

PRIVATE PROPERTY AND THE DISTRIBUTIST THESIS

REGINALD JEBB

THE central tenet of the distributist thesis is a wide-spread diffusion of private ownership, and perhaps our first task should be to show that property privately owned accords with the precepts of natural law. Possession of material things is a right of man, because, being created with reason and will, he is to that extent master of the material world, and the natural destiny of the latter is to serve his needs. But possession does not necessarily imply private ownership. There are, for example, communal forms of ownership. The right of individuals to possess private property is not therefore an absolute precept of natural law. But both reason and experience prove that communal ownership, *as a general mode of human possession*, is unsatisfactory. Aristotle calls it an occasion of strife, and it is almost inconceivable that, with human beings as they are, such a system generally applied could fail to cause constant quarrelling, interfere grievously with primary production, and weaken the bonds that unite the family.

Private ownership, provided it be equitably distributed and does not claim excessive powers, has none of these defects. Moreover the whole trend of the Church's teaching, especially in the famous encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI, as well as in several allocutions of the present Pope, has been in its favour.

But from the starting point of wide-spread private property Distributism enters a field that comprises politics, economy, and human relationships. In this era of finance-industrialism it is revolutionary in its aims. It is in open and unique opposition to the prevalent trends of modern life.

The underlying reason for this opposition can be put in a sentence: whereas the modern tendency is to work from a single centre outwards to an ever spreading periphery, distributism envisages a multiplicity of units, either existing separately or combining to form their own centres of activity. It is thus the reverse of the centrally-planned State.

But it is equally opposed to *laissez-faire* liberalism which by

giving full play to unbridled competition results in the swallowing up of the smaller and less powerful units of production by those grown to a size that commands power. Industrialised England of the nineteenth century affords a perfect example of this process. As units of production begin to grow a proletariat is formed, depending for its existence upon selling its labour to the producer-owners at a price fixed by the latter. The creation of wealth increases and, to cope with the new markets continually being opened up, the units of production grow still larger, drawing into the proletarian net more and more of the population. A moment arrives when, to mitigate the results of competition between these giants, amalgamations and combines are formed, and the doctrine of bigness as the sole means of ensuring prosperity is everywhere preached.

Concurrently with this expansion of wealth and diminution in the numbers of those sharing fully in it there grows up strife between proletarian and owner. The former organises and begins to realise his power. The stage is set for a take-over by the State, bureaucracy replaces capitalism, and centralised planning succeeds liberalism.

That is the point at which we have arrived today. But the important thing to notice is that the social and economic distortions introduced by capitalism still persist. Bigness more than ever commands respect; the two nations of controllers and controlled are more than ever differentiated; strife continues, inflamed by disappointment; and financial power still stands in the way of sound economy.

The situation is indeed in certain respects worse than it was, for today there is no political opposition. Marxism, the tyrannical offspring of chaos, does aim at the transformation of society into a godless slavery, but it is not so much an opposition to the present order as a logical development of its worst features, much in the same way that our present brand of socialism is a development of capitalism. But apart from Marxism, which is an inverted religion rather than a political force, there exists in England today no organised political party that opposes the present trend. Conservatives, Liberals and Labour alike back the 'Welfare State' which concentrates executive action in the hands of a few State officials with a total disregard for local opinion and local initiative.

Distributism is therefore the only genuine opposition in England today to the generally accepted ordering of society. Its acceptance would mean revolutionary changes. Yet it is so far from being an untested, experimental scheme (like socialism) that the arguments of its exponents are based on such solid foundations as natural law, commonsense and human experience. The distributist revolution is a return to the normal from the abnormal.

Now the lasting success of any revolution depends upon two factors. The first is that its aims should be constructive and not merely destructive; and, if results are to be permanent, the constructive programme must be in accordance with the nature of human beings and of material things. The second factor is ability to influence government.

In most revolutions this second factor has been paramount in the minds of revolutionaries, and the first imperfectly developed. The result is a more or less short-lived tyranny. And the reason for this is that most revolutions are inspired by hatred of existing conditions.

In the classic example of the French Revolution, however, both factors were present to some extent. The teaching of Rousseau supplied the constructive element, and the seizure of power by the Paris mob transferred governmental authority from the King to the revolutionaries. That is why the spirit of 1790 is still operative in France today. But though it has been operative for more than a century and a half, the thesis of the French Revolution has never been universally accepted because, by dispensing with religion, it failed to satisfy human nature. It is in its essence impermanent.

Coming back to distributism, the first thing necessary is to recognise that in England today it is a revolutionary theory, and the second is to ensure that it contains the two factors needful for success.

Let us examine first the constructive factor.

Speaking generally, it may be fairly argued that, since private property is, as we have seen, both morally and logically justifiable, it should be diffused among the people rather than restricted to a few favoured owners. Furthermore, that if, as distributists hold, the measure of independence conferred by private ownership fulfils a natural yearning in human beings and develops their

personal initiative, it must benefit the community as a whole. And, thirdly, that if, as is becoming more and more evident every day, concentration of power leads to tyranny, then decentralisation by means of well-distributed property is the obvious answer for those who desire to remain free.

But how far is such decentralisation practical in politics? Will a Distributist State work in the modern world? What will its character be? These are the sort of questions that a distributist must answer if he is to convince the unconverted.

In making the attempt to do so he is faced with one overriding difficulty: whatever he says will be judged by the standards of capitalist economics, for socialists and anti-socialists alike take for granted the financial regime built up in the nineteenth century and consolidated in the twentieth, under which small ownership is held in bonds not by moral considerations, which rightly limit the scope of all ownership, but arbitrarily by those who control the machinery of finance. It is an economic system in which the creation of wealth, the value of ideas, and the advantages of trade are at the mercy of a power that contributes nothing directly to these activities, but which is in a position to render null and void the deserved rewards of those who do.

