

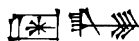
THE SERVILE STATE



HILAIRE BELLOC

THE SERVILE STATE • HILAIRE BELLOC •

Introduction by Robert Nisbet



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INTRODUCTION

by Robert Nisbet

Very early in the first chapter Hilaire Belloc defines the servile state:

That arrangement of society in which so considerable a number of the families and individuals are constrained by positive law to labor for the advantage of other families and individuals as to stamp the whole community with the mark of such labor we call the servile state.

This is clearly a definition worth pondering, as are the other definitions—capitalism, industrialism, collectivism, socialism, etc.—he offers us in the opening section. For, as requires no emphasis here, we find ourselves in the United States living under a form of government that comes more and more to fit Belloc's definition of the servile state. What this extraordinary and prescient mind saw early in the century as a small but widening stream has become,

through relentless taxation, bureaucracy, and coercive regulation, a veritable torrent in our time. Just as Belloc predicted, we find the real liberties of individuals diminished and constricted by the Leviathan we have built in the name of equality. More and more Americans labor by law to support other Americans.

I chanced upon this book some forty years ago, and bought it because of its arresting title and the author's name. I confess, I took it with some skepticism, for in 1936, still a student, I had in me a considerable faith in what the New Deal was doing, or claiming to be doing. A few seconds' flipping of pages in the bookstore was enough to make it evident that the author of *The Servile State* had, back in 1912, anticipated much of what lay in New Deal legislation, and there was no mistaking his hostility to it.

In any event I commenced reading the book immediately, and its effect on me was profound. It has proved to be among the few books—Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, James Fitzjames Stephen's *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, F. J. Teggart's *Processes of History*, and Schumpeter's *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* are others—which have had influence on me so great as virtually to turn my mind around. Suffice it here to say that never again, after reading Belloc's work, did I imagine that there could be genuine individual freedom apart from individual ownership of property. Moreover, the book was the

beginning of my personal awareness of the sharp difference between liberty and what it was so many self-styled liberals were seeking, and, alas, still are.

It is interesting to realize that Belloc thought, while writing this book, that the outlook was by no means totally bleak. He could see the servile state coming into existence in England and certain other countries as the result of the separation of enlarging numbers of people from their property, a process that Belloc sees beginning in the Reformation when the Tudors and their aristocratic allies expropriated not only the wealth of the monasteries but also the holdings of tens of thousands of small farmers, leaving them so destitute as to make them the inevitable recipients of the Tudor state's Poor Law and the victims of this state's ever-mounting despotism. The results were, Belloc thought, the propertyless masses of the England of his day. Even so, Belloc believed countering tendencies were to be seen in western Europe. He cites, in the Conclusion, France and Ireland as countries in which these tendencies could be seen. "The force of which I have been speaking," he writes in the final pages, "is not the only force in the field. There is a complex knot of forces underlying any nation once Christian; a smoldering of old fires."

Belloc would not be so optimistic today, and it is only fair to note that well before his death in 1953 much of his earlier optimism had been lost. After all, there had been, following publication of his book,

two world wars, with their collectivizing effects upon nations, the emergence of totalitarianism in Russia, Italy, and Germany, and a steady growth in all the democracies of a managerial-collective form of state in which, under the labels of social justice and humanitarianism, the liberties of individuals were declining.

Who at this moment would doubt that in America, as well as in other countries of the West, we are rapidly reaching the point where "so considerable a number of families and individuals are constrained by law to labor for the advantage of other families and individuals" that we can begin to see very clearly indeed the outlines of the servile state? Given the debasement of the language of politics in our time, there are of course many who describe this condition as progress, or as a higher freedom and democracy, or as humanitarianism. But the harsh fact remains: a steadily enlarging number of families and individuals in the United States, and other Western countries, are in the position of being constrained by law, beginning with the progressive income tax but extending to numerous other areas of legal requirement, to labor, not for themselves, but, in Belloc's words, "for the advantage of other families and individuals," those who do not work and who enjoy what is called welfare in one or other of its by now diverse forms.

Hilaire Belloc was born in France (La Celle-Saint-Cloud), July 27, 1870, the son of a French lawyer

whose English-born wife (Bessie Rayner Parkes) was active in the early stages of the women's suffrage movement. Belloc's education was almost entirely British, beginning in the Oratory School in Birmingham, continuing at Balliol College, Oxford, from which he graduated with the highest honors in history in 1894. He married an American woman (Elodie Hogan) in 1896. In 1902, Belloc became a naturalized British subject, and he even sat for several years (1906–10) in Parliament. He had proved himself an accomplished debater at Oxford, and there is little question that he could have had a distinguished career in politics had he so chosen. But writing was his choice, his mission indeed, and there are not many in the long history of English literature who can match either the extent of his published work or the astonishing diversity of subject and style.

When he died, July 16, 1953, at the age of nearly 83, Belloc could look back upon well over a hundred books and a vast number of casual essays, articles, reviews, and speeches. One of the most controversial figures of his day, he was also one of the most respected, even honored, for his learning, insight, wit, and brilliance of literary style. He wrote much history, including a four-volume history of England and several historical and biographical treatments of the French Revolution (an event that had almost obsessive influence on Belloc's mind), but his historical writings occupy a relatively small place in his total

bibliography. He was literary critic, social and political analyst, unceasing polemicist in many areas, journalist, novelist, and, far from least, poet. His serious, mature poems will be found in many an anthology of English poetry, but his first venture along this line was in the area of nonsense verse. His *The Bad Child's Book of Beasts*, written while still at Oxford, in 1896, created immediate attention and is to this day regarded as a classic.

