

Research Article

Classical Liberalism of Rerum Novarum (The Vatican's Tactic to Survive the Modern Era)

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Abstract: The paper shows that Rerum Novarum, the first papal encyclical on social teachings, turns out to be one of the comprehensive assemblages of the classical liberal theories in the 19th century. With its publication, the Catholic Church took a competitive position in propagating classical liberalism. In effect, its proclamation marked not only the spectacular reentry of the Catholic Church into the ideological front where it had been marginalized since the Enlightenment, but also its transfiguration into an effective ally of the dominant capitalist class in checking the ever-increasing threat from the socialist movement and maintaining the status quo.

I. Introduction

In the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII criticizes contemporary Western society for its injustices and traces these injustices to the moral and spiritual decay of capitalist liberalism and socialist movement, both of which he subjects to a rigorous scrutiny guided mainly by the newly rediscovered Thomistic principles.^{xxxvii} Pope Leo XIII denounces the abuses which liberals and the capitalist economic system commit, and he alerts readers of the *Rerum Novarum* with much greater vigor to the threat to human freedom posed by the spread of socialism throughout the Western countries; liberalism is rebuked for its excessive individualism, and socialism is demonized for its dangerous collectivism. The encyclical argues that both systems are destructive to human dignity and detrimental to the health of society, which implies that the Church seems to propose a “third way” to address the social problem. However, its perspective and solution to the social question turns out to be heavily skewed toward property owners as a class in favor of the status quo. The virtual absolutization of private property rights and the one-sided response to the anxieties stirred up among the upper classes by the rising tide of socialism cannot but smack of classical liberalism.

Benestad (1985) argues that the teaching of the encyclical has striking similarities with classical political philosophy, but compares the two only in terms of property rights. Fortin (1992) additionally demonstrates what the encyclical takes out of classical liberalism regarding private property rights. However, there have been few studies on how the Catholic Church responds and adapts to the great transformation while preserving the essences of classical liberalism: individual liberty and the market, as well as private property rights. In this essay, we demonstrate that the Church was very successful in forming an ideological alliance with

bourgeoisie states by consecrating their classical liberalism to fight together against the socialist movement.

II. Threats to the Church in the 19th Century

Europe experienced significant political changes with the 1830 bourgeois revolution in France, the independence movements in Belgium, Poland, and Ireland, the 1848 European revolutions and 1871 Commune revolution, and the unifications of Germany and Italy. Several forms of state encroachment directed against the Catholic Church had gained ground across Europe since the collapse of Metternich's Holy Alliance and the July Revolution of 1830 in France; indeed, Joseph Moody in the nineteenth century observed that nearly every continental European country afforded examples of legislative discrimination against Catholicism (Schuck 1991, 5). During the papacy of Leo XIII, liberal states continued the pattern of restrictive, anticlerical legislation begun during the pre-Leonine period. Moreover, several newly constituted liberal states proscribed workless religious holidays and individual almsgiving as deleterious to national economic stability (Schuck 1991, 8).

At the same time, the Catholic Church with its hierarchical structure under the papacy was identified as an enemy of the proletarian movement (Habiger 1990, 3). According to Schuck (1991, 9), the radical phase of the socialist movement developed in three steps, beginning with the 1831 silk weavers' revolt in Lyons, France. The second step was taken in 1849, when the secret German branch of Blanqui's Society of the Seasons published Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*; almost immediately the revolution of 1848 broke out. The third step occurred in 1865, when various dissident groups created the First International. During the May 1871 Week of Blood, the Archbishop of Paris and more than fifty priests were shot as hostages and in reprisals (Schuck 1991, 10).

Indeed, the Catholic Church was at high risk of confronting ever-increasing encroachment and confiscation from liberal states as well as the socialist movement; it is needless to say that her moral authority had fallen to the ground. Holding onto feudal ideology and order, the Vatican remained pro-feudal and anti-capitalist. Before too long, Catholic leaders found themselves deeply at odds with the new order (Nuesse 1991). The Church had to do something in order to survive in the age of revolution and liberalism. In the times of this serious crisis, *Rerum Novarum* was issued by Pope Leo XIII on May 15, 1891.

