

PROPERTY, CAPITALIST AND HUMAN¹

THE question of property is now again receiving the attention it needs. Catholics have for too long assumed that there is no difficulty about it. They have taken for granted that Communists and Socialists wished all the means of production, distribution and exchange to be public property and that Capitalists supported private property. They have taken for granted that it is a principle of Christian teaching that private property is a natural human right and that, therefore, Capitalists were on the whole in favour of Christianity, or at least that Capitalism was not anti-Christian. The development of Capitalism in the direction of large combines, cartels and monopolies has been so gradual that it has passed unnoticed that this development has involved the destruction of private property among the masses of the people. The growth of Communism and Socialism has therefore seemed to be mere wickedness.

But the events of recent years have opened our eyes. At last we are able to see that the development of Capitalism with its accompanying development of machine industry has in fact undermined and to a large extent destroyed the reality of private ownership and individual appropriation, and that, in consequence, the development of Communism and Fascism is inevitable, that in fact these movements are the logical conclusion and consummation of Capitalism.

Take as a simple example such a thing as the Great Western Railway. Before the coming of the railways there were the Stage Coach and the Carrier. Any man with a horse and cart could run a passenger service or could carry goods from town to town. Doubtless it would have been possible for a man with a large capital to buy many carts and many horses, but in fact such a man had no particular advantage. The construction of a railway was a very different matter. It needed in the first place large sums of capital, it needed Parliamentary influence to buy large tracts

¹ *De la Propriété Capitaliste à la Propriété Humaine*, par Emmanuel Mounier (Desclée et Brouwer, Paris; 8 frs.).

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of country on which to lay down the rails. It is unnecessary to pursue the description. It is clear that the Great Western Railway is a quite different kind of property from a horse and cart and that the innumerable employees have no sort of ownership. Moreover the service rendered is now a quite impersonal one. You do not ask for Mr. John Smith to carry you and your baggage from London to Oxford—a personal service. You buy a ticket and as far as you are concerned there need be no personal business whatever. The ticket may be got from an automatic machine; you need have no dealings with porters and guards; you need not even see the engine-driver. The whole thing is entirely impersonal. The service rendered is, from the point of view of the railway company, not a personal but a public one. In public speeches the directors call themselves public servants and demand protection from Parliament. If the employees complain about their wages and conditions and go “on strike” they are thought of as rebels against the community rather than as private persons quarrelling with their boss. The Great Western Railway is typical of all Capitalist enterprises. All the necessities of human life are being produced by similar gigantic, impersonal corporations. The idea of public service is the only thing which redeems what would otherwise be monstrous tyrannies; for the control of hundreds of thousands of men and women for the private gain of a comparatively small number of shareholders would be mere slavery if there were not, on both sides, a sense of public responsibility.

But the Capitalist development of industry, though it has achieved enormous material successes (a fountain pen for every street urchin, radio Beethoven in every suburban home, water-closets by the million, window frames ready-made from Norway, etc.), has at the same time failed to produce universal contentment among the workers. There are wars and rumours of wars, strikes and rumours of strikes, millions of unemployed men and women, slum cities, the devastation of the countryside, the national dependence on food from abroad with all the consequent dangers and all the consequent expense of an enormous Navy, not to men-

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tion a general ugliness and vulgarity in all things made (except the machines themselves), for this ugliness and vulgarity are naturally not visible to our Capitalist Lords and Marquises.

It is to remedy this unhappiness that the various revolutionary theories and policies have been set up. Because the dividends were privately owned, Catholics have assumed that Capitalism spelt private property; but philosophers have not been so easily hoodwinked and there have been, especially since the last war, not a few who have had the perspicacity to see that the Catholic notion of private property was being destroyed as much by Capitalism as by Communism, and that, indeed, Communism was the inevitable next step unless we could return to a real system of private ownership. Pope Leo XIII, who saw this matter very clearly, said that "as many as possible should be induced to become owners." Pope Pius XI, seeing the matter even more clearly, has spoken of the tyranny exercised by those who control monetary credit. But the confusion among Catholics as to the nature of private property has made it necessary to do more than preach sermons. It is necessary to analyse the basis of the Christian doctrine. Why is private property a natural human right? The book which provides the title of this review article is a most valuable addition to our knowledge. It is more than that; it is a weapon of offence and defence. It really does begin at the beginning. It takes nothing for granted. It shows that the Christian doctrine of human property is based upon the *being* of God Himself. And it really does pursue the matter to the end, the actual existing Capitalist world. The reviewer of this book can do very little more than urge his readers to read it.

