

The Restoration of Property

III. *Making a Beginning*

HILAIRE BELLOC

THE practical problem before us is how to effect the beginnings at least of a restoration of property in this society of ours wherein property has been almost destroyed, its principles forgotten, and acquaintance with it lost to the determining majority of our fellow citizens.

The problem is one applying to particular countries—like Britain and the United States—at this particular moment. We have to deal with it in a very different way from what we might adopt in a country where property was still for most men a desire, and for a further sufficient number of men a known and experienced incident.

We can only try to restore it, at first, in some measure—to sow the seeds of such a restoration—in a country which has become one of industrialized capitalism with a determining number of its citizens proletarian—that is, wage slaves.

Now, the obvious intellectual answer to the main question: “How shall we proceed?” is to discover the root of the evil and attack that root.

On the surface the cause of the evil would appear to be unchecked competition, with its destruction of all those safeguards whereby property maintained itself for centuries before the breakdown which began three

to four hundred years ago. But we can go deeper than that. The profound, ultimate root of the whole affair is a certain mood—an attitude of mind. Where you have a public opinion supporting well divided property, a state of society which takes well divided property for granted, and therefore a philosophy consonant with well divided property, institutions or customs conservative of property will arise of their own accord. Conversely, attacks upon the small owner, his attempted destruction by the great man, will be defeated.

“Therefore” (says the intellectual observer of the problem), “we can only effect even the beginnings of the mighty change we have in view by going to the very ultimate causes and applying our remedy there. We must change the philosophy, that is, the religion of the society in which we live. A false and poisonous philosophy having produced industrial capitalism with its herd of wage slaves, and having destroyed normal human economic freedom, we must re-establish a sane philosophy—or rather religion—whence right institutions would necessarily proceed.” Now, it is this obvious or radical attitude which at the risk of paradox I must beg leave to challenge.

I do not think that in England and the United States as now constituted there is a chance of changing the minds of men from that philosophy whence all these evils have proceeded. Nor do I think that the enormous structure of industrial capitalism, with its establishment, as a dominating social feature, of a millioned proletariat in the place of free citizens, can be at once overset by the propagation of ideals. This attempt at general conversion must go on all the time side by

side with the practical tackling of the problem, and such effort at conversion is itself practical but at the moment we cannot expect from it effects on a scale worth noticing.

It is the conviction of this which has decided most of those who have enough historical knowledge and enough moral sense to hate Capitalism and at the same time enough intelligence to despise Socialism, to stand aside or, what comes to the same thing as standing aside, to discuss the abstract doctrine of economic freedom without attempting to issue a concrete program for its recreation. All around us everything works for the destruction of such small proportion of well divided property as remains. Every unit in our social machinery, every habit of our thought takes the present civilization for granted. It takes it for granted that the only solution of our evils is a solution of the same nature as those evils, to wit, the socialist solution. "We have lost", they say, "our economic freedom, and it is impossible to recover it." Or again, "Since there must be monopoly and since the mass of men must be the slaves of monopoly, let us at least put monopoly into the hands of the State and not leave it and its control to a few millionaires".

It is, indeed, true that the position to be attacked is formidable. It is so formidable that anyone may be forgiven for regarding it as not only impregnable, but invulnerable. It is a fortress against which any efforts we may make through attempted reforms of laws here or there, through attempted founding of new institutions here or there, might be compared to the attacking of one of the old-fashioned stone fortresses by unarmed men. They could hardly loosen a stone. They

are surely impotent to effect any breach, however slight, in the invincible defence.

But when you are considering how a fortress may be attacked with the means at your disposal it is your first business to ask yourself where its weak points are to be found. The weakness may seem slight, the opportunity of action against such great and highly organized strength may seem negligible, but the very first business is to find out at least *where* there is an opportunity even on a small scale for beginning. In other words the practical thing is not to attempt to undermine industrial capitalism at once and as a whole—that can only be done by a change in the religion or philosophy of the citizens—nor even to attempt to make suddenly a great breach in the defence, for that could only be done with weapons we do not possess, but to seek out those points, however apparently insignificant, in which the reversal of the great process can be sporadically begun.

I would, therefore, in the consideration of a practical program set out the various points of that program in an order almost exactly the opposite of the intellectual order, and would begin with the thing that can at least be done at once with some chance of partial and limited success. The process may be compared to the killing of a tree by one who must attack with instruments too feeble for cutting the tree down, let alone uprooting it, too feeble even for inflicting a serious wound upon its trunk, too feeble for cutting off main branches or perhaps even secondary branches, but *not too feeble for clipping leaves*.