III. *Rerum Novarum* as *Summa Libertae*

Rerum Novarum is an encyclical, passed to all Catholic bishops, and was designed to address the aforementioned conundrum. The encyclical is the prime example of the 19th century papacy's conscious effort at updating in the whole history of the Church (Misner 1991b). The objective of the encyclical, explicitly expressed at the beginning, is to announce that the Church now needs to speak on the condition of the working class. Additionally, it can serve as the only effective intermediary in drawing the rich and the working class together in order to prevent the socialist movement from making use of the differences between capital and labor to stir up the people to revolt. Accordingly, the encyclical starts with harsh criticism of socialists allegedly working on the poor man's envy of the rich to do away with private property and transfer the possessions of individuals to the community at large; socialists are emphatically unjust because they would rob the lawful possessor, distort the functions of the State, and create utter confusion in the community; and the socialist remedy is manifestly against justice for every man has by nature the right to possess property as his own (nos. 4-15). Socialism throws open the door to "envy, mutual invective, and discord" given that the inequalities are both natural and necessary

since they stem from one's own choices to take the present position in a society that fits best his or her conditions and society would be worse off without them.

What the encyclical draws on to this end is exactly in accord with the essences of old-fashioned classical liberalism: private property rights, individual liberty and the market. This section elucidates the essences of classical liberalism which are found in *Rerum Novarum*.

1. Private Property Rights as the Natural Right

The encyclical treats private property rights with utmost importance, arguing that “the first and most fundamental principle, therefore, if one would undertake to alleviate the condition of the masses, must be the inviolability of private property” (no. 15). The encyclical is obviously one of the most fervent proponents of private property rights; what it says is devised to refute the growing socialist movement, whose aim is to nationalize all private property, including that of the Church. Furthermore, Leo's absolutization of private property rights goes beyond the Church's long-standing teaching on the issue, which originally expounded by Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa theologiae* who raised the question of whether it is lawful for someone to possess a thing as his own (Fortin 1992). Fortin argues that the question receives an affirmative answer supported by three arguments taken from Aristotle's *Politics*: the first is that human beings bestow greater care upon things that belong to them individually than they do upon common things; the second is that they are less confused than they tend to be when everyone is responsible for everything indiscriminately; and the last is that individuals have a better chance of living at peace with one another if they know what belongs to each. In other words, prior to *Rerum Novarum* it was understood that according to natural law the earth originally belonged to everyone and that its subsequent division, dictated in large measure by reasons of expediency, was a matter of human or positive law whose principles are derived from the natural law as

conclusions from premises (Fortin 1992).^{xxxvii} Granted, the encyclical refers to Thomas's doctrines (no. 22), but it proceeds even further to provide the right of private property with a much firmer foundation in nature. The property rights are elevated to stable and perpetual (no. 6), and inviolable and sacred^{xxxvii} (no. 46) rights, which can be fact traced back to John Locke and Adam Smith who praise the right of property as the most sacred and inviolable of rights. In this way, the encyclical owes its extraordinary doctrine of the sanctity of private property to the very classical liberal tradition.

Further confirmation of the Lockean ancestry of the encyclical's view of private property is to be found in its endorsement of the concept of labor as the sole source of property, for example, in its labor theory of property (nos. 8-10). According to Locke, it is by exerting one's labor over an object that one gains legitimate possession of it.^{xxxvii} The encyclical echoes the Lockean moral justification of private property almost in the same way:

The fact that God has given the earth for the use and enjoyment of the whole human race can in no way be a bar to the owning of private property. For God has granted the earth to mankind in general, not in the sense that all without distinction can deal with it as they like, but rather that no part of it was assigned to any one in particular, and that the limits of private possession have been left to be fixed by man's own industry, and by the laws of individual races (no. 8).

