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WEALTH

ALL civilisation is built upon material goods. So long as man lives "from hand to mouth", so long as there are no permanent material goods and fixed property, civilisation cannot arise. Notwithstanding the moral and social dangers of wealth and the acquisitive instinct, the fact remains that higher civilisation presupposes a certain material wealth and stable conditions of property. One cannot deny that cultural life always has a certain *bourgeois* character. The beginning of civilisation coincides with the transition from nomadic life to agriculture and permanent residence. It is not by mere chance that the word culture originates from agriculture. Agriculture is the primary stage of man's mastery of nature. Agriculture brings with it permanent and communal residence and city-building, which in its turn involves the crafts and division of labour. Division of labour again makes possible barter and its rationalised form, money.

Of course, historically, the first property of man is neither soil nor house nor money, but the tamed animal and the weapon. The nomad is proprietor of his herds; this property is, so to say, entirely natural. The struggle between mine and thine, the problem of property, becomes acute only through the competition for soil and particularly because of individual agricultural property. On the other hand, the development of individual personality seems to be closely related to individual property. Where the peasant works a field that does not belong to him, where he is not economically independent, he will hardly become morally free. It is a law deeply rooted in man's nature that man ought to be free to dispose of the produce of his work, that its fruit "belongs" to him. Wherever this law has been disregarded, as in the absentee-proprietorship of the

Roman Empire, this has been a cause of cultural decline. Individual property is an important ethical value. We should not forget, however, that what nowadays is called individual property is of a very different nature. Modern individualism has transformed the firm relation between man and "his" soil into its very opposite, making agricultural soil an object of capitalist speculation.

A similar relation to that which exists between man and soil obtains also between man and his house and his tools. In order to develop as a free personality, man must have certain things that belong to him. It is true that even a slave—like Epictetus—may consider himself a free man, as did the slaves of the New Testament Church, considering themselves as free in Christ. But as a general rule, the connection between individual property and the development of free personality can hardly be denied. A certain economic independence is a prerequisite of free personality. Private, i.e. individual, property is recognised in the Bible as a matter of course, although it is never considered as an absolute right. It is limited by the idea of stewardship under God and by the regard for the common good. The short experiment of Christian communism in the community of Jerusalem does not really form an exception, because everyone was free to place at the disposal of the community whatever he thought fit.

As has already been said, division of work, together with permanent residence, makes possible barter and money. Money is the abstract form of material goods. This abstraction, like all abstraction, includes both great potentialities and great dangers. With money you can buy everything: land, houses, industrial products, and even labour. The economics of money compared with barter may be compared to the relation between algebra and simple arithmetic. Where money has become the main material good, quantity tends to prevail over quality. The desire for wealth becomes infinite. I cannot imagine an infinite number of concrete material goods, but I can easily add an indefinite number of ciphers to any given figure. That is why money becomes a great danger to social life. In itself it is a

most valuable invention, freeing the exchange of goods from chance and other limitations and giving economic life a new mobility.

Material property, necessary in itself, becomes deeply problematic through the sinful nature of man, in two respects: first, with regard to the relation of material goods to other values; second, with regard to the relations between men. Let us call the first danger practical materialism. In itself man's desire to acquire property is necessary both for the individual and for society. Cultural life can develop only where a certain surplus of means beyond bare existence is granted. A nation can apply itself to cultural production only where its energies are not entirely occupied by the production of the necessities of life. On the other hand, interest in material property tends to become isolated and monopolistic. Instead of being a *means* of life, wealth becomes the main aim. The necessary acquisitive instinct degenerates into mammonism, money, the abstract form of goods, playing a large part in this dangerous development. The lust for property becomes particularly dangerous when it is combined with the lust for power. Money becomes the primary means of domination over others. And this is the second form of the sinful development of material property. Man wants to be wealthy at the cost of others, and he wants to be wealthy in order to replace social responsibility by domination.

These two negative aspects of material goods are as old as civilisation. Their most primitive forms are theft and robbery; their more refined, but not less pernicious, forms are unscrupulous competition and exploitation, the use of power for material advantage, and the use of money to wield power. The motive of power has two aspects: people may desire material goods in order to get power, or may use power in order to get material goods. All these possibilities are realised even in the most primitive civilisations. They have taken different shapes in the various epochs with their different social, economic and political structures, but basically they are always the same. It is of no small importance to see this *semper idem*, because otherwise one

is easily deluded by slogans putting the blame on specific social structures. Whether the economic structure is primarily agricultural or industrial, whether it is characterised by barter, money or credit, whether the political structure is monarchic, aristocratic or democratic, we see always the terrific interplay of man's lust for wealth, ruining his own soul and endangering the life of his fellow men and general culture. On the other hand, the identity of the basic forms should not make us overlook differences arising from the various social, economic or political structures.

We have already seen that money, the abstract material good, accentuates certain evil developments, if not necessarily, at least as a matter of fact. In a similar way we now have to think of certain other factors tending in the same direction. Just as money is an abstract form of barter, credit is an abstract form of money. It is an abstraction of a higher order. In both cases abstraction is in itself a positive factor; it widens out the narrow limits of economic life, set by the more concrete forms of goods. By credit one is enabled to work with the money of others, paying them a certain interest as a reward for lending their money, or giving them shares proportional to one's own gains. This expansion and intensification of economic possibilities at first sight looks quite harmless and useful. But upon closer inspection it carries with it great dangers. It creates income without work on the one hand, and it separates economic production from economic power. The non-working money-giver controls the actual work and the distribution of its profit.