It is impossible to understand any of Belloc's writings without beginning with his profound, life-long Roman Catholicism. This religion had undergone a major renaissance beginning almost immediately after the French Revolution, a renaissance to be seen in England and the United States, as well as on the Continent. It is doubtful, I should say, that Belloc could ever have reached his own personal influence as a libertarian Catholic had it not been for such nineteenth-century predecessors as Lamennais, Lacordaire, Montalembert, Newman, Manning, Acton, and many others who did so much to restore Rome to an intellectual, and also to a cultural, social, and economic influence it had not had since perhaps the Counter-Reformation.

Belloc's is the Catholicism of not only those I have just mentioned; his is also the Catholicism of Sir Thomas More, who, as we know, was beheaded for his courageous opposition to the selfsame Tudor economic and political policies that Belloc, four centuries later, would attack with such force, and in

whose *Utopia* we find a form of society not very different from that advocated by Belloc. I should add that there is also much in common between Belloc's social and economic ideas and those contained in the famous encyclicals of Leo XIII in the nineteenth century.

With Belloc's ardent Catholicism goes a philosophy of history that celebrates the Middle Ages for the abolition of slavery and servile status, for the wide diffusion of property-tenure among the people, and thus a significant degree of individual liberty, and for the efflorescence of learning, art, philosophy, and literature that brought Europe out of the Dark Ages. Belloc sees the Reformation and the capitalism that sprang up with it as the causes of modern despotism and of the economic insecurity that leads to the appeal of socialism, collectivism, and, of course, what he termed the servile state. Freedom dies in all of these forms of the state, but they in turn are made possible, Belloc argues, only by the helplessness of those who have been converted into the propertyless masses.

Belloc's view of modern Western history is thus one of regress rather than progress; of decline of life, liberty, and economic security from the Middle Ages. That there is in Belloc a considerable degree of romanticization of this period goes without question, and there were many in his day who attacked him for it: those for whom the medieval period was largely one of squalor, superstition, and feudal

tyranny, and for whom the Renaissance and the Reformation were the nurturing grounds of freedom and enlightenment. And yet, romanticism accepted, it has to be admitted that Belloc's view of the social and economic character of the Middle Ages, and his view of the real effects of the Renaissance and the Reformation, have had some measure of confirmation in the scholarship of recent decades. We are no longer as prone as were so many of Belloc's contemporaries to equate medievalism with evil and modernity with goodness.

It should not be concluded from Belloc's Catholicism and veneration of the Middle Ages that he was a conservative. He declared himself to the left of liberalism. He greatly admired William Cobbett, the early nineteenth-century English radical who also fought for the property rights of the masses. Yet Cobbett's political beliefs had been formed by no less a mind than Edmund Burke. Burke, as we know, had little liking for the "new dealers" of finance, as he called them in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. Burke is by now well established as the father of modern conservatism, but it is well to recall that he supported the American colonists and those in both India and Ireland who sought to repulse British domination. His attack on the French revolutionaries was based entirely upon what he saw as the expropriation of property from church, guild, and landowner, and upon the growth of "arbitrary power" in the name of the people. Burke, in short, was any-

thing but a Tory in his day, and his love of liberty was uncompromising.

There is a strong element of Burke's philosophy in Belloc, as there is indeed in the writings of many in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries whose fundamental devotion to tradition and to continuity did not preclude their hostility to all forms of large-scale organization—economic, religious, or political—in which the liberty and security of individuals were sacrificed. I do not hesitate to declare that, Roman Catholic faith aside, there is little to separate Belloc's social and economic views from those of Thomas Jefferson, who also feared, in the name of individual liberty, the great cities, industries, and bureaucracies which he saw forming in Europe. Some readers of this book may, by virtue of their own definition of "capitalism," take umbrage at Belloc's indictment of it, but they should understand that Belloc's great love was the widest possible distribution in a population of individual, private property, and the freedom to use this property as its owner saw fit. Some would define capitalism with its free market in precisely these terms; but, as I have noted, for Belloc capitalism denoted first the kind of monopolistic expropriations that went with the early Tudor kings and second the growth of large-scale, corporate, property-aggregating industry, which with its conversion of so many individuals into a propertyless condition left them wide open to the advances of collectivism and the servile state. But if Belloc dis-

liked the capitalism of his time, he loathed and feared the kinds of opposition to and controls on capitalism which were the substance of Lloyd George's "liberal" reforms in England, reforms which were forming the very warp of the servile state in their restrictions upon individual economic liberty.

What Belloc desired and tirelessly advocated was a political-economic system that he called distributivism. This was a doctrine that enlisted the energies of the brilliant G. K. Chesterton (whose own conversion to Roman Catholicism stemmed largely from Belloc's influence) and a few other minds of stature. Under this system, all people would own property, would be self-supporting and therefore free and able to fend for themselves against efforts of governments to constrict freedom through passage of coercive laws in the name of humanitarianism and social security. Distributivism means free individuals and families, with none supporting others, and with the state adapted to the requirements of economic freedom rather than the reverse, which, as I have noted, Belloc saw as the very substance of English history from the Tudors on.

Belloc does not tell us, alas, how distributivism is to be brought about; how it is to be generated amid the oppressions and regimentations of modern political and economic life. This may be one of the reasons why his and Chesterton's advocacy of their ideal was relatively unsuccessful.