

PERSECUTING THE COMMON MAN

BY G. K. CHESTERTON

THE explanation, or excuse, for this article is to be found in a speech which I made not long ago; and especially in a certain notion which seems to me very obvious, but which I have never heard stated by anyone else. It happens rather to cut across the common frontiers of current controversy. It can be used for or against Democracy, according to whether that swear-word is printed with the capital D. It can be connected, like most things, with religion; but only rather indirectly with my own religion. It is primarily the recognition of a fact, quite apart from the approval or disapproval of that fact. It involves the assertion that what has really happened in the modern world is practically the precise contrary of what is supposed to have happened. The thesis is this: That modern emancipation has really been a new persecution of the Common Man.

If it has emancipated anyone, it has in rather special and narrow ways emancipated the Uncommon Man. It has given an eccentric sort of liberty to some of the hobbies of the wealthy, and occasionally to some of the more humane lunacies of the cultured. The only thing that it has forbidden is common sense, as it would have been understood by the common people. Thus, if we begin with the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we find that a man really has become more free to found a sect. But the Common Man does not in the least want to found a sect. He is much

more likely, for instance, to want to found a family. And it is exactly *here* that the modern emancipators are prepared to frustrate him in the name of Malthusianism or Eugenics or Sterilization or, at a more advanced stage of progress, probably, Infanticide. It would be a model of modern liberty to tell him that he might preach anything, however preposterous, about the Virgin Birth, so long as he avoided anything like a natural birth; and that he was welcome to build a tin chapel in which to preach a twopenny creed, entirely based on the text, "Enoch begat Methuselah", so long as he himself is forbidden to beget anything. And, as a matter of historical fact, the sects which enjoyed this freedom in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries were generally founded by merchants or manufacturers of the comfortable, and sometimes of the luxurious classes. On the other hand, it is strictly to the lower classes, to use the liberal modern title for the poor, that such schemes as sterilization are commonly directed and applied.

It is the same when we pass from the Protestant world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the Progressive world of the nineteenth and twentieth. Here the form of freedom mostly asserted, as a boast and a dogma, is the freedom of the press. It is no longer merely a freedom of pamphlets but a freedom of papers; or rather, it is less and less a freedom at all, and more and more a monopoly. But the important point is that the process, the test,

and the comparison are the same as in the first example. Modern emancipation means this: that anyone who can afford it can publish a newspaper. But the Common Man would not want to publish a newspaper, even if he could afford it. He might prefer, instead, to go on talking politics in a pothouse or the parlor of an inn. And that is exactly the sort of really popular talk about politics which modern movements have often abolished; the old democracies by forbidding the pothouse, the new dictatorships by forbidding the politics.

Or again, it is the boast of recent emancipated ethics and politics not to put any great restraints upon anyone who wants to publish a book, especially a scientific book, full of psychology or sociology, and perhaps unavoidably full of perversions and polite pornography. As this modern tendency has increased, it has become less and less likely that the police would interfere very much with a man publishing the sort of book that only the wealthy could produce, with sumptuous artistic plates or scientific diagrams. It is much more probable, in most modern societies, that the police would be found interfering with a man singing a song of a coarse and candid description, bawling a ballad of the grosser sort, or even using the more restrained medium of prose with a similar lack of propriety. Yet there is a great deal to be said for song, or even speech, of that old ribald sort, as compared with writing of the new sort when it is at once analytic and anarchic. The old obscenity had a *gusto* and a great virility even in its violence, which is not easily rendered in a diagram or a table of statistics; and the old was always normal and never had any of the horrors of abnormality. The point is that, here again, the Common Man does not generally aim to write a book, whereas

he may occasionally care to sing a song. He certainly does not want to write a book on psychology and sociology—or to read it. But he does want to talk, to sing, to shout, to yell, and howl on due and suitable occasions; and, rightly or wrongly, it is when he is thus engaged that he is much more likely to fall foul of a policeman than when (as he almost never is) writing a scientific study of a new theory of sex. The upshot of uplift, in the modern sense, is the same in practice as in the previous examples. In the actual atmosphere of the age, men will still be arrested for using a certain kind of language, long after they cannot be arrested for writing a certain kind of literature.

