

have begun to show up in the way we live. As Nixon did, "we, too, seek lives without limits and form. We have hollowed out the institutions and codes that once disciplined our individual desires and made us willing to temper private impulse by public ends." In Kurland's words, we have "long den[ie]d . . . institutional values in favor of temporary political expediency."

Professor Kurland's book reminds us, as does the article by Schaar and Carney, that constituting a "public" and acting within a public world are achievements rather than givens. If we are not willing to work for it, the *polis* achieved in 1787 will not be ours.

The question is how many Americans are still, or may be persuaded to become, adherents of the "vital center" and of the rule of reason based on experience, both of which guided the Founding Fathers to the framing of a Constitution that we still purport to follow.

Reviewed by THOMAS D. EISELE

The World of Hilaire Belloc

The Servile State, by Hilaire Belloc; with an Introduction by Robert Nisbet, *Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1978. 207 pp. \$8.00 (paper \$2.00).*

IN THE FULL FLOOD of a life which was to produce more than one hundred and fifty books, Hilaire Belloc insisted on hefting the product before it was published and on eyeing each page proof with a critical squint before giving his *bene placit*. He would have been pleased with this new edition of *The Servile State* by Liberty Press in its Classic Series. The Liberty Press must be congratulated by having given us an early twentieth-century classic crafted in quiet beauty, thus doing justice to its author. The quality of paper and the large, hence generous,

print makes the reading of Belloc's most influential book an added pleasure.

What was *The Servile State* all about? What was the thesis that made the late Walter Lippmann, a man by no means sympathetic with the wide range of affirmations that marked Belloc, declare that *The Servile State* was a "landmark of political thought in this century"? In his sensitively intelligent introduction, Robert Nisbet fingers the thesis in the following quotation which forms the conclusion Belloc set out to demonstrate. *The Servile State* can be defined as

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.

Belloc marched through to his conclusion with an argument from definition. In defining servility in economic rather than in purely political terms, Belloc parted company with a long prejudice that understood slavery principally in terms of juridical bondage. The burden of proof Belloc laid on himself consisted in demonstrating that his definition of servility had begun to fit the Western world, especially England, by the time he worked out his thesis in 1913.

The Servile State begins with definitions. Belloc argued that the servile condition exists in a community when a number of men of modest or no capital, sufficient to stamp the community with its type, is perforce constrained to hire its services to capitalists, in such fashion that the alternative is indigence or the "dole," an alternative rendered so repugnant by the state that forced employment becomes the norm. The capitalist, in turn, finds himself to be an unpaid official of the state, providing for the well-being of a man whose economic status prohibits his caring for himself in illness and decrepitude. Belloc's understanding of the servile state, with some not unimportant but by no means essential distinctions, coincides with what we in this country for some thirty years or more have called "The Welfare State."

For Belloc, economic alternatives—including, as they do, social and political alternatives—are the consequence of the possession of private property, whether property in the form of land or in the form of stocks and bonds and savings. When such alternatives do not exist, or where they exist only marginally, the society in question is already stamped with the mark of slavery. For Belloc the slave is the man who has no significant alternative in life. He must work for a wage because the only other choice is the indignity of welfare, the dole: Belloc does not consider total poverty an alternative. It follows that the proletarian is forced to work for another man because starvation is no choice at all to any sane man and welfare is congenial only to a lazy one. It follows, too, that the key of personal liberty for Belloc is economic liberty and such liberty is the result of the possession of private property.

The conventional objection to Belloc's thesis is easily summed up by the following complaint: "If you don't like your job, find another one!" The complaint well fits a capitalist system in which, theoretically, a few own a significant (but not necessarily overwhelming) number of the means of production and in which a majority, at least a significant and possibly an overwhelming majority, own nothing but their capacity to work. In this model capitalist order, the many are politically and economically free to switch employment and thus better themselves as they move up the ladder of success (or take their chances and slide into economic insolvency). But the weight of Belloc's reasoning, especially in the earlier chapters of *The Servile State*, falls upon demonstrating the fallacy of the thinking in question. The capitalist condition—Belloc argued—is unstable by nature. This instability is intolerable socially. The instability is removed gradually by a social order which eliminates classical capitalism, necessarily a transitory situation, but which does not introduce classical socialism. The state does not confiscate capital. The state, rather, assures the propertyless worker of security and passes the tab to the capitalist—but the state leaves the title and the use of wealth in the hands of the capitalist class. The resultant order is neither

socialist nor capitalist but servile. Many men work for a few and, central to Belloc's thesis, the many have to work for the few: unless they are geniuses (and Belloc seems convinced that such genius is associated with roguery and chicanery: there are no honest "rags-to-riches" boys for this radical traditionalist), they have no choice. The few, in turn, must care for the many.

