

SYNTHESIS ON SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION¹

IT is the most frightful of ironies that our economic system has opened new and valid horizons to the aspiration of our work precisely by that same liberal-commercial drive which has smashed pre-capitalist systems of personal labour and family production. Man's work and woman's bearing—the *bitter* things under the domination of the balance sheet, the world-wide market, the clean-cuffed man of commerce. Because clean-cuffs does not care a damn for man's work and woman's bearing. A production which is primarily judged by its export balance (and that means a production which is primarily for the profit and prestige of the clean-cuffs, the telephone-manipulators of marginal prices, the *destroyers*) runs clean counter to the restoration of the personal in industry. But, says Marcel Melcor, liberalist commercialism at its present stage involves an impossibility and is being destroyed by it. You can't go on developing the consuming power of a minority at the expense of the majority. You can't go on developing the consuming power of a minority at a greater pace than that of the majority. Morals aside, you can't do it. The agricultural population of the world (three-fourths of the world's population) cannot continue to be exploited in the interests of export balance sheets. He says we've got to stop it before it breaks us. And he says the only way to do it is to turn the trend of economic effort away from international export balances and build up justice through recognizing the existence of our next-door neighbour. And he is speaking here primarily as an economist. The humiliating lesson is rubbed in: if you want to save your bacon you must seek first the kingdom of God and His justice. Which is a bit of a surprise if all you wanted to save was your bacon. And it's a welcome snub if you thought that the Christian

¹ *Le Travail et l'Homme*, Etienne Borne et Francois Henry (*Les Iles*, Desclée de Brouwer; 15 frs. Belges).

Au Delà du Machinisme, Marcel Melcor (Questions Disputées, Desclée de Brouwer; 18 frs.)

Revolution was *in any sense* something optional.

It has widened horizons at the cost of closing our houses over our heads and turning our daughters out of doors. That's the price of it, this commercialism of ours. Still it has widened horizons, and you begin the work of restoration with what you've got, both the gain and the loss. Never until now was it possible for the world-transforming nature of human work to be seen so clearly as *necessarily* included in a Christian synthesis; *necessarily* sterile elsewhere. Argue it on any plane you choose, you are reduced to the conscious and developing action of grace in economic, political and social life as the sole thing we have to build with, either as Christians or as needy men without any other label. It is by the common work that men do for their livings that the world is made human and mankind made divine. Why? Because work is fundamentally a conforming to the will of God in events and in persons, in the nature of the material creation and in the objective nature of social needs. It is always possible for the community of our labour to be made the communion of the sons of God. With acknowledgments to international commerce we may say now that the social interconnection of all human tasks is as plain as the nose on your face. The worker collaborates with all men in a work of obedience to the will of God (divinely fruitful and socially so) which is also a work of transforming the face of the earth. Work is the cement of human community and is principally (before anything is) social charity in practice. It is the bringing of the material creation into conformity with the divine humanity. Talk of horizons!

What we feel is the strait waistcoat. Call it the Cross if you choose but you are advised to watch your step. The authors of the essay on Work show little sympathy to those who offer to the workers, in the name of sacrifice, a brutal effacement of the human; who exact obedience to "the will of God" without questioning the principle by which their own economic activities are directed, namely the maximum of interest and of security for their invested capital; who preach the Cross at the worker in order to ensure that they

shall not be required to remove from him the injustices by which they live. Horizons or no horizons, the drive of our splendid and all-conquering civilization has pretty effectively eliminated the human *person* from the economic life. Understandably if you consider the huge immobilizations of capital which accompanied nineteenth-century industrialism. But Melcor sees possibilities of a return to "personal" production in the types of machinery which are superseding coal-driven plant. The access of electrical power shakes loose the industrial town into workshops of greater independence and autonomy. The tendency to "automatism" in factories of a certain highly developed type eliminates the machine "hand," solving inhuman employment in the twofold way of throwing the unskilled mechanic out of work and exacting from the skilled engineer a more individual knowledge of the machinery he tends and a consequently greater exercise of personal powers in his work. The arrangement at once suggested is that of the "leisure state." Melcor shows, however, that this does *not* mean a minimal period of work and a maximal period of leisure for everyone. In the logic of machine development it means highly skilled work for the few and social and economic uselessness for the majority. (Though this is to say nothing of the agricultural majority, always the greater part of the world's population and the principally *exploited* mass of mankind.) A distinction is helpful here. Though the first preparation of raw materials may be safely and advantageously left to quasi-automatic machinery, it is intolerable that the finished "human" product should be so left; for the first process ministers to the workman, the second to our neighbour, the object of the love which informs the work. An automatic sawmill may be a splendid thing without in any way compromising the judgment by which we know mass-produced furniture to be beastly (socially degrading both in its production and in its use). The future envisaged by Melcor is one in which the qualitative development of human products under the hands of workmen to whom the huge modern resources of power are made individually and corporately accessible, is practically

limitless. Cultural developments essentially possible and viable which leave the imagination gasping while providing limitless scope for free human employment. The affirmation of the possible begins when the *necessities* of liberal commercialism have been broken by the very impossibilities they imply. And this has happened already. Industrial technique since the crisis of 1931 is more plastic as regards its future than, probably, at any time since the overthrow of the medieval order.