It would be easy to cite other instances; but these contemporary examples are already too continuous to be a coincidence. It is equally true, for example, that the liberating movement of the eighteenth century, the life in the American and French Revolutions, while it did really vindicate many virtues of republican simplicity and civic liberty, also accepted as virtues several things that were obviously vices, that had been recognized as vices long before, and that are now again beginning to be recognized as vices so long afterwards. Where even ambition had once been a pardonable vice, avarice became an utterly unpardonable virtue. Liberal economics too often implied merely giving to those already rich the liberty to grow richer, and magnificently granting to the poor the permission to become poorer. It was much more certain that the usurer was released to practice usury than that the peasant was released from the practices of the usurer. It was much more certain that the Wheat Pit was as big as the Bottomless Pit, than that the man who grew wheat would ever be found anywhere except at the bottom. There was a sense in which

"liberal economics" was a proclamation of freedom, for the few who were rich enough to be free. Nobody thought there was anything queer about talking of prominent public men "gambling" in the Wheat Pit. But all this time, there were laws of all kinds against normal human speculating, that is, against games of chance. The poor man was prevented from gambling precisely because he did not gamble so much as the rich man. The beadle or the policeman might stop children from playing chuck-farthing, but it was strictly because it was only a farthing that was chucked. Progress never interfered with the game of chuck-fortune, because much more than a farthing was being chucked.

Protestant Progress, in the sense of the progress that has progressed since the sixteenth century, has upon every matter persecuted the Common Man; punished the gambling he enjoys and permitted the gambling he cannot indulge; restrained the obscenity that might amuse him and applauded the obscenity that would certainly bore him; silenced the political quarrels that can be conducted among men and applauded the political stunts and syndicates that can only be conducted by millionaires; encouraged anyone who had anything to say against God, if it was said with a priggish and supercilious accent, but discouraged anyone who had anything to say in favor of Man in his common relations to manhood and motherhood and the normal appetites of nature.

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Now progress has a hagiology, a martyr-ology, a mass of miraculous legends of its own, like any other religion; but they are mostly false and belong to a false religion. The most famous is the belief that the

young and progressive person is always martyred by the old and ordinary person. But it is not true. It is the old and ordinary person who is almost always the martyr. It is the old and ordinary person who has been more and more despoiled of all his old and ordinary rights. Insofar as this progress progresses, it is far more likely that six million men will be forbidden to go to sleep because six men say that certain breathing exercises are a substitute for slumber, than that any of the six million somnambulists will awake sufficiently to clout the six men over their high-browed but half-witted heads. There is no normal thing that cannot now be taken from the normal man. It is much more likely that a law will be passed to forbid the eating of grain (notoriously the parent of poisons like beer and whisky), than that it will be even faintly suggested to men of this philosophy that the economic evil is that men cannot grow grain, and that the ethical evil is that men are still despised for growing it. Given the purely progressive principle, and nothing else as a guide to our future, it is entirely possible that they may be hanged or buried alive for growing it. But of course, in a scientific age, they will be electrocuted—or perhaps only tortured by electricity.

Thus far my thesis is this: that it is not the Uncommon Man who is persecuted, but rather the Common Man. Yet this brings me into direct conflict with the contemporary reaction which seems to say, in effect, that the Common Man had much better be persecuted. It is quite certain that many modern thinkers and writers honestly feel a contempt for the Common Man; it is also quite certain that I myself feel a contempt for those who feel this contempt. But the actual issue must be faced more fully, because what is called the reaction against Democracy is

at this moment the chief result of Democracy. Now in this quarrel I am democratic, or at least defiant of the attacks on Democracy. I do not believe that most modern people have seen the real point of the advantage or disadvantage of popular rule; and my doubt can be very largely suggested and summarized under this title of *The Common Man*.

