

Originally published in *Caelum et Terra*, vol. 6, no. 3, Fall 1996.

The Social Order As Community *by Thomas Storck*

I. Introduction

There has long been a persistent desire on the part of mankind to imagine or to construct a paradise on earth, a utopia in which all of his problems and conflicts would vanish or at least diminish. Most people have heard of some of the 19th century American examples, such as Brook Farm in Massachusetts or New Harmony, Indiana, but there have been many before and since. Those who know Ronald Knox's book, *Enthusiasm*, will remember that numerous heretical sects made attempts to construct such a Kingdom of God on earth throughout the centuries. And while it is certainly true that such utopians and visionaries have always existed, it seems to me that there is a special reason why today, and indeed for the last century or so, longings for an ideal community are more apt to arise in people's hearts than previously.

Let me quote from an article in the July 29th 1995, *America*. This is a description of a 60s-style gathering called the Rainbow Family that has taken place every year since 1972, and last year was held near Taos, New Mexico.

On the first day of the gathering, I watched dozens of young people pound drums and hundreds more dance in half-naked or fully naked abandon.

The writer interviewed one regular attender of these gatherings as to their aim.

Robbie told me that the Rainbow Family "is about the conscious and positive evolution of humankind. It's about world peace and healing our poor, damaged Mother Earth. It's about making us into better people. It happens like a miracle - it's just love, all these wounded, strange, crazy people learning how to love one another." Jesus, he said, would feel at home at the gathering.

When I asked Robbie what he wanted the human race to evolve into, he responded: The ideal is what the Lakota Nation, the Cherokee Nation, the Taos Nation and other Indian nations have. That kind of unity with diversity. The ability to know who you are in a society and on the earth. Knowing that you are related to every human being you may come across." Loving and sharing, he said, are at the heart of so-called "primitive" societies.

It is easy to see through the pretensions of the Rainbow Family. To imagine that a real human community can be created by a week of dancing in a field, and that people's deep defects and faults can be eliminated so easily is to ignore the fact of original sin and has always been the hallmark of such utopians. I think that if the members of the Rainbow Family ever had to sit down and make some hard decisions of the sort that every community eventually has to make they would soon be disabused of their notion that feelings of peace and harmony are a substitute for clear thinking and hard-won moral virtues.

But nevertheless I would not mock such a gathering, for I think that it is a witness to the very deep and laudable desire on the part of human beings for community. And I would suggest that there is

something specially wrong with the modern world that makes it probable that our desire for community will be more intense and at the same time more unsatisfied, than has been the case in other ages or in parts of the world less affected by modernity.

II. The founders of modernity

What specifically is it about the modern world that would aggravate such desires for community? It is this: The modern Western world is built on principles which deny or reject the possibility or desirability of community as the foundation for social life. The men of the 18th century who more or less created the modern social order did so in conscious rejection of the social community that had been built, imperfectly it is true, by Catholic civilization over many centuries. They consciously rejected so much of our heritage as Catholics that as a result the public order of the modern West is based on principles much more anti-Catholic than most of us recognize. Specifically they willed to create a social order not based on mankind viewed as a brotherhood, but on other and less communitarian principles. They aimed to create what some of them candidly termed a "commercial republic." Before examining in more detail what they actually said or did, let us look at this phrase, "commercial republic."

In itself there is nothing wrong with commerce. Though it obviously should be subordinate to the more primary economic acts of producing and consuming, there is certainly a need for buying, selling, trading, even importing and exporting. But would we want to define our commonwealth, our nation, by its commercial activity? Economic activity itself is a subordinate activity of man, and within economic activity, commerce properly so-called, is still more subordinate. Why then would anyone want to raise it to the pinnacle and put it on the masthead of his civilization?

The answer to this lies in the abandonment by the men of the 18th century of an attempt to found civilization upon a religious or metaphysical principle. In part because of a century or more of unfortunate religious strife, but still more, I think, because of new philosophies that either mocked or ignored Europe's traditional religious sense, many thinkers turned to something as ancillary as commerce to find the basis for their new order of things. I hope to show that during the eighteenth century a new concept of civilization and the social order became widespread in Europe and her colonies, and that we are still living with that concept today.

The men of the 18th century whom I will be quoting and to whom I will be referring intended to create a new basis for society. And in their thinking we can see with what force they turned against all that the Church had hitherto created in European culture. I will be quoting from their writings, as well as from some modern commentators who happen to be in agreement with them. In the first place I will be making use of material, gathered from an essay by one Ralph Lerner, who has written for a volume published by the American Enterprise Institute.[i] The interesting thing here is that Lerner, although he sees the same doctrines that I do in these 18th century writers, views them as the prophets of a great new age for mankind, while I consider them as having helped to destroy whatever was left of Christian civilization and community. So, insofar as part of my evidence has been selected for me, it has been selected by an opponent of my position. Perhaps this will make it more objective. At any rate, it is representative of its age and will, I think, serve to show what the real foundations of today's social order are.

