology, and leisure. Collaterally, Aboriginal Australian economy gives an example of what could happen if key parts of Catholic social teaching were to be implemented concretely. That is, we can argue that Aboriginal economy gives an indication of what a society would be like if it adopted these parts of Catholic social teaching.

Keywords: Australian Aboriginal; economy; Catholic social teaching

1. Introduction

This paper shall argue that the values of Australian Aboriginal¹ economy can provide valuable lessons for Catholic social teaching. In doing so, the paper shall invert or “decolonialise” older ways of engaging Catholic faith with Aboriginal culture, in which Western-originated ideas were communicated to Aboriginal people. Instead, the paper shall show how the economic–cultural values of Aboriginal people can teach, inform, and augment Catholic social teaching, thus using Aboriginal culture to enlighten a teaching that originated from a previously dominant foreign culture. That is, Aboriginal economy offers a new source for Catholic social teaching that complements traditional sources, namely the experience of Aboriginal people and their economic values. In a way analogous to Latin American contributions to social teaching, Aboriginal economy offers the chance to go beyond a traditional way of adapting “established theology to particular circumstances” to a new theology of Catholic social teaching that sees “God’s presence and purpose” in the experience and culture of Aboriginal people (Sobrinho 2004, pp. 61–62). This position ties in with Pope John Paul II’s teaching that Aboriginal Australian people and their culture have been gifted with powers and abilities by God since “the beginning of time,” that is, before colonisation (John Paul II 1986a, nn1, 3, 12). It is thus appropriate for Catholic social teaching to be informed by the lessons of Aboriginal economy that will be discussed below.

This paper’s contribution to scholarship is against a background in which much has been written about the culture of Aboriginal Australians and Catholic social teaching about Australian Aboriginal people. However, it seems that the potential impact of Australian Aboriginal economy on Catholic social teaching has been hitherto underexplored. This is despite Aboriginal Australians representing one of the world’s oldest civilisations (Australian Geographic Staff with AAP 2011). They developed an advanced moral culture that restrained warfare and the subjection of one group to another, and limited inequalities of wealth and power (Stockton 1995b, pp. 38–39). Crucial to this paper is the way in which Aboriginal economy adapted new technologies, not to generate more material wealth, but to make more time available for liberal activities and the cultural development of people. Using that insight, this paper will engage this economic culture with Catholic social teaching. It will do this by engaging the available literature from relevant archaeological investigations, drawing lessons from it, and applying them to Catholic social teaching. This



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paper's conclusions will show how Aboriginal economy, as a lived experience revealed by archaeology, can inform Catholic social teaching and provide it with a new foundation.

2. Shifting Attitudes in Catholicism

Up until the middle of the last century, Catholicism was unable to be informed by Aboriginal people due to a viewpoint that Bernard Lonergan calls "classicism," a monocultural ideology that presumed classical European culture to be the one culture to which all people should aspire (Lonergan 1988, p. 241). Missionaries then bound their culture to their faith and translated them, somewhat superficially, into terms comprehensible within other cultures, but with the expectation that truly enlightened people would aspire to classical European culture (Lonergan 1994, pp. xi, 326–27; 1974, pp. 232–33). This meant that, well into the twentieth century, Catholics assumed that mission and education would flow in one direction, in which faith and culture were communicated from a classical culture to an uncultured society. Missionaries and educators thus felt empowered to teach Aboriginal people, but they lacked the intellectual horizon or religious motivation to learn from them.

At a time when Aboriginal people were still subjected to racist "White Australia" policies and assimilationist ideologies, the Second Vatican Council radically altered the Church's relationship with different cultures (Russell-Mundine and Mundine 2014, p. 98). *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican Council II 1965b, n58) stated explicitly that the Church is not bound to any one race, nation or "any customary way of life recent or ancient." *Ad Gentes* (Vatican Council II 1965a, nn.11, 15) taught that missionaries should identify with local communities and not only preach the message of Christ to people of other cultures, but also learn from them, that is, discover "what treasures a generous God has distributed among the nations of the earth."

In his "Kampala Homily," Pope Paul VI then taught that the unity of the Catholic faith was complemented by a plurality of cultures that could express the one faith. The Pope referred to instances in which the European-based Church not only taught the African people, but also learned from them (Paul VI 1969).

Pope John Paul II continued this multicultural trend, stating that in the Church's encounter with different cultures, it "transmits to them her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within" (John Paul II 1990b, n52).

Specifically referring to the culture of Australian Aboriginal people, John Paul II spoke of their "genius and dignity" and stated that their culture "must not be allowed to disappear." He insisted that Aboriginal people and their culture be treated with "esteem" and "love." He taught what some may have thought to be a radical position, that Christian values have been revealed through Aboriginal culture, that God has gifted Aboriginal people with "abilities and powers" from "the beginning of time." (John Paul II 1986a, nn1, 3, 12).

More recently, the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Fifth Plenary Council of Australia acknowledged that "much suffering" had been inflicted by Catholic missionaries who had been ignorant of the richness of Aboriginal culture. It called for a "more informed engagement, built on the foundations of understanding, compassion and respect" (Australian Catholic Bishops Conference 2021, p. 16).

