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“ChesterBelloc” and the Fairy Tale of Distributism



Biographers and historians have not been kind to Distributism, the economic program, jointly advanced by Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton, that focused on bringing about agrarian reform, encouraging small-scale production, and expanding the ownership of private property. Michael Mason, for example, blasts the very concept of “Chesterbelloc,” calling this shorthand label for Distributism—as invented by George Bernard Shaw—a “fabulous beast” that existed only in Shaw’s head. Belloc was a man of action, while his “unwilling partner” Chesterton was “content to live in the imagination.” The differences between the two “were greater than the commonly held virtues of Catholicism, food, drink, conversation and laughter”; Distributism itself was fantastical.¹

Canadian author Michael Coren is more scathing in his judgments. He labels Distributist arguments “ludicrous,” “arrogant,” and “naïve rather than unpleasant, relying on wishful thinking and ignorance of world affairs.” He notes the tendency “for reactionary views to creep” into Distributist analysis, so that “the nasty flavour of economic fascism . . . is strong indeed.” Overall, Distributism “smacks of one thing: extremism.”²

Even sympathetic writers reach negative conclusions. Examining the “classical period of Distributism” (1926–36), *Chesterton Review* editor Ian Boyd expresses surprise over “how little” this “large mass of material . . . tells one about the details of the programme.” There is “an extraordinarily limited amount of agreement” on common policy.³ Ronald Knox underscores the chaos of Distributist writing: “it is not exactly a doctrine, or a philosophy, it is simply Chesterton’s reaction to life.”⁴ Joseph Pearce sees Belloc’s rejection of both capitalism and communism as tempting him into the “treacherous waters” of proto-fascism.⁵ A. N. Wilson finds the aims and principles of Distributism to be “childishly simple.”⁶ Biographer Dudley Barker concludes that Chesterton propagated a theory “without any conception of the practice”:

He had no idea of how a farmer farmed (or how his own gardener grew vegetables); he had probably never been inside a modern factory and he had no knowledge of machinery or business practices—he certainly could not have run a confectionary shop successfully for a day.⁷

Still others fault Distributism for its frivolity and its failure to generate political consequences. Chesterton biographer Margaret Canovan focuses on the movement’s “lack of popular support.”⁸ The youthful Distributist Brocard Sewell accuses the program of having been “too alien” ever to catch on. Within the Distributist League, “the lack of funds was chronic,” the

members were “mostly poor,” women were absent (for “Distributism was always essentially a man’s movement . . . another of its limitations and weaknesses”), and most of the local branches were frail, degenerating into mere debating societies.⁹ Meanwhile, the movement’s magazine carried approving reports “of bizarre attempts by League members to set up primitive and self-sufficient rural settlements.”¹⁰

Such judgments multiply. The Distributist project “was a sure flop politically,”¹¹ attracting an increasingly weird collection of “cranks of various hues.”¹² Canovan calls the Distributist League “a sorry spectacle.”¹³ Coren is disdainful of the weekly meeting of the League’s central branch at London’s Devereaux pub, where “beer would flow, songs would ring out and political debate would go on till the latest hour. It was all so fulfilling; it was all so ultimately empty.”¹⁴

Another common view is that Distributism simply proved to be wrong in both its analysis and its prescription. One writer notes that while Belloc and Chesterton saw freedom as a function of owning the means of production, “modern workers think of it as a function of consumption”; they are less interested in where goods and services come from “and more interested in how to protect their ability to purchase them.”¹⁵ According to biographer Robert Speaight, Belloc’s prophecies of a “Servile State” failed to understand how the state itself, rather than some capitalist oligarchy, “would become the more or less benevolent slave-owner,” while the rich would in fact be “progressively impoverished by successive governments.”¹⁶ W. H. Auden underscores “the basic contradiction” in the Distributism advanced by Roman Catholics such as Belloc and Chesterton: it could only be achieved in a crowded, industrial nation such as Britain if the population was first reduced through strenuous birth control, which the Chesterbelloc fiercely opposed.¹⁷