First of all, then, what 18th century thinkers are we talking about? I will be speaking of a group of writers, primarily John Locke, Montesquieu, Adam Smith, David Hume, and our own Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Rush. All these are representatives of the so-called Enlightenment, whether of England, France, Scotland or the English colonies in North America.

For all the differences in their thought, Lerner calls them "a band of brethren in arms," (LSNS, 25) for they all worked to overthrow the West's remaining heritage of Christian civilization and substitute something new. To begin, Lerner says that these innovators

saw in commercial republicanism a more sensible and realizable alternative to earlier notions of civic virtue and a more just alternative to the theological-political regime that had so long ruled Europe and its colonial periphery. (LSLN, 24)

These men had a profound desire to overturn traditional European social life. They were impatient with "constraints and preoccupations based on visions of perfection beyond the reach of all or most." (LSLN, 25) "They saw fit, rather, to promote a new ordering of political, economic, and social life." (LSLN, 25). What was the old order which they wished to replace? "The old order was preoccupied with intangible goods to an extent we now hardly ever see. The king had his glory, the nobles their honor, the Christians their salvation...." (LSLN,26) But, "Eighteenth-century men had to be brought to see how fanciful those noncommercial notions were." (LSLN, 26)

David Hume, for example, found it quite understandable that men would fight over their economic self-interest, but he found it utterly inexplicable that they should ever have any

controversy about an article of faith, which is utterly absurd and unintelligible, is not a difference in sentiment, but in a few phrases and expressions, which one party accepts of without understanding them, and the other refuses in the same manner. (Hume - LSLN, 28)

Hume believed that Christianity had nourished a spirit of persecution "more furious and enraged than the most cruel factions that ever arose from interest and ambition." (Hume - LSLN, 28) So that, as Lerner says, "fanaticism prompted by principle was incompatible with civility, reason, and government." (LSLN, 28) And also,

...where the ancient polity, Christianity, and the feudal aristocracy, each in its own fashion, sought to conceal, deny, or thwart most of the common passions for private gratification and physical comfort, the commercial republic built on those passions. (LSLN, 30)

In seeking satisfaction under the new dispensation a man needed to be at once warm and cool, impassioned and calculating, driven yet sober. Eschewing brilliance and grandeur, the new-model man of prudence followed a way of life designed to secure for himself a small but continual profit. (LSLN, 30)

Lerner continues, "The contrast with and opposition to the Christian and Greek world could hardly have been greater." (LSLN,33)

One can also see this in John Locke. In his (first) Letter Concerning Toleration, Locke bases his argument for civic toleration of all religions on the following supposition:

The commonwealth seems to me to be a society of men constituted only for the procuring, preserving, and advancing their own civil interests.

Civil interests I call life, liberty, health, and indolency of body; and the possession of outward things, such as money, lands, houses, furniture, and the like. (LCT, 3)

He reiterates this point in his Second Essay Concerning Civil Government:

The great and chief end, therefore, of men uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is the preservation of their property; to which in the state of Nature there are many things wanting. (CCG, 53)

Rulers are not to be involved in matters beyond these "civil interests," and the general tenor of Locke's argument is that religion is a purely private matter which does not even affect men's moral conduct. As Locke says,

If a heathen doubt of both Testaments, he is not therefore to be punished as a pernicious citizen. The power of the magistrate and the estates of the people may be equally secure whether any man believe these things or no. I readily grant that these opinions are false and absurd. But the business of laws is not to provide for the truth of opinions, but for the safety and security of the commonwealth and of every particular man's goods and person. (LCT, 15)

The point here is not that we should pine for the restoration of the Inquisition. Simply that when men unite to form political communities, it is a fatal mistake to assume that things such as God or human morality are of no concern to the community, as such. St. Thomas, for example wrote that law was concerned "to lead men to virtue," though not in a tyrannical manner. But for Locke and the other thinkers of this movement, law is concerned only with the protection of property - and liberty. This one only intangible good, liberty, that the men promoting the new social order valued as a public good will turn up again as we view the results of their work.

