

RESPONSE

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The debate between Messrs. Storck and Woods is typical and thereby illuminative of a divide that has existed among American Catholics for some time. Within the context of the post-Vatican II Church, the camps represented by Storck and Woods share much in common. They are faithful to the authoritative teachings of the Church, they hope to build a stronger and more vibrant Catholicism, and they desire a wider understanding and appreciation of Catholic social teaching (CST). Exactly how that social teaching should be interpreted and implemented in the American economic environment, however, is a point of contention.

Much of the debate hinges on a theological question: how is the authority of the social teaching to be understood? Storck's article seemingly takes the answer for granted. As Woods observes, although Storck cites the popes' admission that they are not experts in economics, this caveat does not appear to influence the rest of his discussion. Storck uses Catholic social teaching unselfconsciously, as though it is clear to any well-meaning person what its contents and directives are, what a Catholic must accept as deriving from the authority of the magisterium, and what he might question.

Storck fails to appreciate that what many call social teaching (ultimately a somewhat arbitrary designation)—papal reflection on matters such as wages, economic organization, and business—is not of the same theological category as matters such as marriage, abortion, or ecclesiology. The teaching of the magisterium has been quite clear that the use of artificial contraception can never be morally justified. What this means for a particular person in a particular situation is similarly straightforward: he may not use it. The teaching of the Church on wages has also been clear: workers must be justly compensated for their work. What this means for a particular actor in a particular situation, however, is murkier. There is not space here to examine the contents of even a selection of the modern social encyclicals, but suffice it to say that any attempt to encapsulate the teaching in a brief statement will be simplified and open to interpretation. “An employer must pay an employee a wage adequate to maintain him and his family in frugal comfort,” is probably the best that can be done, but even this is open to interpretation (What is frugal comfort?) and qualification (What about non-breadwinners? What if the company cannot afford to pay such wages?).

Woods may overstate his case against Storck by accusing the latter of insisting that every jot and tittle of papal writing on social matters demands assent. Yet I use *may* advisedly, for Storck opens himself to the charge by not explicitly denying the proposition. In sum, Storck does not define CST, does not state its parameters, and does not specify areas in which Catholics and others of good will may legitimately disagree. These are critical oversights in an essay that implies that some economic approaches are off limits to faithful Catholics.

Turning to the central matter of Storck's article, the validity of various schools of economics, another common and longstanding division presents itself. This split cuts across religious lines, fueling a controversy that involves economists and other social scientists of various and no religious affiliation: What is the discipline of economics? The issues are those of history, method, and the object of study. For many critics of mainstream economics, including Storck, economics cannot separate, to use Woods' formulation, the "phenomena" from the "positive statements" about them. While Woods' distinction is unobjectionable, it is true that many economists invite criticism by denying, either explicitly or by implication, that normative concerns have anything to do with the subject matter of economics.

Yet Storck is on shakier ground when he levels specific charges, and Woods adequately defends both neoclassical and Austrian schools against his misstatements. Storck's indictment of Austrian economics, almost without qualification, is especially puzzling. By Storck's account, the Austrian is simply another mainstream economic school—a highly debatable characterization. Most economists consider the Austrian school to be a critical, non-mainstream voice in the profession, as Storck's preferred schools of historical and social economics are. His contention, moreover, that Austrian economics is not about "human" science is nearly incredible: one of Mises' best known works is focused precisely on *human action* as the proper subject of economics. (This leaves aside the question of the terminology of *science*, a topic for another time.) In this respect, Woods is entirely justified in taking Storck to task in his closing lines. If one is going to undertake a critique of a large, complex, and influential body of thought (e.g., mainstream economics), one must demonstrate a firmer grasp of that body's major works, thinkers, and complexities.

Much of the intensity of this debate surely derives from its current policy implications. Writing of defending the rights of workers, Storck notes that Pope Leo did not hesitate to "locate that protection in the state." To say as much is not to settle any important question,

however. “State” action might mean many things: among them, enforcement of contracts, business regulation, union legislation, or corporatist organization.

Similarly, Storck’s discourse on property is accurate, but beside the point. Yes, there are various forms of property rights and the state has the right to define and circumscribe them (within certain limits set by the natural right to private property, defended vigorously by Leo XIII in the opening paragraphs of *Rerum Novarum*). This *settles* nothing about what the state should do in this respect. Historical and contemporary evidence suggests that less individualistic forms of property rights are not as economically productive. Economists have helped us to understand why that is the case (e.g., the tragedy of the commons).

Storck believes that our current economic situation demands more government action to ensure justice and equity. He enlists CST in that cause, and there is indeed material that will support his effort. Yet there is also ammunition for opponents of that move. CST will not settle the debate, and to argue that Catholics must simply be more faithful to CST is not helpful. There is no obvious and foolproof solution to economic inequities, only the best attempts by sincere people to try to figure out how to bring about the goals that we share. Whether Austrian analysis or German historical analysis of these questions will be more fruitful cannot and will not be settled by the pope. Nor will the question of how much or what sort of government action will further the ends enumerated by CST (within certain limits set by condemnations of socialism and anarchism). Each particular policy area merits examination on its own terms, but as a generalization, Storck thinks that more extensive government intervention will be beneficial, Woods thinks not. In the current climate, I fear rather than hope that Woods is right.

