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Chesterton and Distributism

by Ian Boyd

Chesterton never gave a systematic account of what he meant by Distributism anywhere in his writing, but the outline of this socio-political philosophy is clear to anyone who is familiar with his work and that of the circle of writers to which he belonged. As the name implies, Distributism meant first of all that property should be distributed in the widest possible way. Belloc stated the case for this policy in *The Servile State*, which he published in 1912 and which became the text-book of the movement. He argued that Socialism and State Capitalism were helping to create the same kind of society in which power would be concentrated in the hands of a small ruling-class and security would be given to a permanent proletariat whose economic position would be fixed by law. The only alternative to the 'slave' state was the Distributist state of small peasant ownership and workers' guilds. The nearest approximation to this simple society was found in medieval times. Consequently Distributists must be prepared to repudiate modern industrialism in its present form and work for a return to the past. The way in which this theory was interpreted among Belloc's followers is best illustrated by a quotation from a Distributist manifesto published twenty-five years later:

Distributists agree with Socialists in their condemnation of the present system of society, but they think the evil is far more deeply rooted than socialists suppose . . . Distributists propose to go back to fundamentals, and to rebuild society from its basis in agriculture, instead of accepting the industrial system and changing the ownership, which is all that Socialists propose. Apart from their conviction that industrialism is essentially unstable and cannot last, Distributists refuse to accept it as a foundation upon which to

build, because they believe that large scale industry may be as great a tyranny under public as under private ownership. They therefore seek to get the smallholder back into industry as they seek to get him back on to the land; and they accept all the implications which such a revolutionary proposal involves.¹

Chesterton's own interpretation of this theory is more difficult to determine. Involvement in what might be called Distributist politics dominated the latter part of his life, but it is doubtful whether the gradual change in political emphasis which this involvement represents can be called a conversion to Distributism. As a schoolboy he regarded himself as a Socialist. But his writing career began in association with a pro-Boer group of Liberals and he published some of his first essays and verse in their journal *The Speaker*. A growing interest in Anglo-Catholic theology and a growing concern with social problems led him to join the Christian Social Union and in the early part of the century he was busy speaking at their meetings and writing for Henry Scott Holland's *Commonwealth*. What helped make him one of the best known journalists of the age, however, was the Saturday column he wrote from 1901 until 1913 for the *Liberal Daily News*. Throughout these years and indeed for the rest of his life he described himself as a Liberal. At the same time he was outspokenly critical of the Liberal party. In 1913, during the Marconi scandal, his discontent with official Liberalism reached a kind of crisis and he began writing a series of articles for the *Socialist Daily Herald* in which he continued his violent criticism of parliamentary government and advocated revolution as a solution to the problems of the age. The pacifist policy of the *Herald* at the beginning of the war and his physical and emotional collapse in November of the same year effectively ended this brief alliance with the Socialists.

The connexion with the movement that was later to become Distributism began in 1916 when he took his brother Cecil's place as editor of *The New Witness*. It is true that he had been writing occasional articles and verse for it and its predecessor *The Eye-Witness* from their foundings in 1911 and 1912. And it is also true that many of the ideas about politics from which the Distributist thesis was derived can be found in earlier works, particularly in his writing in Orage's *New Age* and in his 1910 sociological study *What's Wrong With the World*. Thus he had very early enunciated a primary Distributist principle that public life existed for the sake of the private life it was meant to protect and consequently that all political and social efforts must be devoted to securing the good of the family which was the basic unit of society. And in 1911, during a railway strike, he wrote 'The Song of the Wheels'. This poem

¹A. J. Penty, *Distributism: A Manifesto* (London: The Distributist League 1937), p. 7.

provides an interesting example of the way in which his early political verse anticipates the Distributist protest about the mechanisation of life in a Capitalist society:

Call upon the wheels, master, call upon the wheels;
 We are taking rest, master, finding how it feels,
 Strict the law of thine and mine: theft we ever shun—
 All the wheels are thine, master—tell the wheels to run!
 Yea, the wheels are mighty gods—set them going then!
 We are only men, master, have you heard of men?

