Chapter IV

The Inadequacy of the State Idea

WHAT, after all, is this State idea, this idea of the organised community to which the individual has to be immolated? Theoretically, it is the subordination of the individual to the good of all that is demanded; practically, it is his subordination to a collective egoism, political, military, economic, which seeks to satisfy certain collective aims and ambitions shaped and imposed on the great mass of the individuals by a smaller or larger number of ruling persons who are supposed in some way to represent the community. It is immaterial whether these belong to a governing class or emerge as in modern States from the mass partly by force of character, but much more by force of circumstances; nor does it make any essential difference that their aims and ideals are imposed nowadays more by the hypnotism of verbal persuasion than by overt and actual force. In either case, there is no guarantee that this ruling class or ruling body represents the best mind of the nation or its noblest aims or its highest instincts.

Nothing of the kind can be asserted of the modern politician in any part of the world; he does not represent the soul of a people or its aspirations. What he does usually represent is all the average pettiness, selfishness, egoism, self-deception that is about him and these he represents well enough as well as a great deal of mental incompetence and moral conventionality, timidity and pretence. Great issues often come to him for decision, but he does not deal with them greatly; high words and noble ideas are on his lips, but they become rapidly the claptrap of a party. The disease and falsehood of modern political life is patent in every country of the world and only the hypnotised acquiescence of all, even of the intellectual classes, in the great organised sham, cloaks and prolongs the malady, the acquiescence that men yield to everything that is habitual and makes the present atmosphere
of their lives. Yet it is by such minds that the good of all has
to be decided, to such hands that it has to be entrusted, to such
an agency calling itself the State that the individual is being
more and more called upon to give up the government of his
activities. As a matter of fact, it is in no way the largest good of
all that is thus secured, but a great deal of organised blundering
and evil with a certain amount of good which makes for real
progress, because Nature moves forward always in the midst of
all stumblings and secures her aims in the end more often in
spite of man's imperfect mentality than by its means.

But even if the governing instrument were better constituted
and of a higher mental and moral character, even if some way
could be found to do what ancient civilisations by their enforce-
ment of certain high ideals and disciplines tried to do with their
ruling classes, still the State would not be what the State idea
pretends that it is. Theoretically, it is the collective wisdom and
force of the community made available and organised for the
general good. Practically, what controls the engine and drives
the train is so much of the intellect and power available in the
community as the particular machinery of State organisation
will allow to come to the surface; but it is also caught in the
machinery and hampered by it and hampered as well by the
large amount of folly and selfish weakness that comes up in the
emergence. Doubtless, this is the best that can be done under
the circumstances, and Nature, as always, utilises it for the best.
But things would be much worse if there were not a field left for
a less trammelled individual effort doing what the State cannot
do, deploying and using the sincerity, energy, idealism of the best
individuals to attempt that which the State has not the wisdom
or courage to attempt, getting that done which a collective con-
servatism and imbecility would either leave undone or actively
suppress and oppose. It is this energy of the individual which is
the really effective agent of collective progress. The State some-
times comes in to aid it and then, if its aid does not mean undue
control, it serves a positively useful end. As often it stands in
the way and then serves either as a brake upon progress or sup-
plies the necessary amount of organised opposition and friction
always needed to give greater energy and a more complete shape
to the new thing which is in process of formation. But what we
are now tending towards is such an increase of organised State
power and such a huge, irresistible and complex State activity as
will either eliminate free individual effort altogether or leave it
dwarfed and cowed into helplessness. The necessary corrective
to the defects, limitations and inefficiency of the State machine
will disappear.