Moreover, the Pope utilizes the labor theory of property to contend that "socialists strike at the very interests of every wage-earner, since they would deprive him of the liberty of disposing of his wages, and thereby of all hope and possibility of increasing his resources and bettering his condition in life" (no. 5). In other words, the Church is consciously or

unconsciously trying to weaken the ever-growing solidarity of the proletariat by convincing workers that the very victims of this system would be the workers themselves with their ever-promising socialist reform or revolution.

The Vatican's conversion to modern liberal thoughts can be considered as an equivalent to the Copernican Revolution for the Church because most of the modern popes resisted the transformation through the Western thought, as is evident from the documents of the pre-Leonine period; for example, the last of the "errors" condemned by Pius IX in the *Syllabus* of 1864 is that "the Roman Pontiff can and ought to reconcile himself with progress, liberalism and modern civilization." One can easily imagine the Church's eagerness to preserve the status quo if he or she takes it into consideration that the Church voluntarily apostatized from the Thomistic theology of private property.

2. Functionalist Social Theology Predicated on Liberty

The encyclical has such an emphasis on the different condition of things inherent that "it is impossible to reduce civil society to one dead level" (no 17), criticizing socialist proposals to do so as a vain striving against nature. This can be seen as a much more fervent support for the status quo than the 19th century liberal position, for example Herbert Spencer's evolutionary, individually-based, and natural law-rooted argument in which all people should begin with a level playing field, at least in the theoretical aspects.^{xxxvii} While Spencer focuses only on supposed genetic differences, the Pope admits the possibility of not only genetic but also familial lotteries at an individual level including capacity, skill, health and strength, along with unequal fortune. Nonetheless, these differences have nothing to do with social problems because "social and public life can only be maintained by means of various kinds of capacity for business and the playing of many parts" (no. 17). Their interdependence guarantees harmony among people and

not the conflict. In addition, “each man, as a rule, chooses the part which suits his own peculiar domestic condition” (no. 17). In other words, everything is founded upon individual liberty; current positions are the very result of each individual’s voluntary choice to be the part which is best suited to his or her own conditions. This is exactly what nature wants to do for Spencer; the difference between the two is that for Spencer nature works for the operation in God’s stead to a more or less different degree.

To effect, the encyclical refers to the body-part analogy, where “in a State is it ordained by nature that these two classes should dwell in harmony and agreement” (no. 19), just as for the suitable arrangement of the different parts of the body. Each class needs its counterpart, which leads them to reach a consensus. At the same time, the Church argues against the conflictual notion that capitalist and worker are supposed to be naturally hostile to each other, simply because “so irrational and so false is this view that the direct contrary is the truth” (no. 19). Such functionalism is presented in the work of Émile Durkheim, who developed a full theory of organic solidarity as well as in the work of Spencer.

Furthermore, in the following section, the encyclical puts forth an auxiliary argument to help workers accept the status quo by saying “no strength and no artifice will ever succeed in banishing from human life the ills and troubles which beset it” (no. 18). In other words, the encyclical tries repeatedly to persuade workers to endure their poor conditions because “nothing is more useful than to look upon the world as it really is, and at the same time to seek elsewhere, as We have said, for the solace to its troubles” (no 18). Including quotations from the Bible, the encyclical succeeds in sanctifying earthly hardships and poor working conditions. It is in this very peculiar sector that the Church can maintain its “comparative advantage” in justifying and propagating classical liberal ideology by exploiting religious and spiritual habits of thought. This

concept led Karl Marx to criticize religion as “the opiate of the people” in his introduction to the 1843 work *Contribution to Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*.

All these arguments can be boiled down to the Church’s attempt to sanctify the status quo and discourage the working poor from socialist movements or revolutions, thereby preserving property rights and moral authority of the Church.

3. Private Association as the Solution to the Social Question

A myth was created in the early 19th century of a disappearing society where rich and poor lived like families in mutual care of each other (Ashcraft 1996). The encyclical draws implicitly upon this myth to argue for reciprocal obligations. To restore industrial relations, the *Rerum Novarum* proposes a new relationship between workers and capitalists (Almodovar and Teixeira 2008a). Workers should choose nonviolent ways to solve their labor disputes and perform faithfully and completely the tasks allocated to them. Likewise, capitalists are obliged to acknowledge and respect the human dignity of the workers, urging them to respect their physical and intellectual limitations, particularly of female and child labor, as well as paying a fair wage and allowing workers time for their religious duties.

