

THE SERVILE STATE

Why I Am Not a Socialist

by G.K. Chesterton

Though Chesterton disliked socialism intensely, he did not regard it as the most serious danger facing Western civilization. Writing in 1925, he describes the socialist state as something "centralized, impersonal, and monotonous" but suggests that this is also an accurate description of the societies in the modern industrialized West that regard themselves as enemies of socialism. The coming peril was something Chesterton called "standardization by a low standard," and that danger was as much a characteristic of the West as it was of the Soviet East. The next great heresy, Chesterton insisted, was not Bolshevism but an attack on morality, especially sexual morality. The locus of that attack would not be in Moscow but in Manhattan. Hence the paradox: In one sense, socialism represented a fantasy that could never be fully realized; in another, it represented an evil that was already present. "It is," he writes, "only a thing that is as distant as the end of the world and as near as the end of the street."

Perhaps the best summary of Chesterton's critique of socialism is found in his contribution to a debate that took place in 1908 in the pages of an influential London socialist weekly called the New Age. The protagonists in the debate were Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, and Belford Bax as spokesmen for socialism, and Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc as its critics. In this piece, Chesterton presents an outline of the social philosophy that came to be known as distributism. The underlying distributist idea is the need for private property as a guarantee of human freedom and of human dignity. Chesterton claims to be speaking for ordinary people whose deepest needs are ignored by both the socialists and the defenders of corporate capitalism.

—Fr. Ian Boyd, C.S.B.

I have been asked to give some exposition of how far and for what reason a

man who has not only a faith in democracy, but a great tenderness for revolution, may nevertheless stand outside the movement commonly called socialism. If I am to do this, I must make two prefatory remarks. The first is a short platitude; the second is a rather long personal explanation. But they both have to be stated before we get on to absolute doctrines, which are the most important things in the world.

The terse and necessary truism is the same as that with which Mr. Belloc opened his article in this paper. It is the expression of ordinary human disgust at the industrial system. To say that I do not like the present state of wealth and poverty is merely to say I am not a devil in human form. No one but Satan or Beelzebub could like the present state of wealth and poverty. But the second point is rather more personal and elaborate; and yet I think that it will make things clearer to explain it. Before I come to the actual proposal of collectivism, I want to say something about the atmosphere and implication of those proposals. Before I say anything about socialism, I should like to say something about socialists.

I will confess that I attach much more importance to men's theoretical arguments than to their practical proposals. If you will, I attach more importance to what is said than to what is done; what is said generally lasts much longer and has much more influence. I can imagine no change worse for public life than that which some prigs advocate, that debate should be curtailed. A man's arguments show what he is really up to. Until you have heard the defense of a proposal, you do not really know even the proposal. Thus, for instance, if a man says to me, "Taste this temperance drink," I have merely doubt slightly tinged with distaste. But if he says, "Taste it, because your wife would make a charming widow," then I decide. Or, again, suppose a man offers a new gun to the British navy, and ends up his speech with the fine peroration, "And after all, since Frenchmen are our brothers, what matters it whether they win or no," then again I decide. I could decide to have the man shot with his own gun, if I could. In short, I would be openly moved in my choice of an institution, not by its immediate proposals for practice, but very much by its incidental, even

its accidental, allusion to ideals. I judge many things by their parentheses.

Now, I wish to say first that socialistic idealism does not attract me very much, even as idealism. The glimpses it gives of our future happiness depress me very much. They do not remind me of any actual human happiness, of any happy day that I have ever myself spent. No doubt there are many socialists who feel this, and there are many who will reply that it has nothing to do with the actual proposal of socialism. But my point here is that I do admit such allusive elements into my choice. I will take one instance of the kind of thing I mean. Almost all socialist utopias make the happiness or at least the altruistic happiness of the future chiefly consist in the pleasure of sharing, as we share a public park or the mustard at a restaurant. This, I say, is the commonest sentiment in socialist writing. Socialists are collectivist in their proposals. But they are communist in their idealism. Now there is a real pleasure in sharing. We have all felt it in the case of nuts off a tree or the National Gallery, or such things. But it is not the only pleasure, nor the only altruistic pleasure, nor (I think) the highest or most human of altruistic pleasures. I greatly prefer the pleasure of giving and receiving. Giving is not the same as sharing; Giving is even the opposite of sharing. Sharing is based on the idea that there is no property, or at least no personal property. But giving a thing to another man is as much based on personal property as keeping it to yourself. If, after some universal interchange of generosity, everyone was wearing someone else's hat, that state of things would still be based upon private property.

