CORRESPONDENCE

Work and Property

To the Editor of Blackfriars,

Sir,—Fr. Ceolfrid Heron's very valuable and appreciative article in the August Blackfriars, on my book *Work and Property*, invites a short comment. Misunderstanding seems to arise from my advocacy of "collective ownership" by the "workers." It is thought that such advocacy is out of line with adverse criticism of industrialism and the "leisure state." People ask: how can you be in favour of collectivism and of a return to responsible workmanship at the same time? How can you believe in distributed property and also acquiesce in industrialism? The answer is easy. I believe in workers' ownership of means of production and distribution. I believe in the village blacksmith (still one or two left) owning his own workshop and tools. I believe in the farmer owning his own farm and implements.

But what about the Great Western Railway? That also is an affair of workmen. Is it a bad thing? Is it immoral? Does the Pope refuse to go by train? And what about all the other great industrial enterprises? I may not like the kind of world they imply. I may be able to show that it is all wrong and leading to war and disaster—cheap amusements and conveniences, vulgarity on every hand, not to mention the corruption of family life, the destruction of humane culture and an increasing madness of international rivalry. But what of it? Does any theologian of importance condemn railway trains or telephones or tinned food? Does any theologian condemn the factory system, as such, or say anything against the wage system? As far as my information goes theologians ask for no more than good trade unionists do—higher wages, shorter hours, better canteens, insurance against ill-health and unemployment and possibly a share of the profits large enough to enable employees to buy a bit of property (if there's any for sale).

Very well then, I take it that no one wants the G.W.R. to be abolished. The question is: who shall own it? At present it is the legal possession of the shareholders. We all know what they're like. You read the finance pages of the daily papers. I say I believe in workers' ownership. Why should such a belief only apply to blacksmiths' shops, artists' studios and solicitors' offices? If it is good for me to own my workshop, why isn't it good for railway men to own a railway? And if I say these things, why should I be accused of going back on my vocation

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1937.tb00136.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

to teach in and out of season that the ownership and control of any enterprise is rightly that of those who have the responsibility of doing the work and making a good job of it? A porter cannot own a platform, a guard cannot own a railway carriage, a driver cannot own a locomotive—that's obvious. But they can collectively own the railway—that's obvious too. And as in our existing society the ownership of railways and such things is that of those whose only title is that they have lent money and whose only concern is the profit on what they've lent, it seems somewhat clearer than daylight that it is time we made a bit of a change. Who wants to make a change—a change in the direction of workers' ownership? The workers do—and very rightly and properly. And their demand is entirely in line with what I've always said—that the man who does the work ought to be responsible for it and that there can be no responsibility where there is no ownership. And as I pointed out in *Work and Property,* enlarging on the theme of Prof. Maritain in his *Freedom in the Modern World,* "the formal reason of individual appropriation is the exercise of art or work" and "the notion of *person* must be included in any complete theory of property." In our society we already have collective ownership—that of the shareholders. This is an impersonal ownership. The shareholder in relation to his holding is not a person; he is a receiver of dividends, if any. But porters and guards and engine drivers and foremen and clerks and managers are persons and they are personally responsible for the jobs they do. It is obvious that they ought to be the owners and controllers and that it is the money lenders who should be subordinate and powerless. If a man lends me money, I treat him as such, thank him politely and keep out of his way. I don't give him control of my job. I trust, sir, that all this is clear and that it will not again be thrown up against me that I have done anything but carry my "teaching" to its logical conclusion.

One thing more: May I say that I am sorry if, as one reviewer put it, I seem "to have been particularly unfortunate in the clergy of (my) acquaintance." The reverse is the truth. But I must admit that I share the opinion common among the masses who are "lost to the Church" that the clergy show some reluctance to condemn capitalism—production for profit, production for the sake of dividends.

Yours faithfully,
ERIC GILL.

Pigotts, High Wycombe.

Postscript.—It should be added, to avoid unnecessary correspondence, that when I say that the farmer, the craftsman, should own his own land, workshop, etc., I do not refer to that quasi

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1937.tb00136.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

absolute ownership which goes to-day by the name of "freehold." Ownership means control, personal control, but, definitely, control of good not evil, not for private aggrandisement, but in the interests of society and the common good—in the interest of the individual also, but of the individual as a member of society: "A man should not regard his material possessions as his own but as common to all . . . " Absolute ownership, implying a right to destroy or misuse or leave unused what is necessary to the good of others, is an evil myth. Therefore the ownership I mean is a tenancy, hereditary if desired, granted by responsible authority, enjoying the support and defence of public opinion and law, but implying specified duties and obligations as much as rights and carrying with it no opportunity for the exploitation of other people.—E. G.

TO OUR READERS

Enclosed with this copy of BLACKFRIARS *is a leaflet,* The Facts about Blackfriars. *We should be very grateful to our readers if they would help us in any way to distribute it, and to make* BLACKFRIARS *more widely known. Copies of the leaflet may be obtained free and post-free on application to our publishers,* The Rolls House Publishing Co. Ltd., 2 Breams Buildings, London, E.C.4. *Please state how many you require.* —THE EDITOR.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1937.tb00136.x Published online by Cambridge University Press