Most analysts also stress how “the Belloc tail wagged the Chesterton dog,” with the former leading the latter “into wast-

ing his genius in the deserts of politics and the arid soil of Distributism.”¹⁸ Indeed, in 1923 Chesterton did write to Belloc that “you were the founder and father of this mission; we [others] were the converts but you were the missionary.”¹⁹ In his able biography of Belloc, John P. McCarthy concurs that Chesterton “was very greatly indebted to Belloc in the formation of his opinions” and “should be regarded more as the articulate disciple in these matters.”²⁰ Christopher Hollis adds that whenever Chesterton addressed Distributism, “he spoke only as an obedient disciple, repeating what Belloc told him to repeat.”²¹ According to Coren, though, Chesterton’s death in 1936 “signified the end of the [Distributist] philosophy, if that is what it was,” adding: “The only important debate is concerned with how much the League and the magazine distracted [Chesterton] from the more important vocation of his books, and serious articles.”²²

This chapter takes issue with all of the above assertions and conclusions. To begin with, Distributism actually displayed impressive levels of clarity, coherence, and detail. In terms of specific policies, Chesterton, Belloc, and their allies ran rings around the orthodox economists and the standard party platforms of the 1920s and 1930s, not to mention those of the early twenty-first century. Second, despite his polite deference to Belloc, Chesterton was at least as responsible as his elder for developing Distributism as a compelling Third Way model and for providing concrete policy ideas. Third, rather than wasting his talents in this arena, Chesterton produced some of his most important and enduring work under the Distributist banner. Fourth, Distributism did not die in 1936. Rather, it inspired—directly and indirectly—key aspects of the post-World War II reconstruction of Britain, the United States, Canada, and Australia. Fifth, Belloc’s analysis of the “Servile State” was not only correct in his time; it also provides the surest path to understanding the peculiar and dominant “state capitalism” of

the early twenty-first century. Finally, even the chaotic debates and beer-driven camaraderie of the old Distributist League continue to inspire new generations of young adults as a model of political and intellectual engagement.

The Catholic Imperative

The origin of Distributism lies in the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, issued by Leo XIII in 1891. As a 1931 editorial in *G. K.’s Weekly* summarized:

This encyclical, in its few but brilliant pages of wisdom and exhortation, presents so clear an outline of that social philosophy we call Distributism . . . that no excuse is necessary to Distributists of any creed for reminding them of a book so bound up with their aims and so characterized by humanity and vision.²³

Acknowledging this debt to *Rerum Novarum*, the English priest Vincent McNabb declared: “For us Catholics, the Distributist State is not something we discuss, but something we *have to* propagate and institute.”²⁴ As Coren explains, “Distributism was in [Chesterton’s] eyes a *natural* and *inevitable* extension of his own religion.”²⁵

Rerum Novarum was the first of the great Catholic social encyclicals, usually remembered for its attention to the plight of industrial workers, its rejection of both unbridled capitalism and socialism, and its readiness to engage the modern age with a positive program of reform. However, it can also be read as a manifesto for the restoration of property and an agrarian return to the land.

Early in the document, Leo XIII explains that it is reason which distinguishes human creatures from the brutes, and “which renders a human being human.” It is because of this endowment that man alone has a right “to possess things not

merely for temporary and momentary use, as other living things do, but to have and to hold them in stable and permanent possession.” The pope notes that the careful study of “the laws of nature” affirms this “foundation of the division of property [among men], and the practice of all ages has consecrated the principle of private ownership, as being pre-eminently in conformity with human nature.”²⁶

Moreover, this fundamental right to property holds a special relation to the land. As Leo writes: “the earth, even though apportioned among private owners, ceases not thereby to minister to the needs of all, in as much as there is not one who does not sustain life from what the land produces.” This agrarian theory of value means that those who do not own the soil still contribute their labor; hence, “all *human subsistence* is derived either from labor on *one’s own land*, or from some toil, some calling, which is paid for either in *the produce of the land itself*, or in that which is exchanged *for what the land brings forth*.” This foundation of the true human economy on agriculture also explains Leo’s embrace of the “labor property” theorem favored by agrarians: namely, that land should belong to those who physically work it. As he writes:

Now, when man thus turns the activity of his mind and the strength of his body toward procuring the fruits of nature, by such act he makes his own that portion of nature’s field which he cultivates—that portion on which he leaves, as it were, the impress of his personality; and it cannot but be *just that he should possess that portion as his very own*, and have a right to hold it *without any one being justified in violating that right*.²⁷

Leo’s clarion call for small-scale, peasant agriculture implicitly declared over 80 percent of Europe’s land—circa 1891—to be held *unjustly* by absentee landlords; in England, the figure was

over 90 percent. In effect, *Rerum Novarum* stands as a call for peaceful agrarian revolution.

