

Don't Cry for Me, Argentina:

Pope Francis and the Caring Society

by Samuel Hux (February 2018)



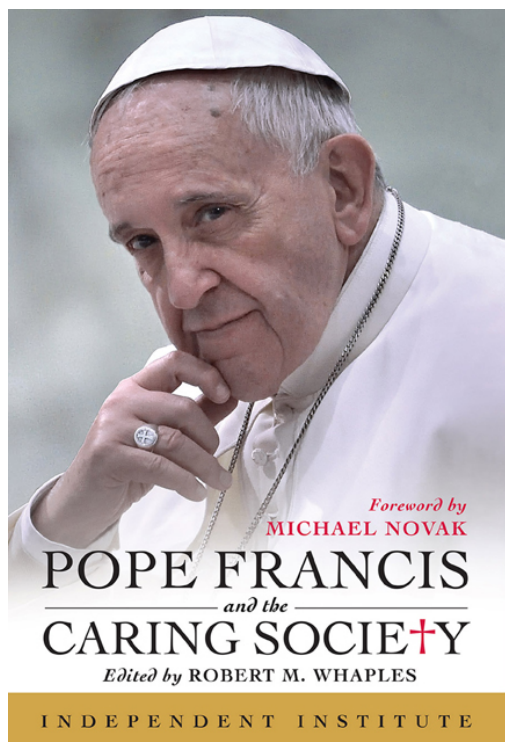
Screaming Cardinals, Whit Conrad, 2012

American liberalism—at least since the New Deal—has assumed that capitalism, whatever its capacity to create expectations of a high standard of living, had to be controlled, its individualistic urges contained by some degree of social planning. If liberalism did not go so far as socialism's open animus against the capitalist ethic, it was nonetheless distrustful of capitalism left to capitalists. But in fact the conventional American liberal attitude has never been quite as distrustful of capitalism as traditional Catholic social thought has.

However the "Protestant Ethic" aided the "Spirit of Capitalism," intellectual Catholicism has generally been resistant to that spirit—even though it is true, as R.H. Tawney pointed out in modification of Max Weber's theory, that without the "capitalist spirit" of Venetian and Florentine bankers in Catholic Italy, a nascent capitalism would hardly have expanded as it did. But I'm not in the habit of thinking of bankers, whatever their religious affiliation, as particularly responsive to social philosophy.

For these reasons in part, I am not as disturbed at some of Pope Francis's hostile remarks about capitalism as many American Catholics are. Let me say off the bat that I (non-Catholic by the way) am not a fan of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, principally because I had gotten used to the intellectual heft of the two philosopher-theologians who preceded him, John Paul and Benedict: in comparison, Francis seems a good-willed intellectual light weight (okay . . . medium weight) whose sociological pronouncements seem to suggest the depth of mental deliberation of your garden-variety liberal professor of English. His notion for instance that the purpose of an economy is to lead people to God is absurd: its purpose is to make a life beyond the level of subsistence possible. His prejudice that "Possessions are so dangerous" because they encourage vanity and make you feel important and "when you believe you are important, your head swells and you become lost" strikes me as intellectually juvenile. Nonetheless, his distrust of capitalists left to their own devices is not outside the broad tradition of papal social considerations. Laissez-faire simply does not easily trip over the tongue of *intellectual Catholicism*. (Which is different from the tongues of *some Catholics who are intellectuals*, William Buckley being one glorious instance.)

Given these facts, while I admire [*Pope Francis and the Caring Society*](#) (ed. by Robert M. Whaples, Foreword by Michael Novak, Independent Institute, 2017), and while I think the seven



essays included (by Andrew M. Yuengert, Samuel Gregg, Gabriel X. Martinez, Lawrence J. McQuillan with Hayeon Carol Park, A. M. C. Waterman, Philip Booth, and Allan C. Carlson) are worthy efforts in themselves to understand and judge Pope Francis, I finally cannot experience the urgency which I and other readers (*presumably conservative*) are clearly meant to feel.

The essays may focus on papal predecessors, the pope's Argentine nationality, even and uneven economic playing fields, charitable giving, the environment, conservation, and family economics—to simply skim the top—but the real theme of the book is something other. The subtitle may be "*and the Caring Society,*" clearly inspired I think by Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home*—but a better subtitle would have been "*Pope Francis's Lamentable Failure to Appreciate Capitalism as Well as His Immediate Predecessors Did.*"

And while Paul VI, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI did indeed abhor socialism and enthusiastically endorse capitalism (so long as guided by a moral vision rather than crass calculations), I don't think the issue ends quite there. To put my thoughts and my judgment of this book in context, I

would like to think out loud a bit about Pope John XXIII's great encyclical: John being a vastly deeper thinker than Francis, that fact more important than the popular view of both as lovable avuncular types and men of the people.

