

LENIN¹

SET up to commemorate the social principles of Leo XIII, there stands in Rome a statue of a modern worker. Its significance is, I take it, unequivocal. Quite definitely it is not what a number of people would like it to be—an expression in stone of those picturesque stories with which the affluent are wont to edify their children about the accommodating fortitude and longanimity of the Destitute. Nor is it merely a comfortable eulogy of labour, an index to the spiritual desirability of mean circumstance (a gift dispensed with suspicious altruism by the prosperous). There is danger to the soul in destitution as well as in opulence. There is a fair distinction between poverty and pauperism. (Blessed are the poor, but in servility there is no virtue.) There is no libel on the Church so gross, yet apparently so ably substantiated from within, as that she encourages an attitude of *laissez-faire* towards the exploited, or presents economic misery solely to theotechnic treatment and compensation hereafter. A certain type of Christian is inspired by a convenient fatalism in respect of the disinheritance of half the world. Him alone have we to thank for the grossest falsehood of all—that religion is the opium of the masses.

The assertion of a heroic principle is intransigent and eternal. That is why, in speaking of Lenin, I speak first of the Worker's statue by the Church of St. John Lateran. Outside Russia there was none in November, 1917, that believed that the reign of Lenin would exceed, in duration, that of Kerensky. Much

¹ *Lenin*. By James Maxton (Peter Davies; pp. 183; 5/-); also biographies of Lenin by others, notably Trotsky, Gorki and Krupskaya.

later even, at home, there was robust confidence in counter-revolution, in the mercenaries and adventurers who, supported by the Central Powers and Allies, posed to the world as the Saviours of Holy Russia. Thence onward flowed ceaseless prophecy that the dictatorship of the proletariat could not last. It was forgotten that Lenin dealt in absolute values, the others in effect: and his reign continues from the grimly simple tomb opposite Saint Basil's Cathedral in the Red Square.

There was no mere opportunism about Lenin—nor chance about the Revolution which he effected. At the High School of Simbirsk, at 30 Holford Square, in Siberia, in prison, wherever, Vladimir Ilyich Ul'yanov moved with the inspiration of certainty. He was conscious, the present writer was told (by one who knew him as intimately as he was known), of the 'inevitable within himself'—of the process to which sincerity alone bade him respond. He was not an egotist: he was merely certain. Our noblest analogy were that of the transcendent certainty of Catholicism. It is more comfortable (for us of the Western world) to ignore the little, dominant man with his Mongol face, shrewd, twinkling eyes, and large, sensitive mouth, whom we know from our illustrated papers. But it is a little difficult. In a comparatively short life-time, very much of which was spent in exile or in prison, repressed and attacked unceasingly, even in the day of his power, by every weapon—forcible and moral—known to the political world, he yet effected a revolution as great as any known to history, with the exception of Christianity. And if it be suggested that he alone was not the source of Bolshevism—well, then, he was greater yet, he harnessed and controlled the energy of revolution, in the five short years that were given him, gave it a form that should last (who knows?) till Armageddon. We have given up waiting for the

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crash that will not come. The U.S.S.R. is economically sound. Little can be gained by denying the statement of Mr. Maxton that there is no sign of collapse, nothing but industrial and agricultural progress, under Stalin and his commissars. We do not talk idly; rather we face the *facts*, which to our certain knowledge can be verified. We derive no comfort from the raggedness, the incompleteness of things in Russia. The knowledge of a task not wholly achieved is the most effective spur to its accomplishment. The Soviet scheme will never be complete; and, therefore, the dynamic of communism may be perennial. We are concerning ourselves with absolute values. The Bolshevik is moved by no necessity in his apology for the use of force or the abrogation of the moral and humane standard. His critic is a society acquiescent in the bloodiest pandemic of butchery ever known, in the effective suspension of morality by a handful of politicians. Bolshevism, moreover, it is argued, quintessentially humanitarian, employs violence for the sake of comradeship. Can this be said of Capitalism?

Lenin was (incredibly enough) a man of business in the sense that practical test was co-efficient with theory: he was shameless in descending to the level of his enemy in order to realise his dreams. There is good reason to believe that Mr. Maxton is right when he says that the Dictator was opposed to the execution of the family of Nicholas on grounds of humanity. The hands of the central Government were forced by the Ural Committee. Lenin, though a ruthless doctrinaire, was acutely sensitive to the infliction of suffering on anyone: he winced necessarily even at the retribution meted out to the authors of past misery: and the butchery of peasant and worker was a nightmare. Yet he did not oppose the Cheka—a terrible successor to the *Opritchniki* and police of Czarist days.

Once again let us insist. Faith resided in the intellect: Lenin was not just the Nihilist inspired perennially by the memory of his brother's death on the scaffold in '87. Nor was he moved by necessity from without when in his desire to identify himself with the sufferings of the workers he threw up a brilliant academic and legal career. We wish that Mr. Maxton had stressed this aspect of Lenin more in his book—which is, on the whole, a well-balanced treatment of objective fact.