King Dives he was walking in his garden in the sun,
 He shook his hand at heaven, and he called the wheels to run,

Sitting in the Gate of Treason, in the gate of broken seals,
 'Bend and bind them, bend and bind them, bend and bind them
 into wheels,
 Then once more in all my garden there may swing and sound and
 sweep—
 The noise of all the sleepless things that sing the soul to sleep'.

The official existence of Distributism as a political movement began only with the publication of *G.K.'s Weekly* in March, 1925, or more accurately perhaps with the founding of the Distributist League in September, 1926. But Chesterton's own version of the Distributist philosophy had been formulated more or less completely many years before. What seems to have happened in the post-World War One years is that the emphasis in his political thought gradually shifted from an attack on what he called the corruptions and hypocrisies of modern political life to an increasingly positive argument in favour of the Distributist programme of land distribution and worker control.

Nevertheless, if there was a classical period of Distributism, it occurred during the years between 1926 and 1936 when he was at once the president of the Distributist League and the editor of *G.K.'s Weekly* which was its political organ. During this last decade of his life, he and his associates produced a considerable body of literature in which they attempted to supply Distributist answers to the political and economic questions of the day. What is most surprising about this large mass of material is how little it tells one about the details of the programme. There seems to have been an extraordinarily wide range of opinion within the movement about its meaning and an extraordinarily limited amount of agreement among its members about their common policy. Chesterton did very little to help establish a party line that would unite his divided followers. He maintained a curious kind of detachment from the movement of which he was the nominal leader. Father Vincent McNabb and to a lesser extent Eric

Gill expressed an almost luddite contempt for machinery of every kind. Others wrote approving accounts in *G.K.'s Weekly* of bizarre attempts by League members to set up primitive and self-sufficient rural settlements. The medieval debate continued endlessly. But he refused to take sides in any of the acrimonious arguments that shook the tiny society, and he showed a great reluctance in making decisions that would affect the everyday running of the league and paper. The articles he wrote dealt mainly with Distributist principles, and it was usually possible for any faction however extreme to invoke his authority for the position it held. His view of Distributism as a political theory escapes the summing-up that its simple outline seems to invite. As Ronald Knox remarks, '... it is not exactly a doctrine, or a philosophy, it is simply Chesterton's reaction to life'.²

One must in fact turn to his fiction for the clearest and most vivid expression of what he meant by Distributism. That the movement was a central concern to him is obvious from the time and energy that he devoted to keeping it in existence. Much has been written about what this effort cost him in terms of money and health, but not enough has been written to explain his obsessive interest in what seems to be an absurd medieval fantasy. A careful reading of the fiction and particularly the novels makes this much easier to understand. The importance of political themes in them is at once obvious. More interesting, however, is the way in which the imaginative statement of his political beliefs presents them in a new light and to a degree alters their meaning. It is as though he could express himself most clearly in a sort of political parable. His imagination was unusually allegorical like that of Blake and Watts about whom he wrote, and like them he was an artist who claimed to see truth as it were in a series of pictures. Any discussion of Chesterton and Distributism, therefore, would be seriously incomplete that failed to take into account the political meaning of his fiction.

What is most interesting about the main body of the fiction is the way in which it questions the Distributist dream of returning to a simpler and more agrarian medieval past. The future crisis of industrialism predicted by Belloc is more or less taken for granted, but there is no idealisation of what is supposed to be the medieval age. In fact there is a recurrent anti-medieval theme in the novels, for in them every attempt to create a medieval social order ends in total disaster. In *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, medievalism is merely the private joke of King Auberon that the humourless Adam Wayne happens to take seriously. The medieval empire they are responsible for establishing eventually becomes so tyrannical that both of them are glad to see it destroyed. The story is supposed to begin in 1984. This may be a coincidence, but it is appropriate that Orwell, who admired the prophetic quality in Chesterton's writing should choose

²G. K. Chesterton: 'The Man and His Work', *The Listener*, June 19, 1941, p. 880.

that date for the title of a novel that draws another horrifying picture of the future. In *The Ball and the Cross*, the medieval theocracy of which the hero dreams turns out to be a nightmare world of terror and injustice.