There is little point in dwelling long on the clear liberal features, the "Christian Democratic" tone of *Mater et Magistra*: the concern for the Just Wage, the approval of labor unionism, the demand for full employment and balance between wages and prices, the insistence on the dignity of labor and the need for dignified working conditions, and such.

Nor is there much point in more than noting the rather obvious "social democratic" features such as Pope John's endorsement of workers' consultation in management decisions and approval not only of social insurance and security but their wider extension; for quite frankly such measures needn't mean all that much unless there is some radical redefinition of just property relations.

John's so-called "opening to the left" (*so-called* I repeat) seems fundamentally at odds with the warning of Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931 that although there was a clear difference between Communism and democratic Socialism—the latter having moderated its views on property and collectivism and having muted the notion of class war—Socialism and the church remained opposed to the extent that "No one can be at the same time a sincere Catholic and a true Socialist"—which opposition John dutifully repeats in his encyclical, in somewhat muted form, even while making "the opening." But perhaps the two popes are not so fundamentally at odds on this issue after all, thirty years having passed between them, and since Pius wrote that "it may well come about that gradually

the tenets of mitigated Socialism will no longer be different from the program of those who seek to reform human society according to Christian principles." Or it may well be—I think it is—that even as early as *Quadragesimo Anno* the tenets of "mitigated" Catholic reformism were undergoing a change, accelerated later in *Mater et Magistra*. I think there is some radical redefinition of just property relations.

To avoid the obfuscation un-nuanced capitalist apologists generally like: we're talking about "productive property" obviously, not someone's house or garden or portable goods. I doubt that many (although I probably give more credit than is due) would disagree with John that "vigilance should be exercised and effective steps taken that class differences arising from disparity of wealth not be increased, but lessened as far as possible," for this can surely be taken to mean house, garden, and goods for all. But it might be somewhat displeasing to those who think primarily in terms of GDP to read that "National wealth . . . the economic prosperity of any people is to be assessed not so much from the sum total of goods and wealth possessed as from the distribution of goods according to norms of justice, so that everyone in the community can develop and perfect himself." For on the one hand this might suggest a modified kind of Chestertonian Distributism, of which there are echoes in *Mater et Magistra*, and "redistribution" has become a scare word for American conservatives old and new. And on the other hand, when John follows these remarks on the distribution of goods with the observation that since "large and medium size productive enterprises achieve rapid growth precisely because they finance replacement and plant expansion from their own revenues," workers should share in those revenues beyond their wages because they help create the revenues, and when he follows this with a quotation from Pius XI's encyclical, "It is totally false to ascribe to a single factor of production

what is in fact produced by joint activity; and it is completely unjust for one factor to arrogate to itself what is produced, ignoring what has been contributed by other factors," he is explicitly saying that wealth should be distributed not simply because the powerful should be charitable (a dominant theme of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*) but because wealth is created partially by labor and justice demands that labor share fully in it—which is to take a considerable cut at the traditional privileges of capital upon which any conventional view of capitalism is based.

I'm being presumptuous enough to try to imagine a lively process of assumption in John's mind which informs his disparate remarks on productive property in separate parts of the encyclical. When he affirms that "artisan and farm enterprises of family type should be safeguarded and fostered, as should also cooperatives that aim to complement and perfect such enterprises," and that it is not less fitting "that the State make special provision for them in regard to instruction, taxes, credit facilities, social security, and insurance," I don't necessarily hear G.K. Chesterton's call in *The Outline of Sanity* for "taxation of contracts so as to discourage the sale of small property to big proprietors and encourage the break-up of big property among small proprietors"—although I'm listening—but I do hear not only *fostered* but *safeguarded*. Which suggests that the charitable restraint of big capital is not enough to rely upon. Neither is the invisible hand of the market: John early quotes Pius XI's recognition that "economic power has been substituted for the free marketplace," something many classical economists still fail to recognize, those who tend to create market models to explain the functioning of an economy often clearly guided by very visible grasping hands. And John is willing to sanction the nationalization of productive property, following Pius XI again, whom he quotes, "if these [enterprises] carry

with their power too great to be left in private hands, without injury to the community at large"—although he appeals to Pius's "principle of subsidiarity" that what bears no threat to the commonweal should be left to the exercise of private moral responsibility.