Now, if you cut enough leaves off a tree the tree dies; and a man not having an axe or a saw or a spade

may yet with small shears and the slight aggressive power of his two hands begin to destroy, one after the other, the leaves. With this principle in mind and for that purpose I ask what concrete proposals are available. How can we sow fresh seed, from whence the institution of property shall begin to re-arise?

There are main departments in the problem: (*a*) The restoration of the small distributor and the small craftsman, either as individual families or as employers of but few subordinates; (*b*) the division of property in enterprises necessarily large among many holders in sufficient amount; (*c*) the confirming of such wholesome division by institutions which shall maintain it and prevent a recurrent degradation of property into Capitalism.

Before considering these a digression must be admitted upon the function of what is today called "The State"; what used to be called (in the days when men preferred reality) "The King".

We have already said that no such reformation as we are contemplating can be undertaken or continued without the use of State power. And to understand the necessity for this we must get rid of the false category whereby men think in terms of two contrasted methods which they call Socialism and Individualism.

These terms do not indicate a true contrast. There is no such thing as individualism; an action by the State is one thing when it is used to free mankind and to give the citizens economic independence, and an exactly opposite thing when it is used to take that independence away. As men would have put it when property was, indeed, well distributed and when there

corresponded to it a strong national monarchy: "The King is there to safeguard the freedom of the small man against the tyranny of the great." That is his function, and there is nothing in common between the exercise of that function and the King turned into a universal owner with all men his slaves—on the contrary, the right conception of kingship as the moderator and preserver of freedom is the very contrary to, and destruction of, the wrong conception of kingship as a universal despotism. We shall find as we proceed in our examination that we cannot follow it for any distance without calling in the powers of the State, to contrast with and as far as possible to destroy the usurped powers of Big Business.

To return, then, to the concrete proposals for a remedy.

If we look at our present industrialized society we perceive that there are two opportunities here, one offering much greater chances than the other, for particular action. The first is the opportunity for restoring the small distributor—the small shopkeeper. The second is the opportunity for restoring the small workshop, the craftsman; and the first is a much more promising opportunity than the second.

As to the restoration of the small distributor (or perhaps we may call it "the saving of him", for he still survives as a type with very numerous examples), there would seem to be two converse economic policies available together. The first is the handicapping of the large distributor, by differential taxation, and the second is using such a system for the artificial economic protection of the small distributor—for all of which, of course, one must go directly contrary to the

accepted doctrines of the past, which have led us into the mess in which we are now floundering.

There are three forms of differential taxation on large distribution (I mean, of course, large retail distribution), all three of which must be applied simultaneously.

(1) There must be a differential tax on chain stores, that is, on the system whereby one man or corporation controls a great number of different shops of the same kind. To control two such may involve but a small tax, to control three a larger one in proportion; and so on, with the curve rising steeply until the ownership of, say, a dozen in the territory over which the Government has power becomes economically impossible. The chain store as we now know it has, by the way, not only the evil of destroying the small distributor, but the further evil of controlling wholesale distribution and even production. Suppose, for instance, a system of chain stores acting as fishmongers; a particular group extends until it controls the fishmongering business of, say, half the trade—say, for the sake of precision, 10,000 shops. It has not only destroyed the economic independence of 10,000 men who would have been each the free owner of a fishmonger's business; it has not only substituted for them 10,000 wage-slaves liable to ruin at any moment by the arbitrary decision of an impersonal master who has no human relationship with them; but it is also in a position to dictate prices to the people who send the fish inland from the ports, and to control in great measure the nature and direction of the fisheries. That is manifestly a usurpation of social power and as such should be destroyed.

(2) The department store also must be handicapped by differential taxation, based upon the number of categories with which it deals. One department store combines, let us say, in a particular case, fifty categories; it acts not only as a druggist and a shoe merchant, a wine merchant and tobacconist, but as a stationer, etc. Another deals with seventy categories, another smaller one with only twenty-five. We need a tax differentiated by the number of categories. It will be easy for a small man to add some little extra activity to his main one—he can sell newspapers as well as tobacco, for instance—but when it comes to dealing with more than a few categories, differential taxation should begin, and before it came to dealing with the great number now occupying the chief department stores it should have become prohibitive.

