

MORALITY AND THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE

[H. N. Brailsford is very well known as an experienced writer of much distinction. He was at one time Editor of *The New Leader*. In this article may be perceived the idealism he has inherited from Shelley and Voltaire, about whom he has written penetrating studies.—Eds.]

THE ARYAN PATH invites discussion of a thesis which many teachers of religion and morals have maintained in every phase of human history. The thesis, to put it in its broadest and simplest form, is that our existing society can be made tolerable and even happy, without any fundamental change in its structure, if all of us, but more especially the privileged classes, can be induced to follow a high standard of morality in our dealings with our fellows. This was always the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, though it used to forbid usury, and is still critical of high finance. Mr. Gandhi has preached impressive sermons on these lines to landlords (especially in the United Provinces) and to industrial capitalists. President Roosevelt has put the same idea in a rather naïve way, though he does not rely solely on persuasion. He supports the existing capitalist framework in the United States, but he believes that about ten per cent of American capitalists are evil men, who bring the system into disrepute. These exceptional persons he tried to restrain by the Codes of Fair Competition set up under the National Recovery Act. He applied this same ethical outlook to international affairs in his last Message to Congress. Civilization is in peril, because about ten or possibly fifteen per cent of the world's population is under dictatorships, turning delib-

erately to aggression. One may pursue this idea indefinitely, and it has even been suggested that a higher standard of personal morality among the heads of armament firms would go far to solve our problems of peace and war.

A socialist is bound to find himself in total opposition to this way of thinking. He can, of course, respect members of a privileged class, be they landlords or industrialists, who try to realise a high social ideal in their daily life. Without such men the world would be an uglier place than it is. But he holds, none the less, that the preacher who relies on an attempt to turn the members of privileged classes into better men, wastes his strength, and hugs an illusion. What is wrong, morally, socially, and in the realm of economics, is not the personal character of these men, but their function, their entire relationship to their fellows. There can be better or worse capitalists or landlords, but a good capitalist or landlord there cannot be. The private ownership of land or industrial capital is fatal to freedom, to morals, to social order and peace. The best of men cannot be moral in a wrong relationship to his fellows.

Let us look first at the simplest of these cases—the landowner. History is clear about the original system under which land was held in most early communities. Ownership was

vested in the whole community, usually the village. Among the European Aryans, the cultivated land was re-distributed periodically, so that each family had its fair share of the better and the poorer soil: some pastures and woods were kept for common use: provision was made for widows and orphans. Again, to this day in Africa the theory and practice of tribal ownership is all but universal—the peasant family enjoys the use of land, but may not alienate it. Broadly one may say that men in this state of society are barely able to understand the idea of privately owned land: when they do grasp it, they think it incredibly wicked. The system had its grave economic defects which certainly called for reform. But it attained some ends of inestimable value for human well-being and dignity. No man, not even the orphan, could be homeless or resourceless. Even if he went off to sea or to the wars, his part in the common heritage awaited him. His share in Nature's resources was guaranteed: he could always gain his bread as a free man with his plough. In other words, he was not a "proletarian," compelled to sell his labour power in order to live. If he did go out to sell his labour to a capitalist, he bargained over wages and conditions with the knowledge that the alternative to a servile existence in a mill was not starvation. He could always go home and till his strips of the common land among his kinsmen.

Space fails me to draw from history the long and intricate tale of the triumph of the idea of property

over this early communism in land. Usually it began with violence and conquest. By mere force the land was snatched by a better armed or better drilled group of men, who made themselves a privileged class, and based right on might. Norman Kings and Mogul Emperors behaved in much the same way. More important, perhaps, for our day are the subtler methods by which capitalist societies have broken down the reserves and resources of the peasantry to turn them into proletarians. In Africa the chief device is an oppressive hut tax which forces the natives to quit their reserves to labour for the white man. In England, through the latter part of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the common lands were simply enclosed for the benefit of the gentry by Acts of a wholly unrepresentative Parliament. Unless the peasants had first been deprived of their land, they would not have endured the slums, the starvation wages and the incredible hours of labour of the early industrial age.

Take such a case as the zemindars of the United Provinces. They were originally the agents of a conqueror, whose whole claim rested on force. I know their villages. The zemindar contributes literally nothing to their economic life. He neither built the insanitary huts, nor made the dirt roads, nor sunk the unscientific wells. Yet he gathers for himself an unearned tribute of half the peasant's land-tax, which is really a rent. To me it seems meaningless to tell this man to be good. His entire claim, every anna of it, is an offence

against morals and society; its origin rests on force and its effect is to keep this whole population in helpless, sub-human misery. To draw tribute for no service cannot be reconciled with any conceivable code of ethics.

