

Double Wages: The Laestrygonians and the Civilization of Endless Production

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Law, Letters, and Ideas

August 2026

Among the monsters encountered by Odysseus on his journey home, the Laestrygonians are easily mistaken for merely another race of Homeric giants. Yet the episode in Book X of the *Odyssey* is considerably stranger than that. Before Homer reveals the Laestrygonians as cannibals, he gives us an unexpected description of their economy. In their country the shepherd driving his flock into the fields meets the herdsman bringing his cattle home. Night and day lie so close together that a man who had no need of sleep could earn two wages: one tending cattle and another tending sheep. It is an extraordinarily modern image. Homer imagines, almost three millennia before the twenty-four-hour economy, a society in which the natural boundary between one working day and another has nearly disappeared.

The detail becomes more significant because of what immediately follows. The Laestrygonians possess many outward signs of civilization. They have roads, occupations, a harbour, a city, houses, a fountain, a king and a royal household. They are not the primitive Cyclopes, living separately in caves without assemblies or cultivated fields. The Laestrygonians appear economically and politically organized. Yet when strangers arrive among them, their king does not feed his guest. He feeds upon him.

This juxtaposition suggests a provocative way of reading the episode. The Laestrygonians represent not simply savagery but civilization emptied of moral order: production without purpose, economic activity without human limits, appetite without restraint. Their society raises a question that modern Western civilization might profitably ask itself. What happens when economic activity ceases to serve human life and human life instead becomes organized around economic activity?

I. The Man Who Never Sleeps

Homer's remark about double wages is striking because sleep is among the most fundamental limits imposed upon human beings. Kings and beggars, masters and servants must eventually stop. Night interrupts ambition.

The Laestrygonian landscape seems almost to abolish that interruption. One worker returns as another departs. The economy could continue indefinitely. If only a man could overcome his inconvenient need for sleep, he could double his productivity and double his income.

There are geographical explanations for Homer's description. The poet may be imagining a far northern country where summer nights are extraordinarily short. We should therefore be cautious about turning the passage itself into an explicit Homeric condemnation of overwork. Nevertheless, within the literary architecture of the episode, the image is remarkable. Immediately before revealing a society in which human appetite has become monstrous, Homer imagines a society in which the natural limitation upon human economic activity has nearly disappeared.

Modern Western society has accomplished technologically what Homer's imaginary worker could not accomplish biologically. The individual must still sleep, but the economy does not.

Factories operate through the night. Financial markets hand activity from one time zone to another. Online shops never close. Entertainment streams continuously. Messages arrive at every hour. Food can be ordered late at night. Work follows the employee home through the smartphone. Artificial light abolishes darkness as a meaningful social boundary. The digital economy has transformed the Laestrygonian fantasy into an ordinary condition: when one worker goes home, another comes out, and commerce continues without interruption.

We have, in effect, created the man who never sleeps by creating an economy larger than any individual human rhythm.

II. When the Economy Becomes the Measure

None of this is intrinsically evil. Work is good. Production is necessary. Trade can bind strangers together peacefully. Technological abundance has relieved enormous amounts of suffering. The mistake would be to romanticize poverty or inefficiency merely because they belong to an older world.

The deeper question is what economic activity is for.

In a properly ordered civilization, the economy exists within a larger conception of human flourishing. People work so that households can live. They produce food so that people can eat together. They construct houses so that families can inhabit them. They accumulate wealth so that they can achieve security, exercise generosity, educate children, care for parents, beautify their communities and enjoy leisure.

But the relationship can be reversed. Instead of production serving human life, human life begins serving production.

Then efficiency becomes an unquestioned good. Faster is presumed better than slower. More becomes better than enough. Convenience becomes better than ritual. Availability becomes better than limitation. Productivity becomes confused with worth.

The hypothetical Laestrygonian who earns two wages because he never sleeps captures the logic perfectly. From a strictly economic perspective, sleep is wasted productive capacity. So are long meals. So are leisurely conversations. So are festivals, contemplation, worship and afternoons spent doing nothing economically measurable.

Indeed, almost everything that makes life recognizably human can appear inefficient when viewed exclusively through the categories of production.

III. The Lost Rhythm of the Square

This helps explain what can feel so different in older European towns, particularly where older Mediterranean habits have survived modernization.

The difference is not simply architectural. A piazza or plaza embodies a different conception of time. The town square is economically inefficient space. People sit there. Children play. Older people talk. Someone drinks coffee for much longer than the coffee requires. Shops may close in the afternoon. Families disappear indoors for meals. Churches ring bells marking hours according to something other than commercial demand. Sunday may still retain traces of being a genuinely different kind of day.

The traditional siesta represents this older logic particularly well. From the perspective of maximum productivity, closing a business in the middle of the day is absurd. From another perspective, however, it recognizes that the human body, the climate, the household and the meal impose rhythms upon economic activity.

The crucial distinction is subtle: life determines the schedule of commerce rather than commerce determining the schedule of life.

Modern Western cities have increasingly reversed that relationship. Public squares become commercial spaces. Cafés seek turnover. Sunday becomes another shopping day. Lunch becomes something consumed at a desk. The family meal must fit around competing work calendars and extracurricular schedules. Even leisure becomes scheduled, optimized and monetized.

We have gained extraordinary freedom from natural limitations. But freedom from every limitation can eventually become submission to a single limitation: the demand that activity continue.

The lights must remain on.