What is the result of narrowing the basis of the social order to material things? Montesquieu wrote,

We see that in countries where the people move only by the spirit of commerce, they make a traffic of all the humane, all the moral virtues; the most trifling things, those which humanity would demand, are there done, or there given, only for money. (The Spirit of the Laws, 146)

And Lerner sums up Montesquieu's thought as follows,

For Montesquieu, a regime dedicated to commerce partook less of a union of fellow citizens, bound together by ties of friendship, than of an alliance of contracting parties, intent on maximizing their freedom of choice through a confederation of convenience. It was in this character of an alliance that men found themselves cut off from one another or, rather, linked to one another principally through a market mechanism. It was a world in which everything had its price - and, accordingly, its sellers and buyers. Not surprisingly, the habits of close calculation and "exact justice" appropriate to one kind of activity were extended to all kinds, and political community was replaced by a marketplace of arm's-length transactions. (LSLN, 44)

We can see in these statements, admittedly with differing emphases depending on which 18th-century writer is being quoted or referred to, an utterly this-worldly notion of life with two chief

aspects: first, a rejection of what Lerner calls "intangible" goods; in Hume, for example, an utter disdain for the notion that it could ever be reasonable to disagree over a mere article of faith, a metaphysical abstraction, "which one party accepts of without understanding them, and the other refuses in the same manner," (Hume - LSLN,28), and finally, in Locke, an explicit restricting of religion to the private sphere. Religion has no importance for the public life of a nation or culture.

This is in fact the key point: No culture exists or can exist without a set of ruling ideas. When everything that smacks of the transcendent is eliminated from the public life of a culture, something has to take its place. In our case it is largely commerce and the ideals and ideas that commerce fosters. Moreover, the liberty that accompanies such a commercial society is a liberty whose chief effect is the dissolving of traditional ties and the destruction of traditional communities, whether that takes place because of direct attacks on the family and on chastity or indirectly, because of an economic system that works as a solvent in hundreds of ways, driving mothers out of the home, moving families about to seek employment or emptying rural areas of farm families.

It is important for us to see how this rejection of any but a materialistic basis for society plays out in everyday life. One example, taken from a writer of the 18th century is the following. Benjamin Rush, a signer of our Declaration of Independence, wrote an essay entitled, "Observations Upon the Study of the Greek and Latin Languages," in which he wrote,

We occupy a new country. Our principal business should be to explore and apply its resources, all of which press us to enterprise and haste. Under these circumstances, to spend four or five years in learning two dead languages, is to turn our backs upon a gold mine, in order to amuse ourselves in catching butterflies. (Rush - LSLN, 45)

Once one rejects "intangible" goods, it is only the cash calculus that counts. Latin and Greek will not open trade routes or help in land speculation, therefore they must go.

The more recent heirs to the same tradition of a commercial society exhibit the same attitude toward tangible and intangible goods. Consider the following passage from John Kenneth Galbraith's 1958 book, *The Affluent Society*.

In the autumn of 1954, during the Congressional elections of that year, the Republicans replied to Democratic attacks on their stewardship by arguing that this was the second best year in history. It was not, in all respects, a happy defense. Many promptly said that second best was not good enough - certainly not for Americans. But no person in either party showed the slightest disposition to challenge the standard by which it is decided that one year is better than another. Nor was it felt that any explanation was required. No one would be so eccentric as to suppose that second best meant second best in the progress of the arts and the sciences. No one would assume that it referred to health, education, or the battle against juvenile delinquency. There was no suggestion that a better or poorer year was one in which the chances for survival amidst the radioactive furniture of the world had increased or diminished. Despite a marked and somewhat ostensible preoccupation with religious observances at the time, no one was moved to suppose that 1954 was the second best year as measured by the number of people who had found enduring spiritual solace.

Second best could mean only one thing - that the production of goods was the second highest in history. There had been a year in which production was higher and hence was

better. In fact in 1954 the Gross National Product was \$360.5 billion; the year before it had been \$364.5. This measure of achievement was acceptable to all. It is a relief on occasion to find a conclusion that is above faction, indeed above debate. On the importance of production there is no difference between Republicans and Democrats, right and left, white or colored, Catholic or Protestant. (TAS, 101)

Doubtless there were a few Americans in both 1954 who rejected the notion that we ought to measure our welfare by purely materialistic measures - but whatever they may have thought, public discourse in this country is conducted solely in terms of material goods.

More recently the very respectable free-market oriented weekly magazine, *The Economist*, published in London, continued this same tradition of putting tangible goods above everything else. In an editorial in the September 9, 1995 issue, on "The Disappearing Family," the editors opined:

Anxiety about the state of the family is nothing new. A constant of modern history is the perception of social decay: the "breakdown of the family" has seen long and distinguished service. Another constant is the fact of material progress. The association between the two is unsurprising. Economic progress gives people opportunities they were hitherto denied, which provokes social change. And social change almost always seems to be regarded initially as for the worse.