But the clearest examples of this distrust of medieval politics is found in *The Return of Don Quixote*. In it the bogus League of the Lion at first enjoys a splendid success. But the 'medieval' state which it establishes is finally revealed as a puppet regime of the cynical industrialists who have manipulated it for their own purposes from its creation. It is significant that the romantic idealist who is the hero is enthroned as King in what is called 'the Mussolini manner'.³ But it is even more significant that he eventually denounces the movement he helped to found and identifies the true medievalist as the syndicalist trade-union official who is bitterly opposed to the medieval league and works instead within a labour union trying to introduce a system of worker control. In the dedication of the novel to the sub-editor of *G.K.'s Weekly*, where it was first serialised, Chesterton calls it 'a parable for social reformers'.⁴ The warning to the more enthusiastic medievalists among his Distributist followers ought to have been sufficiently clear, but there is no sign that they understood it. The suggestion, of course, is that they might create a tyranny in their eagerness to escape one. What is more interesting, however, is the implication that the medieval ideal is entirely destructive unless it is seen as a kind of myth providing a perennial social standard by which to judge the modern world.

The criticism of medievalism is also linked to the distrust of political power of any kind that is expressed throughout the novels. Indeed, the central problem in the fiction, which is also the central problem of Distributism, is how to give power to the people without corrupting them by doing so. *Tales of the Long Bow* provides the only detailed description of a successful Distributist revolution, and in it the revolutionary leaders are only interested in talking about their children and their gardens. After the revolutionary war, they simply retire from politics, and there is no reason to believe that the government they have abandoned will not again fall into the wrong hands. In *Manalive* the private court that is established in the suburban boarding-house spends its entire time examining the political and social implications of the eccentric hero's family-life, but nothing is said about the way in which political power should be exercised. *The Flying Inn* and *The Man Who Knew Too Much* end with victories over the vaguely Eastern armies that are the favourite embodiment of evil in the fiction, but in neither novel is there any

³See Chesterton's note on the novel when the serialisation of it ended in his paper. 'An Explanation: You Can End This Story Here', *G.K.'s Weekly*, November 30, 1926, p. 135.

⁴See the dedication to W. R. Titterton in the first edition (London: Chatto and Windus, 1927), p. V.

hint of the way in which the post-revolutionary society will be governed.

At the end of *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, Auberon and Adam recognise the failure of their medieval experiment and express the hope that the conflict between irony and idealism which has torn their country apart will be finally resolved when political power is given to the ordinary citizen, 'the equal and eternal human being . . . [who] sees no antagonism between laughter and respect . . . the common man, whom mere geniuses like you and me can only worship like a god'. But the myth of the heroic common man, like the myth of the heroic medieval past, provides no real solution for the practical problems of politics. Indeed, the common man remains an ideal only because he has never had to carry the corrupting burden of actual political power. And the failure to distinguish between what is a mythic and what is a practical reality could result in the same kind of tragedy that destroyed the experiments in medieval politics.

The distrust of power and the inability to come to terms with it help explain the deeply pessimistic tone that is characteristic of Distributism in the fiction. It is true that in late novels such as *Four Faultless Felons* and *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond* the king, who makes a brief appearance, wields power without being destroyed by it. But his success is too easy and complete to be convincing. The way in which he reconciles the bitter divisions between left and right is never really described. It is something that is told rather than shown. In *The Man Who Was Thursday*, the story of the anarchist conspiracy and the philosophical police that combats it is an allegory about the hope that comes through suffering and apparent isolation. But what haunts the imagination of the reader is the hopelessness of the fight against the rich and fanatical 'church' of anarchy. The interesting suggestion that the desire for revolution and radical reform can sometimes mask a longing for annihilation and death is never worked out in any detail and is somewhat weakened by the happy ending. And 'Sunday' is far more convincing as the mad millionaire who directs the international anarchist movement than he is as the good policeman who organises the group that defeats it.

