

Catholic Social Reform Versus Socialism

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It has long been prophesied because it has long been coming, and now it has come: the conflict between the Catholic Church and the movement which calls itself Socialism. The issue has already joined, and quite soon it will be fought out, in some places actually under arms — elsewhere by other means — a conflict from one end of Europe to the other.

The doctrine which is labelled Socialism has one fundamental conception sustaining it. It is a negative conception, but none the less powerful. It is the conception that private property is something fortuitous, institutional, not organically attached to the nature of man.

Of course the Socialist movement has a motive force behind it far more positive, and its philosophy springs from roots far more profound than that. It is accompanied almost everywhere by symptoms that have nothing to do with this doctrine, and which betray an origin of direct and violent reaction against Christian civilisation. For however much your economic Socialist may protest (and reasonably) that his Socialism has nothing to do with the attack on marriage, or the attack on patriotism, or the attack on honour, or the attack upon the use of our common traditional European food and drink, or the attack on our intense European tradition of human liberty, or the attack on our fundamental European tradition of immortality, or the attack on our immemorial use of shrines — though the Socialist may pretend that these things have nothing to do with his economic creed, yet in point of fact you do find the general, political movement called "Socialism" carrying all these other things along with it in its tide.

The Dogma of the Socialist

I say it is obviously true that the Socialist movement is but the effect of something far deeper than its negation of private property, and that the motive driving it — a motive subconscious in most of its adherents — is something antagonistic to, and directly subversive of, our Christian civilisation. But the mere criterion, the test, by which you say of a theory that it is Socialistic or not Socialistic, is the dogma of the Socialist on private property. He says indeed that he does not mind private property in things that are not used for the purposes of production and are consumed in personal enjoyment. But it is clear that his denial of the right to private property in the things that are used for the purposes of production, proceeds from a general denial of the truth that property is something organic in man and native to his being.

He tolerates, he allows, a certain measure of private property as an amusement or concession, but the moment the principle of private property comes into conflict with any other principle — as, for instance, the principle of equality, or the principle of giving man as much of enjoyment as possible — property, for the Socialist mind, disappears. The right to private property is a claim which the Socialist regards as the chief cause of unhappiness and injustice among men.

How often do we not read arguments to show, for instance, that an increment in the value of land is not created by the owner of the land, and that therefore it is unjust? Or that the employment of a poorer man by a wealthier man is necessarily an exploitation of the former? Or that the real producer of wealth, where a man and a machine are working together, is the man and not the machine, and that therefore the product should by right belong — not to the man indeed, for that would lead to inequality, but — to the community which is composed of the men that work, and which gives the produce all its value? In all these arguments the thing taken for granted is that no moral right to property exists.

The Affinities of Socialism

We all know the origin of this singular and ephemeral doctrine, and some of us have seen enough of it and have read enough of history not only to discover its origin but to be able to prophesy its fate.

It cannot possibly succeed, because it is founded upon nonsense. Its fundamental doctrine — the doctrine that men do not desire to own and do not normally own and are not more thoroughly men when they own — is a contradiction of basic human experience. It is as much a contradiction as to say that men do not want to eat and drink or do not need sleep.

But though, being inhuman, the system is unworkable, it does not follow that it will not try with great intensity to reach its impossible goal and may not in that effort produce great and very evil results; for the practical consequence of a strong effort towards the unreachable Socialistic ideal is the establishment of a servile condition — of the many working compulsorily for the few.

Most men working for the Socialistic ideal have no conception that they are, in practice, approaching this end; and even the few who are directly working for it — the men and women like Mr. and Mrs. Webb, who love to regulate labour so as to make it secure, but who make no effort towards confiscation of capital — even these have not yet realised how near they have come to the establishment of a Servile State. But, consciously or sub-consciously in various degrees, the individuals joining in the Socialist "push" throughout Europe are making directly for that state of affairs. They are making for a state of affairs in which a few men will be free and the rest of the world will be working for them under compulsion.

This explains the singular sympathy shown by international finance for a theory which might seem to threaten its power. The mind of international finance and the mind of international Socialism are the same type of mind. Both forces are the enemies of property. The one, the accumulation of economic power in a few hands, is the practical negation of property; the other, the Socialist theory, is the theoretic negation of it: and the leaders of Capitalist practice and the leaders of Socialist organisation are brothers when it comes to their common disgust with the fundamental traditions of Europe. Each will speak with contempt of the peasant. Each regards a good division of property and the founding of the State upon a large number of private owners as something odd and outworn.

The Church the Only Real Opponent

By an accident which has been repeated over and over again in history, but which always looks strange at each new apparition of it, the Catholic Church has suddenly come out as the sole force everywhere resisting this new movement.

I say "suddenly" for though in a sense the Catholic Church has been there to resist such a movement ever since she was founded, yet men are only beginning to realise and appreciate, whether within or without her body, that she, and she alone, is to-day the Opposition to what outside her ranks has become universal.