In thinking about the family today, it is well to keep that history in mind. Over the past 30 years almost all rich countries have seen big increases in the rate of divorce. Expanding opportunity is doubtless one of many causes. More women have a career and the financial independence that goes with it: far fewer are forced to choose between misery in a failed marriage and destitution. And divorce laws have been greatly eased, reflecting demands for greater freedom from the control once exercised over private behaviour by church and state. If divorce has gone up for reasons such as these, the change must be counted, at least in the first instance, as a gain.

And a bit later it goes on to say:

Simply, it is too soon to say of society at large that the rise in divorce, and the increase in single-parent households associated with it, has gone so far that the loss outweighs the gain. Without compelling evidence that the net harm is great, and perhaps not even then, governments have no business imposing their moral choices on citizens. This remains true even if it is mainly adults who benefit from more divorce and mainly children who lose....

I submit that there is a direct and clear road from the statements of the 18th century writers I have quoted or referred to above, and these contemporary attitudes toward tangible and intangible goods. In the Galbraith quote and in the editorial from *The Economist* we see the consequences of a rejection of any intangible goods - except unrestrained freedom, the only intangible eagerly embraced by the modern world, which is also the only intangible good mentioned by Locke. "A constant of modern history is the perception of social decay," *The Economist's* editorial writer says. Perhaps that is because a constant of modern history is the reality of social decay, a hypothesis that he does not consider. But note that "material progress" is what makes possible this increased freedom and social change. "Economic progress gives people opportunities they were hitherto denied...." Fewer women "are forced to choose between misery in a failed marriage and destitution." I pass over the well-known fact that divorced women and their children do

experience, if not always destitution, at least a much lower material standard of living, and simply point out that if "material progress" gives people the opportunity to simply walk away from difficult relationships instead of doing the hard work of trying to make them work out, then that is hardly a gain. Of course there are some relationships in which people cannot reasonably or even safely remain - and in those cases a Christian civilization should offer all the support, of every sort, that is necessary. But it is not increased divorce, or indeed any divorce at all, that is needed here to promote human welfare.

As my last examples, I take first a statement by the president of the American Enterprise Institute, Christopher DeMuth, as quoted in the Washington Post on February 23 of this year. Mr. DeMuth said,

It's certainly true that capitalism sometimes conflicts with the preservation of established cultural values. The gale of creative destruction not only destroys old firms, but old methods of doing things. Another world for that gale is progress.

The old things that are destroyed by capitalism are not just inefficient firms or industrial methods invented in a prior era. They include things such as families and communities and even Christian civilization itself. Nor, as some like to pretend, is all this the result of some recent bad turn in our history, a falling off from an earlier and so-called Christian America, a land that never was. No, it is inherent in the commercial republic constructed at the end of the 18th century by the Founders of this country, who consciously and carefully rejected traditional European civilization in order to attempt to build the *Novus Ordo Seclorum*, the New Order of the Ages.

And finally, I quote from a very recent statement by Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, Antonin Scalia. In the same speech in which he opined that the state should permit abortion if that is what the electorate wants, Scalia gave his view of the task of government, which was summed up as "protecting person and property and ensuring the conditions for prosperity."^[ii] This, of course, is nothing but a restatement of John Locke, and demonstrates the fact that conservatives in America are simply one variety of Lockean liberals.

Perhaps the best summation of the commercial republic can be found in the Argentine writer, Julio Meinvielle, in his book, *From Lamennais to Maritain*.^[iii]

We might also point out that a society under the banner of Money, such as the Anglo-American commercial society, or under the banner of Work, such as Soviet Russia, will be structurally atheistic; for even though the merchant and the worker may believe in God, they do not believe in Him in their capacity as merchant or worker but just as private persons; that is, because they are more than just merchants or workers. For that very reason, a society which exalts Money or Work as the supreme value of life is necessarily atheistic as a society.

III. Critics of capitalism

The capitalist system has triumphed in the modern world. But not everyone has rejoiced at that triumph. In fact, the critics of capitalism have been many, and have represented many differing and opposed points of view. Of course socialists and communists have been against capitalism, but its opponents have also included many very traditional Catholics, such as Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton, men no one can accuse of being influenced by what we call the Left. Nor is it surprising that so many have been able to see that the mere production of material products cannot

possibly be the purpose of the social order or the state and that the social atomism resulting from making competition and contract the basis for society is profoundly contrary to the nature of man.