Clearly then it is no good advocating widely distributed property to anyone who, consciously or unconsciously, accepts modern finance-economics. His answer will be that it would not pay, and, given his premises, he will be right. For it is absurd to press for the decentralisation of ownership and at the same time leave centralised the power capable of destroying the whole significance of owning.

This initial difficulty, which leaves no doubt as to the revolutionary character of distributism, is, however, not the only one. A planned State will assume a form that can be fairly accurately foreseen and described, but the essence of distributism is variety, and consequently the way it will develop in a particular country must remain uncertain.

Nevertheless, in spite of these difficulties and those that always confront anyone putting forward an unfamiliar thesis, it should not be impossible to outline the characteristics of a Distributist State or to show that it is a practical proposition.

In order to do this it is necessary to start from the circumference,

where the source of action should reside, and work inwards towards the centre.

That the ultimate unit of society is the family is not generally disputed in free nations. It is indeed accepted as a fairly accurate representation of society in miniature, and it is a unit that comes into being by natural processes and cannot be destroyed except by tyrannical forces running counter to the most fundamental instincts of human nature. But though this is widely recognised, appropriate action is by no means always taken. Too often, in building up the social fabric of a State, society is either atomised into individuals, or else created as a formless mob to be guided from the centre.

The Distributist society avoids both these errors. Basing itself on the natural unit of the family, it makes sure that its foundations are secure by insisting that the family shall normally own property and so gain a foothold for independent action. So equipped, the family is in a position to enter into associations with others of its locality and perform its function of setting a pattern for the State.

On this basis localities and associated interests themselves become active agents, producing in their turn larger areas of co-operation and representative government, until we arrive at a central State body to which is delegated those powers and co-ordinating controls that are beyond the competence of local units.

That would be the general structure of the Distributist State. In theory this is not so much decentralisation—which implies action at the centre to spread control along the circumference—as a centripetal movement originating at, and organised by, the circumference itself. No doubt, in practice, to break away from a regime dominated by socialist-capitalism, the centre must be forced to act first by way of renunciation of its powers, but, once those powers are delegated, the stream of authority must flow in the other direction.

In a social arrangement of this kind localities will not only have much more control of local affairs, but they will be far better equipped to act efficiently than they are under the present system of so-called local government. For they will be peopled by families having, as property owners, a responsible stake in the country. Nor would nearly such heavy taxation be necessary, for the present high rate of taxation is largely due to two causes:

the inability of the wage system to provide adequately for the needs of organised labour; and the number of parasitical State officials that centralised government necessitates.

Although this structure of the Distributist State is based upon family ownership, and therefore upon small properties, it would be a complete mistake to suppose that all undertakings in it would be reduced to a size suited to individual or family management. Such a supposition would be as far from the truth as the taunt that distributists, because they proclaim that the land is the basis of all economy, therefore want everybody to be a farmer.

Under distributism work will be recognised in units of various sizes according to its nature. This will be effected sometimes by the voluntary co-operation of small units; sometimes by the formation of trade and craft guilds, chartered by the central Government; sometimes by State managed enterprises. Thus the difference between Distributism and its rivals, Capitalism and Socialism, does not consist primarily in the size of the undertaking, but in the fact that, apart from the greater number of small private owners in a distributist society, those who work in large firms have the opportunity of partaking to some extent in ownership.

Various suggestions and a number of experiments have been made as to how this can best be done. The salient features of most of these are security of employment, representation on management, allotment of shares in the business for all actively engaged in it, and participation in the profits or losses of the business as a whole.

Such expedients do not amount to the full ownership enjoyed by an independent small-owner, but they would go far to satisfy man's natural craving for property, and would encourage a sense of responsibility.

Yet when all is said and done, the number of strictly economic opportunities for real private ownership on a comparatively small scale is often overlooked in this era of the worship of bigness. Here are a few examples: all farming and its ancillary crafts; all retailing of goods; all motor transport whether for passengers or goods; all fisheries; light industries and a large percentage of building; repair shops; laundries; garages; etc., etc. If these and similar opportunities were taken, the whole social character of the country would be transformed without losing efficiency and by this transformation the task of establishing a Distributist State

be made easier, for there would be an independent public opinion whose weight would be felt by the Government.

There is nothing unpractical in a distributist ordering of society, though there are admittedly formidable obstacles to be overcome in a transition from our present political, economic and social framework to one based upon well-distributed private property. Certain ingrained habits both of domination and of subservience would have to be overcome, and some ingenuity exercised in drawing up laws by which the rights of small owners should be secured. Government must be won over to make the necessary changes possible.

But these are difficulties which every revolutionary movement must encounter. What is more fundamental is the change that would take place in the general manner of life of the populace.

In a Distributist State life would be simpler—that is to say there would not be so many standardised amenities and ready-made amusements. But already we are feeling the loss of the greater part of the amenities that industrial capitalism, in its zenith, provided—cheap imported food, cheap clothing, a succession of glittering gadgets—and this without any of the compensating advantages Distributism would give.

In a country with its roots in an independent peasantry, and characterised by the freedom and resource that spring from multiplicity of ownership, there would not be available great accumulations of capital to fill towns and suburbs with chains of amusement parks, stadia, cinemas, etc., or to replace the country lanes by concrete racing-tracks for cars. But it would live better, if more simply. There would be better quality food, clothes, and houses, because in the main locally supplied, and most important of all, there would be an end of frustration and a new attitude towards work and human relationships, because men would realise that they were free.