

## BLACKFRIARS

urgent than any other. Ought we not to be growing a little suspicious of those who say that the present money system can neither be altered nor bettered?

Yours faithfully,

ERIC GILL.

## DISTRIBUTISM AND PRIMITIVISM

To the Editor of **BLACKFRIARS**.

SIR,—There are two references to Distributism in the March issue of **BLACKFRIARS**, and in both cases a popular and erroneous meaning is applied to the term. The first reference is made by *Jacobin* in the course of his *Remarks*, and the second is made in the course of a review by one whose initials are ‘V.W.’

*Jacobin* deplores that Distributism ‘equates Catholic civilization and primitiveness,’ which is both unjust and untrue: ‘V.W.’ deplores that Distributism has given rise to a ‘widespread misunderstanding of the social philosophy of Saint Thomas,’ which is not untrue and is therefore probably not unjust. It is not untrue, because much has come to be associated with Distributism that is not Distributism; because the creed is sometimes as ill-served by its friends as by its foes.

Its name was coined by Mr. Hilaire Belloc,<sup>1</sup> and it was chosen as providing an antithesis to a word less frequently heard to-day, ‘collectivism.’ It was intended essentially to denote a social philosophy which should be based on a true and Thomist conception of human nature, a personalism to combat the impersonalism of collectivism. Indeed, an excellent introduction to Distributism is provided by Fr. Gerald Vann’s recent Essay in Order, although the author would probably at once repudiate the suggestion. He would repudiate it for the same reason which led Mr. Belloc to avoid any use of his term in a series of articles which he wrote last year for *The English Review*, in which he outlined an immediate and practical policy for a Distributist government. Many of those who have been the friends of Distributism have been impressed, no doubt with some reason, with the necessity of an agricultural revival; and, not unnaturally, they have described how this counter-revolution might be achieved on Distributist lines. So loudly and often have they described it, however, that an agricultural revolution and Distributism are now regarded by many as inseparable, and the original Thomism of Mr. Belloc is now dubbed ‘Homespun

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<sup>1</sup> Vide the supplement to the *New Oxford Dictionary*.

Theology.' In point of fact, Distributism is no more concerned in its essence with a condemnation of Industrialism or a campaign in favour of wheat-growing than with the appreciation of good beer or the ridiculing of Mr. J. H. Thomas. If an agricultural revival must come, let us make it one in which the smallholder can live. But Distributism does not distribute acres and cows: it distributes personal responsibility.

Far from being a 'naïve individualism,' it is a subtle and Christian Communism, in which all, and not merely a select committee, are responsible for the welfare of the state. When the family is regarded as the unit of the state, as here, the family knows that it has an important part to play.

Surely Distributism has some claim to represent in England 'the numerous movements labelled "personalist" by the French? Has it not, O Penguin, all the excellent characteristics of the *New Britain* movement, and does it not in addition answer your call for 'a new conception of personality, and destiny'? Is Distributism to go to the wall because it is inclined to sympathise rather with the Old England than with the New Britain?

Yet 'the attack made by a section among Catholics on the new forms of civilisation made possible by machinery,' coming admittedly from Distributists, does not come from Distributism. 'It may well proceed from rustic tastes, natural or affected, or from panic in the face of the size of the machine,' but it does not proceed from Distributism.

Lest it be thought that I am basely deceiving the 'Back-to-the-Land' section among Distributists (or, if you will, the primitives), I may mention that I count myself among their number: but it must be realised that their 'primitivism' is but *applied* Distributism, even as Distributism might claim to be applied Thomism. The case for 'primitivism,' despite its alleged origin in sentimentalism, daily gains strength with economic support. The Birmingham scheme, for example, bears an almost startling resemblance to the Canadian Gordon plan, and to the plan recently propounded from the White House, whereby 'distressed' families in rural areas must seek escape from unemployment by becoming largely self-supporting.<sup>2</sup> Again: the whole trend of modern agricultural and industrial research is now recognised to be towards regional self-sufficiency; that is, towards making production possible where before it was not possible. And not for nothing do post-marks in the Irish Free State now bear the exhortation to 'Grow more Wheat,' although in London they still urge a more frequent use of the telephone.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, March 1st, 1984.