It will be objected, of course, that for such a system you would need an extension of bureaucracy, that the definition of the various categories will be difficult, etc. It is true that in all these reforms we shall have to extend bureaucratic action—in order to prevent ultimately the swallowing up of all our lives by merely capitalist action. The nature of the modern world is such that we cannot escape from being at least helped by the State in our reforms.

In practice the danger is not so great as it seems, for the various forms of retail distribution are fairly well established; there are divisions apparent to ordinary common sense and practice, and this is so true that many of them, as it is, can only come into existence through a licence granted by, or purchased from, the State—tobacconists, for instance. Let that system be extended, and the thing is done.

Here are licences for carrying on a tobacconist's shop and for carrying on a wine shop—let there be also a licence for carrying on a grocery and fish-mongering business, or what not, let the licence be granted as a matter of right to any applicant, let its cost be insignificant to the man who applies for only one or two or three licences, but then let it begin to rise more and more steeply as the number of licences applied for increases.

(3) The third form of tax is a tax upon turnover. Your large retail distributor who has only one place of business and who deals with only one kind of business can be, and is, in his way, destructive of the small man just as much as the large distributor who owns chain stores or as a department store. Let there be no tax on turnover up to a certain sufficiently high level, then let it begin and grow steeply after another higher point until it becomes prohibitive.

As to the second, converse, half of this policy. The money raised by the differential tax against large distribution, the money provided by that middle zone between the beginnings of large distribution and the point where the differential tax becomes prohibitive, should be used to protect artificially the small man against the great. It should be used to establish and conserve corporate credit within the guild to which—as we shall describe in a later article—the small distributor should belong; it should even be used, perhaps exceptionally, to subsidize the starting of the small man.

Here it may be objected that in many cases nowadays these reforms would be of no productive effect because the small distributor whom we are trying to

save and to increase in number is already a distributor only in name and has already become in practice a servant. This is notably the case with the tobacconists. The wholesale producer and distributor has made of the retail tobacconist nothing more than his agent; he can threaten the small retailer with extinction unless he buys at a dictated price and sells at a dictated price. The capitalist tyranny acts here as it does in the refreshment trade, with the "tied house". The remedy for this is a separate matter which we will deal with later on when we consider the reforms necessary in the control of production and wholesale distribution, but for the moment let the suggested reforms in the matter of retail distribution stand.

The opportunity for restoring the artisan or small employer of craftsmen is, as has been said, far less than that for restoring the small distributor. For this there are two reasons. In the first place, concentrated production under large groups of capital can produce in many categories not *somewhat* cheaper than the individual or the small group, but enormously cheaper—though note that this is not universally true. Next (and this is really more important) fashion and habit have come in to help the evil. The purchaser has lost the habit of, and desire for, choice. I say that this mental and spiritual disease is more important than the merely mechanical fact of cheap production. Such a statement will sound fantastic in the ears of those who are accustomed, as all modern men are, to implied materialism. Yet here, as in every other department, it is the mind that governs and not the material conditions. To see how true this is consider what the effect actually is of choice exercised before

our eyes in the modern world and what the effect would be if the use of choice were widely extended.

It is notorious that in certain districts, in certain trades covering great numbers of people, choice is still exercised and has a great effect. For instance, I would quote the demand for Cheshire cheese among the Lancashire operatives. They know what they want and they insist upon it; they will not accept, as will men in the South, a substitute or an inferior article. See also the effect of choice as it is exercised, though in a restricted field it is true, by the middle and upper middle classes in certain categories of furniture and design. Here, as in nearly everything else, the right process has been largely reversed; men take what is imposed upon them and not what they themselves choose. Supply controls demand, and not demand supply. But there is still a sufficient amount of choice remaining, as anyone in the furniture trade will tell you, to produce a considerable effect in the more expensive lines. Whether it would be possible to effect the moral revolution of reviving a habit of choice only experiment can show. It has been done in some categories, notably in architecture; in others it has quite failed. But in most it has not even been tried. With the exercise of choice, of individual will, of preferring this to that and seeing that you get it, you extend the opportunity for the artisan, the individual craftsman, the man who makes a thing to order or one who employs and personally supervises a few.

It must be admitted that there is only a limited field here available for the restoration of economic independence. Concentrated mechanical production will for long necessarily occupy the greater part of the

economic area involved in any particular form of manufacture. Still, for the purpose of spreading the moral effect of economic independence, for the purpose of familiarizing modern men before they lose the power altogether with the idea of economic independence, the re-erection even of a number of craftsmen small in proportion to the manufacture of the total amount of a particular product would be of the highest value.