This new economic technique of the modern age, however, reached its full importance only in combination with the transition from craft to machine industry. The tool of the craftsman is cheap and can be owned by anyone. The machine, however, the factory, the industrial plant, is expensive; the individual cannot afford it, he is dependent on credit. Industrialisation is possible only in combination with credit, in its two forms: interest-earning and share-taking credit. Herein originates that system which we call capitalistic, and which at first is a merely technical device that must be sharply distin-

guished from what we call the "capitalistic spirit". Taken for granted that all the persons concerned are good Christians, free from greed or egoism, this capitalistic system combined with industrialism would work for good. But just as money, the abstract form of goods, brings with it danger, even more does capitalistic credit become morally dangerous as soon as our moral hypothesis ceases to hold. In its combination with egoistic motives, this credit system becomes what is called capitalism in the evil sense of the word. Why is that so?

First, in expanding the possibilities of profit-making, it also intensifies the profit motive. This is the effect of the doubled abstraction. Just as money can be more easily desired in indefinite quantities than concrete goods, profit-bearing securities can be more easily desired indefinitely than money. The pure quantification of the material goods tends to unlimited desire. Second, the development of the capitalist system means the gradual separation of ownership of the tools—machine, factories, etc.—and actual working with those tools. It creates dependent labour and independent capital. It is particularly the absentee-owner, the anonymous shareholder who, not knowing those who actually do the work and their conditions, is free from those moral inhibitions of the profit motive which are likely to function wherever work is done in personal co-operation. Third, the difference in economic power between the dependent workmen and the independent proprietor of the productive capital goes on increasing. Fourth, this economic power, concentrated in a few hands, may become so great that it can influence and perhaps even control political power. Big business is an important factor in world politics.

So far, we have followed the analysis of capitalism given by Karl Marx, which, generally speaking, is correct. But certain corrections in his picture are necessary. Like his teachers of the Manchester school of economics, Karl Marx also presupposes the pure *homo oeconomicus*, taking for granted that the person who has economic power will use it without any consideration for the community or the human individual. This is wrong. The sense of justice and human personality is an important

element even in a capitalist society. Second, Karl Marx has not taken account of the fact that through the trade-union movement and state legislation the evil consequences of the capitalist system can be and have been checked to a large extent. Capitalism in Marx's sense, i.e. unlimited exploitation of labour in the exclusive interest of capital profit, hardly exists any more in Western society. All the same, the moral dangers inherent in the capitalist system have become and still are sinister realities: tremendous intensification of the profit motive, increased inequality with regard to property and power, social disintegration. There does exist what Karl Marx calls a "proletariat", i.e. enormous masses of men living under conditions unworthy of and detrimental to human personality, as well as to true community and spiritual cultural life.

The necessary reaction against this threat from above has created what Karl Marx calls the class struggle, which, of course, is not merely a Communist programme, but a double-sided fact, poisoning and disintegrating society. The injustices inherent in and produced by the capitalist system and the proletarian disintegration of society have created a mentality within the world of labour which makes men inclined to listen to the slogans of totalitarian Communism, which in itself is the end of free society and of human culture.

By all these factors the problem of material goods is accentuated in a way unknown to previous ages, unknown particularly to the time of Old and New Testament revelation. In the teaching of the prophets, of Jesus, and of the apostles material goods and property are regarded as natural consequences of man's being a creature. The Bible is not ascetic, either in this or in any other respect. In the Old Testament wealth is not morally discredited: it is a divine gift and a manifestation of God's blessing. But there already we do find a very critical estimate both of acquisition of goods and of property. The prophets in particular passionately denounced the egoistic profit-motive, which makes men forget God and trample upon their neighbours. They are uncompromising in passing judgment upon the mighty and wealthy who use their power to

exploit and enslave the powerless. In the New Testament this critical attitude becomes even sharper, and wealth appears almost exclusively as a negative value. It seems almost impossible to be rich without forgetting the poor or without forgetting God. The man who enjoys his wealth without being moved and worried by the sight of poverty cannot be a disciple of Jesus. But even there we do not find a general moral disqualification of wealth or the postulate of poverty. The use which the medieval theology made of Jesus' word to the rich young man is a misunderstanding. There is nothing like a general precept or "counsel" of poverty in the teaching of Jesus. Wealth is not in itself evil, but its temptation is almost irresistible. While in the church of Corinth there are "not *many* wealthy", still there are some, just as among those who followed Jesus there were *some* who had means, without being blamed for it.

It is then very difficult, if not impossible, to gain direct norms from the Bible for present-day problems of economic life, in so far as they are predominantly structural. Attempts have been made to derive from the Bible a general prohibition of interest, and therefore a general opposition to the capitalist system. This interpretation, however, identifies two fundamentally different things: interest in the Old Testament sense, and interest as the basis of the credit system, which is entirely unknown in the Bible. To take interest from money lent to a neighbour who is in need is a different thing from deriving interest from money or credit given to someone who wants to make more money by it. The prohibition of interest by the medieval Church has nothing whatever to do with Biblical teaching.

On the other hand, it is obvious that in the age of technical industry and the credit system the problem of material property and acquisition is fundamentally different from what it was in the time when the farmer, the craftsman and the travelling merchant were the predominant figures of economic life. Material property in the modern sense includes power over the dependent non-proprietor and even power over the state machinery. While power in itself is not morally evil, it becomes evil almost inevitably through the possibility of misusing it.