The Catholic Church was not founded to defend private property any more than she was founded to defend the institution of marriage or the right of a man to decent living, or, for that matter, the right of a man to laughter or to music or any other good thing. But incidentally because she is a witness to the truth she is a witness to all truth. In particular since she is the guardian of morals she is compelled to safeguard all those things which good morals connote, in a word, she is compelled to safeguard the sanity of man. If some large section of the human race went mad to-morrow on the matter of music and said that all music was immoral, put down the playing of music wherever they could and persecuted those who played or listened to music, we should have the Catholic Church appearing in opposition. Sooner or later you would get the definition: "If any man says that the playing of a musical instrument is in itself an offence against the moral law, let him be anathema."

Such a parallel sounds ridiculous to-day, but not more ridiculous than the position of the Catholic Church as the defender of private property would have sounded to our forefathers. The Catholic Church defends the institution of private property because the institution of private property is human, is native to man; and because the only real alternative to that institution is a set of institutions which degrade the dignity of man, invade his free will, and lessen his immediate majesty and his power to save his own soul.

The interest of the great conflict which is now actively joined has indeed certain novelties, though much the most of its character is but a repetition of things already well known — things with which the most of Europe has grown exceedingly familiar. The novelties are specially to be found in the way in which the weapons of the two opponents are engaged.

In most of the very great struggles from which the Catholic Church has emerged triumphant during her long history the opponent has attacked directly, but the battle now engaged is not of this kind. It is not a parallel battle — that is, a battle on two fronts each facing the other; it is a turning movement. A number of accidents in the immediate past — the character and development of the Protestant countries, the way in which the Press has monopolised information, the character of the owners of the Press, the line of development which happens to have been followed by the inheritors of the French Revolution — these and twenty other modern things have caused the axis of the attack to be indirect. The Socialist was not to his knowledge marching against the Catholic Church. He was marching against a position to which the Catholic Church lay, as it were, in flank. Only after he had gone a certain way along his road did he find himself menaced by the Church, and that in a fashion which even yet continues to puzzle him, though the greater number of the Socialist leaders have made up their mind that the struggle is inevitable and have determined to mass against the Catholic organisation.

Conversely, the Catholic reply to Socialism is not simple; the weapons which the Catholic Church is using against this new heresy cannot be as direct as were the old. They cannot be the main weapon of the Catholic mind. That mind is occupied with the scheme of life as a whole: you cannot expect it to concentrate entirely upon one detail of human life and upon one part of the many which build up a healthy and normal political organisation.

The Revolution of To-day

Therefore it is — on account of the indirect contact between the two opponents — that there is still so much confusion. That confusion will, perhaps in quite a short time, be eliminated. As the Catholic resistance becomes more clear, the Socialist body will be turned towards an immediate attack upon the Catholic Church. You will find those who organise the Socialist international movement (closely intermixed with those who organise and dictate the international financial movement) directly pointing to the Catholic Church as the enemy, and aiming immediately, openly and consciously at her destruction. We see it already appearing in the increasing jealousy and irritation provoked by the reappearance of strong Catholic political powers in Europe as a result of the war.

Poland is called unreasonable. Why? Because it is a Catholic country and a country of peasants. And France the same. And Italy the same. What our opponents tell us is reasonable, what seems to them normal, what they understand, is industrial civilisation, with its absence of faith in the great towns, its organisation of a proletariat under capitalists, its reduction of humanity to a dust where no one knows his neighbour, its anonymity, its obedience to a few concealed leaders.

No doubt the thing should be reformed (they tell us), but reformed upon its own lines. A spirit opposed to industrialism, a spirit which has developed on other lines, the spirit of the fields and of the village, of tradition, is an irritant to these people; they are already a little bewildered and very jealous of its growing power.

For let there be no error about this: the tide in Europe has turned. The effect of the Great War has been to hasten the decline of modern industrialism, the atheist industrialism of the great towns. It has also wounded, perhaps to death, the Eastern Schism. It has vastly accelerated that process whereby Protestant communities were already before the war rapidly losing all positive doctrine. It has actually resurrected one great Catholic nation. It has reinforced three others. It has ground to powder what was the keystone of the anti-Catholic arch in Europe — Prussia. And (though this last effect is not yet apparent, for it is as yet only in the germ) it has released among the various German peoples and in Hungary and among the Western Slavs, forces, hitherto subordinate, of Catholic thought. The Catholic in Central Europe has no longer before his eyes, as an object lesson, the superior strength of Protestant Prussia. And the effect of that revolution is incalculable.

The field is left free for the struggle between the Socialist movement (relying the more and more on the growing discontent of the embarrassed industrial regions) and the growing power of the Catholic Church. That struggle will involve far more than the defence of private property; it will involve all our traditions and institutions, and their sum, which is civilisation itself.