This widespread opposition to capitalism has been of concern to some of its defenders. For example, Michael Novak, a writer to whom I will be referring more than once, writes, "Although the evidence of the immense benefits for...moral progress ushered into history by capitalist economies lies before their eyes, they [i.e. anticapitalist intellectuals] go on as if it does not exist." [iv] The defenders of capitalism commonly talk as if only the left and a few naive fellow travellers, mostly ecclesiastics, were enemies of the capitalist economic order. And so they have attempted to explain this opposition, or explain it away, in various ways. For example, one free marketer, Ernest van den Haag, explains this opposition as an example of irrational commitment to ideology:

Union leaders, socialists, academic egalitarians, Marxists, totalitarians and millenarians of every kind have a strong emotional investment in their policies and theories which ultimately leads to ideological and finally to material investment. They cannot be persuaded by any argument, however well it shows that the policy they favor is contrary to the public interest, ineffective or both. The attempt of economists to tutor the emotionally committed is as doomed to failure as the attempts of philosophers to tutor the insane.[v]

And van den Haag goes on to say that

rational knowledge is of little help in dispelling the resentment against the market - or the longing for an ideal system in which a just government justly rewards moral merits.

On closer analysis this longing rests on nonrational fantasies: Each of us secretly hopes that his essential superiority will be recognized in an ideal system. Albeit unconsciously, revolutionaries as well as reformers place this hope on an ideal government, which functions as a true *parens patriae*, a just and omniscient parent - just as a gambler places his hope on Dame Fortuna, who inexplicably but certainly and justly will love him best, and prefer him - as mother should have done. (CSOH, 27)

Another writer in the same volume says,

I suggest that the root of much - perhaps not all, but much - of the hostility to free markets comes from man's difficulty in dealing with the most human of activities, the making of conscious choices. (CSOH, 47)

I could continue in this vein, quoting other writers' accounts as to the true sources of opposition to capitalism. But what I believe to be those true sources is perhaps apparent in what I have said above: Human beings have a powerful, though faulty, longing for justice and brotherhood. Modernity and the economic system it fosters, capitalism, can never produce either. Therefore the resentment against capitalism arises.

IV. The romanticization of capitalism

Now some defenders of capitalism seem to have seen this. They understand that capitalism must win at other levels besides the merely materialistic. And so several efforts have arisen to

romanticize capitalism. One such effort can be found in Michael Novak's book, *Toward a Theology of the Corporation*.^[vi]

In thinking about the corporation in history and its theological significance, I begin with a general theological principle. George Bernanos once said that grace is everywhere. Wherever we look in the world, there are signs of God's presence: in the mountains, in a grain of sand, in a human person, in the poor and the hungry. The earth is charged with the grandeur of God. So is human history. If we look for signs of grace in the corporation, we may discern seven of them - a suitably sacramental number. (TTC, 37)

What are these seven "signs of grace?" They are: creativity, liberty, birth and mortality, social motive, social character, insight, and the rise of liberty and election. Novak continues, "In these seven ways, corporations offer metaphors for grace, a kind of insight into God's ways in history." (TTC, 43)

Now in fact most of what Novak says about the theology of the corporation seems to me simply inflated nonsense. The interesting thing about it is not his pseudo-theology, but the fact that he feels the need to offer one at all. It suggests that he might feel that many of the objections made against capitalism and its lack of community have merit. For example, here is his explanation of "social character," one of the corporation's "signs of grace."

The corporation is inherently and in its essence corporate. The very word suggests communal, nonindividual, many acting together. Those who describe capitalism by stressing the individual entrepreneur miss the central point. Buying and selling by individual entrepreneurs occurred in biblical times. What is interesting and novel...is the communal focus of the new ethos: the rise of communal risk taking, the pooling of resources, the sense of communal religious vocation in economic activism. (TTC, 40-41)

The attempt to harness the desire for community for the sake of capitalistic business enterprises has had more success than it deserves. It forces us, however, to focus on the question of what capitalism really is and what kind of social order it creates. Is it one of atomism and strife or, as Novak asserts, is it a communal and corporate one? Pirate crews were also communal and slave gangs worked corporately. Much more than verbal similarity is needed to show that capitalism is the communitarian force that Novak makes of it here.

V. Is there a "Catholic Whig Tradition?"

Michael Novak, however, makes another and more serious attempt to put capitalism in a communitarian and less harsh light. He writes as follows,

...beginning in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries...a group of Western European moralists became skeptical of the moral biases of the aristocratic class and developed the thesis that a regime based upon commerce, and pursuing plenty as well as and even more than power, offered the most reasonable route to the moral betterment of the human race. (THOL, 63)

And, "Where earlier generations found the pursuit of plenty, of wealth, and of commerce morally inferior, they found it morally superior to the foundations of any previous regime." Novak posits and attempts to discover what he calls a "Catholic Whig tradition," that is, a line of Catholic thinkers who were more or less in agreement with the 18th-century project of refounding the

social order on a new basis. Let us see what this supposed Catholic Whig tradition is and whether in fact there is any such thing.