The pope also grounds the right to own property in the family, the God-ordained cell of society. He underscores that no human action or law can “abolish the natural and original right of marriage, nor in any way limit the chief and principle purpose of marriage ordained by God’s authority from the beginning: ‘Increase and multiply.’” Using language that Chesterton would later adopt, Leo continues: “Hence we have the family, the ‘society’ of a man’s house—a society very small, one must admit, but none the less a true society, and one older than any State.” From this, the natural family gains duties and rights “peculiar to itself” and “quite independent of the State.” Indeed, the “right to property,” already shown to belong “naturally” to the individual, must also belong “to a man in his capacity of head of a family.” This right becomes “all the stronger in proportion as the human person receives a wider extension in the family group.” The Pope emphasizes that the “most sacred law of nature [is] that a father should provide food and all necessities for those whom he has begotten.” It is also “natural” that he want those children who “carry on . . . his personality” to be provisioned against want and misery. Leo concludes: “in no other way can a father effect this except by the ownership of productive property.”²⁸

And so, the pope declares the first duty of the state to be the safeguarding of justly held private property. The “great labor question” facing the modern era could not be solved except by acknowledging “that private ownership must be held sacred and inviolable.” Most observers see this statement as a rejection of socialism. It is surely that, but it is also much more. For *Rerum Novarum* urges that the law “*should favor ownership*, and its policy should be *to induce as many as possible of the people to become owners.*” By ownership, moreover, Leo means above all the possession of land. As he writes: “If working people can be

encouraged to look forward to obtaining *a share in the land*, the consequence will be that the gulf between vast wealth and sheer poverty will be bridged over, and the respective classes will be brought nearer to one another.”²⁹ In short, the crafting of a society based on small property, particularly in land, becomes the Catholic solution to the modern industrial crisis.

Chesterton, the Missionary

While Belloc was clearly struggling with questions of liberty and property during the inaugural decade of the twentieth century, the first book-length treatment of Distributist themes actually came from Chesterton in 1910: *What's Wrong with the World*. Since 1901, Chesterton had been wrestling with the implications of *Rerum Novarum*, both in his columns for the liberal *Daily News* and in articles for the eclectic journal *New Age*, edited by the “guild socialist” A. R. Orage.³⁰

With Belloc, Chesterton shaped his ideas in partial reaction to the dominant “progressive” ideologists of his day: H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, and Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Wells thought the common man to be fairly hopeless. To rescue the young from incompetent parents, he believed that “the community as a whole” should take charge of their upbringing, with the parents consigned to “celibate labor establishments.” Instead of private property acting to promote social hygiene, Wells thought an active eugenics policy would lead to “the development of a healthy, intelligent, and adaptable race.” Shaw agreed. The Webbs, meanwhile, wanted to use public welfare policy to “shape up” the poor, through everything from public regulation of wages, hours, and working conditions to the founding of Reformatory Detention Colonies, where the poor could serve society with efficiency. As Belloc quipped, “‘Running’ the poor is [the Webbs’] hobby, and the occupation of the ample leisure which their own position as capitalists affords them.”³¹

Where Wells and Shaw would improve the masses through eugenic breeding and the Webbs through state controls, Chesterton proposed a different model. As Margaret Canovan explains, he

built upon a sympathy with the deeply-rooted emotions that cluster around the home and the homeland: the love of the ordinary man not only for his family, but for his home; the longing for a little domain of one’s own, whether it be a peasant’s land, or a suburban clerk’s garden, or even a slum dweller’s back yard.³²