In the last century, the Church has thus changed significantly from a monocultural outlook and a monodirectional view of mission to a multicultural position in which the culture of Australian Aboriginal people can be esteemed and recognised as bearing cultural gifts of God. Having said that, the Church has embraced a more inclusivist theology concerning other faiths, as fostered by *Nostra Aetate* (Vatican Council II 1965c, n.2), though there is still significant debate about the extent of that theological inclusivity, as seen in *Dominus Iesus* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2000, n.12), which balances an inclusivist theology with insistence on the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. At the same time, the Church's understanding of and relationship with culture/s has faced significant challenges. As Rowland notes, the Church entered the Second Vatican Council with an

awareness of culture and the need to engage it, especially with respect to *aggiornamento*, but it lacked a theory of culture that would make such an engagement more effective. She argues that the Church is still coming to terms with such a theological explanation of culture (Rowland 2003, pp. 1, 13). In that light, there is a pressing need to develop a better theory of culture and to better engage Aboriginal culture. Graeme Mundine, Executive Secretary of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission, argued that there is a need for the mainstream churches “to learn more about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island life which can be used to show Jesus.” Reflecting on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christian experience, he also observed that “Indigenous peoples are [still] not listened to and they need to be more actively encouraged and supported to take a stronger lead within their churches” (Mundine 2007, p. 3).

3. The Materialist Challenge/Question and the Aboriginal Answer

To better put into context the values of Aboriginal economy, it behooves us to briefly consider materialism, according to Catholic social teaching, and its drive to fulfil an insatiable desire to accumulate more material goods. Such materialism has been condemned in Catholic social teaching.

Pope John Paul II taught that materialism, in its consumerist and Marxist forms, harms human dignity by reducing humanity to “the satisfaction of material needs” (John Paul II 1991, n19). He also taught that materialism resists the Holy Spirit, and leads to an existence in which death is “the definitive end of human existence” (John Paul II 1986b, n56-7).

Pope Benedict XVI likewise condemned materialism and subjectivism for causing a “crisis of meaning” for human beings (CAN 2006) and for creating a “spiritual desert” that results in “an interior emptiness, an unnamed fear, a quiet sense of despair” (Pope Benedict XVI 2008).

Pope Francis taught that materialism causes material objects to take possession of human beings to the extent that they lose their identity (Pope Francis 2013b, n1). Francis lamented that an “... insatiable greed marks all human history, even today, when, paradoxically, a few dine luxuriantly while all too many go without the daily bread needed to survive” (Pope Francis 2018).

The materialist culture condemned by the popes is grounded in the ideology that human desires for material wealth are infinite. Indeed, the core of “the economic problem” is that resources are limited, but human wants are unlimited. That problem is usually resolved through a command economy, or through the price mechanism that balances supply and demand.

We may thus ask if the infinite desire for material goods, or “insatiable greed,” as Pope Francis called it, is truly universal. If a culture had an alternative to this materialist mindset, we may ask what lessons it could teach the rest of the world. A nonmaterialist worldview seems to characterise many Indigenous cultures around the world. In this paper, one particular culture will be explored, that of Aboriginal Australians, who embraced an economic philosophy that prioritised the human person over material wealth.

Indeed, beyond the materialist ways of consumerism and socialism, Australian Aboriginal people show how the economic problem can be resolved in a third way, through custom and culture. Aboriginal culture’s economic mechanisms, especially the use of new technology, have been geared not towards an ever-increasing desire for material wealth, but towards the desire for time, liberal activities, leisure, and culture.

4. Aboriginal Economy

If we are explaining Aboriginal economy and Aboriginal people’s use of new technology, it is important, first, to clarify what is meant by “Aboriginal economy.” Stockton explains that it means an economic frame of reference that provides people with a “total outlook” and an “all-inclusive conceptual framework.” This outlook and framework allow people to relate to their environment with regard to how that environment satisfies their wants and needs (Stockton 1982a, p. 30).

It should be acknowledged that an anthropological explanation of Aboriginal economy has significant challenges. Modern Aboriginal economy has been neglected in Australian society. Altman points out that “the Indigenous customary sector” is “generally unrecognized and undervalued in mainstream discourse” because it does not correspond to the economic theories that are most common in Australian society. That is, Aboriginal customary economy, where it does exist, is known more for its activities, which include “hunting, fishing and gathering for domestic use,” rather than for the economic philosophies upon which it is built (Altman 2002, p. 39). Additionally, there is the problem that contact, colonisation, depopulation, and assimilation have disrupted Aboriginal society to the extent that many anthropologists believe it impossible to study contemporary Aboriginal economy. In other words, the harm done to Aboriginal society has been so disruptive that the traditional basis of Aboriginal societies could not be determined by anthropologists by studying living Aboriginal people. Yengoyan lamented that “There is no doubt that most cultural factors which we call ‘economic and material culture’ can no longer be studied adequately.” Indeed, the economic cultures that could be studied were those that had transitioned from traditional to colonial economies (Yengoyan 1979, pp. 395–96). In addition to the difficulties faced by anthropologists, Christian missionaries most often downplayed the importance of Aboriginal cultural values. Even after the initiatives of the Second Vatican Council, the Bishop of Darwin, J.P. O’Loughlin, claimed that it was unlikely that an Aboriginal person “thoroughly indoctrinated in his stone age philosophy” would be able to “make a success of life in the 20th Century” (Rademaker 2018). Thus, due to the disruption of Aboriginal culture, a sense of cultural superiority of Europeans over Aboriginal people, and “ignorance of true Aboriginal society,” and resulting unwillingness to learn from Aboriginal people, it was most difficult for Catholics to learn from the economic values of contemporary Aboriginal people (Pattel-Gray 1998, p. 16; Matthews 2007, pp. 17–18). There is, however, room for further research, which will be noted below.

Despite the challenges of understanding Aboriginal economy through anthropology, archaeology offers clearer perspectives. We draw especially on the work of priest-archaeologist Stockton (1979, 1981, 1982b, 1984, 1995b) and archaeologist Rhys Jones (1977), whose conclusions correlated with or were supported by Hiatt (1967, 1968) and Gould (1971, 1973). Stockton’s work was on ancient campsites and stone tools dating back 22,000 years and focussed on mainland Australia, especially around Sydney and the Blue Mountains (Stockton 1982b, 1984, 1995b). Jones’ research focussed on Aboriginal people in Tasmania (Jones 1977). Stockton’s and Jones’ methodologies and archaeological approaches differed. However, their conclusions correlate and support the central point of this paper, namely, that in Aboriginal economy, material inventions and new technologies have not been used to increase material wealth, as happened in Western culture, but instead they have been used to increase the time available for liberal activities and the culturing of persons. In other words, new technologies have not been used to generate material assets. Instead, they have been used to increase “wealth of time,” which allowed more time for liberal culture.