However : this is not the occasion for a complete discussion of Distributism and its applications, which have notoriously appealed to minds renowned neither for naivety nor for lack of profundity. There is but one further not irrelevant fact to which the attention of 'V.W.' must be drawn.

In the course of his review, he mentions M. Maritain as among the French 'personalists,' who, he will concede, have grasped something of the sociological implications of Saint Thomas's theory of 'personality.' If, therefore, he will refer to one of **XI** Maritain's most recent works, he will find that there is cited as a particular example of its practical application, 'le curieux essai de la colonisation de la terre qui se dessine actuellement chez les "distributistes" anglais.'<sup>3</sup>

Must M. Maritain now he dismissed from the ranks of the exponents of 'authentic Thomism'? And is it not possible to sympathise with those who claim that Distributism is essentially but applied Thomism, and, moreover, that it is the only attempt at a social application of Thomism in this country, and worthy as such of the benevolence of the journal of the English Dominicans?

At all events, it is the only definite and constructive Catholic social policy in England, and the only alternative to the rather defeatist attitude of those who strive to reconcile existing social conditions to Catholicism. That seems true at least to one who, on the Feast of Saint Thomas of Aquin, begs to subscribe himself,

Faithfully yours,

MICHAEL DERRICK.

To the Editor of BLACKFRIARS.

SIR,—I myself have straw in my sabots and sometimes share Mr. Derrick's taste for the primitive. What is more, in the very paragraph to which he takes exception, and all against my then current hankering for the amenities of suburban life, I even wrote that Distributism and the Land Movements are affirming and establishing *necessary principles*. One may doubt, of course, whether they are the only ones, but that is by the way.

The occasion of Mr. Derrick's criticism so far as I am concerned is a small point of fact. Did I say that Distributism equates Catholic civilisation and primitiveness? I did not. The question is easily settled by referring to my words and not to a misquotation of them. He grants that there are Distributists who make such an equation, and this is what I said, though not so strongly.

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<sup>3</sup> *Du Régime temporel, et de la Liberté*, p. 210, Note (2).

## CORRESPONDENCE

My purpose was to deny that Catholic civilisation and 'primitiveness' (even in a good sense) are convertible terms. Mr. Derrick goes further, and denies that Distributism and primitivism are convertible terms. Excellent. If primitivism is only a species of Distributism, then by another remove it is only a sub-species of Catholic civilisation, and I feel bound to question a homespun theology which tangles them together.

Yours, etc.,

JACOBIN.

To the Editor of **BLACKFRIARS**.

SIR,—Mr. Derrick's recognition that my only reference to Distributism 'is not untrue' absolves me, I trust, from the painful necessity of proving it. But he must pardon me if I cannot reconcile this recognition with his previous assertion that in my review 'a popular and *erroneous* meaning is applied to the term.' I can only plead that I applied no meaning whatsoever to the term. My reference was quite expressly not to its meaning but to its unfortunate associations, for which, I would venture to add, I think Distributists have only themselves to blame.

Were all Distributists to distinguish so clearly as does Mr. Derrick between the wholly admirable principles of Distributism and the queer idiosyncrasies of Distributists, Distributism might become a real power in the land. And M. Maritain and other foreign observers might cease to regard its applications of personalism as *curieux*. My only concern was to dissociate the associations of Distributism from Thomism as Mr. Derrick dissociates them from Distributism.

Meanwhile, Sir, **BLACKFRIARS** can show no greater 'benevolence' to Distributism than does your wise and witty Jacobin in distinguishing issues which Distributists themselves have confused to the hurt of their own movement. And in dissociating tastes and opinions of individual Distributists from Catholicism as well as from Distributism he is not only doing service to the latter, but is removing what is in danger of becoming, in the strict theological sense of the word, a scandal.

Your reviewer,

V.W.