Applying *Rerum Novarum* to English politics brought Chesterton into conflict with his coreligionists. The more conservative Catholics had taken the encyclical as “a general confirmation of the established order.” They emphasized the document’s condemnation of socialism and ignored its critical dissection of capitalism as well as its agrarian claims.³³ In response, Chesterton would emphasize the “exceedingly radical” implications of arguing that men and women are wonderfully different, that public life exists to defend private life, that property secures liberty, and that “all political and social efforts must be devoted to securing the good of the family”: the basic lessons of *Rerum Novarum*.³⁴

An unsigned review of *What’s Wrong with The World* appeared in the July 30, 1910, issue of the *Saturday Review*. Despite a slightly cynical tone, it ably captures the thesis of the book:

Plainly stated, the whole wrong is that Jones has not all that he should have. Jones, being the normal man, wants a home, a wife, some children, and a bit of property. At present, he may have none of these things. His home is often a flat or a tenement; his wife is often a wage-earner, his children are not his own, for the State can have their hair cut because his wife is not permit-

ted to keep them clean; and as for property—England is a “feudal” country, so that a poor man’s back garden belongs to somebody else. What is wrong with this world is precisely this—that modern politics, economics and ethics all conspire to keep Jones from having what he ought to have.³⁵

Echoing Leo XIII, Chesterton opens his defense of property by appealing to “the principle of domesticity: the ideal house, the happy family, the holy family of history.” With irony, he notes that “the cultured class,” the progressive intelligentsia, “is shrieking to be let out of the decent home” in favor of a sensual, postfamilial order. Meanwhile, “the working class is shouting to be let into it.” In a powerful passage directly inspired by *Rerum Novarum*, Chesterton celebrates “the free family,” declaring: “It may be said that this institution of the home is the one anarchist institution. That is to say, it is older than law and stands outside the state. By its nature it is refreshed or corrupted by indefinable forces of custom or kinship.”³⁶

In the early twentieth century, new distempers threatened the free family, including the advocacy of easy divorce. Chesterton tackles this head on, asserting that “the success of the marriage comes after the failure of the honeymoon.” Underscoring the real nature of marriage, Chesterton adds that “[a]ll human vows, laws, and contracts are so many ways of surviving with success this breaking point, this instant of potential surrender.” He asserts that the man and the woman in a marriage are “one flesh,” even if not “one spirit”: “Man is a quadraped.”³⁷

The same “upper class philosophies” of Wells, Shaw, and the Webbs threatened the physical home, as well. Under their sway, wrote Chesterton, “the average man has really become bewildered about the goal of his efforts, and his efforts, therefore, grow feebler and feebler. His simple notion of having a home of his own is derided as bourgeois, as sentimental, or as despicably

Christian.” Feminists, meanwhile, condemned the mother in the home as a dependent ornament who yearned to be free.³⁸

Chesterton responds with the truth “that to the moderately poor the home is the only place of liberty. Nay, it is the only place of anarchy.” Coining a wonderful phrase, he labels the family home a “chamber of liberty.” Chesterton notes that the average worker does not want a semi-attached house nor a flat in a high-rise building. “He wants . . . a separate house,” because the “idea of *earthly contact* and foundation, as well as an idea of separation and independence, is a part of this instructive human picture.” In this private home tied to the soil, human life finds fulfillment:

As every normal man desires a woman, and children born of a woman, every normal man desires a house of his own to put them into. . . . [H]e wants an objective and visible kingdom, a fire at which he can cook what food he likes, a door he can open to what friends he chooses.

Chesterton concludes that to “give nearly everybody ordinary houses would please nearly everybody; that is what I assert without apology.”³⁹

More broadly, he notes that for most persons “the idea of artistic creation can only be expressed by an idea unpopular in present discussions—the idea of property.” The average man or woman cannot produce a great painting or a memorable sculpture. Together, however, they can imprint their personalities on the earth, on their homes, and on their small workshops. “Property is merely the art of the democracy,” Chesterton richly intones. “It means that every man should have something that he can shape in his own image, as he is shaped in the image of heaven.”⁴⁰