The organised State is neither the best mind of the nation
nor is it even the sum of the communal energies. It leaves out
of its organised action and suppresses or unduly depresses the
working force and thinking mind of important minorities, often
of those which represent that which is best in the present and
that which is developing for the future. It is a collective egoism
much inferior to the best of which the community is capable.
What that egoism is in its relation to other collective egoisms
we know, and its ugliness has recently been forced upon the
vision and the conscience of mankind. The individual has usu-
ally something at least like a soul, and at any rate he makes up
for the deficiencies of the soul by a system of morality and an
ethical sense, and for the deficiencies of these again by the fear
of social opinion or, failing that, a fear of the communal law
which he has ordinarily either to obey or at least to circumvent;
and even the difficulty of circumventing is a check on all except
the most violent or the most skilful. But the State is an entity
which, with the greatest amount of power, is the least ham-
pered by internal scruples or external checks. It has no soul or
only a rudimentary one. It is a military, political and economic
force; but it is only in a slight and undeveloped degree, if at all,
an intellectual and ethical being. And unfortunately the chief
use it makes of its undeveloped intellect is to blunt by fictions,
catchwords and recently by State philosophies, its ill-developed
ethical conscience. Man within the community is now at least
a half-civilised creature, but his international existence is still
primitive. Until recently the organised nation in its relations
with other nations was only a huge beast of prey with appetites
which sometimes slept when gorged or discouraged by events,
but were always its chief reason for existence. Self-protection and self-expansion by the devouring of others were its dharma. At the present day there is no essential improvement; there is only a greater difficulty in devouring. A “sacred egoism” is still the ideal of nations, and therefore there is neither any true and enlightened consciousness of human opinion to restrain the predatory State nor any effective international law. There is only the fear of defeat and the fear, recently, of a disastrous economic disorganisation; but experience after experience has shown that these checks are ineffective.

In its inner life this huge State egoism was once little better than in its outer relations.1 Brutal, rapacious, cunning, oppressive, intolerant of free action, free speech and opinion, even of freedom of conscience in religion, it preyed upon individuals and classes within as upon weaker nations outside. Only the necessity of keeping alive and rich and strong in a rough sort of way the community on which it lived made its action partially and cruelly beneficent. In modern times there has been much improvement in spite of deterioration in certain directions. The State now feels the necessity of justifying its existence by organising the general economic and animal well-being of the community and even of all individuals. It is beginning to see the necessity of assuring the intellectual and, indirectly, the moral development of the whole community. This attempt of the State to grow into an intellectual and moral being is one of the most interesting phenomena of modern civilisation. Even the necessity of intellectualising and moralising it in its external relations has been enforced upon the conscience of mankind by the European catastrophe. But the claim of the State to absorb all free individual activities, a claim which it increasingly makes as it grows more clearly conscious of its new ideals and its possibilities, is, to say the least of it, premature and, if satisfied, will surely end in a check to human progress, a comfortably

1 I am speaking of the intermediate age between ancient and modern times. In ancient times the State had, in some countries at least, ideals and a conscience with regard to the community, but very little in its dealings with other States.
organised stagnancy such as overtook the Graeco-Roman world after the establishment of the Roman Empire.

The call of the State to the individual to immolate himself on its altar and to give up his free activities into an organised collective activity is therefore something quite different from the demand of our highest ideals. It amounts to the giving up of the present form of individual egoism into another, a collective form, larger but not superior, rather in many ways inferior to the best individual egoism. The altruistic ideal, the discipline of self-sacrifice, the need of a growing solidarity with our fellows and a growing collective soul in humanity are not in dispute. But the loss of self in the State is not the thing that these high ideals mean, nor is it the way to their fulfilment. Man must learn not to suppress and mutilate but to fulfil himself in the fulfilment of mankind, even as he must learn not to mutilate or destroy but to complete his ego by expanding it out of its limitations and losing it in something greater which it now tries to represent. But the deglutition of the free individual by a huge State machine is quite another consummation. The State is a convenience, and a rather clumsy convenience, for our common development; it ought never to be made an end in itself.

