

Friedrich Naumann, “What Does Christian-Social Mean?” (1894)

Abstract

Friedrich Naumann (1860–1919) was a Protestant theologian and politician who sought to reconcile Christian values and an industrial economy with liberal democracy. He fought the forces of political conservatism, represented most famously in the theology of the antisemite Adolf Stöcker. Naumann synthesized his own blend of liberal and Christian values. He sympathized with unions and workers’ movements, seeking to integrate the social concerns of the lower classes into politics, and he argued for the abolition of the Prussian electoral law, which maintained voting privileges based on wealth. He went on to help form the *Fortschrittliche Partei* [Progressive Party] in 1910 and the *Deutsche Demokratische Partei* [German Democratic Party] in 1918, two of Germany’s leading liberal parties.

Source

The religious is, needless to say, only one aspect of Christian-social. The economic aspect must be in harmony with it. How do we arrive at a Christian-social conception of the economy? [...] The first approach recommended to us follows – that we should we assume a conservative stance, generally speaking, and then make some concessions in the direction of Social Democracy, that we should accept what is “legitimate.” But what is legitimate about Social Democracy remains entirely unclear in this approach. The following objection, however, is important: the conservative program contains not a single sentence for employees, dependents, clerks, wage-workers, and day-laborers. It is a program for gentlemen. In the midst of this socially unsettled time, the suffering masses are not remembered with a single syllable on the great day at Tivoli. A party that thinks so little about the jobless, about those who labor and are laden down, cannot remain the only starting point for work among the people in the spirit of Jesus. This is also unchanged by the fact that one generally finds the most understanding for the church among conservatives. It is not “churchliness” we thirst for, but “brotherliness.” And because the time when Christian-social branches grew on the conservative tree seems to have passed, never to return, it makes sense to want to develop the economic program freely, that is to say, out of certain general moral principles. One takes the terms “brotherliness,” “justice,” “worth of the individual,” “kingdom of God,” “property,” “family,” and “work,” clarifies them, defines them, and finally derives from them a conclusion that is as tangible as possible. This method should not be simply dismissed as useless speculation. This kind of mental work is the necessary accompaniment to our progress. For the Christian-socials, the science of ethics must be a treasure house of ideas, but one must not fall into the trap of an unhistorical era and seek to construct everything in heaven and on earth through logic and ethics. If we did that, we would merely replace the abstract system of Social Democracy with another similar intellectual edifice, and since the starting point would be an idealistic one, it would probably be an edifice with even less tangible content than the materialist construction. Our task is precisely to move out of socialist abstraction, under the guidance of Christian ethics, and to reach the ground of reality. In this spirit, I say in the first section: we must advance economic thinking precisely at those points where Social Democracy ends. We must adopt from the latter the question: What is being done for the lowest stratum of the people? On every issue, we must grapple internally with Social Democracy, in order to grow out of it, just like Social Democracy grew out of economic liberalism. These words already indicate that we cannot have a finished program today. If we did, we would not constitute a direction for the future, but at best only one for today.

I often have to answer the question: what shall we study in order to work in the manner you envisage? If

this question is asked by someone who is willing to wager several years of his life on study – and his whole life on the result of that study – I basically give no other answer than “Marx and Christ.” Some have criticized me for this and have said that I should list in the first place Roscher, Wagner, and Brentano. I will have the opportunity later to state how valuable the bourgeois national economy is to me, but here I would like to assert as an empirical proposition that it is difficult, starting from the bourgeois economic doctrine, to find the principled position that looks at everything in the spirit of Jesus, in the spirit of the poor brothers. After all, those who come to me with this question do not aspire to a purely academic economic doctrine; they are young men who wish to become practical Christian-socials. A Christian-social who does not want to become a professor, however, does not need to know every detail, but he must have experienced for himself something of what the linen weavers and the bricklayers experienced from us in their spirits. Moreover, I admit that the path is not entirely without danger. It cannot be ruled out that now and then a young friend is so beguiled by Marx that he loses sight of Christ. But wherever something is to be achieved, there is danger. He who calls out to the young men: “Close your eyes when you see Marx passing by!,” can raise perfectly nice people, but not men who are tough enough for the struggle that awaits us. After all, who is it that we wish to win over? Precisely the people who are already social-democratic today or will be so tomorrow. But how shall we do that if we have not ourselves experienced this very people and its newspapers, pamphlets, and meetings? [...]

We believe that the “social question,” if it develops further, will split first of all into two great questions: the question of capital and the question of organization. On the question of organization, Social Democracy has achieved great things among industrial workers. In our eyes, too, the unions and the professional associations [*Fachvereine*] are valuable building blocks for the future. Moreover, the organizing power of Social Democracy does not seem by any means exhausted. We believe that it is capable of achieving the organization of commercial clerks [*Handelsangestellte*]. Whether it will be Social Democracy that organizes the rural folk, or whether this will be done initially by the anti-Semites, we don’t know. Surely it is obvious that one cannot organize entire sections of the population permanently around the formula of anti-Semitism; still, one can imagine a mixture of conservative, Marxist, and anti-Semitic ideas, which for a longer period of time preoccupies a national group [*Volksgruppe*] that was previously sleeping under the conservative wing. What is certain is that the Christian-socials must pay the utmost attention to the organizational movement, no matter who is running it.

