

## *Thesis and Antithesis*

### I

#### PRIVATE PROPERTY IN A CULTURAL CIVILIZATION

**THE** importance of private property as one of the fundamental institutions of a Christian State is the central idea of **all** Catholic thought on social reconstruction, and the widest possible extension of property among the community is regarded as an essential requirement of social justice. It is, however, too readily assumed by many that a diffusion **of** private ownership of productive property, whether it be in the form of land or the possession **of** any craft or business, would of itself provide a solution to most of the problems that now afflict **us**. But a more detailed survey of the economy of modern civilized society will reveal the fact that few, if any, of its members can be entirely self-supporting, and that an interchange of goods and services is a daily requirement. However widespread individual ownership may become, this necessity for a constant series **of** exchanges on the part of the owners **is** the dominating feature of any civilized community. This aspect of the question **of** the reconstruction of our social order has not so far received the consideration that it deserves, but the importance of its bearing on social justice can be gauged by a brief examination of the peculiar nature of property in our economic system.

Whenever Catholics speak **of** private property as being natural to man, and, having regard to his condition of susceptibility to the effects of original sin, as the arrangement most conducive to social harmony, and argue from this that ownership implies the right of the possessor to the unlimited return or profit accruing from its use, it is seldom remembered that property **as** possessed in the majority of cases to-day depends **on** its value on the functioning of a highly complex and interdependent series of economic operations. By this is meant that no property, whether productive or otherwise, **is** sufficient of itself to provide for all

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the requirements of the owner, but has its market or exchange value on account of the existence of a system of society in which division of labour is the chief characteristic. And it is because of this differentiation of activity among the community that things and services will exchange for other services and things through the medium of money. Apart then from this complex framework, few forms of property, including trades and professions, have any high degree of inherent value. Even land is not excepted, for although the produce resulting from the labour applied to it has real value to the owner independently of any particular social organization, unless the possessor is content with an extremely simple manner of living, the conditions attaching to all other forms of property will obtain here also, although in a different degree.

If, then, property as it exists in modern civilization has value only in so far as it is exchangeable through some common medium, and if the exchangeability depends on the existence of a system of labour division resulting in a continual interchange of goods and services, it follows that the better the system is regulated the greater will be the degree of security of the component units. But where there is little or no such control of these economic activities security will be impossible, and instead of an equitable distribution of the necessities and amenities of life, fortuitous circumstances will bring about the impoverishment of some units and the disproportionate enrichment of others. This undue aggrandisement is exemplified best of all in the case of combines and trusts, but it is none the less true that smaller bodies are able to attract to themselves more than a fair share of the general wealth arising out of economic activity. And even if the nation were composed of craftsmen and peasant proprietors, all the monopolist features of combines would tend to reproduce themselves in miniature unless exchange regulation were applied to prevent any such disequilibrium among the units.

The purpose of this brief analysis of our economic order has been to show that the traditional teaching of the rights of private ownership has no validity when applied to pro-

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**perty in our** present system. When most forms of property consisted of land which, without the necessity of a series of exchanges through a monetary medium, provided for nearly all the requirements of the owner, such property had an absolute value, and all increment derived from it could be morally justified as the possessor's right. By to-day the case is quite different. The division of labour, made possible by the extended utilization of natural forces, has resulted in property acquiring a variety of economic forms, none of which is capable of itself of supplying the needs of the owner, and is consequently possessed of only a relative value. Such species, therefore, are in a different category to those forms to which the traditional rights were ascribed, and to claim for these new categories these same rights is to ignore the fact of their essential relativeness of economic value.

The Christian teaching on the obligations involved in ownership and the doctrine of the just price and just wage require, it would seem, an amplification wide enough to embrace this aspect of property, in order to achieve the fullest ideal of social justice. For it should now be obvious that the notion of the right of an owner to the unlimited profit earned from his property—and the term includes all its varied forms—is in opposition to any scheme of control, and serves only as a supposed ethical basis for a competitive arrangement, which, as has been shown, is incompatible with any equitable distribution of the means of sustenance, and consequently the negation of social justice.

If, then, this analysis of property as it exists and functions to-day is a true one it will be conceded that co-operation must supersede competition. But since modern civilization is not comprized of groups more or less detached economically from each other, such co-operation must be all embracing; and this could be brought about only by State supervision, which would be, no doubt, a stupendous undertaking. However formidable this may seem, the degree of administration already achieved would have appeared equally impossible of realization a century ago, and although a perfect system of State economic guidance

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may be unrealizable, nevertheless much could be accomplished towards this end if the will to achieve it were operative.

