

MEN AGAINST LEVIATHAN

The Outline of Sanity

G.K. Chesterton

Reprint ed., 1926; Norfolk, Va.: IHS Press, 2001

\$23.95

183 pp.

Economism and the National Prospect

John Attarian

Monterey, Va.: American Immigration Control Foundation, 2001

\$6.00

72 pp.

The Free Press

Hilaire Belloc

Reprint ed., 1918; Norfolk, Va.: IHS Press, 2002

\$11.95

95 pp.

Reviewed by Samuel Francis

G.K. Chesterton, like his friend Hilaire Belloc, is today best known as a polemicist for Roman Catholicism, but both writers were also prominent in their day as social critics, especially of modern capitalism. Unlike the socialist left, they and their followers defended an economic system known as “distributism,” which promised a third way between the path of Marx on the left and Mises on the right. Today, despite the quite dated references in much of their work on this subject, what they had to say is more relevant than ever, as what is called capitalism (which includes a good deal of socialism) lurches across the globe, wiping out traditional cultures, national boundaries, and racial and ethnic identities.

Distributism, unlike socialism, champions private property, but, unlike capitalism, it also rejects the unlimited accumulation of wealth and the centralization of economic power that attends it. The ideal for distributists is an economy in which the small firm (ideally a shop selling products its owners manufacture themselves) or farm owned and operated by the same persons is prevalent—the kind of peasant economy that prevailed in many medieval settings and has been systematically obliterated by the rise of modern capitalism and its twin brother, the modern centralized state.

The result is cultural and economic (as well as racial) dispossession of the bulk of the population, which is reduced to what is really a kind of proletarian status. Workers, whether in mass factories or mass offices, may retain a good deal of material affluence, but they have entirely lost their independence as they become locked into “career paths” working for giant, anonymous organizations often known only by a set of meaningless letters or fabricated acronyms (“Exxon,” “CVS,” “IBM,” “Amoco,” “Verizon,” “Cingular,” etc.). They thereby lose any ability to mount even the simplest resistance to whatever the masters of the state and the mass economy demand of them in either thought or action, and since the bureaucratized “culture” permeates their minds, any inclination to resist soon vanishes.

This process of proletarianization goes far to explain why virtually no one today dares to question those subjects the system does not want questioned or even discussed, and the end result of proletarianization, of course, is slavery—the “Servile State” that Belloc discussed in another book, the “Friendly Fascism” of more recent writers. It is well beyond high time that someone wrote a book that offers a serious exposition of distributism as a critique of modern global capitalism and its political and cultural analogues as well as a practical plan for moving toward a distributist order.

Unfortunately, what Chesterton offers in *The Outline of Sanity* is not that book. Instead, what we mainly get is a steady stream of the kinds of word play that characterizes the Chestertonian style: metaphors, similes, elaborate (not to say convoluted) analogies, parables, puns, understated ironies, and overstated generalizations, among other rhetorical devices too obscure to identify or analyze, often marshaled for the purpose of expressing a point that Chesterton seems to imagine is mysteriously profound but which in fact is commonplace. One lengthy passage, from his chapter on the “The Religion of Small Property,” will serve to illustrate:

The pioneer spirit is beginning to fail, as a well-known traveller recently complained, but I doubt whether he could tell us the reason. It is even possible that he will not understand it, in one radiant burst of joyful comprehension, if I tell him that I am all in favour of a wild goose chase, so long as he really believes that the wild goose is the bird of paradise; but that it is necessary to hunt it with the hounds of heaven. If it be barely possible that this does not seem quite clear to him, I will explain that the traveller must possess something as well as pursue

something, or he will not know what to pursue. It is not enough always to follow the gleam; it is necessary sometimes to rest in the glow; to feel something sacred in the glow of the camp fire as well as the gleam of the polar star. And that same mysterious and to some divided voice, which alone tells that we have here no abiding city, is the only voice which within the limits of this world can build up cities that abide.

Some readers may regard this sort of writing as both amusing and instructive, but I must confess that I found it tedious in the extreme, especially after the writer insists on keeping it up continuously throughout the book, and utterly useless for the communication of serious thought and information. There are plenty of readers who are Chesterton fans, and no doubt they will treasure this as well as his other books, but those who really want to learn something about either distributism or what distributists are criticizing and why will have to go elsewhere.