The second claim of the State idea that this supremacy and universal activity of the organised State machine is the best means of human progress, is also an exaggeration and a fiction. Man lives by the community; he needs it to develop himself individually as well as collectively. But is it true that a State-governed action is the most capable of developing the individual perfectly as well as of serving the common ends of the community? It is not true. What is true is that it is capable of providing the cooperative action of the individuals in the community with all necessary conveniences and of removing from it disabilities and obstacles which would otherwise interfere with its working. Here the real utility of the State ceases. The non-recognition of the possibilities of human cooperation was the weakness of English individualism; the turning of a utility for cooperative action into an excuse for rigid control by the State is the weakness of the Teutonic idea of collectivism. When the State attempts to
take up the control of the cooperative action of the community, it condemns itself to create a monstrous machinery which will end by crushing out the freedom, initiative and various growth of the human being.

The State is bound to act crudely and in the mass; it is incapable of that free, harmonious and intelligently or instinctively varied action which is proper to organic growth. For the State is not an organism; it is a machinery, and it works like a machine, without tact, taste, delicacy or intuition. It tries to manufacture, but what humanity is here to do is to grow and create. We see this flaw in State-governed education. It is right and necessary that education should be provided for all and in providing for it the State is eminently useful; but when it controls the education, it turns it into a routine, a mechanical system in which individual initiative, individual growth and true development as opposed to a routine instruction become impossible. The State tends always to uniformity, because uniformity is easy to it and natural variation is impossible to its essentially mechanical nature; but uniformity is death, not life. A national culture, a national religion, a national education may still be useful things provided they do not interfere with the growth of human solidarity on the one side and individual freedom of thought and conscience and development on the other; for they give form to the communal soul and help it to add its quota to the sum of human advancement; but a State education, a State religion, a State culture are unnatural violences. And the same rule holds good in different ways and to a different extent in other directions of our communal life and its activities.

The business of the State, so long as it continues to be a necessary element in human life and growth, is to provide all possible facilities for cooperative action, to remove obstacles, to prevent all really harmful waste and friction,—a certain amount of waste and friction is necessary and useful to all natural action,—and, removing avoidable injustice, to secure for every individual a just and equal chance of self-development and satisfaction to the extent of his powers and in the line of his nature. So far the aim in modern socialism is right and good. But
all unnecessary interference with the freedom of man’s growth is or can be harmful. Even cooperative action is injurious if, instead of seeking the good of all compatibly with the necessities of individual growth,—and without individual growth there can be no real and permanent good of all,—it immolates the individual to a communal egoism and prevents so much free room and initiative as is necessary for the flowering of a more perfectly developed humanity. So long as humanity is not full-grown, so long as it needs to grow and is capable of a greater perfectibility, there can be no static good of all; nor can there be any progressive good of all independent of the growth of the individuals composing the all. All collectivist ideals which seek unduly to subordinate the individual, really envisage a static condition, whether it be a present status or one it soon hopes to establish, after which all attempt at serious change would be regarded as an offence of impatient individualism against the peace, just routine and security of the happily established communal order. Always it is the individual who progresses and compels the rest to progress; the instinct of the collectivity is to stand still in its established order. Progress, growth, realisation of wider being give his greatest sense of happiness to the individual; status, secure ease to the collectivity. And so it must be as long as the latter is more a physical and economic entity than a self-conscious collective soul.

It is therefore quite improbable that in the present conditions of the race a healthy unity of mankind can be brought about by State machinery, whether it be by a grouping of powerful and organised States enjoying carefully regulated and legalised relations with each other or by the substitution of a single World-State for the present half chaotic half ordered comity of nations,—be the form of that World-State a single empire like the Roman or a federated unity. Such an external or administrative unity may be intended in the near future of mankind in order to accustom the race to the idea of a common life, to its habit, to its possibility, but it cannot be really healthy, durable or beneficial over all the true line of human destiny unless something be developed more profound, internal and real. Otherwise the
experience of the ancient world will be repeated on a larger scale and in other circumstances. The experiment will break down and give place to a new reconstructive age of confusion and anarchy. Perhaps this experience also is necessary for mankind; yet it ought to be possible for us now to avoid it by subordinating mechanical means to our true development through a moralised and even a spiritualised humanity united in its inner soul and not only in its outward life and body.