Here I'd like to take a quirky look at Saint Thomas Aquinas before returning to a quirkier look at the encyclicals. *Nationalization*. It's a kind of theft or robbery, from one obvious point of view. In the *Summa Theologiae* (2a 2ae, Question 66) Aquinas distinguished in value and kind between "theft" (*furtum*) and "robbery" (*rapina*). Robbery is the more detestable because more physical injury can be inflicted, although theft is not open, is done by stealth, is furtive. Nonetheless they are kindred acts. Is either ever justified?

Answering the question "Is it possible for robbery not to be a sin?" Aquinas concludes, "There is no robbery where sovereigns exact from their subjects what is due to them for the good of the common estate, even to the extent of using force," so long as the demands are not extortionate. And answering the question "is theft justifiable in cases of necessity?" he decides that "in the case of necessity everything is common," that "If one is to speak quite strictly, it is improper to say that using somebody else's property taken out of extreme necessity is theft. For such necessity renders what a person takes to support his life his own." Of course what's "extortionate" and what's "extreme necessity" are probably going to be subjective, self-interested judgments. And of course, there's no specific justification of nationalization here, even if "sovereign" can mean now the "sovereign state"; and there's no appeal to Aquinas on this point in the encyclicals. But on the other hand there is nothing in the entirety of Question 66, "*de furto et rapina*," that's at odds with John and Pius on "Public Property," and they might have

appealed to Aquinas on this point if they had been as willing as I am to risk being thought “Jesuitical” and appreciate the irony. But the popes appeal to him so often, and that gets us to the major point.

Leo XIII: private property is a natural right, as St. Thomas says. Pius XI: private property is a natural right, as Pope Leo and, implicitly, St. Thomas say. John XXIII: private property is a natural right, as Popes Pius and Leo and St. Thomas say.

Two matters occur to me. (1) Why is John so pronounced in stressing the *social* function of property, insisting that if you have it you have it in stewardship, and what’s the rather ambiguous meaning of the following conjunction?: John repeats that “the right of private property is from natural law itself” while in the preceding sentence he has summarized approvingly a teaching from Pius XII (1941 Pentecost Broadcast) to the effect that “the right of every man to use [material goods] for his own sustenance is prior even to the right of private ownership.” And (2) what exactly *does* Aquinas say about natural rights and property? To the *Summa Theologiae* again, 2a 2ae, 66:

Aquinas asks, “is the possession of external goods natural to man?” In a sense, no: “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.” However: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea,” etc. *Stewardship*. “God has pre-eminent dominion over all things, and in his providence he ordered certain things for men’s material support. This is why it is natural for man to have dominion over things in the sense of having the power to use them.” This is to say nothing, however, of

individual possession.

Then Aquinas asks, “is it legitimate for individual men to possess anything as their own?” Countering the apparent primitive communism of some early church fathers, he decides that it is, for reasons in line with Aristotle’s teachings in the *Politics*: a person tends to take more care of something that’s his sole responsibility; human affairs are organized more efficiently when a person “has his own responsibility to discharge” than they would be “if everybody cared for everything”; there’s greater peace when “everyone is content with his task” than when “quarrels . . . break out amongst men who hold things in common without distinction.” (Anyone who hears an argument from John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government* as well is absolutely right.)

But these are practical observations of administrative efficiency over what’s held in stewardship (however one judges their prescience), not observations about natural law. “Community of goods,” as a matter of fact, might itself be considered a dictate of natural law in the sense that man in general, *mankind*, has been given by God usufruct of the earth; but neither communism nor private possession is dictated by natural law.

Rather—and rather emphatically!—“*the distribution of property is a matter not for natural law but, rather, human agreement, which is what positive law is all about . . .* The individual holding of possessions is not, therefore, contrary to natural law; it is what rational beings conclude as an *addition to natural law*” (italics mine). And consequently, I add, if rational beings were to judge that collective possession was more reasonable, they could, by human agreement, fix upon such

as an addition to the natural law and not in violation of it.

This is not to argue for either; it is to take the question of private property out of the realm of natural law where Aquinas, the popes' principal source, never put it, and to place it in the realm of human agreement, positive law, where Aquinas put it and where the thrust of John's arguments—however much his position constrains him to remain solidly within the encyclic tradition—tends to put it. Nor is any of this an argument for nationalization; it is only (only?) to argue that (1) John's teachings are perfectly in line with the priorities of social insurance and security of a welfare state, or the latter is in line with the former; and (2) given his remarks on the function of property, on the distribution not only of wealth but of the decision-making process in the creation of wealth, and, in general, his suspicion of the conventional privileges of capital, his views are not really compatible with conventional capitalist apologetics.