One place where they would be well advised to turn would be the too-short monograph, *Economism and the National Prospect*, by John Attarian, who holds a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Michigan and is a well-known writer for paleo-conservative journals. While with Chesterton what the reader gets is a constant stream of tiresome and unconvincing word-play, what Dr. Attarian offers is careful logical analysis, copious and well-documented quotations to support his arguments, and clear prose that communicates sophisticated ideas in a simple and straightforward exposition. "Economism" as he uses the term is the doctrine that "reduces humans to economic animals, reduces life to economics, and argues that only economics matters." It is at once a combination of what is usually called "economic determinism," the belief that economic motives determine all human action and that economic forces determine all human history, and what might be called "ethical materialism," the belief that material gain is the highest ethical ideal for human beings. Dr. Attarian says he originally thought that he had coined the term "economism" but later found that another contemporary writer had already used it. In fact, the word "economism" was used by the German free market economist Wilhelm Röpke as well as the American libertarian writer Albert Jay Nock. I cited their usage of the term and Nock's definition of it in a *Chronicles* column of 1990 as a view that "interpreted the whole of human life in terms of the production, acquisition and distribution of wealth. Like certain Philippians in the time of St. Paul, its god was its belly."

Economites (a useful word that Dr. Attarian does coin to distinguish adherents of economism from economists, who merely study economics) these days are perhaps unlikely to profess their economism openly, and it may be suspected that it exists mainly as a kind of unconscious assumption embedded in the set of what many people today simply regard as obvious truths about the universe and man—the sky is blue and everyone is and should be driven by desire for material gain. Indeed, as Dr. Attarian shows in a chapter devoted to the refutation of economism, so silly is the claim of this belief to be true that hardly anyone could profess to adhere to it.

But as he also shows in his many quotations from many different proponents of economism, both on the left and the right, many do believe in it and espouse it. Economism is especially prevalent on the political right, usually among libertarians and neo-conservatives. Thus, among the economites Dr. Attarian exposes are *Reason* magazine editor Virginia Postrel, *National Review* editor John J. Miller, professional neo-conservative Hispanic Woman Linda Chavez, failed entrepreneur George Gilder, columnist George Will, the *Weekly Standard's* David Brooks, House Majority Leader Dick Armey, Jack Kemp, and many others. The *Wall Street Journal* and almost any periodical on the contemporary right is a virtual treasure trove of fatuous economite nonsense, as for example, my own favorite, from John J. Miller: "Haitians make great Americans. They boost our productivity, hold down our cost of living and make us more competitive." As Dr. Attarian comments, the unspoken premise of these two sentences is that to be a good American is to be "someone who makes economic contributions." People like Mr. Miller are such sloppy thinkers that they are probably not conscious of believing that and would deny believing it, but their own prose betrays them.

Dr. Attarian details the impact and consequences of economite thinking in different fields of public policy such as immigration, foreign trade, and the environment, but his larger target is the same as that of Chesterton and Belloc—the "global capitalism" that is currently smashing its way across the globe and is rationalized only through the formulas of economism, which, he is well aware, serves the material interests of the very forces that push it into our minds and down our throats.

Economism clearly serves the agendas of the corporations and other powerful interests which run this country, and they are not about to drop it. Corporations' profits depend on expanding their market shares, which means expanding exports, and on driving down their costs, which means using cheaper imported inputs, low-wage immigrant labor, and transferring production overseas. Mainstream news and opinion media are owned by these selfsame corporations, hence are globalist. Most think tanks depend upon corporate money, hence are unlikely to generate serious criticisms of globalization and economism.

If there is one flaw in the monograph, it is that the author seems to concede that economism was a dominant strain of American culture from its beginnings. He fails, I think, to distinguish between the legitimate economic aspirations of early settlers and pioneers, on the one hand, and the obsession with material gain that possessed later American elites, on the other. "Born of rebellion against long-standing authority, America was and remains peculiarly inclined to impiety, hence to economism," he writes. This, one has to suspect, is more the Russell Kirk Toryism of the author emerging than serious historical analysis. Pioneers who fought Frenchmen, Englishmen, Indians, Mexicans, and assorted outlaws were not driven solely by desire for economic gain. They were also driven by the same forces that Dr. Attarian mentions as driving everyone else:

People ruin themselves over love and sex; get caught up in causes; squander their lives serving adventurers like Bonaparte; murder and make war over religion, ethnic hatred, and desire for power or revenge. Rational pleasure-pain calculators governed by economic incentives don't act like that. So much for the shallow myth of Economic Man.

