

EDITORIAL NOTES

Almost a Distributist

I DO NOT remember ever experiencing a greater shock of both pleasure and astonishment than when reading the passage quoted below, from a recent book. The astonishment arose from the author's name—he was almost the last person in the world I should have expected to voice such sentiments. The reader is urged to postpone satisfying his curiosity until he has reached the end, and to place his hand over the name when he turns the page—such surprises are too rare not to be enjoyed to the full.

The pleasure arose not only from the author's eloquent, trenchant statement of some of the truths most necessary for the men of our day to realize, but from finding them expressed anywhere in this country outside the columns of *THE AMERICAN REVIEW*. It has been rather a solitary business, this year and a half, talking about liberty in terms of the only condition by which it can be attained: namely, the diffusion of active ownership in productive property until ownership is characteristic of society (instead of exceptional as in our state of increasing plutocracy and proletarianism), until it dominates its tone, its laws, its conduct. Liberty, to be sure, is on everyone's tongue—but it is identified with freedom of speech, quadrennial voting, idiosyncratic morals, and similar trivialities—when it is not identified with leisure and “the two-hour week”. Property, too, has many a resound-

ing speech made in its behalf; but only by those who wish to continue hogging the nation's heritage of wealth, with the fewest possible concessions to the demands of ordinary humanitarianism—and none at all to liberty. For the conception of property as the safeguard of liberty, upon which this nation was founded, has all but died out among us. You can read till blinded the endless stream of newspaper, magazine, and book discussions of economics and politics, and never see it mentioned—but only the ceaseless babble about “security” or “plenty” of the collectivists, avowed and concealed, who are driving us toward the Servile State, and who differ only in the question whether our masters shall seize power or simply gravitate into it.

It was an unwonted pleasure, then, to meet the following passage in a discussion of contemporary problems:

It is by the reduction of the extremes and the fostering and the maintenance of a middle condition among its people that a modern state can make itself most solid and most serviceable. When a large class are insecure and a powerful class possess extraordinary private influence, the incentives to exploit the state for special purposes are too strong to be resisted by the public spirit of the disinterested and the neutrality of the uninterested. In the proletariat there is a reservoir of voters who, lacking a definite stake in the social order, are responsive to bribery and enchantment; in the plutocracy there are men of exceptional enterprise and audacity, who, as Aristotle said “have too much of the goods of fortune, strength, wealth, friends, and the like” and “are neither willing nor able to submit to authority”. Therefore, to establish a

state, of which the government is representative, in a community which desires to preserve an economy run by private transactions but held in balance by collective action, it is necessary to take as an avowed object of policy the abolition both of the proletariat and of the plutocracy.

In making this avowal we must not let ourselves be distracted or confused by the cry that this is socialism, Marxism, the class war, and confiscation. It is none of these things. It is their very opposite. It is a policy which is frankly and unashamedly middle class in its ideal; it envisages a nation in which private property for private use and private security is firmly established because most men possess it; it is opposed to the condition of proletarianism as a denial of the security, the independence, and the liberty which sufficient property will provide; it is opposed to plutocracy because the inordinate accumulation of property means an inordinate accumulation of power. This is not a project to abolish private property and to make all the people servants of the state. On the contrary, it is a project to make the mass of the people independent of the state: that they may be free citizens, who need not be fed by the government, who have no impelling reason to exploit the government, who cannot be bribed, who cannot be coerced, who have no fear of the state and expect no favours. For their livelihood and personal security rest upon private property and vested rights, not upon the acts of officials.

It has been the fashion to speak of the conflict between human rights and property rights, and from this it has come to be widely believed that the cause of private property is tainted with evil and should not be espoused by rational and civilized men. In so far as these ideas refer to plutocratic property, to great impersonal corporate properties, they make sense. These are not in reality private properties. They are public properties privately

controlled and they have either to be reduced to genuinely private properties or to be publicly controlled. But the issue between the giant corporation and the public should not be allowed to obscure the truth that the only dependable foundation of personal liberty is the personal economic security of private property.

The teaching of history is very certain on this point. It was in the mediaeval doctrine that to kings belong authority but to private persons, property, that the way was discovered to limit the authority of the king and to promote the liberties of the subject. Private property was the original source of freedom. It is still its main bulwark. . . . Men cannot be made free by laws unless they are in fact free because no man can buy and no man can coerce them. That is why the Englishman's belief that his home is his castle and that the king cannot enter into it, like the American's conviction that he must be able to look any man in the eye and tell him to go to hell, are the very essence of the free man's way of life.

This is the substance of liberty, not perhaps as dialecticians or doctrinaires might define it, but as the peoples who have won and maintained their liberties have learned to understand it. . . .