I will begin by following Novak as he conducts his search. One cannot understand Latin American thought, Novak begins, "unless one understands the Catholic intellectual traditions of southern Europe and Latin America...." (THOL, 1) So far, so good. He points out that this is true even of Latin American thinkers who reject the Catholic faith. Let me quote a fine passage of Novak's,

Moreover, I have encountered in my travels many writers and scholars in Latin America who, while not Catholic, find the language of northern Anglo-Saxon political economy too emotionally and culturally thin, too materialistic in its timbre, too individualistic in its intonation, too dryly pragmatic. For many in Latin America, the smell of incense at the High Mass, the flickering candles and their smoke, the bells, the sonorous hymns, and the taste of the Lord's Body on the tongue convey a sensibility that is far thicker than that received in the bare white Puritan churches of New England....

A highly cultured people, furthermore, necessarily carries with it a profoundly conservative sensibility. Painfully aware of the richness and complexity of the past, they revel in holding onto that past and recreating it. Partly, they live in memory as birds in air. Their imaginations need the past as certain fauna live only in the tangled jungle; one sees this vividly in Latin American novelists. Thus, nearly all Latin Americans, even the most radical, nourish a conservative consciousness, sometimes under the banner of "national identity." They identify themselves with past events, heroes, movements, struggles. Progressives in Latin America are seldom purely progressive; most want to carry their past proudly with them as they advance. (THOL, 1-2)

I can easily agree with what Novak has written here. He reveals the existence of an intellectual tradition that is utterly unknown to most North Americans. With reference to socio-political thought, this tradition begins in Plato and Aristotle, then continues with Catholic thinkers including Augustine, Aquinas, Bellarmine, and later on DeMaistre and Donoso Cortes. It is a tradition that is worthy of being better known among Anglo-Saxons, especially Anglo-Saxon Catholics, and in many important respects, it is totally opposed, in both its starting points and in its conclusions, to our own traditions of political thought. Novak says as much (in a different book), with reference to Latin America

a socialist order is closer to their own past. It is less pluralistic and more centralized, and it allows for a more intense union of church and state than does the democratic pluralism of the North American type." (LSLN, 4)

(One can accept this without thereby becoming an advocate of socialism, for socialism was simply one more and flawed attempt to construct a community without God. Just because capitalism is wrong does not make socialism right.) Having admitted that many Latin Americans would "find the language of northern Anglo-Saxon political economy too emotionally and culturally thin, too materialistic in its timbre, too individualistic in its intonation, too dryly pragmatic," (THOL, 1) Novak posits the existence of the "Catholic Whig tradition" in order to offer something to Latin Americans which is not entirely alien to their heritage and yet promotes capitalism. Curiously, he takes his cue in this matter from Friedrich von Hayek, a quintessential libertarian and northern European secularist, who defines Whig as one who favors "a free economy (and democracy and pluralism)." (THOL, 2) What Novak endeavors to do is to take the writers whom I quoted in the

first part of this talk, tone down what they said a bit, and enroll Thomas Aquinas and other Catholic thinkers among them. A few examples of his manner of proceeding follow.

"The God who gave us life gave us liberty." The words are Thomas Jefferson's, but the thesis is that of Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas, man is the glory of the universe, an image of God on earth, made to be like God in his liberty. (THOL, 115)

What is the problem with this? When St. Thomas wrote about man and his freedom it was simply a statement of the truth of man's freedom of choice; they were not meant to be a political statement. It is otherwise with Jefferson. Liberty as used here by Jefferson and by Aquinas mean different things. Novak describes the 18th-century innovators thus,

One of the great achievements of the Whig tradition was its new world experiment, the *Novus Ordo Seclorum* (the new order of the ages). Its American progenitors called that experiment the commercial republic. The Whigs were the first philosophers in history to grasp the importance of basing government of the people upon the foundation of commerce. They underpinned democracy with a capitalist, growing economy. (THOL, 11)

In his attempt to justify Aquinas's standing as a Whig, Novak has to fudge a good deal. For example, he makes the point that Thomas accepted the created world and rejected the supernaturalistic Augustinianism common to many earlier Catholic thinkers. Thus Aquinas "legitimated...all that is good about human nature and its strivings" (THOL, 111) But does this make him a Whig? And in what sense is it just to say that St. Thomas legitimated the "strivings" of human nature?