Belloc, the Prophet

In his inaugural book-length treatment of Distributist themes, Belloc explores in depth the reasons for the disappearance of England's "chambers of liberty" and other forms of private property. Appearing in 1912, *The Servile State* offers an unexpected and fairly complicated argument. Belloc asserts

[t]hat our free modern society in which the means of production are owned by a few being necessarily in unstable equilibrium, it is tending to reach a condition of stable equilibrium by the establishment of compulsory labor legally enforceable upon those who do not own the means of production for the advantage of those who do.⁴¹

Belloc rephrases his thesis for the second edition of the book, stating that "the effect of socialist doctrine upon capitalist society is to produce a third thing different from either of its two begetters—to wit, the Servile State." By servile, he means precisely slavery, where "an unfree majority of non-owners" work for the gain of "a free minority of owners." Where capitalism has held sway, this "reestablishment of slavery" is "a necessary development," and nowhere more so than in England.⁴²

Behind these startling assertions lie key definitions. By capitalism, Belloc means a system of oligarchic monopoly, where ownership of land and capital is confined to a minority of free citizens, while the property-less majority form a proletariat dependent solely on wages. By "Servile State," he means political, economic, and social arrangements under which a majority of families and individuals "are constrained by positive law to labor for the advantage of other families and individuals." In this circumstance, wages are supplemented by state regulations and benefits insuring minimal "sufficiency and security." All the same, it involves "reestablishing the slave."⁴³

Belloc provides a lengthy historical narrative on how modern England fell into the new slavery. Here he borrows arguments from R. H. Tawney’s *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*, which chronicled the opening blows against England’s free yeomanry.⁴⁴ Slavery, Belloc notes, has been commonplace in human history; liberty, the exception. Certainly, between 500 and 1000 A.D. the European peoples took slavery for granted. Poverty “made the slave,” as indigent men sold themselves into slavery as an alternative to starvation. Slaves and masters alike accepted the system as a given.

However, in the bosom of the Western Christian church, freedom slowly spread. By 900 A.D. or so, the sale of men had come to an end. A century later, slaves on country villas became serfs, with compulsory labor replaced by a fixed payment of produce and with the peasants gaining customary rights to the use of land. “Then, as now,” Belloc the agrarian relates, “the soil and its fixtures were the basis of all wealth,” and this wealth was once again effectively in the control of those who worked the soil. In the towns, meanwhile, self-governing guilds emerged to control the production, quality, and pricing of goods and services. This “distributive system” of cooperative bodies worked to prevent emergence of an economic oligarchy. As Belloc explains, such “restraints upon liberty were restraints designed for the preservation of [a broader] liberty.”⁴⁵

Alas, Belloc argues, this medieval Distributist order was replaced by “the dreadful moral anarchy . . . which goes by the name of capitalism.” England, once a land of owners, became by 1912 a land of property-less proletarians, with one-third of the people indigent and nineteen of every twenty dispossessed of land and capital. The cause of this change, Belloc stresses, was not the invention of new machines and the rise of industry. Rather, monopoly capitalism derived from “the deliberate action of men, evil will in a few and apathy of will among the many.” And it began in the sixteenth, not the eighteenth century.

The key act, in Belloc's view, was the seizure of monastic lands by the English crown in the 1530s and 1540s. These properties, about 30 percent of England's arable land, quickly fell into the hands of the rural squires, who already held another 30 percent. Using legal devices such as the statute of frauds and enclosures, this landed oligarchy further suppressed and destroyed the English yeomanry over the next two centuries. By 1700, England was a land of plutocrats and protetarians. When the great mechanical inventions arrived, the rural oligarchy won control of industry and its wealth as well. Discoveries that "would have blest and enriched mankind" instead reinforced the sharp division between owners and proles.⁴⁶

Belloc stresses, however, that "the Capitalist state is unstable" and therefore best seen as "a transitory phase" between two stable forms of society. The strains in capitalist society come partly from the conflict between the moral theories of liberty on which the state reposes and the reality of class division and exploitation. They also come from the insecurity to which capitalism condemns the mass of people. As Belloc writes, "[i]f you left men completely free under a capitalist system, there would be so heavy a mortality from starvation as would dry up the sources of labor." Indeed, "the system would break down from the death of children and out-o-works and of women." From the Elizabethan poor laws through the work houses and the Speenhamland system of child allowances to the Poor Law of 1834, capitalism used "non-capitalist methods" to keep alive the protelariat.⁴⁷