Dr. Attarian might have dwelled a bit more on the rise of economism in American history. Although there was an important strain of it in such early figures as Alexander Hamilton, whose nationalism was centered on economic development and material acquisition, it did not become dominant until after the Civil War, when the triumph of the Republican Party and Lincoln's ideology helped produce the "Gilded Age." There is a good reason why Lincoln remains an icon in an age that has swallowed economism whole.

Nevertheless, within the confines of the short monograph Dr. Attarian has written, it's understandable why he sacrificed a certain amount of history to contemporary concerns. What he has written is probably the best available introduction to how deeply economism has already penetrated our thought and values and to what is fundamentally and philosophically wrong with the economite mind and what it produces.

As Dr. Attarian points out in the passage quoted above, "mainstream media" are themselves corporations and, for all their "left-wing bias," are as steeped in economism as oil companies and car salesmen. Indeed, one of the larger points of the "Third Way" critics of capitalism and socialism is that right and left, capitalism and socialism, are really largely the same things. Dr. Attarian shows how the economism espoused by neo-conservatives and libertarians who imagine themselves to be die-hard anti-communists is closely related to the Marxist assumptions of communism. As for the media, it was no secret to Hilaire Belloc, Chesterton's great friend and fellow polemicist, that the "Free Press" even of his day was mainly an illusion. There was a free press, but then as now, it consisted mainly of small newspapers and magazines that rejected the lies, propaganda, and sophistry of the dominant media.

Nor was it a secret to Belloc that "the Press," as the industry of producing and disseminating ideas and information (and misinformation) came to be known, was itself a product of capitalism.

Side by side with the development of Capitalism went a change in the Press from its primitive condition to a worse. The development of Capitalism meant that a smaller and yet smaller number of men commanded the means of production and of distribution whereby could be printed and set before a large circle a news-sheet fuller than the old model.

The concentration of ownership and control of the means of production in the Press meant that an oligarchy controlled what the masses could read, know, and believe. The emergence of modern capitalism, then, was inseparable from the systematic manipulation of the human mind by technological means in the interests of those who controlled the technology.

Belloc, as was his habit, does not adequately document the concentration of media power in his own day. He preferred to argue along what are almost deductive lines—the particular follows from the nature of the universal — but the preface to his *The Free Press*, like that of Chesterton's *Outline of Sanity*, often makes these authors' arguments more concrete and relevant than the authors did themselves. Thus

The owners of the Media conglomerates are not (merely) professional journalists; they are, rather, giants of the corporate world and the "entertainment" industry. General Electric owns NBC; Walt Disney owns Capital Cities/ABC; Viacom owns both CBS and Paramount; Time Warner owns both CNN and American Online; and Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation owns Fox.

It might have been useful had the authors of the unsigned preface from which this passage comes detailed the precise names of the chief executives of these conglomerates, so that we might know exactly who and what it is that is controlling our minds and what our minds are permitted to perceive.

Belloc saw the plutocratic domination of the "mainstream press" as balanced by the existence of the real "free press," the small newspapers and journals that managed to remain afloat without succumbing to the bonds of advertising and financing by which the larger press outlets were controlled. The free press in his view consisted not merely of the newspapers of the right but included the socialist press as well (oddly, he seems to include the Morgan-dominated *New Republic* as part of the free press of his day). The free press suffered from various disabilities, but cumulatively it was able to uncover facts and develop ideas that allowed some degree of intellectual and personal autonomy to persist. In this respect, of course, the free press of Belloc's day was similar to the "underground" press, local talk radio shows, short-wave radio, and Internet websites that today offer alternative views of reality to the one imposed by the "mainstream media."

Today, Belloc's belief that the independent sector of the media would be successful in instigating significant reforms seems naïve—certainly, whatever its other accomplishments, the free press of Belloc's time failed to do so. Still, if the Western world today is ever to be steered away from its present course of disaster, it will be because men of the courage and honesty of Chesterton, Belloc, and John Attarian demanded that it do so. Toward the end of *The Free Press*, Belloc writes what should be the motto of the men and women of the free press whenever and wherever they lift their heads.

No man who has the truth to tell and the power to tell it can long remain hiding it from fear or even from despair without ignominy. To release the truth against whatever odds, even if so doing can no longer help the Commonwealth, is a necessity for the soul.

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