Jones’ research focussed on new and developing Aboriginal technologies, such as improved stone tools or hunting weapons (Jones 1977, p. 197). He asked whether their “increased extractive efficiency” would bring about “more food, different food, or more time.” First, by comparing the development of technologies in Aboriginal culture, especially with regard to different technologies on mainland Australia and the island of Tasmania, Jones found no evidence that better technologies went into extracting more food (Jones 1977, p. 200). Second, with regard to different foods, the archaeological evidence showed that ecological, rather than technological, developments led to the adoption of different foods (Jones 1977, pp. 200–1). Third, Jones found that instead of providing more food or different food, Aboriginal technological development and “technological efficiency” led to more time available for other activities (Jones 1977, pp. 197, 201). Thus, Jones’ research showed that Aboriginal economy did not use new technologies for material gain. Instead, the Aboriginal people’s economic culture ensured that they “invested the advantages of the

new tools into the realms of the ego, the mind and the soul” (Jones 1977, p. 202; Stockton 1982a, p. 33).

Stockton’s research similarly shows that changes in stone tool technology allowed more leisure time at base camp (Stockton 1984, p. 61). He shows that Aboriginal economy valued human culture over the accumulation of material goods (Stockton 1982a, 1982b, 1984, 1995a, 1995b). He argues that the archaeological and other evidence confirms that new technologies have been used by Aboriginal people neither to increase material wealth nor to accumulate more material goods, but to enhance liberal culture (Stockton 1982a, p. 33; 1984). Another perspective on this same reality is that Aboriginal Australians did not adopt new technologies in order to increasingly exploit their environment. Instead, the new technologies were used to create more time for leisure and the liberal activities that added quality of life. He notes that those liberal activities included religious ritual, education, art, sport, play, and cultivation of close relationships (Stockton 1982a, pp. 31, 33).

This archaeological account of Aboriginal economy corresponds with the discovery of economic historian Noel Butlin that Aboriginal “production” was geared not only to food and tools. Instead, precolonial Aboriginal economy was geared towards “services such as information, education, diplomacy, maintaining order, entertainment, feuds, art and ceremonies.” In other words, Aboriginal economy has been oriented primarily towards intangible services rather than tangible material goods (Sveiby 2009, p. 349).

To put the point concisely, the evidence is that, in traditional Aboriginal culture, new technology has not been used to foster materialism or consumerism, but it has been used for the liberalisation or culturing of the human person. This is in stark contrast to Western economic culture in which people have traditionally used new technology to increase material wealth.

In summary, the work of Stockton and Jones shows that Australian Aboriginal economy did not use new technologies to further exploit the environment, to amass greater material wealth, or to over-supply daily needs. Instead, new technologies were used to create “time wealth” which increased the time available for liberal activities and the culturing of Aboriginal people.

From another perspective, Aboriginal economy shows a “third way” of resolving the economic problem. Instead of a free market or a command economy that limit the accumulation of material goods through scarcity or government control, Aboriginal economy has instead restrained the desire for material goods and increased wealth so as to allow more time for liberal activities. This economy also has other effects and lessons for today. So this paper now turns to specific ways in which Aboriginal economy can inform, augment, and otherwise support Catholic social teaching.

5. The Primacy of the Human Person

Aboriginal economy illustrates an ideal of Catholic social teaching highlighted by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* (Pope Francis 2013a, n58), namely the need for economics and finance to be refocussed so as to favour human persons. That is, economics and finance should be at the service of human values, not the other way around. As Francis puts the point, “Money must serve, not rule!”

Francis complements John Paul II’s teaching that work is more than a utilitarian means to survival. Instead, work has a teleological element that makes it a vocation. That is, work is ordered to the service of humanity (John Paul II 1981, n6). In that light, John Paul II teaches that work should therefore be an imitation of God, in whose image humans are created (John Paul II 1981, n25). Beyond being the means to subsistence, work’s teleology is not merely “productive” or “efficient,” but it is meant to be a [pro]creative activity that adds value to creation, with human beings acting as co-creators with God.

These teachings mean that the purpose of work and the use of technology envisaged by Catholic social teaching (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, n269; John Paul II 1981) have a personalistic dimension. In short, work should contribute to human dignity and should contribute to the cultural and moral development of human beings.

We see such a vision in Aboriginal economy, which validates Catholic social teaching in its critique of teleologically challenged consumerism. That is, by orienting work towards human flourishing and liberalisation, Aboriginal economy has given work a teleological purpose that goes beyond the materialist way that contributes to both “human toil and suffering,” and to “harm and injustice” at the national and international levels (John Paul II 1981, n1). Instead of work contributing to such materialism, Aboriginal economy shows how work can serve the human person and human values.

In a similar way, Aboriginal economy illustrates the point that the *telos* of humanity is towards “eudemonistic notions of happiness that are inextricably linked to the common good” (Holland 2020, p. 38). This contrasts with materialistic economics that instead promote a selfish individualism that deprioritises the common good. That is, materialistic economics drives people away from inner culturing or liberalising and focusses on consumption of externals, while also neglecting the needs of others in favour of one’s own wants and desires.