The market must remain open.

The shepherd must meet the herdsman on the road.

IV. The Stranger at the Door

This brings us to the most disturbing feature of the Laestrygonian episode.

Odysseus's scouts approach a functioning city. They encounter the king's daughter and are directed toward the royal household. They therefore enter a social structure that ought to be intelligible within the moral world of the *Odyssey*. A stranger arrives. The household receives him. Food is provided. Information is exchanged. Gifts may be given. The stranger eventually continues his journey.

This is *xenia*, the sacred institution of hospitality.

King Antiphates performs a monstrous inversion of it. Instead of feeding the stranger, he eats him.

The horror is not merely cannibalism. It is the destruction of the distinction between a person and a consumable thing.

And here the Laestrygonian episode becomes especially relevant to consumer culture.

A society organized overwhelmingly around production and consumption gradually acquires the habit of evaluating everything according to usefulness. The forest becomes timber. The river becomes energy. The house becomes an asset. Attention becomes advertising inventory. Personal information becomes data. Friendship becomes networking. Education becomes credential acquisition. Leisure becomes an industry. Even the individual increasingly learns to think of himself as a bundle of economically marketable capacities.

None of these descriptions is entirely false. The danger arises when they become exhaustive.

For the stranger presents a special problem to a civilization governed by utility. The stranger has no obvious claim upon us. He is outside our household, our company, our network and perhaps our nation. Hospitality therefore requires precisely what a purely transactional order finds difficult to explain: giving something to someone before establishing what he can give us in return.

The stranger tests whether we still recognize the person before calculating his usefulness.

V. Consuming the Human Being

The Laestrygonians fail that test absolutely. The stranger possesses value only insofar as he can literally be consumed.

Modern consumer culture obviously does not practice Laestrygonian cannibalism. The comparison is metaphorical, and it should remain so. Yet Homer's image exposes a permanent danger: once consumption becomes the dominant paradigm through which the world is understood, human beings themselves can gradually be treated as consumable.

Employees become “human resources.” Customers become market segments. Online users become engagement metrics. Creators become content providers. Relationships become opportunities. People are valued while productive, attractive, entertaining or useful and discarded when they cease to satisfy the relevant appetite.

The deepest problem with consumerism is therefore not that people own too many things. It is that the logic appropriate to things begins to govern our relationships with persons.

Things exist for our use. Persons do not.

The entire institution of Homeric hospitality rests upon that distinction.

VI. The Suitors and the Laestrygonians

This also illuminates the relationship between the Laestrygonians and the Suitors awaiting Odysseus at home.

The two groups initially appear opposite. The Laestrygonians are extraordinarily productive. Their shepherds and herdsmen nearly overlap shifts. The Suitors, by contrast, produce virtually nothing. They remain in Odysseus’s household eating his cattle, drinking his wine and consuming the inheritance of Telemachus.

Yet these are two sides of the same disorder.

The Laestrygonians reveal production without moral order.

The Suitors reveal consumption without stewardship.

Both mistakes arise when economic goods become detached from their proper relationship to human beings and households.

The Suitors treat Odysseus’s estate as something existing for their appetite. The Laestrygonians treat Odysseus’s men in essentially the same way. In one case property is consumed as though no owner, heir or future existed. In the other, persons are consumed as though they were property.

The properly ordered *oikos* stands between these extremes. Property exists, but possession entails responsibility. Food is consumed, but it is also shared. Wealth is produced, but production serves the household. The stranger is received not because he is useful but because hospitality recognizes something sacred in the person who arrives at the door.

VII. Returning to Ithaca

The *Odyssey* is therefore not merely a story about travelling across geographical space. It is a journey through rival conceptions of human existence.

Odysseus repeatedly encounters partial worlds. The Lotus-Eaters offer pleasure without memory. The Cyclopes possess strength without law. Circe threatens intelligence by reducing men to beasts. Calypso offers immortality without home. The Suitors enjoy consumption without stewardship. And the Laestrygonians present something particularly recognizable to the modern world: organized economic activity without a corresponding moral order capable of governing appetite.

Against all these alternatives stands Ithaca.

Ithaca is imperfect, vulnerable and comparatively poor. But it represents home: the bounded place in which relationships endure across time. Odysseus belongs to Penelope; Penelope to Odysseus; Telemachus receives an inheritance he did not create; servants remember obligations; ancestors remain present through memory; land passes between generations; strangers can become guests.

The modern West has achieved something the Laestrygonian shepherd could only imagine. We have constructed an economy that never sleeps. That achievement has produced extraordinary abundance. The Homeric question is whether we still remember why we wanted abundance in the first place.

If work no longer yields leisure, if wealth no longer produces generosity, if communication no longer creates community, if public space no longer produces fellowship, and if productivity leaves us incapable of receiving the person who has no immediate usefulness to us, then our success begins to resemble the strange country encountered by Odysseus.

The warning of the Laestrygonians is therefore not that civilization should cease producing. It is that production cannot tell us what civilization is for.

Human beings require limits: night and day, work and rest, feast and fast, household and marketplace, private life and public square. Such boundaries do not necessarily obstruct civilization. They may be among the things that make civilization possible.

For eventually the stranger arrives.

At that moment the true measure of the city is not how many wages its citizens can earn, how continuously its markets can operate, or how efficiently its resources can be consumed. The question is much older and much simpler.

Can it stop long enough to welcome him?