

DISTRIBUTISM

DISTRIBUTISM is a word that I have not been able to find in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, but though the word is new, the idea or ideal that the word connotes is at least as old as Aristotle. Distributism is that order of society or state of things in which distributive justice prevails. Distributive justice is the virtue or the good will which moves the ruler or the head of the State to distribute the common goods proportionately. Distributism is the exact opposite of Socialism. Socialism would make private possessions the common property of the State, to be administered by the State or by municipal bodies: whereas Distributism stands for individual freedom and upholds man's natural right to possess property as his own. Hence it is not a little confusing to find Mr. Bernard Shaw claiming that Mr. G. K. Chesterton's Distributism is the sound doctrine which he himself has been preaching all his life as Socialism.

Those who would care to learn more about Distributism should read Mr. Chesterton's little book *The Outline of Sanity*¹. It is a series of articles taken from the weekly paper which he edits and worked up into a book. The author himself describes the book as a controversial causerie,—‘a mixture of gossip and gospel turned into a grammar of distributism.’ It has nothing of the nature of the formal text-book. It does not overawe with pompous pretensions or terrify with the heavier kind of learning. It rambles remorselessly and digresses without compunction or apology; but that is because it is dealing with living

¹*The Outline of Sanity*. By G. K. Chesterton. (Methuen and Co., Ltd. 6/-.)

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realities which will not always fit into artificial designs or yield to mechanical treatment. Besides, any sane discussion that honours objections with a reply must of necessity digress, and some of us agree with the wise man who said, 'digression is sometimes the better part of travel.'

If it is a grammar of Distributism, it is not of the arid, abstract, tiresome kind. Mr. Chesterton's exuberant wit and poetical fancy are sufficient guarantee against any possibility of his giving us a grammar that would bore us. Perhaps the wit and the imaginative flights and the apparently casual way in which the book grew may give the merely occasional and desultory reader a general impression of inconsequence and a lack of precision; but anyone who reads with care will easily detect the unity amid diversity and plainly see the main theme that runs through all these varied discussions. Dismiss your prejudices; try to put aside the facile newspaper tags about G.K.C., the paradox-monger, who is not to be taken seriously; and moreover remove and burn the book's 'jacket' whereon the publisher, with rather fatuous humour, describes G.K.C., among other things, as a politician; and then, if necessary, take off your own jacket and settle down to understand this thing called Distributism, even if it is only to understand something you intend to refute.

The funny man with a taste for parody may find in the distributist scheme ample scope for merriment. How delightful to cut up England and distribute it piecemeal allowing exactly one rood for each Englishman! But not even those, who with cheap derision make sport of the idea, seriously pretend to believe that Distributism means pooling all property and wealth and parcelling it out so that all can share and share alike. It means distributing the common goods, not equally but proportionately, giving to everyone his due, giving the labourer the fruit of his labour:

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it means encouraging as many as possible to become owners: it means condemning rapacious usury, which, although more than once condemned by the Church, is nevertheless, under a different guise but with like injustice, still practised by covetous and grasping men: it means striving to prevent the formation of trusts and monopolies, and opposing the concentration of so many branches of trade in the hands of a few individuals. In fact it means working for the destruction of all the social evils against which Pope Leo XIII declaimed in his famous encyclical *Rerum Novarum* so long ago as 1891. Distributism is an attempt to find some remedy for the misery and wretchedness pressing so heavily and unjustly at this moment on the vast majority of the working classes—a remedy which the Pope said must be found without delay more than thirty-six years ago.

If it is an attempt to find this much-sought remedy, your practical man will ask (and rightly): 'How does Mr. Chesterton propose to apply the remedy? How are we to bring about this delightful and desirable state of things called Distributism? Is it not another Utopia? And if so, why offer an ideal we cannot attain? Why waste time denouncing what we cannot destroy? Why make men discontented with conditions with which they must be content? Why revile an intolerable slavery that must be tolerated?'

Mr. Chesterton replies: 'When we in turn ask *why* the evil is indestructible, they answer in effect, "Because you cannot persuade people to want it destroyed." Possibly; but on their own showing, they cannot blame us because we try. They cannot say that people do not hate plutocracy enough to kill it; and then blame us for asking them to look at it enough to hate it. If they will not attack it until they hate it, then we are doing the most practical thing we can do, in showing it to be hateful.'

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Mr. Chesterton claims nothing more than to have attempted a diagnosis and a discussion of the evil for which Pope Leo XIII thirty-six years ago asked a speedy remedy. His diagnosis may not be acceptable to some who read his words. By all means let readers so disposed object, criticise and refute. But let no one pass by with a shrug of the shoulders and a murmur that it is no affair of his.

'A moral movement,' says Mr. Chesterton, 'must begin somewhere; but I do most positively postulate that there must be a moral movement. This is not a financial flutter or a police regulation or a private bill or a detail of book-keeping. It is a mighty effort of the will of man, like the throwing off of any other great evil, or it is nothing. I say that if men will fight for this, they may win; I have nowhere suggested that there is any way of winning without fighting.'

Distributive justice is essentially the concern of the rulers of the State; and in democratic England, which claims to be ruled by the people for the people, that means that distributive justice is the business and concern of everyone.

EDITOR.