It is good enough to say that Bolshevism is historically, after the riot of unscrupulous individualism, a reaction against the all-excluding worship of property. When in 1915 Conscription was applied to the life and limb of our nation, there was no such conscription of wealth. Sins against our social life alone cry to Heaven for vengeance. Against this convention Communism is the protest *par excellence*. Bolshevism seems inevitable in the order of historical necessity. Only if man had remained universally faithful to the Christian revolution (the subversal of materialist values) could Bolshevism have been avoided. Only if we return to the Catholic Church, cease to subscribe to the prostitution of life-values, can world-communism be rendered less likely. But free-will (the communists cynically observes) has proved an indifferent tool: he will have another. The Soviet leaders in high places seem to some Catholic specialists bad men inspired by a bad ideal. We prefer to leave their moral character alone. They are certainly mainly bookmen, and we wish (since the whole question turns on that of property) both they and their Western critics would study St. Thomas. In human experience liberty can be apprehended as a function of property. The destruction of property is effectively the destruction of freedom. To renounce property (or to have it renounced for one) is to bind oneself to the will of

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another—be it the state or the capitalist. The monk is justified in his dependence, in the renunciation of property, because ‘in religion’ he binds himself to the Will of God. For Catholics (of all men, the most free), as there is only one God, so there is only one Religion. But the real Christian conception, and use, of property is restricted. As the suggestion of any sort of interference with private property is usually dubbed ‘Bolshy legislation,’ we had best quote St. Thomas.

Of the use of external things he says: ‘Concerning the enjoyment of them a man should not look upon external goods as private, but as common, in this sense that he must freely share them in another’s necessity’ (*Summa Theol.* 2^a-2^{ae}; LXVI. 2). Again, ‘The purpose of earthly goods is to meet human needs; the division of property . . . must be subordinated to these needs; and the superabundant wealth of some is by natural law due to the poor’ (*Ibid.*, 7). As for the Fathers, one can imagine, fairly accurately, their stormings at our present economic system. ‘It is the bread of the famished you hoard, the money of the needy that you keep buried’ (Basil the Great).

There is a crisis to-day of which the fall of Imperial Rome, the discrediting of mediaeval culture and the *éclat* of Democracy were predecessors in the natural order of things. The Traditionalist dwelling among ghosts from sad years is content to wail ‘*dies mali sunt,*’ and is alone in his last quarrel with the inevitable. The reader of the Pope’s Encyclicals knows that he has more to do than deplore: ‘Even more severely (than Revolution) must be condemned the foolhardiness of those who neglect to remove the *conditions which exasperate the minds of the people.*’

The Catholic Church is constructive. She seeks first whereon to build: are we to acquit the age wholly of virtue? From a vast number of vices there is distinct in

the new generation a tendency to analysis, to censure and dissent. Youth to-day is superlatively contemptuous of majorities; and conformity is no longer the hall-mark of the elect. The convention of the sects is no longer mistaken for Religion, education is recognised without the (once universally recognised) *sine qua non* of the university. The man in the street has intellectual interests and affinities. This is the generation in which Lenin lived. Tragically enough, there is a growing tradition that the dissent of Youth is the birthright of revolution. It is not—but it is well on its way to being usurped for want of a claimant. A great force has awakened men, even in these early hours, whose impulse is to Rome. God forbid that, through the rift between tradition and the modern mind, it should be diverted. The rising generation may grasp at Truth with implements strange to the traditionalist. Convention (apt ever to masquerade as a thing of absolute value) holds up its hands in horror. Snubbed and disqualified in the pursuit of Truth, Youth takes himself and his tools elsewhere. Art, too austere and intellectual to be apprehended by sense, is dubbed grotesque: integrity and unity are so rare that their appearance in stone is the occasion of derisive amazement. They fly for succour to Moscow. *Au verso*, the distrust of tradition is so great, the human animal so absurdly given to associating unassociable things, that Christ is made the protagonist of economic oppression. Once more he is vested in soiled purple and mocked with the mockery of children who do not understand. The Anti-God poster is as much pathetic as anything else.

To conclude: These are the apprehensions suggested, by Mr. Maxton's book, to a Catholic reader. Bolshevism is an idealism born of economics. It is also a combination of business and religion: and, strangely enough, the business is subordinated to the

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religion. So great is the missionary impulse of Bolshevism that the Soviet expends large sums of money on foreign propaganda. But it is not Red gold the capitalists need fear so much as the generous propensity for spending it. Bolshevism has moral force as well: its intellectual affinities increase daily, whereas Western capitalism (I refer specifically to our individualism born of the Reformation), in its terror of Russia, confesses to the rapid process of disintegration within itself. What it does not admit is that its increasing debility is a symptom of a bankrupt ideality, of a divorce from the intellectuals that becomes more and more pronounced. To communists in Russia, Western capitalism wears as sinister an aspect as communism does to us. But it is brute strength they fear, not moral. We are conscious not merely of the challenge of Bolshevism and Eastern nationalism, but of our moral insecurity, of insincerity in the past—a past that will not return. For the moral standards are subverted, the intellectual world undergoing a rigorous metamorphosis. The sects despair of survival in their present form, at least doubt it. There is a disedifying rush to accommodate the new arrivals, be they ever so sinister.

The Catholic Church alone remains; change nor compromise she cannot—nor has she need. Her attitude to the Traditionalist is not necessarily approving—to the attempted universalisation of cultures and traditions not essentially catholic. She can dispense with tradition's politic. In the light of her day she needs no lamps. Not the most universal pressure of snobbism and individualism can force the Church to err—nor stem the tide of the inevitable. We pray that when She leads along the path of Truth, ultimately (be it ever so sluggishly) the world will follow.

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