Now, I speak quite seriously and sincerely when I say that I, for one, should greatly prefer that world in which everyone wore someone else's hat to every socialist utopia that I have ever read about. It is better than sharing one hat, anyhow. Remember, we are not talking now about the modern problem and its urgent solution; for the moment, we are talking only about the ideal—what we would have if we could get it. And if I were a poet writing a utopia, if I were a magician waving a wand, if I were a god making a planet, I would deliberately make it a world of give and take, rather than a world of sharing. I do not wish Jones and Brown to share

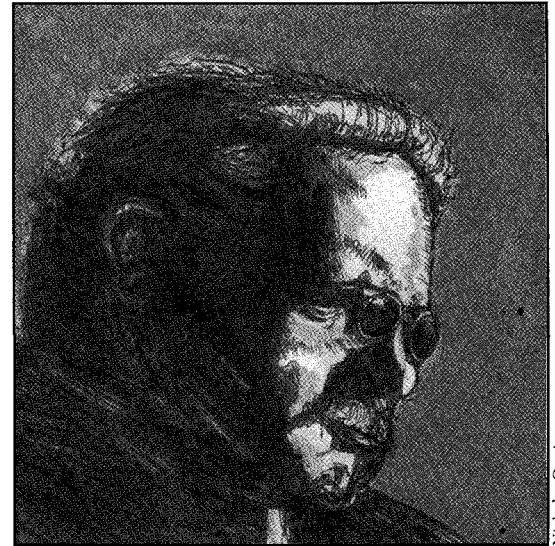
the same cigar box; I do not want it as an ideal; I do not want it as a very remote ideal; I do not want it at all. I want Jones, by one mystical and godlike act, to give a cigar to Brown, and Brown, by another mystical and godlike act, to give a cigar to Jones. Thus it seems to me, instead of one act of fellowship (of which the memory would slowly fade), we should have a continual play and energy of new acts of fellowship keeping up the circulation of society. Now I have read some tons or square miles of socialist eloquence in my time, but it is literally true that I have never seen any serious allusion to or clear consciousness of this creative altruism of personal giving. For instance, in the many utopian pictures of comrades feasting together, I do not remember one that had the note of hospitality, of the difference between host and guest and the difference between one house and another. No one brings up the port that his father laid down; no one is proud of the pears grown in his own garden. In the less non-conformist utopias there is, indeed, the recognition of traditional human liquor; but I am not speaking of drink, but of that yet nobler thing, "standing drink."

Keep in mind, please, the purpose of this explanation. I do not say that these gifts and hospitalities would not happen in a collectivist state. I do say that they do not happen in a collectivist's instinctive visions of that state; I do not say these things would not occur under socialism. I say they do not occur to socialists. I know quite well that your immediate answer will be, "Oh, but there is nothing in the socialist proposal to prevent personal gift." That is why I explain thus elaborately that I attach less importance to the proposal than to the spirit in which it is proposed. When a great revolution is made, it is seldom the fulfilment of its own exact formula; but it is almost always in the image of its own impulse and feeling for life. Men talk of unfulfilled ideals. But the ideals are fulfilled, because spiritual life is renewed. What is not fulfilled, as a rule, is the business prospectus. Thus the Revolution has not established in France any of the strict constitutions it planned out; but it has established in France the spirit of 18th-century democracy, with its cool reason, its bourgeois dignity, its well-distributed but very private wealth, its universal minimum of good manners. Just so, if socialism is established, you may not fulfil your practical proposal. But you will certainly fulfil your ideal vision. And I confess that, if you have forgotten these

important human matters in the telling of a leisurely tale, I think it very likely that you will forget them in the scurry of a social revolution. You have left certain human needs out of your books; you may leave them out of your republic.

