

## POVERTY AND THE WORKERS

**R**EADERS of *Labour, Life and Poverty* by the Polish economist F. Zweig (Gollancz, 1948) will have met a strange aspect of working class lives. They will have met workers earning £5 per week and spending over 30s. of it on their own cigarettes, or men spending 30s. a week on drink. The general picture of the London worker described in this book is of a class saved from pauperism by council houses and social services only to return to pauperism by their spending habits.

But how can it be otherwise? Our desires in these days are determined by so many factors that have one thing in common and that is that we should have more. The heroes on the films are never without a cigarette, never without a drink; they have no need to work, even when their 'work' is part of the background of the film. Money never restricts them, their women have beautiful clothes and their apartments are the last word in luxury. Our popular reading material follows the same line and helps to create a desire for more and more. Our advertisers do the same. New desires are very often created and they have, in fact, become enshrined in American economics as part of an explaining away of depressions.<sup>1</sup>

So we workers want more money and when we get it we want more still so that we can ape these ideals held up to us by those who want our money. The whole idea of an ever increasing standard of life is promoted by those who benefit materially by our constant strivings to possess more and more money. They seek it with us, because they will take it away by selling us 'better' cigarettes, 'better' motor cars, 'better' drinks and so on.

We workers have been gulled into this game of ever wanting more. We have been gulled by the rich who work on the principle that 'those who have money have the duty to get more'. We complain about these rich people and attack the system that makes them rich and denounce the greed for money as the ruling force in the state. We forget that 'the fault is ultimately ours, because "money" is the ruling power in our hearts'.

'There is no idolatry so destructive of charity, so desolating, there is nothing which so certainly obscures the face of God, as the desire of money—the root of all evil. "The root of all evil!" Did I make up that phrase? No; it is the word of God to man. . . .'

The opposite to this love of money, this glorification of wealth and of material possessions, is poverty.

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<sup>1</sup> This probably over-simplifies a complex problem.

'The principle of poverty is the only one consonant with the nature and destiny of man and his material environment and condition.' It is this principle that has to be taught to the workers. It is trite to say that this is the age of the workers, to point out that they can control politics and to a large extent dominate economics. Trite but true. And the horror of it is that the workers appear to desire to reproduce the same materialistic society of the middle classes against which they revolted. We workers must realise that the principle of money, with its greed, its cruelty, its class wars, has failed and that we cannot rebuild society on it. We need a new principle, that of poverty.

Not, let us hasten to point out, the poverty of destitution, not the evil poverty that was forced on us by the middle classes and the merchants in their search for more money. That is not the poverty we want. We have tried that, perforce, and we have learnt how evil it is, how it destroys men, how it breaks up the family, how it produces a soulless society, how it breeds bitterness, hatred and wars; that evil poverty we denounce, we fight it with all our strength.

But there is a good poverty, the poverty that is a blessing, that has been a centrepiece of Christian sociology as long as there has been any Christian sociology. 'To go without, to give up, to lose rather than gain, to have little rather than much—that is its positive teaching. Blessed are the poor in spirit; the humble, the common man, the common woman, simple women, mothers of children. . . .'

We know them among the workers, perhaps mainly in the older generation. Men and women happy in their simple sufficiencies, not asking for much more and always ready to help a neighbour. There are not too many of them but they can be found. The pity is that their children have all too often been caught up in the pleasures of life which they find so 'enthraling' and which is truly so-called because they make slaves of us.

This should mark us Christians off from the rest of the world. Unfortunately we are almost entirely bound up in the same chains as the non-Christians. 'Communism wants to make the rich poor so that the poor may be rich. But the Church of God wants to make the rich poor and the poor holy.' This 'poverty begins in the mind—it is first of all a way of believing, thinking and feeling'.

The first result of this good poverty would be the attack on the world's materialistic standards. No longer would we want 'more clothes, more rooms, more speed, more comfort, more luxury, more amusements, and to get all these things, more money, more dividends—more colonial supplies of "raw materials", more "spheres

of influence'', more trading agreements'.

We would want a sufficiency and we would be happy with it. If a family has enough to eat of what use is it to bring rare delicacies from the ends of the earth at great expense? If a man has enough clothes why add more to his wardrobe? If a house can hold a family in reasonable comfort why add unnecessary rooms that entail hosts of servants?

These wants are only possible in a world based on a society 'founded solely on the notion that those who have money have the duty to get more, and that those who have none must be enslaved or exploited or "employed" until machines make their existence unnecessary'.

The search after money brings industrial strife, brings hatred, brings discord and dethrones peace to promote war.

But we workers in realising this, if we ever do, would not cease being revolutionaries. Having too much is an evil. Having too little is an evil. If we are prepared to renounce our false ideals it is only to reject those idols under whose worship we have suffered. We shall revolt and shall seek to end the possession of wealth as a means to avoid work, as a means to enslave the workers.

Our ideal would be more that description of the results of the co-operative revolution in northern Nova Scotia—we have no millionaires here, but we have no very poor.

This Christian poverty, which ensures social justice, which does not hanker after unnecessary goods should be welcomed because it brings peace. There can be no peace while our ideals are riches, wealth and comfort.

We want peace in this world, peace between nations, peace between classes, peace between neighbours.

'Let peacemakers remember. Let them above all remember that it is no manner of good preaching peace unless we preach the things that make for peace—that even the love of our fellow men is no good unless it means giving rather than taking, yielding rather than holding, sharing rather than exclusive possession . . .' and 'the plain truth is: only in poverty can we have peace'.

This poverty with its reasonable sufficiency for human life, would begin a revolution that would eliminate stock exchanges as we know them, eliminate gambling on futures, eliminate profiteering. The list could be extended and the charge would be that we were away in the clouds.

That is probably true. To talk to the workers about poverty is extremely difficult. It is possible to talk to the rich about the dangers of riches and at times they will feel uncomfortable. With

the poor who have suffered from the evil poverty there is a feeling that to talk to them about the good poverty is either to insult them or to crush their revolutionary instincts. How difficult it would be to show them that to follow the course of this good poverty would be to work a revolution more complete than any Russian one.

How can we do it? Perhaps introduce them to the writings of Eric Gill. All that has been written here is an imperfect exposition of one section of his thought and those who know Gill's writings would echo the view that it would be better to send people to them rather than impose such an exposition on them.

He was misunderstood and suspected by those who did not see the world as he saw it and they glossed over such views as his on poverty. They did not understand it because money ruled in their hearts and they did not want a revolution.

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(All the passages quoted in this article are from the writings of Eric Gill.)

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## THE PURITAN DENIAL

THE technical achievements and elaboration since the sixteenth century do not comprise the whole of modern capitalism. Capitalism has been much more than that; it has been an outlook on life with its own peculiar orientation and values. To endeavour to understand capitalism as a socio-economic form, therefore, it will be of help to look at the type of character which played a fundamental rôle in the capitalistic development. There is a vast literature on the relation between capitalism and Calvinism, especially in its Puritan form. The general question does not concern us here. What we shall consider is the Puritan character as it appeared in the middle seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In this way it will be possible for us to discern more clearly the temper from which the modern technical innovations sprung or by which they were exploited. The spirit that lies behind these new methods in many ways involves an asceticism as rigid and as austere as the older medieval one: but the goal is different, the *ascesis* is intramundane, while the reward is no longer invisible but very near and very tangible.

When one examines the Puritan mentality at this period, that character with its intense energies and limited horizon, it reveals those features that have made possible the organisation of industry and wealth which has caught millions of human beings in its