What am I after? Why this digging around in papal encyclicals and Thomism? A traditionalist conservative who, while grateful for the largesse capitalism affords those of us lucky enough to live under it, I am still resistant to the idea of embracing its laissez-faire variety, and even more resistant to the idea that such an embrace is the natural duty of the conservative. And as a traditionalist I am taken by the sheer traditionalism of Catholic thought, tradition being to me not something frozen in the past but a living process of communication across the ages in which first words are not forgotten. From Chrysostom's primitive-communist declaration that "wealth is common to thee and thy fellow servants, just as the sun is common, the earth, the air," to Basil's that "the bread you keep belongs to the hungry. The gold you have

hidden in the ground belongs to the needy," to Aquinas's cautious defense of private possession according to "human agreement" modified by the declaration that "in the case of necessity everything is common," to John XXIII's insistence that economic prosperity is defined not by "the sum total of goods and wealth" but by "the distribution of goods according to norms of justice."

I would not like to give the impression that the social ethics of Christianity is all that interests me. I am fond of quoting the great German Protestant theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher that religion is "a sense and taste for the infinite." And quite frankly the "social gospel" of "liberal Christianity" bores me, primarily because it seems to me a cop-out and avoidance of the difficult theological mysteries of Christianity. Nonetheless, Christian social ethics, specifically as it applies to property and questions of economics, is what is at issue here. And (1) the Catholic variety of same is the most coherently developed and commanding edition (so to speak) of Christian social ethics there is; and (2) Catholic social doctrine was never intended—*by its authors!*—to serve as defense of the social and economic privilege of the lucky few, no matter how often it has been misapplied in that service.

I never quite understand why putative conservatives would make the embrace of laissez-faire economics a test of one's conservative credentials. After all, when you get right down to it (as we used to say), a laissez-faire arrangement (or dis-arrangement) of economic life is an un-deservedly respectable version of Thomas Hobbes's life in a state of nature: the war of all against all: so much for being thy brother's keeper. Nothing *conserving* about that.

John XXIII's great encyclical was famously called his "opening to the left." That's nonsense. Reinhold Niebuhr observed some years ago (while commenting on John's *Mater et Magistra* and Protestant surprise at its acceptance of extensive welfare measures) that the social thought of the church in predominately Catholic countries has skipped over classical laissez-faire and retained much of the social and anti-atomistic ethos of medieval thought. Opening to the left? It seems rather to me *an opening to and welcoming of the traditional.*

So how does all this relate to the issue at hand? I fully agree with the authors of *Pope Francis and the Caring Society* that capitalism is far more productive and protective of a good life for all so long as morally conceived . . . and that Francis is misled in his hostility toward it; I am fairly convinced that the hostility has its source, as Samuel Gregg argues, in Francis's experience of a corrupted oligarchic conception of capitalism in Peronist Argentina, and Francis should be wise enough to see what his predecessors have grasped. And I am amused (there is no other way to put it) that when Francis practically endorses a life among the poor as morally superior to a life blessed (I would say) with material possession, his rhetoric (according to Gregg again) is very ironically "very reminiscent of Juan Perón, his wife, Evita Perón, and contemporary Peronist leaders."

Nonetheless, if Francis frightens people who judge the *conservative* disposition by how closely it reflects conventional economic endorsements of capitalism and definitions of property, they should know that Francis cannot hold a candle to John XXIII, to say nothing of Saint Thomas

Aquinas.

There is another matter I should in good faith confess which colors to a degree my response to this book. As I read it I was bothered by I-knew-not-what at the time. I know now. While I think it just that economists (the vast majority of the book's contributors) should judge the Pope's utterances about economic matters, an admittedly sub-rational portion of my mind was disturbed, even perhaps offended, by a certain *presumptuousness*: namely the assumption that Catholic thought should conform to professionally economic values rather than the worldly bowing to the demands of the transcendental; that purveyors of "the dismal science" should confidently instruct "Christ's Vicar on Earth" about his responsibilities.

That, I admit, is going a bit over the top—especially since I myself, failing to practice what I preach, have presumed to suggest that Francis might better instruct himself about some economic matters to which he has given insufficient thought. And since I am now in an apologetic mood, if I have expressed reservations about what I take to be the basic premises of the book, I must add the following: Professor Whaples and his colleagues have collaborated in what is in effect a provocative seminar-in-print that the reader (or this one at any rate) cannot help but wish to join the conversation. That is the highest compliment to a collection of essays that I can imagine.

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Response to David Theroux's