Now, I happen to hold a view which is almost unknown among socialists, anarchists, liberals, and conservatives.

I believe very strongly in the mass of the common people. I do not mean in their "potentialities"; I mean in their faces, in their habits, and their admirable language. Caught in the trap of a terrible industrial machinery, harried by a shameful economic cruelty, surrounded with an ugliness and desolation never endured before among men, stunted by a stupid and provincial religion, or by a more stupid and more provincial irreligion, the poor are still by far the sanest, jolliest, and most reliable part of the community. Whether they agree with socialism as a narrow proposal is difficult to discover. They will vote for socialists as they will for Tories and Liberals, because they want certain things, or don't want them. But one thing I should affirm as certain, the whole smell and sentiment and general ideal of socialism they detest and disdain. No part of the community is so specially fixed in those forms and feelings which are opposite to the tone of most socialists: the privacy of homes, the control of one's own children, the minding of one's own business. I look out of my back windows over the black stretch of Battersea, and I believe I could make up a sort of creed, a catalogue of maxims, which I am certain are believed, and believed strongly, by the overwhelming mass of men and women as far as the eye can reach. For instance, that an Englishman's house is his castle, and that awful proprieties ought to regulate admission to it; that marriage is a real bond, making jealousy and marital revenge at the least highly pardonable; that vegetarianism and all pitting of animal against human rights is a silly fad; that, on the other hand, to save money to give yourself a fine funeral is not a silly fad, but a symbol of ancestral self-respect; that, when giving treats to friends or children, one should give them what they like, emphatically not what is good for them; that there is nothing illogical in being furious because Tommy had been coldly caned by a schoolmistress and then throwing saucepans at him yourself. All these things they believe; they are the only people who do believe them; and they are absolutely and eternally right. They



Nicholas Carrie

are the ancient sanities of humanity; the ten commandments of man.

Now I wish to point out to you that, if you impose your socialism on these people, it will in moral actuality be an imposition and nothing else; just as the creation of Manchester industrialism was an imposition and nothing else. You may get them to give a vote for socialism; so did the Manchester individualists get them to give votes for Manchester. But they do not believe in the socialist ideal any more than they ever believed in the Manchester ideal; they are too healthy to believe in either. But while they are healthy, they are also vague, slow, bewildered, and unaccustomed, alas, to civil war. Individualism was imposed on them by a handful of merchants; socialism will be imposed on them by a handful of decorative artists and Oxford dons and journalists and countesses on the Spree. Whether, like every other piece of oligarchic humbug in recent history, it is done with a parade of ballot boxes interests me very little. The moral fact is that the democracy definitely dislikes your favorite philosophy, but may accept it like so many others, rather than take the trouble to resist.

Thinking thus, as I do, socialism does not hold the field for me as it does for others. My eyes are fixed on another thing altogether, a thing that may move or not; but which, if it does move, will crush socialism with one hand and landlordism with the other. They will destroy landlordism, not because it is property, but because it is the negation of property. It is the negation of property that the duke of Westminster should own whole streets and squares of London; just as it would be the negation of marriage if he had all

living women in one great harem. If ever the actual poor move to destroy this evil, they will do it with the object not only of giving every man private property but, very specially, private property; they will probably exaggerate in that direction; for in that direction is the whole humor and poetry of their own lives. For the Revolution, if they make it, there will be all the features which they like and I like: the strong sense of English cosiness, the instinct for special festival, the distinction between the dignities of man and woman, responsibility of a man under his roof. If you make the Revolution, it will be marked by all the things that democracy detests and I detest: the talk about the inevitable, the love of statistics, the materialist theory of history, the trivialities of sociology, and the uproarious folly of eugenics. I know the answer you have; I know the risk I run. Perhaps democracy will never move. Perhaps the English people, if you gave it beer enough, would accept even eugenics. It is enough for me for the moment to say that I cannot believe it. The poor are so obviously right, I cannot fancy that they will never enforce their rightness against all the prigs of your party and mine. At any rate, that is my answer. I am not a socialist, just as I am not a Tory; because I have not lost faith in democracy.