Novak continues,

By no means would it be legitimate to ask if Thomas Aquinas were a Whig in the same sense as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Edmund Burke, Adam Smith, Lord Acton, or Friedrich von Hayek. The more exact question is, What did Thomas Aquinas hold that might embolden those who today cherish the Whig tradition to count him in their number? There are six propositions of Aquinas that seem particularly compelling to the Whig temper. (THOL) 113-114)

What are those "six propositions?" They are: 1. "Civilization is constituted by reasoned conversation;" 2. "The human being is free because he can reflect and choose;" 3. "Civilized political institutions respect reflection and choice;" 4. "True liberty is ordered liberty;" 5. "Humans are self-determined persons, not mere individuals (group members);" and 6. "The regime worthiest of the human person mixes elements of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy." Most of these six theses are not peculiar to the Whig tradition, number six, for example, has been a staple of political philosophers since pagan antiquity, and numbers two, four and five are likewise hardly peculiar to the Whigs. But in fact Novak does not really attempt to make a serious argument here. He does not attempt to show that these theses are uniquely Whig, nor that, to the extent St. Thomas held any of them, this fact should make us "count him" in the same tradition as John Locke. By Novak's method of reasoning, almost every classical political philosopher could be counted as a Whig.

It would be extremely tedious to examine in detail each of Novak's six points, so let us look a bit at his discussion of just one of them to see his method of proceeding.

"Fourth Thesis: True liberty is ordered liberty." After some platitudes on the need for restraint and the moral virtues, Novak says the following,

The proudest boast of the young Whig republic, the United States, was the legendary manly strength (virtue) of its leaders, notably George Washington, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson - and also the virtue of its people, who were asked in an unprecedented way to reflect and to deliberate upon the ratification of the Constitution under which they would live and to maintain sufficient virtue to keep the republic from the self-destruction into which all earlier republics had speedily fallen. (THOL, 117)

In the first place, this paragraph has really nothing to do with the rather vague discussion of virtue which precedes it, nor does it have anything to do with St. Thomas. In typical Novak fashion, no argument is made. Nothing is even asserted. All depends upon a vague power of association and suggestion.

Moreover, Novak shifts back and forth, as it suits his purposes, between a narrow and an expansive definition of Whig. No one of the six points is especially characteristic of the Whig tradition as defined by Hayek, for example. Throughout Novak implies much more about Aquinas than he dare assert, and asserts much more than he proves.

There are undoubtedly thinkers whom one can call Catholic Whigs - Lord Acton, for example, would seem to be one, and Novak himself fits the definition well. The important question, of course, is whether it includes exponents of authentic Catholic tradition, such as St. Thomas Aquinas. And I think that if Novak's case is the best one that can be made for including Aquinas among the Whigs, then definitely St. Thomas cannot be labeled as such. Certainly Aquinas says things that Whigs said, and that nearly everybody would say, such as that tyranny or totalitarian government is an evil or that order is better than chaos. But this does not make him a Whig.

VI. Catholic alternative

We have looked at various attempts to refashion human society. Some of these attempts at least gave a nod in the direction of the solidarity of mankind as the necessary foundation of any social order, while others denied that. Before finishing, let us turn to what the Catholic Church proposes on these matters.

Catholic social thought has always seen society as a unity, a unity based on true mutual interests, on justice and on charity. Here is a vision of community, yet a vision that does not fail to take into account our fallen human nature. Just as labor and capital are not inherently in conflict, so all the other natural groupings of human society can and ought to work together so as to form a community not just of individuals but of nations. As Pope Pius XII said in his first encyclical, *Summi Pontificatus* (October 20, 1939), the evils of his own day were caused in the first place by "forgetfulness of that law of human solidarity and charity which is dictated and imposed by our common origin and by the equality of rational nature in all men, to whatever people they belong." And Pope Pius goes on to speak of the "truth which associates men as brothers in one great family," and further,

And the nations, despite a difference of development due to diverse conditions of life and of culture, are not destined to break the unity of the human race, but rather to enrich and embellish it by the sharing of their own peculiar gifts and by that reciprocal interchange of goods which can be possible and efficacious only when a mutual love and a lively sense

of charity unite all the sons of the same Father and all those redeemed by the same Divine Blood.

Here is a vision of human community and solidarity as powerful as anything that the Rainbow Family can come up with. It is opposed both to the Whig version of civilization founded on mere exchange of goods and to those who forget the fact of original sin. The entire social teaching of the Church is based on this vision of human solidarity. Nor does the latest social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, change anything in this regard, despite some of its tendentious commentators, who have created a widespread belief that somehow the Church now takes a more benign view of a society based on the free market than she previously did.