To put it briefly, it is now the custom to say that most modern blunders have been due to the Common Man. But I should like to point out what appalling blunders have in fact been due to the Uncommon Man. It is easy enough to argue that the mob makes mistakes, but as a fact it never has a chance to until its superiors have used their superiority to make much worse mistakes. It is easy to weary of Democracy and to cry out for an intellectual aristocracy. But the trouble is that every intellectual aristocracy seems to have been utterly unintellectual. Anyone might guess beforehand that there would be blunders of the ignorant. What nobody could have guessed, what nobody could have dreamed of in a nightmare, what no morbid mortal imagination could ever have dared to imagine, was the mistakes of the well-informed. It is true, in a sense, to say that the mob has always been led by more educated men. It is much more true, in every sense, to say that it has always been misled by educated men. Furthermore, it is easy enough to assert that the cultured man should be the crowd's guide, philosopher, and friend. Unfortunately, he has nearly always been a misguiding guide, a false friend, and a very shallow philosopher indeed. And the actual catastrophes we have suffered, including those we are now suffering, have not in historical fact been due to the prosaic practical people who are supposed to know nothing, but almost invariably to

the highly theoretical people who knew that they knew everything. The world may learn by its mistakes; but they are mostly the mistakes of the learned.

To go back no further than the seventeenth century, the quarrel between the Puritans and the populace was originally due to the pride of a few men in being able to read a printed book, and their scorn for people who had good memories, good traditions, good stories, good songs, and good pictures in glass or gold or graven stone, and therefore had less need of books. It was a tyranny of literates over illiterates. But it was the literates who were narrow, sullen, limited, and often oppressive; it was the illiterates who were, at least relatively, gay and free and fanciful and imaginative and interested in everything. The Uncommon Men, the elect of the Calvinist theory, did undoubtedly lead the people along the next stretch of the path of progress; but what this led to was a prison. The book-reading rulers and statesmen managed to establish the Scottish Sabbath. Meanwhile, a thousand traditions of the sort they would have trampled out managed to trickle down from the medieval poor to the modern poor, and lingering as legends in countless cottages and farmhouses, were collected by Scott (often repeated orally by people who could not read or write) to combine in the construction of the great Scottish Romances, which profoundly moved and partly inspired the Romantic movement throughout the world.

When we pass to the eighteenth century, we find the same part played by a new and quite contrary party, differing from the last in everything except in being the same sort of rather desiccated aristocracy. The new Uncommon Men, now leading the people, are no longer Calvinists, but a dry sort of deists drying up more

and more into atheists; and they are no longer pessimists but the reverse, except that their optimism often is more depressing than pessimism. There were the Benthamites, the Utilitarians, the servants of the Economic Man: the first Free-Traders. They have the credit of having made clear the economic theories of the modern state and the calculations on which were mainly based the politics of the nineteenth century. It was they who taught these things scientifically and systematically to the public, and even to the populace. But what were the things, and what were the theories? Perhaps the best and broadest of them was a most monstrous and mythical superstition of Adam Smith, a theological theory that Providence had so made the world that men might be happy through their selfishness; or, in other words, that God would overrule everything for good, if only men could succeed in being sufficiently bad. The intellectuals in this epoch taught definitely and dogmatically that if only men would buy and sell freely, lend or borrow freely, sweat or sack freely, and in practice, steal or swindle freely, humanity would be happy. The Common Man soon found out just how happy—in the slums where they left him and in the slump to which they led him.