In this way, Aboriginal economy sits well with and illustrates the “*eudaimonia*” outlined in Aristotle’s *Ethics*. Both rest on the view that humanity has a “reason or *telos* for all things.” As Holland argues, “*eudaimonia*” drives human beings towards purposeful and meaningful lives in which “relationships, health, and contributing to the community are valued factors” (Holland 2020, p. 44). Thus, in contrast to the mere accumulation of external goods, both Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* and Aboriginal economy uphold what a person is meant to be in themselves. *Eudaimonia* and Aboriginal economy both prioritise the “inner culturing” and fulfilment of the human person.

In a similar way, the Aboriginal approach to work and technology illustrates the warning of Catholic social teaching against making an idol of work. As the *Compendium* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, n257) notes, “the ultimate and definitive meaning of life is not to be found in work. Work is essential, but it is God—and not work—who is the origin of life and the final goal of man.” The *Compendium* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, n260) further teaches that we should not be “enslaved” to work, but instead use work in the service of this human soul (cf. New American Bible 2010, Matt. 6:19–21). We see this important part of Catholic social teaching supported by Aboriginal economy, which has lived out the reality that work is not an end in itself, but a means to human values and fulfilment.

In short, Aboriginal economy fulfils the teaching of Jesus that the Sabbath was made for human persons, not people for the Sabbath, that is, that work is at the service of human values, not the other way around (New American Bible 2010, Mark 2:27–28).

The previous paragraphs segue into John Paul II’s point that ethical concerns should always have priority over technical realities (John Paul II 1990b, n18). That is, persons are more important than things. John Paul II highlights a challenge to Catholic thinking, that our world has become overwhelmed by “rapid developments in science and technology” (John Paul II 1990a, n7). While these developments bring many material benefits, John Paul II cautions that they do not always work for the good of human persons, either as individuals or as a society. For Catholic social teaching, then, we have the responsibility to find human meaning in the midst of technological change, and to respond to technological and economic developments in a way that enhances “the moral, spiritual and religious” dimensions of human existence. One would argue that the Aboriginal prioritising of human values over work and technology provides a concrete example of how such meaning can be found.

6. Technology and Leisure

Aboriginal economy also throws light on the problem of work, technology, and leisure. That is, we face the question of whether our economy is focussed on work and generating material wealth, or on leisure and intangible gain.

Technology has the capacity to help make our lives better, even happier. In his classic 1930 essay, John Maynard Keynes argued that new technology was helping humanity to

solve “its economic problem.” He predicted that technological developments would allow people to fulfil their economic needs with only a fifteen-hour work week (Keynes 1963). Interestingly, the workload Keynes predicted correlates with that of Aboriginal hunter-gatherer culture, which required only two to four hours of subsistence activities a day (Stockton 1995b, p. 38).

A number of reasons have been offered to explain the fact that most people in our society are working the same hours, or even more, instead of the utopic fifteen hours predicted by Keynes. However, one explanation stands out. The wants and perceived needs of today’s Western society are more than those of the 1930s. It seems possible that with modern technology, we could easily sustain a 1930s level of comfort with Keynes’ fifteen-hour work week. But we could not sustain ourselves thus if we are bound to a 2020s level of material wealth and prosperity, including large air-conditioned homes, two cars, mobile phones, flat-screen televisions, internet access, and myriad medical technologies. In other words, as our productive efficiency has increased, our desire for material goods and services has risen dramatically. Such is the fate of an economy based on insatiable desires.

In contrast, Stockton argues that Aboriginal hunter-gatherer culture required only two to four hours of subsistence activities a day, with the rest of the day given over to leisure and liberal activities, such as art, talk, and religion (Stockton 1995b, p. 38). By limiting work activity to what was necessary for subsistence, rather than material wealth accumulation, Aboriginal people have also been able to keep their environment safe from over-exploitation and the depletion of its resources.

The above also illustrates Pieper’s thesis that Western society has forgotten the value of leisure. It has instead yielded to an ideology (or an unconscious set of values or paradigm) of “total labour” (Pieper 1952, p. 2). On the one hand, Pieper argues that leisure, properly conceived, was one of the very foundations of Western culture (Pieper 1952, pp. 1–2). As Aristotle noted in his *Metaphysics*, creative leisure gave rise to the arts and sciences that gave meaning and value to society. Indeed, as Pieper points out, the Greek word *σχολή/skole* and the Latin *scola* do not refer to schools as we know them today, but they refer to leisure (Pieper 1952, p. 2). Moreover, Aristotle argued that human happiness depended on leisure, not on work. He wrote that “happiness seems to depend on leisure; we work in order to enjoy leisure, just as we make war in order to enjoy peace” (Aristotle 1991, p. 1177). In that way, Aristotle’s call is for work that is not ordered to materialist accumulation, but to leisure, which is the basis not of survival but of culture.

A further point is made in the *Compendium* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, n258). “The apex of biblical teaching on work is the commandment of the Sabbath rest.” This is a teaching that is based on human beings having been created in the image of a God who himself “rested on the seventh day (Gen 2:2)” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, n284). The *Compendium* adds (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, n285) that “Sabbath rest” in the Christian tradition should be “an appropriate time for the reflection, silence, study and meditation that foster the growth of the interior Christian life.”

This point is effectively reinforced by John Paul II, who argues that Sabbath rest is not meant to be a period of recovery for more work, but instead a time for contemplation of our ultimate end in God (*Dies Domini*). In other words, Sabbath rest is for the liberalisation of the human person (John Paul II 1981, n19). This corresponds to the teaching of Leo XIII. “Rest from labour is not to be understood as mere giving way to idleness; much less must it be an occasion for spending money and for vicious indulgence, as many would have it to be; but it should be rest from labour, hallowed by religion” (Leo XIII 1891, n41).

The problem is that, in modern Western society, work has overwhelmed and dominated human activity to the point where human existence is oriented towards work (Pieper 1952). Utilitarian productivity is privileged, and human life is commodified with respect to production. Having forgotten the value of leisure, Western society has instead privileged material gain and the accumulation of possessions.

