
TWO FACES OF ANTI-CHRISTIAN MATERIALISM

THOMAS STORCK

CULTURAL SOCIALISM & THE CULTURE OF CAPITALISM

To most people it probably seems the height of folly to spend any more time talking about socialism. After all, since old-style Communism in eastern Europe has disintegrated and socialist parties in the West have generally not done too well at the polls lately, is not socialism a matter of interest only to historians? And is not socialism irrelevant to Catholics, since papal social teaching has long made it clear that the socialist world view is not an option for Catholics? Is it not time, then, to get on with our celebration of capitalism? I suggest that there is still a major problem to be considered, for the same papal statements that criticize socialism also criticize capitalism, and for the same basic reason.

In *Quadragesimo Anno* Pope Pius XI said: "No one can be at the same time a sincere Catholic and a true socialist." It is likely that most Catholics acquainted with this remark conceive that the main reason for this incompatibility is the antagonism between socialism's doctrine of state ownership and the Church's defense of private property. When Leo XIII wrote *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, the socialism of his day advocated a complete confiscation of private property. Such enforced common ownership is without doubt contrary to Catholic teaching on the right to private property. But by 1931, when *Quadragesimo Anno* was issued, a different socialism had arisen which no longer called for a complete abolition of private property. As Pius XI wrote, this socialism

is much less radical in its views. Not only does it condemn recourse to physical force: it even mitigates and moderates to some extent class warfare and the abolition of private property.... It would seem as if socialism...were moving toward the truth which Christian tra-

dition has always held in respect; for it cannot be denied that its programs often strikingly approach the just demands of Christian social reformers.

To understand what is wrong with capitalism we must understand what is wrong with socialism. If, as Pius XI said, the economic proposals of moderate democratic socialists are often quite close to Catholic social principles, why then cannot Catholics be socialists? The answer, given by Pius XI, is interesting, and is a rebuke to two kinds of Catholics: to those who desire to be socialists, and to those (so common in America) who consider calls for worker ownership or state regulation or ownership of certain industries (an idea explicitly approved of by Pius XI) to be socialist and as such condemned by the Church. Why, then, is socialism not compatible with the Faith? It is because socialism is "entirely ignorant of or unconcerned about [the] sublime end both of individuals and of society" and asserts that "living in community was instituted merely for the sake of advantages which it brings to mankind."

Socialism is condemned not so much because of its economic theories as because it is materialistic, and conceives of man and society in entirely earthly terms. The battle President Mitterrand had during the 1980s with the Church in France over Catholic education should convince anyone that, no matter how moderate or just his economic theories may have

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been, Mitterrand and his socialism were hostile to the Christian way of life. Literature issued by the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (now the Democratic Socialists of America), an American organization whose proposals for worker ownership and management of factories often "strikingly approach the just demands of Christian social reformers," makes socialism's basic hostility to Catholicism very clear. Consider the following discussion of human liberation:

The struggle to set humans free lies behind all social ferment of modern times. Its first round was moral — the growing recognition, which signaled the end of the Dark Ages, that humans need not be slaves of old prejudices, beliefs and customs, but can make their own decisions and chart their own lives.

It does not take much imagination to see that these references to the "Dark Ages" and "old prejudices" refer to the Catholic Church and the Christian civilization of the Middle Ages. So one hears here the voice of the so-called Enlightenment, the myth that has captivated almost all of the modern West, that with the coming of modern times the human race finally emerged from its childhood and now must push fearlessly on toward full maturity. Such socialists do not see mankind as dependent on a Deity, or recognize that tradition is more than a collection of "old prejudices, beliefs and customs." Now, like Prometheus, men are to "make their own decisions and chart their own lives." It is not hard to see that Pius XI was not exaggerating when he wrote that socialists were not concerned about the "sublime end both of individuals and of society." Therefore Catholics may not be socialists, not (I repeat) because moderate socialist economic proposals are necessarily unjust and unsound, but because socialism, as an heir of European liberalism, wants to sever man from the supernatural. Even if it might give him a relatively just city on earth (something that we Catholics must also strive for), it in no way prepares him for the city that is to come, the city in which we hope to dwell eternally.