There is, however, a widespread prejudice against any State interference in our economic relationships, and the least mention of any such co-ordination suggests to many a regimentation completely destructive of human liberty. The reply to such criticism is that the guidance here desiderated is not a substitution of complete State control for private and personal activity, but is merely complementary to whatever degree of co-operation is possible among units themselves.

The alternatives to such supervision on the part of the civil power are either the continuance of the free competitive system with its appalling poverty and distress, for modern society is far too complex for the application of effective remedies by units independently of State assistance, or else a return to a primitive order of society with its diffusion of property of the absolute category supplying any general system. Here, then, is the opportunity for most of the requirements of the owner without the necessity of money exchange transactions. But this latter type, even if realizable, would mean the denial of the achievements of centuries, and is therefore too retrogressive for serious consideration. It is not here assumed that the transition from the competitive order to the co-operative one could be effected all at once. Individual efforts towards co-operation fostered by the State would necessarily precede any general system. Here, then, is the opportunity for Catholics to supply the examples of justice and charity by co-operating among themselves. Their abandonment of the notion that chance impoverishment and possible inordinate enrichment are necessary conditions of private ownership of productive property would allow of better use being made of their resources, and more employment could then be provided by them.

It is not yet sufficiently realized that social justice requires that every human being has a right to the means of sustenance and to the conditions for a full and complete

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sharply with the modern connotations of 'control.' Nor is it true that property in the Catholic sense involves a competitive organization. The contrary is true. The Distributist State provides the only field for real co-operation. The classic co-operators were the Guildsmen. It is too often forgotten that the Guilds were based on personal private property, and personal private work. Property is essential to the Catholic position, not because it solves all social problems of itself, but because it provides the only soil or atmosphere in which liberty and happiness can flourish. In a state of ideally diffused property, the Leonine Contract is *impossible*: it is *difficult* in proportion as the State approaches that ideal. And since the Leonine Contract is at the root of all social injustice, we may say that the ultimate justification of property is that it preserves a man and his family from the domination of other human wills. This principle, so vital to Catholic philosophy, is paramount, and transcends all considerations of period and place, since it touches the very nature of man and of human society.

But Mr. Powney points out, quite accurately, that the modern form of society is ultimately incompatible with real diffused property. Mr. Eric Gill made this clear in the February issue of **BLACKFRIARS**, and it is demonstrably true that a mechanical organization of society involves some form of communist basis, be it Bolshevik or Fascist.

Which are we to give up? Mr. Powney tries to compromise, if I read him rightly, by suggesting some form of State-planned and controlled production and distribution, (Why end with the State? Why not the World Control of Mr. Wells?) But this is not to save the primary institution. It is to destroy it. Mr. Powney may rightly be restrained from charging me £5 for a copy of his article, but if I, having been made Controller of Literature on account of my superior ruthlessness, direct that Mr. Powney shall publish no more articles until **1936**, I am destroying his property in his own ideas. If there is a glut of Mr. Powney's articles, the matter will be attended to by the abandoned race of editors, and this is the true operation of those mutual restraints in which property flourishes. As State Con.

of the achievement of centuries, and is therefore too retrogressive for serious consideration.' But he abandons his own test. He deploras 'the appalling poverty and distress.' They are part of the achievement of the past two centuries. He would not 'perpetuate the mechanical industrialism rampant to-day.' It is even more definitely part of the achievement. So are the fifteen-inch gun and the contraceptive. In the field of justice, time is *not* of the essence of the contract, and until we can divest ourselves of this fallacy, our discussions on social justice will be vain. They were wiser in the past. Father Witcutt has recently discussed an important book by Gina Lombroso, in which the writer claims that all the mechanical principles were known to and rejected by the ancient civilizations. I have no knowledge on the point, but I do know that the steam engine was being invented and rejected all over Europe from the thirteenth century onwards. So striking an 'achievement' must have been rejected for some reason. May it not have been for its estimated effect on liberty and happiness? Can we, at all events, eliminate the fallacy of time-progress, and apply the tests of liberty and happiness? The terms of the problem are these and no other.

*The Catholic doctrine of Private Property is primary and independent of period. Leo XIII, in the full tide of industrialism, emphasizes it even more strongly than St. Thomas. That being so, what conditions foster it, and what are inimical to it? We are bound to work for the first and against the second. I am prepared to follow such an inquiry wherever it leads. If it is patient or clamorous of mechanization I will accept it. But for the same reasons I will reject the incompatibles. Will our friendly opponents do the same? I claim without arrogance that the ground is ours, for I have not yet seen a reasoned discussion for mechanization, or its blood-brother 'planned economy,' which does not repose upon a time-argument having no relation to liberty and happiness. Mechanization and diffused property are incompatible. So stands the case, by the admission of Mr. Powney. Which are we to give up, the Controllers or the **Rock?***

H. ROBBINS.