Pieper argues that our culture needs to re-evaluate work and recover the value of leisure. He argues that leisure is not mere idleness, but “the preserve of freedom, of

education and culture, and of that undiminished humanity which views the world as a whole" (Pieper 1952, p. 33).

In addition, John Paul II observes, in *Laborem Exercens* (John Paul II 1981, n7), that materialist philosophy, of the sort commonly encountered in our culture, tends to reduce people to "an instrument of production." Such reduction turns a person into an object of production, which contradicts the Church's teaching that human persons are both makers and subjects of work.

Given these arguments and Church teachings on work and economy, how can they be supported, illustrated, or augmented by Aboriginal economy? Aboriginal economy took a cultural, rather than a material or commercial, view of the human person. As we see in Jones, this was noticed by the very first European observers of mainland Australian Aboriginal people. They noted the depth of their religious life and their complex and lengthy rituals that required hundreds of participants. Jones also refers to Collins (1798) and other early scientific observers, who wrote extensively on the Sydney Aboriginal peoples, highlighting their "complex initiation and other rituals, involving scores of men participating in them over periods of several weeks" (Jones 1977, p. 201).

The time available for such deep and complex rituals came from the Aboriginal peoples' economic approach that privileged culture over material accumulation. As Stockton notes, when Aboriginal people made stone tools, "Many hours were spent on non-essential aspects of manufacture e.g., embellishment." Stockton notes that while such an activity could be seen as functional, it "was largely leisurely and communal", "a concomitant of the social intercourse which is highly valued Among Aborigines. . . ." (Stockton 1984, p. 59–60).

Thus, to reiterate an earlier point in this paper, Stockton indicated that technological innovations led to more time spent on liberal activities around the campfire (Stockton 1984, p. 62). Such liberal activities "fit the remainder of the waking time left over from subsistence activities, and include leisure, religious ritual, education, display of skill or art, sport and play, sex, interpersonal communication and anything else which makes for quality of life" (Stockton 1982a, p. 31). "Inevitably, a society will rationalize some or all of these activities as needful, and within its economic thinking the boundary between subsistence and liberal activity will be blurred."

We are thus left with the following question. Is leisure rest from work for the purpose of more work, as we see in Western societies dominated by materialism? Alternatively, is leisure the object (meaning) of work, an ideal we see in Catholic social teaching, and a lived-out reality in Aboriginal culture?

7. Inequity and Exploitation

Catholic social teaching faces the challenge of an economic ideology in which the economy is dominated by financial concerns. As Pope Francis complains, our materialistic system prioritises finance and individual prosperity at the expense of the common good (Pope Francis 2015, n109). Such an approach, as noted by Popes Francis and Benedict, leads to excess inequality (Pope Francis 2013a, n53; Holland 2020, p. 46). The Church has traditionally interpreted inequality through an Aristotelian perspective. That is, "excess inequality undermines the civic virtues and severs the sense of shared purpose necessary for the common good" (Holland 2020, p. 46). Such excess inequality also "undermines the norms of reciprocity" (Holland 2020, p. 46; Pope Francis 2013a, pp. 53–60).

Without meaning to contradict the traditional Aristotelian perspective on inequality, Aboriginal economy provides another way of understanding the root of inequality and also a concrete way to avoid harmful inequality. Stockton insightfully contrasts Western storage economy with Aboriginal economy. Western storage economy developed with long-lasting cereals, grape and olive products, hoofed animals, the means of storage (such as pottery), and the use of hardware and irrigation. Such a storage economy enabled some individuals to accumulate excess wealth. This wealth was not limited to products that were stored, but it extended to the means of production, such as domestic animals, land, and slaves. This wealth accumulation resulted not just in material accumulation but also enlarged "political

units,” and money as a measure and means of transfer of wealth (Stockton 1982a, p. 32; 1995b, p. 38).

It is here that Stockton sees the emergence of radical inequality. That is, while this storage society needed 10–12 h of labour a day, the disparity between rich and poor came from the wealth of a few coming from the productivity of others. At the same time, these means of storage lifted “the natural constraints on extractive and productive activity, and in the threat of exhausting resources in a way not possible before” (Stockton 1995b, p. 38).

Aboriginal economy thus clarifies Western economy by contrast. It raises a series of questions. Do we use technology, whether it is extractive or storage technology, in order to increase time for liberal activities or culture, or do we use it to increase wealth, which results in inequality between persons and the exhaustion of natural resources? It seems clear that Aboriginal economy clarifies a way in which humans can avoid radical inequality and at the same time foster an approach to the environment that is less rapacious and more in line with the stewardship called for in the Bible (cf. Genesis 1).

Pope Francis highlights the apparent failure of modern political and economic systems to protect the vulnerable, preserve the environment, or foster the common good. That is, the exploitation of persons and exploitation of the environment come from the same chalice of accumulatory materialism (Pope Francis 2015, nn196, 198).

Again, Aboriginal economy illustrates this teaching by an approach that has fostered homeostasy. An important part of this economic outlook is Aboriginal law that regards the cosmos as a system that is “a closed, self-reproducing, self-regulating system of life.” The system is also a steady-state one that itself maintains all life at “optimum levels of productivity.” Importantly, every part of this cosmos “is a moral agent” (Stockton 1995b, p. 61). Certainly, this view seems to reflect a premodern Aristotelian scientific worldview in which the laws of the universe were moral laws. This is contrasted with the modern scientific worldview heralded by Galileo that saw the cosmos as governed by mechanical laws rather than moral ones.