The encyclical suggests such associations and organizations to help those who are in distress and draw the two classes more closely together. They include societies for mutual help: creating various benevolent foundations, established by private persons, to provide for the workman and for his widow or his orphans, in case of sudden calamity, in sickness, and in the event of death; and institutions for the welfare of boys and girls, young people, and those more advanced in years (no. 48). The most important of all are “workingmen’s unions” for these virtually include all the rest. Private societies cannot be prohibited by public authority for to enter into a society of this kind is the natural right of man. However, the State may justly forbid

and dissolve certain societies whose “purposes are to stir up disorder and incite their fellows to acts of violence” – i.e. socialist unions or associations – and it should intervene to prevent them. It means that workingmen’s associations should be so organized and governed as to follow what the encyclical proposes; otherwise, they should be forbidden or dissolved. These legitimate private associations can lead the society as a whole to harmonious order again under the guideline of the Church. Hence, the Church’s proposal for private associations as the solution is in itself equivalent to the old-fashioned classical liberals’ assertion that only the market can address the social question and not artificial entities. The legitimate private associations of the Church and the free market of the classical liberals are the same in that they deal with economic and social problems in hand predicated on the exclusion or minimization of possible interventions by extrinsic third-party entities such as government, civic groups, and others.

True, the encyclical argues for the public authority to deal with the general interest and some particular class sufferings. But the public interventions should not be undertaken more than they are required for the remedy of evil or the removal of mischief in cases of extreme need. Except for labor strikes, unjust workload and working conditions, and denied time for religious duties, the public authority should not interfere in social problems.

In sum, the disadvantage of the capitalist ownership of the means of production is not to be eliminated by socialism, but by the teachings of the Church on faith and morals, the laws of the state, and the actions of legitimate private associations, all of which must comply with liberal ideology.

IV. Conclusion

It has often been remarked that the papacy was slow in speaking out against the alleged injustices to which the industrial revolution and the triumph of capitalism had directly or

indirectly given rise. Its proclamation on this matter followed the formation of the powerful socialist movement to which assorted nonreligious or antireligious theorists had been lending their voices since the 18th century or earlier; indeed, the Holy See joined the debate in a time when the condition of the modern laborer had already begun to improve (Fortin 1992).

Nevertheless, the Vatican managed to position itself in the new era to play its original, major role as a control mechanism, which Hobbes recognized in *Leviathan*. Just as the Catholic Church had once assailed the bourgeoisie for its support of the Old Regime, so was it trying to ally itself with the bourgeoisie against the proletariat. Eric Hobsbawm (1975) aptly summarizes her successful positioning into the new era:

[T]he decline of religion was, as we have seen, inhibited not only by tradition and the striking failure of liberal rationalism to provide any emotional substitute for collective religious worship and ritual, but also by the reluctance to abandon so valuable, perhaps so indispensable, a pillar of stability, morality and social order (321).

The encyclical provided not only a theological but also a practical foundation for preserving the classical liberalism and suppressing the growing threat from socialism, which helped Catholicism to become so indispensable a pillar of social order that liberal states turned out to be reluctant to eliminate the papal authority.

In addition to the sanctification of the main dogmas of classical liberalism, a practical implication of the encyclical should be noted for the labor movement history in the following decades. What is striking about the development of the Catholic working-class movement is that it seems to have been a genuine ideological reaction to socialists; the Catholics not only drew

support from some of the same groups of workers as socialists, but also built the same kinds of organizations as socialists (Strikwerda 1988). Indeed, many, Catholics and non-Catholics, used the term “Christian socialists” to describe those who set about putting *Rerum Novarum* into practice (Misner 1991a, 218). The consequence also provides part of the convincing evidence of the Roman Pontiff’s success in positioning and functioning in the modern capitalist system as a powerful and efficient exorcist of the socialist evil spirits.

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