Belloc illustrated this point with a wry example tucked into a footnote: If an independent author contracts with a publisher to write a history of the County of Rutland and falls into a pit while doing research, the publisher is not responsible to pay the author's hospital bills. Should the same author disguise himself and take a job as gardener at the same publisher's house and fall into the same pit wherein he is wounded "by a fierce fish," that publisher will be "mulched to my advantage, and that roundly." Belloc observed, as early as 1913, that *by law* there is a difference recognized between the relation, freely entered into, of a writer to his publisher and that same publisher to one of his "employees." The distinction points, implicitly at least, to the difference between a free man and a slave.

Unlike many traditionalists (Belloc was a *radical* traditionalist), he did not see status as a necessarily desirable condition. Status is desirable only if servility is desired. If freedom is preferred, then contract is better than status, but contract is forced and hence the equivalent of status if the man contracting his labor does not have property behind him. The capacity to say "no" to the boss and not go on welfare is Belloc's understanding of economic liberty. In 1913 he thought that such liberty existed in few places in the world, and in 1978 such liberty exists in ever fewer.

Belloc made a mistake, in my judgment, in his evaluation of servitude. He envisioned servility as necessarily restricting a man to a subsistent wage or to a slight margin above it. The past forty years have proven him wrong due to the vastly more complex economic situation in which we today find ourselves. Servility, I would argue, is compatible with a very high income, but the alternative to such an income, humanly speaking, is intolerable to a man once

accustomed to its benefits. Consumerism has made us all the slave to things. Our credit economy digs the grave of liberty because most men simply cannot face the possibility of living outside of the presumed glitter of a world built on advertising that seduces them into mortgaging their future to a credit and consuming mentality. Belloc's "drop-out," the man with the capacity to say "no" and simply take off to the South Seas, is McLuhan's "Executive as Drop Out." The option exists for nobody else, but it exists for nobody else not because the middle and lower classes are one step from indigence but because they are one step away from affluence—and they simply cannot, by every cultural and political canon that governs suburbia, retreat down the ladder. As a wag put it a few years ago: We do not sell out at forty: we sign up at twenty-two. The servile state today is bread and circuses and very few indeed can afford a ticket out of the theater. Everybody is owned by a bank and a bunch of credit cards. Belloc who abominated usury as a sin, would have been appalled at its monstrous dimensions today, but he would have recognized their lineaments. He commented sagely in *The Servile State* on the debasement of currency which, in his own England, was already centuries in existence.

The Servile State is principally an exercise in logic on the facts created by insecurity in the capitalist world, but Belloc buttresses those facts by an appeal to history. The concentration of wealth in the hands of a capitalist class was not the consequence of industrialism. That concentration of wealth preexisted, at least in England, the advent of machine production and permitted mechanization to be bent to the ends of a few rather than to those of the many. The Reformation's rape of ecclesiastical lands in England and the failure of Henry VIII to keep that wealth in the hands of the crown spawned a new oligarchy that was already inclosing land and freezing out the free peasant

decades before the Industrial Revolution. (Was Belloc influenced by William Cobbett or did he come to his conclusions independently? I do not know but I incline to the second alternative.)

Belloc argued in *The Servile State* that freedom is a relatively rare occurrence in the history of man; that freedom was born in the early Middle Ages because Christendom found it intolerable to permit the continued existence in its midst of an institution that violated the dignity of man; that freedom was then—in 1913—fast disappearing from England and indeed from most of the West; that freedom is impossible to achieve unless men actively want it; that the appetite for freedom was fast declining and was indeed not even a living memory to most of his contemporaries who labored for others in shops and factories and farms; that once the desire was dead, resurrection would be extremely difficult indeed; that in fact it was probable that the West—and with it the world—would give up freedom as an ideal to be exercised broadly throughout society: in short, that the servile state would most probably be our future.

Our world does not look very much like the world of Hilaire Belloc in 1913, just about the time he abandoned politics as an exercise in frustration. Our world is vastly more complicated financially and technically and economically than Belloc's. But *The Servile State* still runs through edition after edition and men today still ponder the sobering thesis advanced by its writer: there is no liberty, political or social, unless there is economic liberty, which means the restoration of property, not paper property owned by usurers, but real property owned by proprietors, by men who in one fashion or another eat and drink their own. Nothing less is worth the dignity of Christian men.

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