Through an economy that relied on a moral view of all things, Aboriginal people achieved a state of “homeostasy.” Jones uses the term “culling” from farming to note the maximum rate of energy extraction that can be levied against a particular level (or, in the case of a complex hunting and gathering economy, levels) of a life-form pyramid in a unit area without exhausting the total resources (Jones 1977, p. 201).

That rate was sadly exceeded many times by Western cultures. We see a key example on the American plains, where new technologies such as rifles, railroads, and preserved foods were employed in a manner that “extracted” bison to near-extinction. Similarly, in Australia, schooners and long boats were used in such a way as to hunt Bass Strait seals to near-extinction (Jones 1977, p. 202).

How can we explain these differences in approaches to the environment and the treatment of resources and humans? Through the dual lenses of archaeology and anthropology, Stockton compares Western and Aboriginal economies. He observes that Western society began with a struggle within its natural environment, which was turned into an endeavour to dominate, manipulate, and exploit the environment to fulfil wants and needs. Then, when the environment was exhausted, new environments would be sought out and similarly exploited. Stockton observes that this way of living precipitated conflicts between societies and led to competition between individual people (1995b, p. 18). This point is borne out by the work of Malthus (1798) in his *Essay on Population* and Darwin’s (1859) *Origin of Species* in which the natural order of human beings and nature itself are interpreted in terms of exploitation, shortage, and lethal competition that lead to survival of the fittest. At its worst, this view of economy and the “natural order” led to human relationships being based on greed and dishonesty, people having their personal value defined by their work, utilitarian production being valued over service to the community, wastefulness of resources, environmental exploitation, and competitive conflict in all areas of life (Stockton 1995b, pp. 38–39).

Instead of that way, in which material possessions and utilitarian production are almost idolised, that Aboriginal Australians took another cultural path. Rather than materialistically exploiting land as a commodity, they took on the responsibility of custodians. As Stockton notes, Aboriginal people became partners with their land in a way of life that evolved into a spirituality (Stockton 1984, p. 62; 1995b, p. 18).

This partnership that led to homeostasy returns us to the pivotal point of this article. When Aboriginal people adopted new technologies, they did not do so in order to increase their material wealth or to allow them to further exploit their environment. Instead, new technologies were used to augment the time available for liberal activities. In other words, technological innovations were not viewed as means of greater productivity but as opportunities for self-enriching activities. Stockton notes that, over forty millennia, Aboriginal society evolved to achieve balance with its environment in a way that persisted until British colonisation (Stockton 1982a, p. 33).

Stockton also points to Rhys Jones' model of homeostasy (Jones 1977, p. 202), in which the balance between people and the land to which they belonged became not only a set of rules or laws, but a deep spirituality that permeated Aboriginal life. Under this culture, when new tools were developed, "the choice was towards more time and not more food... The siphoning off of the man hours gained by the deployment of a new technology into non-productive activities can, in this context, be seen as a powerful homeostatic mechanism, ensuring that the labour thus released is not invested into some positive feedback system, whose result might at best be anarchic to the social order and, at worst, disastrous for the long term balance of the community to its resources" (Stockton 1982a, p. 31).

Jones refers to examples seen in Sharp. When steel hatchets were introduced to the Yir Yiront of Cape York, many tasks were reorganised, and they were achieved with greater ease and speed than with the old methods. Importantly, though, the people did not extract more food from their environment, but instead completed their tasks more quickly (Jones 1977, p. 202). Similarly, Bowdler's 1970 study showed that when fish hooks made of shells were "introduced into the coastal economy of southern New South Wales about a thousand years ago," instead of more fish being added to the people's diet, the "the fish hooks caused a change in the species of fish eaten" and almost certainly changed the section of society doing the work. Men had previously used bone-tipped spears to hunt rock-dwelling fish. But the new technology was used by women to fish for snapper from bark canoes. This change had the effect of "further freeing the men for non-productive activities."

These points are borne out also by the archaeological data that showed that populations of Australian Aboriginals varied not according to technologies, but according to the available resources, which further indicates a relationship of homeostasy with the land, rather than over-extraction (Jones 1977, p. 202).

It should be clarified, though, that the homeostatic relationship with the land results from an economic culture, not a technological limit (Jones 1977, p. 202). We see this in the encounter of Aboriginal people with modern technologies or situations. As Jones notes, Aboriginal women with digging sticks can catch rabbits more efficiently than Western men using telescopic-sighted rifles. Aboriginal fish traps are also more efficient than modern poles, lines, and hooks. So, regardless of the advanced technology available to Aboriginal people, their rate of "resource extraction" from their environment has always been balanced by their economic priorities, which ensured that there was never "a pauperisation of the total resource." In short, Aboriginal economy led to the harmony with the land that is sought for in the writings of Pope Francis.

It would seem, then, that Aboriginal economy can realise the aim of Catholic social teaching, as stated in the *Compendium* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, n258), that Sabbath rest is seen as "a barrier against becoming slaves to work, whether voluntarily or by force, and against every kind of exploitation," whether that is the exploitation of land or of people. It would seem apparent that while Catholic social teaching would aspire to put the brakes on an economy to prevent the exploitation of land or people, Aboriginal economy shows a concrete way in which this can be achieved with proven outcomes.

8. Objective vs. Subjective

A final point concerns the difference between human beings as the subject of work and its object. Throughout *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul II teaches that work has meaning and eschatological purpose. Work in its intended meaning is the work of human persons who are subjects. However, crude materialism makes people into objects of work, rather than subjects. Again, Aboriginal economy can illustrate this part of Catholic social teaching.

The *Compendium* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, n270) proposes that human work has a subjective sense that may encompass, but goes beyond, the objective. The objective sense refers to the sum of what people produce. The subjective sense refers not to what people produce, but how. The subject of work is a dynamic being who acts according to a vocation in the light of one's being "in the image of God." That is, humans as subjects act as rational beings who can decide for themselves with a view to self-realisation.