The idiotic American practice, then, of labeling as socialistic any program that departs from free-market economics violates both the papal approval of state ownership of certain key industries and papal calls for more widespread worker ownership or management. More importantly, it fails to grasp the

deeper and underlying reason for the condemnation of socialism. The abolition of private property advocated by 19th-century socialists was merely a symptom of their fundamental materialistic error, that this life is all there is, and the production of material goods is the purpose of society. For community of property was conceived of as a means of increasing the production of material goods and providing for their more equal distribution. The fact that it would have weakened the family by making it directly dependent on the state mattered to them not at all, for surely if all had more material things, what more could one desire? The family as the school of virtue and character can mean but little to one who thinks the end of man lies only in the production and use of material goods.

Right after Pius XI's discussion of what is right and wrong about socialism, the Pontiff goes on to discuss what he calls "cultural socialism." He says that cultural socialism's "main aim is the formation of minds and manners." It is not surprising that there was something rightly denominated cultural socialism, for if the root error of socialism is a wrong principle about human society, it follows that if such a wrong principle were put into practice it would give rise to its own culture. For at the base of every culture is an image of man, of human society, and of man's relationship with God.

In the 1930s Western socialists actually tried to create such a socialist culture. David Dubinsky, for example, who did much useful work in reviving the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union in the 1930s, also worked to establish a variety of cultural socialism. During a visit to Austria in 1934 he saw the array of projects which the Austrian socialists had established for Austrian workers. On returning to New York, Dubinsky set out to imitate them. Gus Tyler summarized Dubinsky's perspective this way: "The idea was to make the union a 'way of life,' a center of athletic activity, of artistic expression, of social communion, of political participation, of creative performance, of intellectual engagement." It might strike the reader that none of these proposals was necessarily wrong in itself. Unions are a good thing and so is the development of man's intellectual, artistic, and athletic potential. But the problem is that Dubinsky wanted to center culture around the union, whereas culture ought to be centered around Christ. This does not mean that only "church-related" activities are

acceptable, but it does mean that any attempt to base culture on something less than fundamental theological truths is inadequate for the Christian.

“But,” someone might object, “doubtless Dubinsky did not forbid union members to believe in God. They were still free to organize their private lives on a theological basis and participate in union activities. After all, our society is organized in the same way, except that instead of the union being the center of things, the commercial nexus is.” Indeed. And precisely because the commercial nexus is the center of our society, our own cultural capitalism is tarred with the same brush as is cultural socialism and condemned for the very same reason.

If there can be a cultural socialism, then there can be a cultural capitalism. Both socialism and capitalism make assumptions about God and man, and about society and its purposes. It is true that capitalism does not *explicitly* say much about these subjects. And that is part of the problem, for capitalism and the capitalistic society and culture it has created would prefer to leave to the side questions about God and ultimate questions about man. These matters are in fact rendered private affairs, and society as a whole is characterized by a pervasive commercialism and consumerism around which we are all expected to organize our lives. But the very fact that liberal capitalism organizes society around what is clearly a subsidiary activity for man — buying, selling, and consuming — shows that it has an image of man and society implicit in it, and this image is as materialistic as that conceived of by the socialists. Likewise, the god of capitalism is really the god of Deism, who created a clockwork world that runs on its own and whose laws are to be mastered in order to accumulate wealth. Under capitalism people are permitted to utter other religious pronouncements, including calls urging us to center everything on the true God, but that is because such statements are considered harmless. No one is expected to act upon them to the extent of upsetting capitalist society. Religion remains a private affair, and even if we could return to the state of things in the 1950s, with prayer and Bible reading in the public schools and Christmas displays on public property, this would change nothing. Such exercises and displays only hide the fact that religion is not an important social force and that our society is and has long been organized on a purely secular basis.