As examples of the author's thought we may quote the following: "There is a general right of man over nature which authorizes him to use its goods *in view of his end.*" He shows that no theory of property can have authority which does not base itself upon and keep always in view the final end of man's existence. "Man has no absolute power over creatures, he has only a delegated authority. To reverse the popular saying: God proposes; Man disposes. Capital-

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ism, like Paganism and like Communism, is the heresy which attributes to man the supreme dominion of God, of a god who is conceived as concupiscence, not as love." "We possess only that which we give or that to which we give ourselves." "The primary reality in human society is the person." In Capitalist industrial production the machine and the income are the principle producers. " 'My car,' says the Bourgeois. But in reality it is the car which possesses him." "As conceived by Capitalism, private property means the uncontrolled ownership by the individual of all the wealth which the system allows him to accumulate—Capitalism has made of the right to responsibility a right to usurious profit and to impunity. While pretending to defend the person, it crushes him beneath the anonymous mechanism of money. It stifles liberty under the pressure of economic strife and secret oligarchies, and only allows enterprise to those who are already masters."

As the primary distinction for the workman is the distinction between *making* and *doing*, so, in the matter of property, the primary distinction is between *being* and *having*. And our author shows that human property must be based upon the nature of human *being*. "The question is not how is the thing used but to what purpose is it used." "The use of goods is common to all men by natural right. . . . Whereas a man administers goods as master, he is, in the matter of use, merely a member of the community." "Where poverty below the level of necessity exists, the superfluity of all is due to the necessitous. Its possession is delegated. To retain possession of wealth due to others is an injustice. In this sense we may say: property is theft." And as St. Basil said, "The bread which you hoard (*katechesis*) is the bread of him who hungers." "Wealth can have no other end than the enrichment of the common estate." "The poor have over the superfluity of the rich an *assignment* in the name of the common good. And they are entitled to make it efficacious by the formation of opinion and the reform of institutions. . . . Charity is above, not beside, justice. It is not a mite given to appease the conscience. The whole of one's superfluity must be consecrated to the good living of

all. Money is made to be spent, not saved . . . to spend requires better management than to accumulate.”

“The co-operation which modern industry entails leads to the moral necessity of co-proprietorship.” Neither the Capitalists nor the directors nor the wage-earners can be said to own anything really, or vitally, or personally, least of all the enterprise in which they are jointly concerned. “The reign of money has substituted for all other motives the single motive of indefinite personal profit. . . .” In general, the author does not propose to destroy existing institutions nor to establish collectivism, but “to form as it were collective personalities based on the organization of responsible persons—to make capital coincide with labour and responsibility—capital being held by the workers in the form of profit shares.” He proposes to hand over to collective control all those branches of industry which are essential to the public service. He maintains that “the proper function of the state is not to possess but to direct and arbitrate.” And he maintains with Cajetan “that the state has the right to dispossess unworthy proprietors and to distribute their superfluous wealth in the name of justice and the common good.” “The state has a direct right of expropriation, when it is a question of public interest. . . .”

All these matters are argued at length and the author is free from either hatred or prejudice. We have only one criticism to make. It is a pity that he has not taken up the principle that the metaphysical basis of the right to individual appropriation is the human necessity of manipulation. The doctrine of St. Thomas (and many others), echoed by Leo XIII, that men look after what is their own better than that which belongs to another, is not merely a piece of shrewd observation or worldly wisdom. It is a plain and simple fact that unless a man has control of tools and materials he cannot manipulate them as seems to him right both with regard to the good of the work to be done and the service of his fellows. And he cannot exercise that control to the full unless he enjoys the legal protection which ownership implies. Nothing that our author says is in any way contrary to this. Our regret is simply that he does not

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develop this fundamentally important truth in his thesis. "The hireling flieth, because he is a hireling, and he hath no care for the sheep." We may not conclude from this that all hirelings are bad men, but simply that they are all careless. And they are careless because in the nature of things they have not the responsibility of owners. If, therefore, we want good farming we must have a peasantry owning its own farms. And we want good farming; for though "man does not live by bread alone" he does in fact live by bread.

This matter of "ownership for the sake of control" is of particular importance. At the present time it is the development of machine industry and the control of production for the sake of buying and selling, rather than making and using, which has made Communism and Fascism so popular and given them their ethical force. If you deprive men in the mass of their responsibility as makers, you deprive them of the metaphysical basis of individual appropriation. In our industrial world it is natural that the Christian formula should be reversed. Private ownership for the sake of public use, that is the Christian doctrine ("And if anyone should ask what is the Christian teaching about private property, the Church replies without hesitation, a man should not regard his material possessions as his own but as common. . . ."—Leo XIII, *Rev. Nov.*, 19). But in the modern world the inevitable doctrine is public ownership for private use. That is where Communism is finally anti-Christian. That is why Capitalist-industrialism leads to anti-Christ.

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