Paying attention not to the objects of production but to the subjects who work, we find authentic dignity in work (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, n271). This dignity is obtained when work and production are for the service of the person, as in Aboriginal economy, rather than the other way around where material goods are idolised. As the *Compendium* puts the point (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, n271), materialism reduces a worker to a "mere instrument of production." Aboriginal economy, on the other hand, shows what the *Compendium* looks for, with the dignity of the human person determining the value of work, rather than the other way around, with production determining the dignity of the person.

Again, the *Compendium* (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004, n272) proposes that "Human work not only proceeds from the person, but it is also essentially ordered to and has its final goal in the human person." This is not possible in a purely materialistic society, but it is actively fostered in Aboriginal society in which work and production are ordered to the liberalisation and culturing of a person, rather than for the sake of material gain or accumulation.

In short, then, Catholic social teaching seeks a way to make humans the subject of work, rather than its object. Aboriginal economy shows a way in which this is not only possible but has actually worked for millennia.

9. Conclusions

Working in the Catholic community, this author has observed that many Catholics, both laypeople "in the pews" and professionals, are not comfortable with learning from Aboriginal culture. In that light, it helps to know that learning from the wisdom of other cultures is hardly without precedent in Catholicism. As Pope Leo XIII observes, "the early Fathers and Doctors of the Church, who well understood that, according to the divine plan, the restorer of human science is Christ, who is the power and the wisdom of God, and in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, took up and investigated the books of the ancient philosophers, and compared their teachings with the doctrines of revelation, and, carefully sifting them, they cherished what was true and wise in them . . ." (Leo XIII 1879, nn10, 27–28). In that spirit, Lonergan notes that Augustine used Plato and Aquinas used Aristotle to reconceive Catholic theology in a way that was coherent, up-to-date, and credible in a new cultural context (Lonergan 1974, pp. 45, 49, 62).

One would thus argue that, in Aboriginal wisdom, Catholic social teaching can similarly find an articulation of its teachings, a way of rendering them intelligible, and also a way of defending them, by way of showing that the principles of that teaching have been lived out already—in this case, for millennia.

To this end, one finds irony in the quote from Leo XIII that is cited by Lonergan so favourably, "*vetera novis augere et perficere*"—to augment and perfect the old with the new (Leo XIII 1879, n24). In the light of *Aeterni Patris* and a century of culturally conscious Catholic theology, it is taken for granted that Catholic social teaching can learn from the new. Given the ancient nature of Aboriginal culture, being tens of thousands of years older than Christian culture, the irony is that instead of augmenting the old with the

new, Catholic social teaching can augment the old with the older, to highlight lessons from Australian Aboriginal culture. Hence, the way of authentic Catholic mission should not be to engage in monodirectional instruction of Aboriginal people, but to augment, contribute to, and sustain Aboriginal culture with the “new” message of Christianity and, in a reciprocal way, to “augment and perfect” Catholic faith and teaching with the older culture of Aboriginal Australians.

The key lesson for Catholic social teaching taken from this aspect of Aboriginal economy concerns the economic question of whether we should use new technologies to increase wealth or to increase the time available for liberal activities and culture (or culturing) of people. The lesson is especially important in our culture in which more leisure time is potentially available and in which we have the opportunity to work towards a postmaterialist and more humane culture that values (i) leisure, (ii) liberalising and culturing people, and (iii) preventing inequality and conflict. Having said that, we face the threat of humans being objectified as “instruments of production” who exist for work, rather than vice versa.

Additional to that threat is the possibility that our culture will slide further into dominant economic values that encourage greed, define individuals by their work, and value productivity over service and economy over community building, and which lead to over-exploitation of resources and to competitiveness in all areas of life (Stockton 1995b, p. 38).

If we recall that St John Paul II bases Catholic social teaching not on the value of material goods but on the dignity of the human person, it would seem that Aboriginal economics and social morality can teach Catholics, and society in general, a valuable lesson in human dignity (John Paul II 1987, n41).

Catholic social teaching calls for human and humane values where the economy serves humanity, rather than the other way around. It calls for material possessions to be subject to the human good. It also calls for reduction in conflict and peace between people. Aboriginal economy shows a proven way in which these objectives are possible and have in fact persisted for millennia.

One would argue, then, that Aboriginal culture, in partnership with Catholic social teaching, has valuable lessons to teach Western society. Instead of using new technologies to sustain a never-satisfied craving for more goods and services, Aboriginal culture has used technology in the service of leisure and the liberal activities that make persons more cultured and more civilised. This simple, but powerful, contrast between economic visions means that Aboriginal culture can offer a solution to some pressing social concerns facing Western society. That is, by prioritising the liberal realm over the material, Aboriginal people provide a valuable lesson in leisure, a lesson that has been neglected by a technology-obsessed society and a lesson that can be re-taught and augmented by the Aboriginal peoples’ way of life.

Aboriginal economy can thus prompt a new approach to Catholic social teaching. This would not contradict earlier teachings but complement them and provide them with renewed foundations. To give one example, in addition to reflecting on the needs of the poor, Aboriginal economy can prompt reflection on the wants and needs of the wealthy. It offers an alternative to the “insatiable greed” that Pope Francis (2018) believes “marks all human history.” This approach would resonate with the spirit of Kurt Vonnegut’s poem written after he and Joseph Heller attended a party in the home of a billionaire.

I said, “Joe, how does it make you feel
to know that our host only yesterday
may have made more money
than your novel ‘Catch-22’
has earned in its entire history?”
And Joe said, “I’ve got something he can never have.”
And I said, “What on earth could that be, Joe?”

