

THE SERVILLE STATE RECONSIDERED

A radical contradiction vitiates the political theory of Mr. Belloc. It can be stated thus: the Roman civilisation and the medieval are continuous because in the dark ages the barbarians who dominated in society thought they were Romans and accepted the Roman Empire, although with manifest decadence; the British working classes are in imminent peril of becoming a servile class by the imposition of some elements of slavery, although they will not be called or considered slaves, by themselves or others.

The former thesis (that of *Europe and the Faith*) assumes that society depends on the formalities of the mind: what it intends to accept. The latter thesis (that of the *Servile State*) assumes that society depends on what the mind actually accepts, regardless of formalities or aspects.

The difference between Roman civilisation and that of the dark ages was that the fully civilised class of the former knew what it was doing; while that of the dark ages did not, but was conserving a good greater than it could value. The essence of the culture of antiquity was its awareness of its own nature: the fullness of intelligence concentrated on reality. That culture apparently perished in the dark ages. The best minds of the latter period concerned themselves with supernatural truth, and lived monastic lives. The practical intellect was exercised in military defence of Western Europe: but with little sense of unity of culture, save by that supernatural truth for which it fought, along with the primary motive of self-preservation.

In modern England slavery signifies in popular speech the exercise by one man over another of the totality of property rights—including the right of life and death. Slavery in Mr. Belloc's thesis means the legal obligation of one man to labour for another's profit: that other providing him with the requisites of livelihood. Therefore, says Mr. Belloc, if such a status is imposed on Englishmen they will be slaves without recognising the fact, because they associ-

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ate another mode of servitude with the name. An analogous case will clarify the matter. In pagan civilisation, the word *servus* meant a man who was subject in matters of life and death, and the use of his body, to a private citizen, not the republic. In the thirteenth century the same word signified a man subject to a local ruler (a lord of the manor) for capital punishment, and not a royal justice: who owed part of his labour and its produce to the lord, and required his permission if his marriage interfered with the rights of the lord over his progeny. Each of these three servile marks was profoundly altered in substance, although they remained in legal formalities, together with the name.

In Mr. Belloc's theory, modern English slavery will be characterised by compulsory labour for a master (probably accompanied by a fixed wage). No legal dominance, whether proprietary as in Roman law or judicial as in medieval custom, need accompany this status. Marriage rights, if they are controlled at all, will be controlled by the state, not the master. The new servility will be a new *type* of 'servile state' (such is the notion the casual reader attaches to the name, for 'servile' has a broader meaning than 'slave')—a state containing a class servile by law. Herein lies the difference. The ancient slavery was thought of, and therefore was, the subordination of person to person primarily, of class to class secondarily, and as a result class distinction existed then only in germ, or on occasion; it was not a background of thought. In modern England class distinction is taken as part of the national life; by some, perhaps a majority, as part of the nature of the universe, and this to a degree exceeding the reality. English slavery will be regarded as primarily a relation of class to class, and secondarily as a relation of person to person. It will be a creation of positive law, a jurist's sanction of the natural stratification of mankind: not as in pagan antiquity something permanent, above man-made law and even civilisation itself. Only by a habituation of the mind to the combination of these constituent elements can modern class legislation approach ancient servitude. Even then,

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the superiority of the law (and therefore of the enactments by which men are slaves) to the masters whom they serve, will leave an equality radical though obscured.

If therefore such mutations in English social order will be slavery despite the use of another name, so conversely it would seem that the social changes of the dark ages involve a new and lower civilisation despite the retention of the names and symbols of the Roman Empire. If the title 'free' is given to men obliged to labour for masters, freedom remains the heritage of Englishmen as Rome remained the heritage of the dark ages.

Now, permanence in social forms is no part of Western culture; indeed freedom from such fixity is of its essence. It is a thing of the mind which can produce external order varying according to circumstance because it holds within itself all order in its principles. This marks Greece and Rome as it marks France and Britain. They are one society thereby. But in the dark ages men saved civilisation by conserving its forms. They could not reproduce; they could only imitate. A barbarian chieftain bearing the insignia of a prefect or patrician was not less, but more a barbarian by reason of this fictitious loyalty to a culture he had assumed but not assimilated. Therefore the old civilisation perished and that of the Middle Ages was a new order. That is the thesis which Mr. Belloc opposes.

The truth is multiple. It is certainly necessary to agree with Mr. Belloc in maintaining that the essence of the old culture was conserved by the Church, and that its secular discipline was partially absorbed by the barbarian kings who did not conquer the Empire, which was not their aim and was beyond their imaginations to achieve. But because they, the secular hegemony, only superficially grasped hold of the Roman mentality, by a confused and general apprehension, they dragged all society down with them, and the clean and clear thinking of Græco-Latin thought-forms perished (outside the hierarchy and the monasteries). Clovis was Roman only in the sense in which Northcliffe was educated. Both imagined that they were that which

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they admired: but admiration (in the literal sense) and apprehension are mutually exclusive. They did not know what they did not possess of the Roman mind, because knowing *is* possessing. Likewise, Mr. Belloc should insist that Englishmen who think they are free because they are subject only to laws, will be free, although those laws may oblige them to labour. Civilisation requires the knowledge in society of the nature of man and some expression of that truth as dependent and secondary, but unnecessary and mutable. Slavery requires the economic subordination of man to man primarily, and the political subordination secondarily, but as a necessary complement without which the primary factor is not slavery. Thus the anticipated developments of English social life will not be slavery save as serfdom was or 'wage slavery' is such. The differentiating elements make a new institution, with a family resemblance to the old, but lacking its stigma (a completely unjust stigma). The point is that any difference makes all the difference.

The concept of Christendom round which Mr. Belloc's social philosophy turns, with its manifold and arresting exposition in his numerous works, can perhaps be summarised, and in a way modified, thus: the ancient world was the realisation of the possibilities of human nature and human intellect to attain a certain perfection of social order. The Church held the principles of that achievement as part of a vaster body of truth, the Christian revelation, for it is a secondary function of the Church to civilise. In the dark ages she safeguarded that tradition of thought: Byzantium retained its outward expression of order, and the feudal west kept up its ceaseless vigour. These three marks of classical culture, thought, order, activity, were split up in the half light of the decline: only their unity makes Western civilisation in its fullness. Perhaps that glorious vision from Thales to Damascene is a second paradise to which all future ages will look back as the triumph, even in its failure, of human effort.

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