Take, for example, the man who makes simple or more ornate wooden furniture on a small scale with personal knowledge of the methods and without having recourse to concentrated mechanical means. We cannot replace him in his old position of making *all* the furniture needed in the community; he will, for a long time to come, account for no more than a small fraction; but we can easily multiply his present numbers by five, even by ten, perhaps by more than ten, and so set an example of what is desirable in the commonwealth. What is more, we could put before the eyes of people now unaccustomed to them objects of a proper shape, not turned out on a hideous pattern which some capitalist group happens to find the cheapest, but suited to the tastes of the producer and the purchaser.

It must be admitted, of course, that in the beginning an effort of this kind would be the merest nibbling at the edges of a vast field. To our socialist opponents it will seem not only negligible, but ridiculous. We shall probably have a great deal less effect at first than, say, William Morris and his school—for these called themselves socialist and were therefore listened to with some respect by people who had forgotten

what property was. But if we could add to the moral effect a definite political weapon—the subsidizing and protecting of the small artisan at the expense of Big Business; the confirmation of the small artisan's position by a legalized guild system (which I touch on in the final article of this series)—we shall be able to do more than the dilettanti of the nineteenth century were ever able to effect, though in their time there was a larger proportion of independent artisans remaining who might still have been saved.

In the case therefore of the artisan, as in the parallel case of the shop, the thing to work for is a revolution of political principle; a new set of ideas and therefore a new set of enactments, the reverse of those which built up industrial capitalism. We need enforceable laws and actual institutions which shall artificially advantage the small distributor against the great and the small craftsman or small user of machinery against the large manufacturer. That is, of course, “un-economic”. In other words, it will cost money. So do the luxuries of the big capitalists cost money today. A well made piece of furniture, neither repulsive nor mechanical in design, will cost more than a piece turned out by mass production. But you are buying something at that price, and it is something well worth having—much better worth having than cheap furniture. It is citizenship, and the escape from slavery.

I am here tempted to repeat the thought that must occur throughout this series: “But all this is moonshine, because there is no condition of mind in a modern industrial State prepared for such a political change.” Possibly not. But at any rate those are the lines, and the only lines, along which the change can

be effected. The small distributor and the small craft producer could thus be re-established. He would not be made universal; he would at first be only a rather larger minority than the present small minority is; but he would be more secure than he is at present, though he would not at first appear in the community in very much larger numbers, and he would grow. What his presence *would* effect would be an object lesson in freedom and security, and, let us hope, a tendency on the part of his neighbours to change their own condition, where this was possible, from one of wage-slavery to one of independence.

Even were such a policy successful beyond any limits now thought possible, there must remain a very large field, indeed, in which the individual craftsman or the small employer of craftsmen, the individual small shopkeeping family or the modest controller of a very few shops or of a small personnel in one shop, has no place. Vast areas of modern production and exchange will necessarily concern great units and great units alone. How shall these be dealt with? How shall well divided property re-arise in those fields of economic effort where the small unit can in the nature of things have no place?

That is the next question to be answered, and I shall deal with it in the next article of this series, the fourth. In the fifth article I shall ask how a similar policy can be applied to the land; in the sixth and last article I shall deal with the machinery necessary for consolidating the position of small property where it shall have been restored.

(To be continued)

REVIEWS

The Nature of Progress

IT MAY seem paradoxical to suggest that the starting-point of human progress", says Mr. Dawson in his present book,* "is to be found in the highest type of knowledge—the intuition of pure being; but it must be remembered that intellectually, at least, man's development is not so much from the lower to the higher as from the confused to the distinct." This statement, from the current sociological standpoint, is revolutionary. But the author backs it up with a firm array of facts. The *essence* of primitive religion is not a belief in ghosts or magic or myths. It is not animism or pantheism or polytheism. It is "an obscure and confused intuition of transcendent being". When this intuition has been educated by long eras of experience and by great centuries of culture it becomes, as in Plato and St. Thomas Aquinas, the clear summit of human knowledge. But from the first it is present, since human nature in all times is radically the same, and it is the ultimate motive of human progress.

This intuition gave rise to Shamanism. The Shaman or primitive Messiah was venerated by the tribe, not primarily as a magician and not at all as the representative of a particular god, but, above all, as a person peculiarly in touch with supernatural life and being. He was succeeded by the organized priesthood and the elaborate myths of the cults of fertility. This cultus

* PROGRESS AND RELIGION by Christopher Dawson (SHEED & WARD. 254 pp. \$1.50).