G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) was a playwright, poet, novelist, journalist, editor, theologian, philosopher, and Christian apologist. Fr. Ian Boyd, C.S.B., is the editor of the Chesterton Review.

COMMONWEAL

Death and Life of a Great Urban Thinker

by Steven Greenhut

The death on April 25 at the age of 89 of Jane Jacobs, author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* and several other books, has already set off a debate over her legacy. Admirers from the New Urbanist movement see her primarily as an advocate for compact, vibrant cities. They cite Jacobs as inspiration for their war against urban sprawl. These folks have been the ones mostly called upon to eulogize her, and the casual observer would be left to think that she was one of them.

Others—myself included—recognize that Jacobs was, of course, an advocate for urban life, compact cities, and other things the New Urbanists promote but believe her biggest legacy is one of standing up for the average urban citizen against the coercive designs of city officials, planners, architects, and bureaucrats. She was, first and foremost, an advocate for freedom and individual decisionmaking. Her blasts against government planners are as stinging as those written by Ayn Rand, although they display a subtlety that Rand could never master and an understanding of community that Rand could not grasp.

In 1961, when Jacobs wrote *Death and*

Life, the big planning fads of the day were those advanced by the likes of New York planner Robert Moses. The poor should not be forced to live in ugly tenements, with their kids playing in the streets. They shouldn't have to endure the awfulness of crowded streetscapes with too few parks and a mixture of business and residential uses. The planners knew that what the poor needed was lots of open space, modern apartment buildings, and residential areas cordoned off from the unseemly world of commerce. Big, broad boulevards and freeways were in, as were tall, Bauhaus-style office buildings and unadorned housing blocks.

Today, we all shake our heads in dismay at urban renewal. I remember the fruits of it back East, where public housing was plopped in the middle of settled ethnic neighborhoods, where poor but vibrant areas were cleared away by bulldozers to make way for new offices. Some activists referred to urban renewal as "Negro removal." I recall one Eastern city where a couple of old buildings stood amid a sea of government parking lots, with most of the city's downtown destroyed—all thanks to the planners and their powers of subsidy, eminent domain, and central planning.

Many older cities saw their downtowns obliterated as four-lane freeways blasted through the neighborhoods, often blocking the waterfronts from the streetscape. Urban renewal, the epitome of top-down government planning, was a disaster that wrecked countless communities, many of which have never recovered.

Jacobs was at first something of a gadfly in her hometown of New York City. The *Los Angeles Times* obituary recalls the incident in which Robert Moses announced a plan to put a freeway through Washington Square in Manhattan, and Jacobs and other protesters rushed the podium. The *Times* cites an AP interview in which Jacobs recounts the imperious Moses arrogantly dismissing those who opposed the destruction of their neighborhood as "a bunch of mothers!" (How dare a group of mere mothers stand up against the designs of the elite!)

In *Death and Life*, Jacobs describes an interview with the residents of an East Harlem housing project. Officials couldn't understand why the tenants particularly despised the rectangular lawn at the project. Then one articulate tenant revealed:

"Nobody cared what we wanted when they built this place. They threw our houses down and

LIBERAL ARTS

PRESIDENT EXPECTED TO REMEMBER LOT'S WIFE

"*With This Ring*, the world's first magazine catering to every kind of wedding—be that same sex, interracial, or interfaith—continues with Launch [sic] plan despite obvious lack of support from White House.

"President Bush is slated to strongly [sic] reaffirm his opposition to gay marriage today and once again attempt to push through a constitutional amendment defining marriage as a union solely between a man and a woman, putting yet another obstacle in the way for those interested in same sex marriage.

"Jonathon Scott Feit, Chief Editor and Publisher of *With This Ring* magazine, says that 'President Bush is, once again, out of touch with the pulse of the people he is supposed to represent.' . . .

"*With This Ring* will be the first-ever bridal publication to broaden the scope of the traditional 'White Wedding' and reach—both from an editorial and advertising standpoint—an open-minded audience that views same sex couples, interfaith couples, interracial couples and even couples looking for a non-traditional wedding as fundamentally equal."

—from a press release for *With This Ring*, by Rachel Cone-Gorham