Socialists propose a collectivist solution to this instability. They would make the state the owner of all productive capital. However, Belloc emphasizes the difficulties of collectivization, including the impossibility of real confiscation and the failed economies consequent to state control over industry. Instead, Belloc believes that the capitalist owners and the state were cutting a different deal, one creating the Servile State: "Subject

the proletarian, as a proletarian, and because he is a proletarian, to special laws. Clothe me, the capitalist, as a capitalist, and because I am a capitalist, with special converse duties under those laws.” Out of this resurrection of status, the capitalists would gain a sure hold on their property and wealth. Although moving “from free proletarianism to servitude,” the workers would settle for “security and sufficiency.”⁴⁸

Some have interpreted Belloc’s Servile State as meaning simply the welfare state, with its cradle-to-grave benefits such as health care and food stamps.⁴⁹ This is surely part of what Belloc meant. But he also implies something more, a merger of government and monopoly capital into a “corporate state” or “state capitalism.” Under this system, private capitalists would be better protected from disorder and dissent than when they were dependent on voluntary efforts, while workers would be confirmed in their completely servile status.⁵⁰

Belloc identifies the signs of the Servile State’s emergence in the early twentieth century. He sees students in the modern state schools “brought up . . . definitely and hopelessly proletarian”; they are trained to see property as unattainable for their ilk and to “think of themselves as wage earners” alone. Belloc also sees a common thread to new laws and policies involving employers’ liability (for employee accidents), workman’s compensation, unemployment and sickness insurance, and the fixing of a minimum wage. In place of independent bargaining between two free men, these are fixed arrangements between owners and nonowners, measures that lock the latter into wage-earning servility. The author states that such legislation “would not exist in a society where property was well divided.” Instead, signs of incipient slavery grow, for the converse of a minimum wage is compulsory labor, and Belloc predicts the forming of labor colonies for the recalcitrant.⁵¹ Still, as the new order sets in, the internal strains of the capitalist era are relaxed, “and the community will settle down upon the servile basis which was

its foundation before the advent of the Christian faith, from which that faith slowly weaned it, and to which in the decay of that faith it naturally returns.”⁵²

The only other option, Belloc states, is the re-creation of the property state. This entails actions that would redistribute ownership from the few to the many—that is, a deliberate restoration of the Distributist order as found in late-medieval Europe. In this book, though, Belloc provides little guidance on how to pursue this end. Rather, he worries that the instincts necessary for the survival of private property are already too far gone: “Will men want to own? Will officials, administrators, and lawmakers be able to shake off the power which under capitalism seems normal to the rich? . . . Can I discover any relics of the cooperative instinct among such men?”⁵³ He offers little hope for the England of his day.

However, in a parallel set of essays also published in 1912 and appearing in the *Oxford and Cambridge Review*, Belloc lays out concrete reforms that could restore property to families. He calls on the state to act “continually as the protector and nourisher of the small man” through measures such as differentiated corporate taxes that favor new and small companies and the state subsidization of bonds purchased by low-income households.⁵⁴ He would return to and expand on these ideas in his 1936 essay *The Restoration of Property*.

One compelling idea, though, appears only in the 1912 version of the essay. Here, Belloc answers the critics of Distributism who mock talk of re-creating a peasantry. Belloc replies that he did not expect the first experiments in restoring ownership to occur among agricultural holders. Rather,

the great field . . . for experiments of this kind, paradoxical as it may sound, is *the suburban field*. . . . [T]here is a universal tendency making for private ownership of houses and small plots just outside our great urban cen-

ters, and here *a revolution upon a great scale could be effected* if the credit of the community were called into play.⁵⁵

This was a prophecy that would be fulfilled, albeit in unexpected places.