We need not continue, through the last two centuries, all the tale of the frenzy and folly inflicted by the fickleness of the educated class on the relative stability of the uneducated. The intellectuals next rushed to the other extreme, and became Socialists, despising small property as they had despised popular tradition. It is quite true that these intellectuals had a lucid interval in which they proclaimed some primary truths along with many priggish falsehoods. Some of them did rightly exalt liberty and human dignity and equality,

as expressed in the Declaration of Independence. But even this was so mishandled that there is now a disposition to deny the truth along with the falsehood. There has been a reaction against Democracy; or, in plain words, the prigs are now too bored even to go on with their normal routine about the Common Man—the familiar routine of oppressing him in practice and adoring him in theory.

I do not adore him, but I do believe in him, at least I believe in him much more than I believe in them. I think the actual history of the relations between him and them, as I have narrated it, is enough to justify my preference. I repeat that they have had all the educational advantages over him; they have always led him; and they have always misled him. And even in becoming reactionaries, they remain as raw and crude as when they were revolutionaries. Their anti-Democracy is as much stuffed with cant as their Democracy. I need only allude to the detestable new fashion of referring to ordinary men as morons. First, it is pedantry, the dullest form of vanity, for a moron is only the Greek for fool; and it is mostly sham pedantry, for most of those who mention morons hardly know they are talking Greek, still less why on earth they should. It also involves this moral evil: that a man who says that men are mostly fools knows that he has often been a fool himself, whereas the morons are thought of like monkeys, as if they were a fixed tribe or caste.

The Common Man may well be the victim of a new series of tyrannies, founded on this scientific fad of regarding him as a monkey. But it is doubtful whether he can be much more persecuted for having the instincts of a moron than he has already been for having the instincts of a man.

PORTRAIT OF A DAY

BY RANDOLPH BARTLETT

ONE day in history is such a vast and complex tapestry of events that no man can see it in entirety at a single glance. Even the newspaper, fed by cable, telegraph, radio, and air mail, presents but a swift glimpse of the larger figures in that tapestry. Though the day may be remembered for a battle, a shipwreck, an earthquake, or a coronation, these are the major occurrences. In the twenty-four hours between midnight and midnight a myriad of minor incidents are added to the sum of human experience. The aspect of the individual, as he passes through this period, has often been described, as James Joyce described it in *Ulysses*. Seldom, however, has anyone endeavored to depict the aspect of the world itself as it appears to the individual during a similar space of time. To the Chicago merchant the twenty-four hours have meant one thing, to the shepherd on the hills of Persia they have been quite different.

In order to draw a portrait of a day, then, it is necessary to forget place, and deal only in time. The portrait presented here is an attempt to reveal by this means the aspect of a day to one who, standing upon some other planet, might miraculously see all parts of the spinning earth, from New York to Vladivostok, from Xochimilco to Srinigar. The following, for instance, is what happened on this globe, as reported by thousands of professional observers, during the twenty-four hours of October 14, 1935:

12:01 a.m. to 2 a.m.

Midnight on the Atlantic seaboard of the United States: the weather was warm for the season and a light haze was forming. The new day arrived to the raucous tunes of second-rate radio orchestras, corrupting the ether with the reigning ballad from Tin Pan Alley, *You Are My Lucky Star*. A shot was heard by a Hollywood resident; on a street corner he found the body of a young movie actress; an automobile disappeared into the darkness. A man was strolling in Central Park, New York; an attractive woman invited him to her apartment; when they arrived two men beat him, robbed him, and threw him out.

Off Portland Bill in the English Channel, the Swedish tanker *Barfonn* had been ablaze for hours; the motor ship *Temeraire* arrived in time to rescue fourteen members of the crew of seventeen. At the other side of the world, on the Island of Guam, the crew of a pathfinding Clipper plane, the first such craft to land on this map speck, was being wined and dined. Out of a second-story prison hospital window in Lyon, France, a *soi-disant* paralytic leaped and escaped the sleepy guards. He had simulated paralysis for several months after being convicted of fraud.

Two weeks of earthquakes had reduced the peasants of the Banjaluka district of Bosnia to nervous prostration, although no casualties were reported. The farmers in the Kiangsu province of China feared that