

G.K.C.—DISTRIBUTIST

“IF I had not fallen for G.K. in 1900 I should have been caught by the Webbs in 1910.” I quote this sentence from a letter recently received because it may remind many of a fate they also escaped. The Fabian, as we now know, did not offer an alternative to Capitalism, he offered fetters of security and sufficiency; a better ordered world of which, even before the war, there seemed a need. The slums were awful and the rich corrupt, we did not question the qualities of the Fabian remedy. The young were to be nourished in clinics and educated in schools, the unfit exterminated, the old fed and clothed like the lilies of the field, the dead collected by a municipal Carter Paterson. The people were to control the means of production and distribution, text books on economics were to replace the Bible and everything was to be efficient. Fabian tracts, black with statistics and documented to the *n*th degree, were found upon the bookstalls, experts became as eloquent as the blue books from which they preached. Sanitation was exalted into a religion and hygiene accepted among the gods. The whole was spiced, for those reaching the more active areas of propaganda, by a certain laxity in morals, an evidence of escape from Victorianism. This looseness was to be discouraged among the poor, who were to be kept sober if not righteous; though not godly they were to be maintained at least in health.

The lugubrious procession of economists, welfare workers, mother Grundies and busybodies was held up by a circus. The *Flying Inn*, the *Eye Witness*, the Chester-Belloc partnership, the Marconi Scandal broke the spell. The dull drama of Reform turned into a joyous harlequinade, we had escaped the Fabian. We ceased to recite statistics and sang songs, good fellows romped on a stage set for inspectors, freedom eluded the officials and the cow jumped over the moon. Alas, the curtain was almost immediately rung down by the war: in the years of slaughter the Fabian secured all the jobs he had prefigured, Capital was served by a regimented proletariat, G.K. was reduced to straws in the wind

for a limited and much sobered audience. But in the nature of the man himself and in what he stood for—Truth, Justice, Liberty—there could be no final defeat. The straws had a habit of accumulating into stacks and became magical for the making of bricks with which, even now, we would go a-building.

I am here concerned with but one aspect of his work, that which suffers under the awkward title of "Distributism." Distributism is based on "the idea that the commonwealth is made up of a number of small kingdoms, of which a man and a woman become the king and queen and in which they exercise a reasonable authority, subject to the common sense of the commonwealth, until those under their care grow up to found similar kingdoms and exercise similar authority. This is the social structure of mankind, far older than all its records and more universal than any of its religions; and all attempts to alter it are mere talk and tomfoolery. . . . It is a mere matter of arithmetic that it puts a larger number of people in supreme control of something, and able to shape it to their personal liking, than do the vast organizations that rule society outside."

Some would recapture this state by passing laws and holding meetings; they plan, in the economic and political terms inherited from the last century, a distributist Utopia. G.K. was not of this mind, he did not add to the colours of shirts, he conspired not with rebels and consorted not with politicians. He would sing songs against grocers and explode with derisive laughter at the ineptness of the rich, but he did not encourage us to boycott the one or attack the other; his violence towards individuals got no further than "Chuck it, Smith." While being opposed to machinery he owned a car, while favouring peasants and land settlement he lived in a suburb and was connected with the world by telephone! Could he be true to the principles associated with his name and run a paper, even at great loss, which emerged from the kind of press used by the most capitalistic of his opponents?

In what way, then, was he entirely consistent (as he was) with his own principles? The essential to distributism is

something to distribute—that is, property or possessions. Possessions, owing to the dominance of the Money standard, are too often confused with token wealth; distributists find themselves assessing our present problems in terms of pounds, shillings and pence rather than in terms of things. Now the things which a man most certainly possesses are those which he alone can supply, it is these for which he is primarily responsible. He may wrap them up in a napkin or put them into circulation, he may keep them or sell them or give them away, for they are his. It is obvious that Gilbert Chesterton's possessions consisted in ideas, what money he received in exchange for them, and how he distributed that, is of no importance to us, though it may have been otherwise to those dependent on him.

It is not for me to appraise the quality of those ideas though they have amazed and stimulated me for over thirty years, I have simply to record the profligacy of their maker in distributing them. Over the air, in lecture halls and Common rooms, in books and periodicals the stupendous flow went on. And, what is so important, in this cascade of pearls there was no means test imposed upon the recipient. They were offered to cockney, peer and peasant with equal courtesy and the same humour; he never spoke down to an audience or gave away less valuable articles than he could sell.

The Distributist League, which he founded at the instance of some who wished to see his teaching more explicitly developed, has concerned itself chiefly with propaganda. G.K. may not have been amplified by Distributists with startling success, it is not easy to turn a song into a debate or make one creed out of many aphorisms, but it supplies a fellowship which may eventually be his most enduring monument. Distributism, as we have seen, is not to be narrowed down to monetary terms or limited to a few crafts or professions. It may immediately be adopted, "Even while we live in town houses we can own town houses," without a mass meeting in Hyde Park. It is not a system to impose on the other fellow but a faith in which all may live. Chesterton offered each man a kingdom rather than a vote,

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these small realms increase and multiply among the secret people who have not spoken yet. These are the Leaguers who will remember the first distributist, though they never saw his face and knew not the contagion of his laughter, they know him by his works. Ruskin spoke of us from a library, Carlyle fumed at us from the clouds, Morris preached from a workshop, and their words are no longer living. G.K. spoke *with* us in pub or home, or wherever we happened to be. The things he advocated "can be done *by* people," not *to* people—provided they "take as much notice of earth as monks do of heaven" (then) "people might really believe in the spades that create as well as in the swords that destroy; and that the English who have colonized everywhere else might begin to colonize England."

HILARY PEPLER.