And Joe said, “The knowledge that I’ve got enough.” “I have enough” (Vonnegut 2005)

In a similar spirit, Aboriginal economy can prompt Catholic social teaching to challenge the rich to ask “what is enough?” Such a challenge would prompt a serious rethink of whether material wealth or liberalisation of the person is best for human flourishing, challenge the question of what is sufficient for a person in the light of the needs of the poor, and challenge thinking on the relationship with the environment and whether it would be based on exploitation or homeostasy.

In a spirit of detraditionalisation, one would also propose that Aboriginal economic values would not be seen as simply correlating with Catholic social teaching, but as a new source that would inform and augment that teaching. One would have in mind Pope John Paul II’s point that the “Church’s social doctrine is not a “third way” between liberal capitalism and Marxist collectivism” but that it is “the accurate formulation of the results of a careful reflection on the complex realities of human existence.” In other words, Catholic social teaching is a formulation of a moral theology, which advances not “technical solutions” but the good of the human person. Aboriginal economic values provide not only a concrete source and example of such values, but they can provide Catholic social teaching with a model which reflects on the human good, which an economy is meant to serve. To put the point into other terms, Angrosino argues that an anthropologically informed approach would see the Church not as dealing with culture as a unified whole and thus relativising or downplaying the importance of local cultures but as negotiating with “players with varying access to political, economic, and social power.” That is, rather than expressing social teaching from its traditional monocultural sources, a detraditionalised approach would include the treatment of traditionally underrepresented cultures, such as Aboriginal culture, as equal players in Catholic social teaching (Angrosino 1994, pp. 827, 830). As indicated above, such an approach would allow the “lived experience” of Aboriginal economy to form a detraditionalised source of Catholic social teaching, as has occurred most notably through the experience of Latin Americans.

It should be re-emphasised, though, that Aboriginal economy is not dependent on levels of technology. As noted with the examples of fishing and hunting mentioned above, the way that Aboriginal economy uses technology is not a matter of primitive versus advanced technologies. Instead, Aboriginal economy introduces a *telos* into the use of technology—that the technology exists for the liberalising and culturing of people, not for making people objects of work and addicted to wealth accumulation and resource storage. To this end, it may clarify things that Aboriginal economy did not exist on a path from a “primitive” to an advanced European economy. Rather, it existed on an altogether entirely different economic path. Thus, it is not the level of technology that is the issue, but the way technology is used and the human values that technology supports or hinders. If we make the humane choice advocated in Catholic social teaching and Aboriginal economy, then technology does not dominate humanity, but it serves human values.

As an avenue for further research, one would suggest an examination of contemporary Aboriginal economic values and their potential impact on Catholic social teaching. In other words, this article has explored the previous “lived experience” of Aboriginal economy as revealed by archaeology. Further research could profitably explore the lived experience of Aboriginal people today. Such a study would be beyond the range and scope of this paper and would face the challenges noted above, namely that Aboriginal society has been disrupted so much by colonisation, assimilation, and other factors that many anthropologists have given up the effort to study contemporary Aboriginal economy. However difficult such a study would be, it would be valuable especially in showing if and how precolonial economic values can be linked to Aboriginal culture today. A starting point may be observations that contemporary Aboriginal life is marked by “sharing and caring,” commitment to the extended family, and the prioritising of persons over material things (Pattel-Gray 1991, pp. 5–6; Grey 1975, pp. 9–15; Stockton 1995b, pp. 67–72). One would suggest that primary studies, by participating in the life of contemporary Aboriginal people, and learning from their shared experience, would enable a researcher to connect

contemporary Aboriginal life with the economic values known through archaeology and then apply these to informing and augmenting Catholic social teaching today.

It would also be worthwhile to consider the lessons that can be learned from similar economic values in other Indigenous cultures around the world. To give just one example, Brian McCoy discusses the similarity of experiences of Indigenous people in Australia and Canada. Both peoples were dispossessed and subjected to a “culture genocide” that dismissed the cultural wisdom that could have been shared with Western society (McCoy 2021). At the same time, research shows that the economic values of Indigenous custodians of traditional knowledge around the world can show the way from the inequality, accumulation, and unsustainability that characterise Western economies to economic models that foster sharing, sustainability, and greater equality (Swiderska et al. 2006). Such research is beyond the scope of this article, but a further project would reveal lessons from the economic values of other cultures that can inform Catholic social teaching.

It should be acknowledged as well that even though Aboriginal economy has much to teach Catholic social doctrine and the wider world, this would not imply an uncritical adoption of all the values of Aboriginal society. Catholic morality and social teaching rest upon the dignity and inviolable rights of all people, as a community and as individual persons. This was not always the case in Aboriginal history, where individual rights were sometimes relativised for the common good or the benefit of powerful groups. However, such conflicts of values or lines of dissonance should not prevent Catholic social teaching from learning from Aboriginal economy any more than the undesirable aspects of Roman and Greek society prevented the Church from adopting key elements of Roman law or Greek philosophy to inform and challenge Catholic governance and thinking.

In conclusion, this research has explored Australian Aboriginal economy and culture as a lived experience revealed through archaeology. This paper claims that Australian Aboriginal economy and the culture it produced validates, supports, and augments important elements of Catholic social teaching on work and leisure. This paper has shown how, in partnership with Catholic social teaching, Australian Aboriginal economy can be applied successfully in the pursuit of advancing human values. This application does not only regard conclusions or contents of Catholic social teaching. That is, we see potential not only in correlations between Aboriginal economy and Catholic social teaching, but we envisage a new foundation for that teaching. Just as attending to the “lived experience,” of Latin American people and theologians changed the face of Catholic social teaching and the way it is done, we can propose that Aboriginal economy can have an analogous impact on that teaching.

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Note

- ¹ Hereafter, unless otherwise specified, “Aboriginal” and “Aboriginal people” will refer to Aboriginal Australian people and/or their culture.

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