This pessimism is also implied by the relationship of the Chestertonian hero to the world in which he lives. Not only does the fiction draw a familiar contrast between the corruptions of business-men and politicians and the simple virtues of farmers and workers, but it also emphasises the isolation and helplessness of those who attempt to challenge the existing social order. The typical hero is always an eccentric whose history creates a further and more tragic contrast between the madness of a world that claims to be sane and the sanity of a character that the world regards as mad. *Manalive* is perhaps the most obvious example of this, since it is supposed to be the record of a trial that is meant to determine the hero's sanity. In *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, Auberon speaks of himself and Adam as

the only people who are sane ('the whole world is mad, but Adam Wayne and me') and at the end of the novel they must both accept responsibility for the mad irresponsibility of their plans. *The Ball and the Cross* presents an even more disturbing situation in its allegory of the world as a universal mad-house in which all the characters are imprisoned and from which they all make an improbable escape that symbolises the coming social revolution. *The Poet and the Lunatics*, as its title suggests, examines different kinds of madness and in an oblique way attempts to define social sanity. But the hero is finally a fugitive who is regarded as a madman himself and the climax of the novel occurs when he makes his escape from yet another mad-house. The Chestertonian wise fool is in fact always alone and helpless. It is true that, like Chesterton, he claims to be a spokesman for God and the people, but as Charles Williams points out, both these great allies are 'voiceless and unarmed'.⁵

The political pattern of the fiction therefore remains remarkably constant. It might be called with equal accuracy radical tory or moderate anarchist. The anarchist element is provided by the distrust of the modern state and the belief in the value of free and self-governing social units. What the novels celebrate is the love of freedom and the confidence that the weak and dispossessed are able to co-operate to help one another. The feeling that inspires all the fiction is a longing for the destruction of what Chesterton regarded as an unjust and thoroughly discredited Capitalistic system. It is a feeling that is perfectly expressed in the bitter anti-parliamentary song that is sung by the revolutionary army at the conclusion of *The Flying Inn*:

Men that are men again; who goes home?
 Tocsin and trumpeter! Who goes home?
 For there's blood on the field and blood on the foam
 And blood on the body when Man goes home.
 And a voice valedictory . . . Who is for Victory?
 Who is for Liberty? Who goes home?

But the pattern is also a tory one, since it implies the impossibility of achieving the political success that Chesterton regarded as necessary. The feeling of confidence and trust in human nature that underlies the Distributist call for revolution and the Distributist idealisation of the common man is contradicted by the strong undercurrent of pessimism about the corrupting effect of political power. Thus the novels stress repeatedly the dangers of constructing any kind of Utopia, particularly the pseudo-medieval Utopia which held such a fatal and delusive charm for Distributist idealists. What the novels finally

⁵'Gilbert Keith Chesterton', *Poetry at Present* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), p. 99.

express with great force is a tory conviction about the reality of original sin, which Chesterton defined as 'the permanent possibility of selfishness [that] comes from the mere fact of having a self'.⁶ And it is this inner weakness that makes the Distributist dream of a free and equal society for all impossible. This contradiction in Chesterton's political thinking and feeling is never resolved. There are indeed occasional hints of what a solution would be in the scattered and moving allusions to the kind of divine grace that would heal and perfect man's wounded nature. But until a cure for man's perennial selfishness is found the Chestertonian common man will continue to be crushed by the hateful system Chesterton so movingly denounced :

Through the Gate of Treason, through the gate within,
Cometh fear and greed of fame, cometh deadly sin;
If a man grow faint, master, take him ere he kneels,
Take him, break him, mend him, end him, roll him, crush him
with the wheels.

Russia's Don Quixote

by Janice A. Broun

'Who are you? Without waiting for a reply people answer for themselves. All Communists and atheists regard me as a militant reactionary. All reactionaries regard me as a Communist and almost an atheist. All churchmen think I am a sectarian; all sectarians regard me as a churchman. Every ignoramus thinks me an intellectual; every intellectual regards me as a social reject and member of the Proletariat. Every Russian thinks me a Jew; every Jew regards me as a Russian' (1966).¹

'One (fellow prison) inmate called me Don Quixote . . . I am a Don Quixote because he is the prototype of all revolutionaries and friends of truth. Dostoevsky wrote: "If God in the Last Judgment calls on Humanity to render account of what good it has done, it could hand him with tears Cervantes' Don Quixote"' (1970).²

'Only people who do nothing make no mistakes' (1966).³

⁶Mr. H. G. Wells and the Giants', *Heretics* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1905), p. 79.

¹The Lord is my Safe Stronghold, 1966.

²My Come-back, 1970 (written after release from Sochi prison).

³With Love and Anger, 1966.