The English aristocrat who draws his royalties on every ton of coal, got in hardship and peril by the miners, is in the same case. He too contributes nothing, neither the labour nor the science nor the machines that extract the coal. He draws a tribute for no service, because some ancestor "came over with the Conqueror." One may go on indefinitely. Property raising its rents because others have built a railway or a road: ground landlords whose values rise in proportion as others toil and build and trade in the heart of a great city: they are merely conspicuous members of a vast privileged class, which lives by the co-operative work of the rest of the community. Not only can it live in idleness, and refuse its contribution to the common work; its claim to do what it will with its own frustrates any orderly planning of our economic life. Society no longer owning the land, cannot (unless it buys out the parasites) decide to what social uses it should be put. Private property in land is not merely robbery but anarchy. You cannot make it moral. All that the preacher can do is to induce the landlord to give back, as a humiliating and enslaving charity, some fraction of an income derived from ancestral theft.

It is a consequence of this system by which the few own all the means

of life—the land, the minerals and the machines—that freedom is denied to the mass of their neighbours. If, in order to live, I must first secure the possibility of work from a landowner or a mill-owner, I am not free; I cannot determine the basic conditions of my own existence. He with his machine and the law behind him, refuses me work till I accept his terms: without land or mechanical tools I am a weak bargainer, for I shall starve, if I am stubborn. Arrived in his workshop I must make what he commands and as he chooses, even if it be a shoddy or harmful thing that offends my craftsman's conscience. Even outside the daily round of the estate or the workshop, my master, partly because he is wealthy, but chiefly because he can deny me the chance to work, still in great measure controls my life, for he can dismiss me at will. Only if I have first built up, in spite of my poverty and my fears, a powerful trade union, will I dare at an election to vote against him. His class, moreover, owns the press and can hire propagandists. Thus is the promise of democracy frustrated. There can be no true freedom, social, economic or even political, where one man can by this leverage of ownership deny to hundreds of his fellows the chance to work and live.

"But," the reader may say, "the owner may be a just man, who will pay fair wages, and concern himself with the welfare of his workers." To a certain extent such a policy "pays": to that extent it will be followed. Let us look at the realities. The capitalist system aims at

profit: everything else is secondary, from the soundness of the articles it turns out, to the welfare of the workers. The managing director is responsible to shareholders, who judge him solely by the dividends his management yields. The shares of every company are priced solely on this basis: as the expectation of profit rises or falls, so does the prestige of a company fluctuate, and the esteem in which its chiefs are held by the world of business. Now from this standpoint labour is merely one of the costs of production. It is the manager's duty to his shareholders to buy it as cheap as he can, precisely as he buys his fuel, his lubricants and his raw materials. Thus the whole tendency of the system is towards social inequality.

The gross inequality is a great evil, but there is another. Labour, which the manager is bound to regard simply as one of his costs of production, also furnishes his market. It ought to grow as manufacture expands, so that mass-consumption may keep pace with mass production. It never does. Always the pressure of the profit-making system to keep wages low as a cost of production causes a lack of equilibrium between the power of the machines to produce and the power of the masses to buy. Too little has been paid out in wages, too much accumulated in a few hands, which cannot spend it all. So the process of exchange gets blocked, and the capitalist system suffers from the recurrent slumps that come near to ruining us all.

It then tries to save itself in one of two ways. It restricts output;

it actually as in America puts hundreds of millions of acres out of cultivation. It makes a scarcity and calls it recovery. Thus it fails and must fail to realise the plenty that science promises. Its other device is Imperialism. Because it has starved its own market at home—the wage-earning masses—it must needs go out and conquer markets abroad. Thus by another road it rushes to ruin, for now it must arm, both to subdue the inhabitants of its conquered dependencies and to fend off rivals. Always this system of the private ownership of the means of life makes for scarcity, inequality and servitude, and always it begins with force and ends in war.

As for the maker of armaments he is bound by the same rule of profit. An honest merchant of death will sell shells that really will burst, and gas that really will poison our lungs. What more will you ask of him? That he should sell arms only to those whose cause is just? Who is he to judge of that? Born a capitalist and an imperialist, will you trust him to judge the cause of revolted workers or rebel "natives"? If the world must have arms, then it is for the organised society of nations to judge to what use they shall be put.

In a society built on wrong relationships the individual cannot be moral. There can be no such thing as morality in a society whose structure, based on the private monopoly of the means of life, denies to the masses freedom, equality and the opportunity to grow to their full mental stature as human beings.

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