The future speculations outlined above are admittedly an insufficient motive to social transformation. The Christian ethic outlined by Borne and Henry in the essay on work suggests the *way* by which the economic formations proposed by Melcor become viable. And in becoming viable they become far less easily predictable. An ethic of labour not dictated *a priori* but taken as it arises in the valid aspirations of the workers in their conditions of to-day and so subsumed into a Christian synthesis is the basis from which, really and in the concrete, personalism must take its movement and from which it must receive its spiritual balance. The authors of the essay on work appear to have achieved an amazing and provocative success in sketching the main philosophical outlines of this principal dynamic force in the achievement of Christian revolution.

There are criticisms due to the value of the book, for it is too good to let go without meticulous scrutiny. It is misleading that art and work should be divorced as separate activities, the one pursuing the beautiful (which has nothing to do with utility) and the other pursuing the useful (which has nothing to do with beauty). In the opinion of the present reviewer the overstressed distinction hurts the synthesis of the book. True, there is a valid distinction of essence, but to carry this distinction into a division of essentially *separate* activities is to overlook the synthetic, bodily-spiritual nature of all human activity *in the concrete*. The totally a-social artist is a product of the same commercial-industrial drive which has beggared our work of intellectual significance; which has bestialized our labour and made a dry-dugged vampire of our art. One feels it to be a pity

that the works of Eric Gill or of Ananda Coomaraswamy are not more readily accessible to the French public. The comparison of work with contemplation shows a slightly romanticized view of the latter with which readers of *Colosseum* will be familiar. Again it is the synthesis of the book which is hurt, for the essay, immense in its promise, could have been much more powerful, if at the cost of being less optimistic.

Nevertheless the world-conquering nature of the Christian ethic is a reasonable ground for optimism. Our work is social charity in practice and is the cement both of human personality and of human community. However intellectually impoverished our work may be this remains true, and the drive of the Christian ethic cannot stop short of qualitative improvement of the nature of industrial tasks and of industrial products.² A technical means to this has already been sketched from Melcor. From a synthesis of both books, bearing in mind the dedication of *Le Travail et l'Homme* to the J.O.C., the following may be advanced. As social charity is towards really existing persons and not towards an abstraction called humanity, so in practice the remedial action of social charity is through *le plus prochain*, the neighbour to whom the social action of our labour immediately binds us. For the worker this means not only the brotherhood of labour expressed in his work, but also that the work thus performed in common is itself an act of social devotion to the needs of others. So envisaged, the remedial action of labour is seen to be included in the remedial action of grace, and it is plain that the fundamental power of Christian revolution lies in its foundation in the liturgical action of the Mass. With the formation of corporations in industry, bound by the real charity of immediate neighbours in social action, the principle is accepted of the settlement of economic disputes, inequalities and distress through the organisation of *le plus prochain*,

² The word "industrial" is here used in its generic sense and has no special reference to a perhaps inaccurate label for the 'ism from which we suffer.

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an organisation of industry in basic accord with Catholic theology.

It is apparent firstly that the liberal-commercialist conception of the economic life has rendered the word *justice* practically inapplicable to any industrial dispute whatever *expressed in its own terms*. (The claims of the workers being unanswerable precisely because they are expressed in *human* terms.)

Secondly, that liberal commercialism has reached an *inevitable* check in that limitless expansion without which its own principles of action involve and impose impossibilities.

Thirdly, that the check so imposed forces a reorganization and re-orientation of the economic life for which the means are already apparent in present developments of the technique of industry. But these means, in order to be so used, impose the necessity of justice both to industrial and agricultural workers, and require a greater proportional productivity of agriculture through a considerable proportional increase in the consuming power of agricultural communities.

Fourthly, that the social dynamism of this reorientation is present in the Christian ethic of labour.

Fifthly, that social charity modelled on and actually implementing real economic relations, fed by the liturgical life of the Church, is the form and life of the new order whose achievement is to be worked out in practice by Christians themselves or *failing this*, left as a pious abstraction. A pious abstraction to provide might-have-been's for the discussion of historians some half millennium hence when, conceivably, some beginnings of culture may have been re-established after the suicide of 20th century man.

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