

VII. THE EVOLUTION OF THE PRISON

I have never understood why it is that those who talk most about evolution, and talk it in the very age of fashionable evolutionism, do not see the one way in which evolution really does apply to our modern difficulty. There is, of course, an element of evolutionism in the universe; and I know no religion or philosophy that ever entirely ignored it. Evolution, popularly speaking, is that which happens to unconscious things. They grow unconsciously; or fade unconsciously; or rather, some parts of them grow and some parts of them fade; and at any given moment there is almost always some presence of the fading thing, and some incompleteness in the growing one. Thus, if I went to sleep for a hundred years, like the Sleeping Beauty (I wish I could), I should grow a beard--unlike the Sleeping Beauty. And just as I should grow hair if I were asleep, I should grow grass if I were dead. Those whose religion it was that God was asleep were perpetually impressed and affected by the fact that he had a long beard. And those whose philosophy it is that the universe is dead from the beginning (being the grave of nobody in particular) think that is the way that grass can grow. In any case, these developments only occur with dead or dreaming things. What happens when everyone is asleep is called Evolution. What happens when everyone is awake is called Revolution.

There was once an honest man, whose name I never knew, but whose face I can almost see (it is framed in Victorian whiskers and fixed in a Victorian neck-cloth), who was balancing the achievements of France and England in civilisation and social efficiencies. And when he came to the religious aspect he said that there were more stone and brick churches used in France; but, on the other hand, there are more sects in England. Whether such a lively disintegration is a proof of vitality in any valuable sense I have always doubted. The sun may breed maggots in a dead dog; but it is essential for such a liberation of life that the dog should be unconscious or (to say the least of it) absent-minded. Broadly speaking, you may call the thing corruption, if you happen to like dogs. You may call it evolution, if you happen to like maggots. In either case, it is what happens to things if you leave them alone.

The Evolutionists' Error

Now, the modern Evolutionists have made no real use of the idea of evolution, especially in the matter of social prediction. They always fall into what is (from their logical point of view) the error of supposing that evolution knows what it is doing. They predict the State of the future as a fruit rounded and polished. But the whole point of evolution (the only point there is in it) is that no State will ever be rounded and polished, because it will always contain some organs that outlived their use, and some that have not yet fully found theirs. If we wish to prophesy what will happen, we must imagine things now moderate grown enormous; things now local grown universal; things now promising grown triumphant; primroses bigger than sunflowers, and sparrows stalking about like flamingoes.

In other words, we must ask what modern institution has a future before it? What modern institution may have swollen to six times its present size in the social heat and growth of the future? I do not think the Garden City will grow: but of that I may speak in my next and last article of this series. I do not think even the ordinary Elementary School, with its compulsory education, will grow. Too many unlettered people hate the teacher for teaching; and too many lettered people hate the teacher for not teaching. The Garden City will not bear much blossom; the young idea will not shoot, unless it shoots the teacher. But the one flowering tree on the estate, the one natural expansion which I think will expand, is the institution we call the Prison.

Prisons for All

If the capitalists are allowed to erect their constructive capitalist community, I speak quite seriously when I say that I think Prison will become an almost universal experience. It will not necessarily be a cruel or shameful experience: on these points (I concede certainly for the present purpose of debate) it may be a vastly improved experience. The conditions in the prison, very possibly, will be made more humane. But the prison will be made more humane only in order to contain more of humanity. I think little of the judgment and sense of humour of any man who can have watched recent police trials without realising that it is no longer a question of whether the law has been broken by a crime; but, now, solely a question of whether the situation could be mended by an imprisonment. It was so with Tom Mann; it was so with Larkin; it was so with the poor atheist who was kept in gaol for saying something he had been acquitted of saying: it is so in such cases day by day. We no longer lock a man up for doing something; we lock him up in the hope of his doing nothing. Given this principle, it is evidently possible to make the mere conditions of punishment more moderate, or--(more probably) more secret. There may really be more mercy in the Prison, on condition that there is less justice in the Court. I should not be surprised if, before we are done with all this, a man was allowed to smoke in prison, on condition, of course, that he had been put in prison for smoking.

Now that is the process which, in the absence of democratic protest, will certainly proceed, will increase and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue it. Prison may even lose its disgrace for a little time: it will be difficult to make it disgraceful when men like Larkin can be imprisoned for no reason at all, just as his celebrated ancestor was hanged for no reason at all. But capitalist society, which naturally does not know the meaning of honour, cannot know the meaning of disgrace: and it will still go on imprisoning for no reason at all. Or rather for that rather simple reason that makes a cat spring or a rat run away.

It matters little whether our masters stoop to state the matter in the form that every prison should be a school; or in the more candid form that every school should be a prison. They have already fulfilled their servile principle in the case of the schools. Everyone goes to the Elementary Schools except the few people who tell them to go there. I prophesy that (unless our revolt succeeds) nearly everyone will be going to Prison, with a precisely similar patience.