Whereas the organizational question demands specialized study and agitation, there remains a complex of problems that affects all segments of the population equally, and which must therefore be dealt with as evenly as possible within all the individual organizations. We call this complex of problems the question of capital. It is here that we charge the Social Democrats with fatalistic optimism. As is well known, bourgeois liberalism has the principle of *laissez aller*, *laissez faire*. Social Democracy inherited this principle and gave it roughly the following formulation: the more one allows the concentration of capital free play, the more quickly the capitalist system will reach its end, and that is why we are principled free-traders and do not bother Rothschild and his ilk from going about their work, which, by the fortune of fate (we don’t know why, but it must be this way), must essentially serve our wishes. In this decision to let capital grow lies both the strength and the weakness of Social Democracy; the strength: because every great optimism attracts people, because this doctrine is capable of creating a mood that is similar to that of some religious sects, which place all hope in a great day of wrath and bliss, and wind their way boldly through everyday life, since the morning stars of the Thousand Year Kingdom are already in the sky; the weakness: because this kind of mood cannot last longer than a human lifetime. The bourgeois world is not as fragile as it is said to be, the expropriation of the expropriators, the concentration of enterprises do not take place with the rapid certainty of a mathematical process – in short, the longer Social Democracy adheres to its view of the capital question, the more difficulties it will find itself in. These difficulties are now becoming urgent in two ways. First, there are the bills based on a conservative anti-Semitic standpoint that seek to attack capitalism, even if their efforts are weak for the time being. Simple common sense, following the saying that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,

will vote for a usury law and a stock exchange tax. If Social Democracy remains faithful to its doctrine, it must reject both kinds of laws outright; it must proudly disdain all these “palliative remedies.”

[...]

[...] To this we must add the second factor: there is a certain relationship between unemployment and capital concentration. The number of jobless grows along with great wealth, that is to say, with the level of unconsumed annual income. Now, it is quite possible that unemployment, too, will be integrated into the system as a necessary dark side of the correct development of things, but it is less possible for a party that seeks to serve the neediest to console the unemployed for decades by referring to the system. The hundreds of thousands of jobless will demand with rising urgency practical anti-capitalism right now, so that they might live. If this anti-capitalism is not available in the shape of a political party, practical anarchism must occur among them.

We doubt very much that Social Democracy as a party has sufficient capacity to develop to embrace this anti-capitalism. It is too strongly tied down by its past to do so. But here lies the task of the Christian-socials. Here the voice of the Gospel is working with us. What Jesus said about mammon comes alive. Here help comes especially from that great teacher: necessity. It is merely a question of finding the right formula for this anti-mammon sentiment. We feel that it is in the following formulation: “We recognize the concentration of enterprises as necessary, but we reject the concentration of capital.” Like all brief pronouncements, this sentence is open to misinterpretation; one might say: capital is in essence nothing other than fields, houses, mines, factories: how do you want to concentrate business without simultaneously concentrating capital? But this objection is only correct as long as one equates capital and the means of production a priori. We use the word capital in the sense of the legal claim to a part of the production; we understand by capital the paper reflection of real things, the mortgages, mortgage bonds, stocks, promissory notes, and the like, in short, the privilege of enjoying some kind of interest. Capital concentration means Rothschild, Bleichröder, and their ilk. Now, since concentration is simultaneously business concentration only where it is in the hands of great entrepreneurs (Krupp, Stumm), but is not linked with business concentration wherever it is produced by ground rent (mortgage interest, rent), the struggle against the private exploitation of ground rent is in our eyes the next and best way for the practical anti-capitalism of the Christian-socials. Without dreaming about general “natural rights” to land, we have common ground here with the proposals of the land reformers. What sets us apart from the conservatives and the anti-Semites is our support for further business concentration; what sets us apart from the social democrats and the bourgeois liberals is our rejection of the concentration of capital.

[...]

The two phrases “organization of the people” and “anti-capitalism” provide an unending source of work. The kind of Christian-social movement we have in mind will not construct plans in thin air, nor will it put forth a few demands that can be achieved in ten years. That is entirely the wrong approach: one puts forth a number of soft demands which already have, or will soon have, the approval of all sensible people at the top and the bottom, and then one is surprised when these self-evident matters – like a little workers’ protection or a drop of tax reform – do not excite people. Nobody leaps into the fire for small goals. The chief danger of the Christian-socials is to be small and narrow and cautious. Our slogan must become: practical and broad.

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