The author, if you please, is Walter Lippmann. Yes, Walter Lippmann; in the Godkin Lectures delivered at Harvard last May and now published as *The Method of Freedom*.*

I must confess that my pleasure in reading this masterful presentation of the social views which THE AMERICAN REVIEW was in large measure founded to propagate, was somewhat tempered by the recurring thought that there *must* be a catch somewhere. For

* THE METHOD OF FREEDOM by Walter Lippmann (MACMILLAN. 117 pp. \$1.50).

after all, this was Walter Lippmann speaking. I wish it were possible to say that there was no catch, and to welcome Mr. Lippmann completely into the fold of Distributists. His powerful pen and the fine vantage point of his newspaper articles could perform immeasurable service to the ideal of liberty-through-property—the only way that the central American tradition can be preserved. But alas! the catch came in the very next paragraph. After one more sentence of unexceptionable good sense he proceeds to give the whole show away, in the words italicized:

From this point of view the extinction of proletarian insecurity and the reduction of plutocratic power are means to an end: which is to fortify the régime of liberty upon a foundation of private property. And here again, I must say in a parenthesis that it is not necessary or possible to attempt too precise a definition of private property. *I mean by it substantial security of income necessary to existence. Whether that income is derived in whole or in part from land, stocks, bonds, wages, salaries, pensions, insurance, does not matter provided the individual is assured that in the normal course of events he can depend upon it.*

What a descent! What a let-down! From *property* and *liberty* to *income* and *security*! From farms and shops and home industries and small factories to stocks and bonds and wages and pensions! From the distributist state to—the planned economy!

It becomes apparent that Mr. Lippmann was not talking about liberty and property at all. The whole thing was a rhetorical accident; a momentary flight of a highly gifted and agile penman who remains the

inveterate liberal—which is to say, the inveterate enemy of liberty. This was, in spite of everything, the same old Walter Lippmann. The Walter Lippmann who could, in *A Preface to Morals*, quote all the favourite passages of Babbitt and More from Buddha, Confucius, Plato, Aristotle, Christ, bearing on the inner check, the principle of vital control, and accompany them with apparently fully comprehending comments—only to end with a bastardized Stoicism under the name of “high religion”, and make a plea for “disinterestedness” on the part of our business men that amounted only to a sophistical defence of *laissez-faire*. This was the Walter Lippmann who could observe the events in Paris of last February 6th—the inevitable outgrowth of thirty years’ work on the part of Charles Maurras and his brilliant assistants in rousing an increasing host of French citizens to a realization of the evils of their pseudo-democratic régime, a work that has played a vital and germinative part in the great anti-parliamentary movement that has given us Fascism—and could discuss the episode not only with no allusion to Maurras, but entirely in terms of fluctuating currencies and rising prices! Economic determinism gone mad, if the epithet were not redundant.

But in a chameleon-like way he was able to capture for a moment the mood of Distributism—though not for long enough to feel what it really means; to know the meaning of the liberty he so eloquently champions, to know what is this thing called ownership he so sturdily plants himself upon. This is not the occasion for a detailed examination of the fallacy into which Mr. Lippmann has fallen. The delusion about

"security" is only one aspect of the general contemporary muddle in these matters which will be the subject of a longer piece, in an early issue, to be called "The Attack on Liberty", as previously announced. But perhaps a question or two, using an excellent test of liberty proposed by Mr. Lippmann, will suggest the point.

Whom does Mr. Lippmann think a man can tell to go to hell if he is dependent on wages? Anybody that really matters to him? More important, whom does Mr. Lippmann think a man can tell to go to hell who is dependent on the hope of "insurance against accident, disease, old age, and unemployment; pensions [when] incapacitated and handicapped"? The *essence* of these schemes for social insurance is that they strike not only at liberty but at every semblance of ordinary dignity. They oblige a man not only to forgo using strong language to a multitude of personages, but to preserve a faultless record of submissiveness and meek service to a string of officials added to whatever employers he may have. It is impossible to imagine a system of social insurance that does not involve a card for each man, filled out by employers and officials, recounting the man's behaviour as judged by employers and officials. That is not liberty. To men with any taste for liberty it is not sufferable.

It is true that a man who has a tidy collection of stocks or bonds paying dividends can say pretty much what he pleases to anybody. But one thing he cannot say: he cannot say that he *owns property* in any significant amount. . . . This covers all of Mr. Lippmann's kinds of "property" that are to secure liberty except the first one, *land*. On first meeting it I thought

of course he meant a farm. But now I am sure he meant a piece of real estate.

The climactic proposal which Mr. Lippmann is working up to in his defence of liberty and property—this soon reduces to a plea for “recognizing the right to work as one of the rights of man”—is the following: “The essential principle is to have on hand at all times varied projects of useful public work on which any citizen may find employment when he needs it.” . . .

Well, let us be grateful to Mr. Lippmann for lending his pen, if only for a moment, to the cause of liberty. And let us take renewed hope that the old American ideal may still find supporters from the fact that one so little able to understand it could come for a little while under its spell.

S. C.