The most sober Catholic, if he truly has formed his mind on Catholic truth, will not deny this vision of human community, while the most optimistic Catholic, if he is orthodox, will realize that our vision of community must be tempered by the realities of our sinful state. The social teachings of the Church present this chastened vision of community, tempered by the reality of personal sin and the creation of structures of sin, structures which both institutionalize evil and tend to make all of us cooperators in evil. Because of this, I suggest that when he considers the foundations of society a Catholic ought to be at once both hardheaded and a dreamer, both realistic and utopian. If a Catholic is confronted by those who desire a total reshaping of civilization, a civilization refounded on some new principle, be it the *Novus Ordo Seclorum* of the commercial republicans or the trans-historical paradise of the Marxists, he should reply in these words of St. Pius X, from his encyclical letter, *Notre Charge Apostolique*, of August 25, 1910,

No, Venerable Brethren, We must repeat with the utmost energy in these times of social and intellectual anarchy when everyone takes it upon himself to teach as a teacher and lawmaker – the City cannot be built otherwise than as God has built it; society cannot be set up unless the Church lays the foundations and supervises the work; no, civilization is not something yet to be found, nor is the New City to be built on hazy notions; it has been in existence and still is : it is Christian civilization, it is the Catholic City. It has only to be set up and restored continually against the unremitting attacks of insane dreamers, rebels and miscreants. (No. 11)

Christian civilization is not something existing in the air, something that is a blueprint only, something that forever eludes us. No, it has existed. Its effects and remnants still exist in parts of the world. It is of course true that this historic Christian civilization had many faults. And though it is the case that these faults could, in principle at least, have been dealt with within the framework of Catholicism, it is also the case that a Catholic will realize that the search for a perfect civilization is vain. If the Catholic city had faults, then let these be corrected as well as possible, but if they are never entirely corrected that does not mean that the social order should be scrapped and begun over again. It is rather a matter of setting right, restoring, protecting. The more keenly Catholics of the past had seen the defects of Christian civilization, the more keenly they should have tried to correct them, but at the same time understanding that there was no magic formula which would usher in the new order. It was simply a matter of the hard work of shoring up and improving what they already had.

On the other hand, though, a Catholic is a kind of utopian, a dreamer of dreams of perfection, without contradicting anything that I have just said. For he longs for the perfect "civilization of love" (to use a phrase of Paul VI and John Paul II), the social order that is true community. He longs to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in renewing this earth. Ultimately, though, he is longing for the heavenly Jerusalem coming down from above, for only here can the true Catholic city be

found. As the epistle to the Hebrews tell us, here on earth we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come. And in desiring that city which is to come, we at the same time work to establish and maintain the earthly Catholic city, hoping perhaps that in some way the earthly city can be transformed with the spirit of that city coming down from Heaven. Thus we acknowledge with Pius X our mundane task of continually restoring what we have, while at the same time longing for what we do not yet have.

At the heart of the Church is the sacrifice of the Mass, an act of reconciliation between God and man, between individual men, between man and the rest of creation. Thus at the heart of any civilization formed and informed by the Faith is reconciliation, unity, community. This is the vision of the social order that the Church has always held out to mankind. If the participants of the Rainbow Family do not understand this, do not understand that the Church is their ally, even their guide, in whatever good that they are seeking, then perhaps the fault lies with us Catholics. How can we convince others that the Church is not simply another institution of bourgeois society, but the only real alternative to that society? Well, perhaps we had best start by convincing first ourselves, next our fellow Catholics, and then the rest of mankind.

Notes

[i]. Ralph Lerner, "Commerce and Character : the Anglo-American as New-Model Man" in Michael Novak, ed., *Liberation South, Liberation North* (Washington : American Enterprise Institute, c. 1981) pp. 24-49.

[ii]. Quoted in the *Arlington Catholic Herald* (May 16, 1996) p. 12.

[iii]. Julio Meinvielle, *From Lamennais to Maritain* (Buenos Aires : Ediciones Theoria, 2nd ed, c. 1967) (Translation privately prepared for Theology Dept., Christendom College)

[iv]. Michael Novak, *This Hemisphere of Liberty : A Philosophy of the Americas* (Washington : AEI Press, 1990), p. 63.

[v]. Ernest van den Haag, ed., *Capitalism: Sources of Hostility* (New Rochelle, N.Y. : Epoch Books for the Heritage Foundation, c. 1979) p. 12. Another similar work is, Ernest W. Lefever, ed., *Will Capitalism Survive?* (Washington : Ethics and Public Policy Center, c. 1979).

[vi]. Michael Novak, *Toward a Theology of the Corporation* (Washington : American Enterprise Institute, c. 1981)