In *Quadragesimo Anno* Pius defined capitalism

as “that economic system in which were provided by different people the capital and labor jointly needed for production.” This is the bare bones of capitalism: the mere separation of ownership and work. Here is no strife of competition, no exploitation of workers, no mass consumerism and practical materialism — here is capitalism as it might be administered by the angels. Both Leo XIII and Pius XI, however, were intent on changing the actually existing capitalism of their own times to rid it of its very real evils. If one reads Pope John Paul II’s *Centesimus Annus*, one will see that in his approvals of a market economy, he likewise has in mind something very different from the economic system that exists in the U.S. today. For example, he calls for a society in which the market is “appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the State, so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole of society are satisfied,” and he criticizes a “system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong juridical framework....” This reminds one of Pius XI’s equally strong statement: “Free competition, and especially economic domination, must be kept within definite and proper bounds, and must be brought under effective control of the public authority, in matters pertaining to the latter’s competence.” There is not space here to list all the elements of a just economy which either Pius XI or John Paul II call for. But even a quick review of *Quadragesimo Anno* or *Centesimus Annus* will not reveal papal approval of the type of capitalism we have.

Capitalism in the abstract, then, as defined by Pius XI, is an economic system characterized by a separation of ownership and work. Most people in a capitalist economy do not own or control the enterprise in which they work, but are compensated by wages paid (ultimately) by those who own the enterprise. And such a system need not offend against justice, if all the strictures of Pius XI, John Paul II, and other pontiffs are remembered. Cultural capitalism or the *spirit* of capitalism, on the other hand, is how this system actually has worked in history and is the kind of society that results from it; it includes widespread consumerism, greed, exploitation, and even practical atheism.

Just as certain of the economic proposals of the socialists divorced from their socialistic ideology and animus need not offend against justice, so too the mere capitalistic arrangements of wage payment for work need not offend against justice, but coupled with the ideology and animus that propels a capitalistic

society they in fact produce a state of affairs that is not acceptable to the Church and that is not the expression of a just society.

Catholics are free to work to construct a real alternative to both socialism and capitalism, building on the patrimony of the Church's social teaching. As John Paul said in *Centesimus Annus*, "it is unacceptable to say that the defeat of so-called 'Real Socialism' leaves capitalism as the only model of economic organization."

The task set out for Catholics in the social encyclicals is to create economic arrangements that fit the minimum demands of justice. If we would do so we would find that much of our way of life would be altered. We would effectively terminate the culture of

capitalism, even if we still had a system of wage payment and capitalist owners. The relentless consumerism, degrading advertising, endless attempts to focus our attention on the empty and the fleeting, and the conduct of economic affairs as a private preserve for the rich and powerful — all this would be gone. Gone also would be the worker who works 40 hours a week but still lives in poverty, or the transporting of factories abroad to avoid paying higher wages or to escape environmental laws. Just as the materialism of socialism cannot hide behind the often just economic proposals of some socialists, so the materialism of capitalism cannot hide behind the efficiency and productivity of certain capitalist systems. Both materialisms must be rejected by Catholics. Both are evils. ■

WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO GOOD OLD-FASHIONED FUN?

MITCHELL KALPAKCIAN

Why the ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY Is Bad for CHILDREN

Those of us who grew up in the 1940s and 1950s recall fondly the improvised games and spontaneous fun we as children created through the use of our imagination. The word "bored" was not part of our vocabulary, and organized athletics like Little League did not dominate our lives. With one good bat, an old baseball, and a few gloves to be shared among us, we initiated, organized, and officiated our own games, with no need for adult supervision or arbitration. When the inevitable disagreements arose about whether a ball was fair or foul or a runner was safe or out, we settled the matter with a game of odds and evens — one player from each team making a throw of fingers and the sum

deciding the issue. We did not expect adults to entertain or amuse us — or whine about our having nothing to do. Other than imploring our parents to drive us to the lake or the beach on a sultry summer day, our fun was primarily our own invention. The benefits of a simple childhood — uncorrupted by the entertainment industry or amusement business — were a strong imagination, a love of adventure, a spirit of creativity, and the enjoyment of pure fun.

What has happened to this normative experience of childhood and youth, one that is depicted in many classics of children's literature, like Twain's *Life on the Mississippi* and Alcott's *Little Women*? In these 19th-century works, life is grounded in reality, nature, and the family — life is lived in an authentic way. For Mark Twain "the great Mississippi, the majestic, the magnificent Mississippi rolling its mile-wide tide along, shining in the sun" becomes the source of fun, excitement, and adventure. One is never at a loss for things to do.

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