

## THE CONSCIENCE OF CAPITAL

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A WRITER was recently rebuked in the Catholic Press for asking the question: *What would have happened if every pulpit in the land had thundered against the factory conditions of the early industrial revolution; supposing the Church had said, 'We care not one jot or tittle for your iron laws of Economics, we care nothing about the alleged financial ruin of the country; these are not our concern'?* And the same writer withal is again reproved for his belief that *de facto* economic forces are more powerful than moral ones, that we are driven daily to greater and greater completeness of monopoly control, that private interest would have it so, that government supports the process, and that war speeds up its *tempo*. It is of course understandable that to authors and journalists, recently busied in boosting a highly moral war, and looking for another, any doctrine of economic supremacy should be repugnant. For it must be granted that the economic argument, however true, gives a shaky moral basis for planning—whether of wars or the peace. *Habitaculum quamquam miserum quomodo non palatium aequiparantur coelestium ipsimet enim aedificaverunt. . . .*

It is not quibble but objective fact that communism and capitalism cannot be regarded as mutually exclusive. Even Lenin admitted as much when he introduced the N.E.P. Capitalism postulates distribution (however unequal) and co-operation (however unwilling). And the world has yet to witness a communism that has dispensed with capital. There have been communists and communists, Essenes, monks and nuns as well as Bolsheviks. So much for its practice. As for the theory of it, it has had other prophets than Marx. Whereas of capitalism it may be said, there is no such thing if you look for a theory: but a million capitalisms if there be a million capitalists. A Catholic apologist of capital, then, must subject himself to the truth that only he to whom earthly things are indifferent becomes their master. But he must be realist enough to recognise the twist that has been given to the truth, when the indifference is instilled merely in the breasts of the have-nots. The world is really at his feet whose conversation is genuinely in heaven. 'The prophets wrestled with the waves of social agitation. Christ walks upon them.'

When, therefore, our Lord said 'It is my will to give unto this last even as unto thee', it is not to institute a feeble fatalism that assesses character in terms of economic circumstances beyond our control. It is rather to herald the formula: *From each according to his capacity, to each according to his needs*. Is it not the text of Ruskin's indictment of the economics of competition, the foundation of a doctrine of non-competitive just exchange? There is a suspicious urgency today in the manner of preaching and re-preaching the necessity of free competition. Is it expedient that some should go to the wall? Then competition shall send them there! There is no truer saying than Peabody's that the social order is not a product of mechanism but of personality, and that personality fulfills itself *in the social order*; or Schleiermacher that true individuality is to be found in a fully organised society and a worthy society in a fully developed individual. To be acceptable, alas! to too many, any appraisal (let alone solution) of the social problem must be *Yea or Nay, have or hold-not*, every picture as flat as the canvas and in black and white. There must be neither definition nor qualification; neither half-tone nor perspective. Such are quibbles and circumlocutions.

Yet in this most intricate of complexes the greatest discrimination and delicacy is required. For never was an age more devoted to organisation as the main factor in social progress; and never did the growth of organisation, far from displacing personality, so increase its effectiveness. The one does not conflict with, nor can it be substituted for the other.

The doctrine above all others to be preached (as a speaker told his audience at one of the earlier congresses of the Co-operative movement), the object to be striven after first is the production not of *things* but of men ('fine human beings, not rich goods'). But the apostle of free competition is very sensitive in his zeal. His very soul is agonised that a 'maximum target' missed, or a delivery delayed, or his convenience threatened should be the price of carrying out the Master's will: 'unto this last'.

He must be taught to reverse a mental process in which money does not function towards the life of man, but the life of men towards money. A favourable balance of trade (that after which the powers strive) that is to say, an export exceeding the value of goods imported, the balance being the debt incurred by the loser in the deal—this is no adequate aim for nations calling themselves

civilised and even Christian. The final aim of such economics can be only the securing of a liquid profit, and the result an unpurchaseable surplus, unpurchaseable in that there is an insufficient spread of money to buy it, equally unexportable in that the same output of foreign goods would be equally unbuyable. Is this 'capitalism' that writes history in terms of an irresponsible, go-getting scramble for gain? Is this 'capitalism' that can only portray the human face in the guttering light of purchasing power mal-adjusted to productive capacity? Was the 'capitalist' on the scene saying his piece long before Karl Marx, is not he the true prophet of economic determinism?

Return to the apologists of capital. Their contention, it is true, gives the lie to Marx and is objective enough when they contend with some acerbity that today the rich no longer grow much richer and the poor, poorer. On the contrary the later adventures of wealth have been accompanied by a distribution of amenities and resources among millions who a century ago would never have dreamed of them. Thus at least for the moment. But this is not a uniform progress and means less than would appear to the grosser perceptions of prosperity. For not only have the bosses demanded in return a far greater surrender of individuality in the shop and of rights, personal and political, through the state (roving cameras, means tests, padlock laws, etc., *ad infinitum*) but whereas the poor have grown less poor they have not attained the same rate of progress as the production of riches, and it is this that gives a peculiar and inequitable character to the present social situation.

Nevertheless, in that his Scripture forbids him to penetrate to the human element (or at least to put people before things), the capitalist exegete must not see thus far. So that it is with difficulty that he is educated to see the sense of any evangelical bearing on the subject.

Yet the broad fact remains that when our Lord spoke of the rich (and never did he come so near to contempt) it was on *things*, not people, that he spent his contempt—nay, hatred. *Things*, and the scarcely-surmountable obstruction they formed along the way of truth and justice and love—the road to the kingdom. Privilege, the economic illusion of virtue, the universal substitute, covers a multitude of sins. It blesseth him that gives and him that takes. It edifies all. The courtesy-bob in object

thankfulness for the roughest condescension; the forelock pulled for the smallest respite or remission; very heaven lauded when master and landlord saw fit to return a token of the rents and the labour on which he lived. . . . These, we are told, linger yet in the memory of the elders as remnants of better days, when the Pauline injunction was heeded and there were happier dealings between masters and servants.

The more serious, we have suggested, will turn to the Gospel, and to its authorised interpretation in later times. Thus, in a broadcast to the Argentine, Pope Pius XII reminded us that 'when he who has an abundance of riches is generous towards others he is only carrying out an elementary duty towards him for whom all good things proceed'. In his *Summa* St Thomas says that the poor have 'by natural right' a claim to the things 'a person possesses in superfluity' and that no person must hold material things to be his own absolute property but common property and therefore 'must readily let others who are in need have part of them'.

Logically enough a former editor of a well-known continental journal remarks, 'These teachings of St Thomas certainly go far beyond the obligation to give alms and to be generous to the needy. In them Catholics may well find the legitimate credentials to be admitted as co-planners and co-builders of that economic and social New Order which, in continental Europe, is already clearly outlined as the coming secular civilisation of Europe. Should this New Order come about without the collaboration of the Catholic element, or, more fatal still, after overcoming religious resistance, it would spell the end of Christian influence in the life of the affairs of the state, and of the masses of the people.'