

## MEETING THE DISTRIBUTIVISTS AGAIN

IN this age of planned nonentities it is refreshing to be reminded of such a vivid and forthright personality as that of G. K. Chesterton and to learn that the Distributist movement initiated by him and Hilaire Belloc has been revived. The pamphlet, *Man Unchained*, by Charles Graham Hope, offers "the balanced middle way, based on natural eternal principles, against the dangers to security and freedom inherent in unrestrained individualism and collectivism."

An unusual feature of this exposition is the preliminary statement that "we should define our terms with the greatest possible precision, and then stick to our definitions with unswerving fidelity." The definitions of wealth, labour and capital, though somewhat discursive compared with those deduced by the Georgeist school from consistent and generally-acknowledged axioms, are not opposed to Georgeist philosophy. It is acknowledged also that "Natural Law both proclaims Man's right to freedom, and restricts his exercise of it; human law ought first and foremost to secure this freedom within the framework of society." "Land is the source of wealth" and "land in all its aspects needs far more thought and action devoted to it than it has hitherto received."

The writer sets out to vindicate "the equality of men before God, the dignity of human personality, and the ownership of property," and almost every page abounds in phrases calculated to evoke the sympathy of people of liberal disposition. With these premises and in this atmosphere one expects to see developed a logical and harmonious programme for the just distribution of wealth, free from ambiguity and uninfluenced by any of those hastily-accepted assumptions that have allowed collectivist ideas to multiply.

Unfortunately, one soon notices the omission of some essential considerations, and some departures from the salutary method of enquiry first pursued. At no place is there any reference to freedom of exchange as a necessary condition of personal freedom and security, and of all civilised life. There is no attempt to define exactly what is meant by land and one looks in vain for any aspect of it except its relation to an artificially-fostered agriculture deemed necessary to prevent a "disastrous" policy of "cheap foreign food subsidised by our exports" and the buying of "expensive food products at the expense of our own agricultural industry."

Natural Law is defined no more precisely than "divine law revealed through natural reason," or "the law that commands us to keep alive." This is not sufficient for objective economic discussion, but it is sufficient to condemn any man-made law that raises the price of food above its natural price. But our gravest charge against the logical integrity of this pamphlet is that it should propose to form any conclusions on the distribution of wealth without ever bringing into consideration the nature and incidence of rent. Property is defined as "that arrangement in Society whereby the control of land and of wealth made from land, including, therefore, all the means of production, is vested in some person or corporation." No attempt is made to define property according to Natural Law or justice.

These omissions lead one to doubt the title Distributist as the most appropriate description of a movement which, rejecting collectivism, seeks to build a logical "middle way" between that conception and "the thing which we now call Capitalism, and by which we really mean Individualistic or Monopoly Capitalism, or, more

accurately, Individualism." We think this confusion of monopoly, the private ownership of capital, and the rights of the individual is gravely misleading in itself and the apparent distortion of the meaning of its terms is quite unwarranted. An individual is no more a capitalist than a labourer; monopoly is one thing, capital another. To condemn "Individual Monopoly Capitalism" and to assert that, "When machines were invented, modern capitalism used them according to its philosophy of greed and individual materialism," is to bring charges against persons unidentified, and to bring them without evidence.

The question of Big Business and the distribution of wealth deserves more methodical investigation. If "land is the source of wealth," before we reach any conclusion about its distribution we must first ascertain how our laws affect access to this source. This is not to contend that any reform of our land laws can be a panacea for all the ills of society, neither is it a preliminary to the introduction of some rigid system of coercive legislation; it is a reminder that real reform must act on primary, not secondary, factors and that removal of aggression at the first stage facilitates removal of coercion at subsequent stages.

If a monopolist were to buy all those direct privileges of patent and copyright which the law allows; if, under cover of a tariff or quota he were to corner all the primary productions needed for his business; if he were to take advantage of all those burdens of licences, rates and taxes which tend to keep the small man out and let the big man in; if, by subscriptions to the appropriate party machines and trade pressure-groups he were to ensure that all the day-to-day priorities and regulations suited his interests—if he were to accomplish all these things and yet be cut off from the land whence he must draw his raw materials and on which every part of his business must be carried on, he would still be as dependent as any unprivileged member of society upon the monopolist of land.

In practice, of course, monopolists understand the land question better than our Distributist advocate appears to understand it. They never start building their structures of "private enterprise" until the foundations have been well and truly laid in land monopoly.

"It will be found that perhaps 95 per cent. of the total values represented by millionaire fortunes is due to those investments classed as land values and natural monopolies, and to competitive industries aided by such monopolies," says Professor J. R. Commons, in his book, *The Distribution of Wealth*. When one considers what this entails in personal frustration and bitterness, in the dull, drab hopelessness of life and in the corruption of public spirit the wonder is not that we are drifting daily towards that totalitarianism which is the only alternative to present conditions that the masses are allowed to see, but that we have not reached totalitarianism long since. The urge towards freedom is indeed stronger than we realise.

The revival of this Distributist Association is no doubt evidence of this urge, but the influence of that body, we suggest, could be more easily extended by a closer examination of the evils it opposes and a more consistent programme for their elimination. To ignore the necessity for land freedom and trade freedom is to leave the distribution of wealth to the decision of private monopolists or State officials, or (what is much more likely) a pernicious combination of both.

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