The Kingdom of the Home

By the mid-1920s Distributism drew mounting attention, a consequence in part of the crisis afflicting international capitalism. Hyperinflation, rising trade barriers, agricultural depression, unemployment: all pointed to the failure of the pre-1914 liberal order to recover after the Great War. All the same, Chesterton faced scathing criticism for his fanciful theories and their lack of specifics. As Maisie Ward remarks, “With bland disregard of the breakdown of their own system, the orthodox economists were challenging him to establish the flawlessness of his.”⁵⁶

One result was *The Outline of Sanity* (1926), Chesterton’s most complete Distributist treatise. Like Belloc, he offers careful distinctions. “If capitalism means private property, I am capitalist,” he reports. “If capitalism means capital, everyone is capitalist.” However, Chesterton argues that the label now held a narrower meaning. A “relatively small” class of capitalists possess “so much of the capital” that “a very large majority” of the citizens must serve these capitalists for a wage. Such an exercise of monopoly “is neither private nor enterprising,” he adds. Indeed, it “exists to prevent private enterprise.” Meanwhile, socialism would make “the corporate unity of society” responsible for all economic processes, representing “an extreme enthusiasm for authority.” Distributism, in contrast, is premised on the family, the kingdom of the home. Because capitalists and socialists “dislike the independence of the kingdom, they are against property. Because they dislike the loyalty of that kingdom, they are against marriage.” Distributists alone “insist in

the full sense that the average respectable citizen ought to have something to rule.” Again alone, and because of this respect for property, Distributists have the unique right to be called democratic.⁵⁷

Chesterton notes that his critics have called a policy of small distributed property “impossible,” a fantasy, due to the “Law of Rent” and other devices that make concentration inevitable. “It is true that I believe in fairy tales,” he retorts, “in the sense that I marvel so much at what does exist that I am the readier to admit what might.” More directly, he asserts that “the monopolist momentum is not irresistible,” adding: “It may be very difficult for modern people to imagine a world in which men are not generally admired for covetousness and crushing their neighbours; but I assure them that such strange patches of an earthly paradise do really remain on earth.”⁵⁸

All the same, Chesterton acknowledges the difficulty of the situation. He accepts the historical account laid out in more detail by Belloc, concluding that “England became a capitalist country because it had long been an oligarchic country.” In recent decades, the “passion for incessant and ruthless buying and selling goes along with the extreme inequality of men too rich or too poor.” After passing a certain point, “the broken fragments of property” prove to be “easily devoured.” In terms of regimentation and centralization, “capitalism has done all that socialism threatened to do.” Under prevailing trends, “[t]here is nothing in front but a flat wilderness of standardization either by Bolshevism or Big Business.”⁵⁹

Indeed, by the mid-1920s, owners of the great businesses in England had themselves abandoned liberal economics. Instead of believing that if men were left to bargain individually the public would automatically benefit, they now pleaded with workers not to strike “in the interests of the public.” Chesterton quips: “the only original case for capitalism collapses entirely, if we have to ask either party to go on for the good of the

public.” Instead, “ordinary conservatives are falling back” on Communist arguments “without knowing it.” Add in the near-disappearance of English agriculture, and it was clear that English leaders for almost a century had committed their nation to “new and enormous experiments,” including, in Chesterton’s words:

- “to make their own nation an eternal debtor to a few rich men”;
- “to driving food out of their own country in the hope of buying it back again from the ends of the earth”;
- “to losing every type of moderate prosperity . . . till there was no independence without luxury and no labour without ugliness”;

And all of this “hanging on a thread of alien trade which [grows] thinner and thinner.”⁶⁰

Great trusts, or monopoly combines, had also been allowed to form. For a long time, capitalist apologists denied that such trusts could arise within a free market. By the 1920s, Chesterton reports, “[t]hey talk as if the Trusts had always been a part of the British Constitution, not to mention the Solar System.” Yet such adamancy reveals weakness. It is dangerous, he says, to suppose “the capitalist conquest more complete than it is.”⁶¹

In place of these perilous and failing experiments, Chesterton calls for the restoration of property to the masses. Following *Rerum Novarum*, he grounds hope for renewal in families: “As each . . . family finds again the real experience of private property, it will become a centre of influence, a mission,” and a movement. Furthermore, as in *Rerum Novarum*, this mission would necessarily involve the creation of a free peasantry, a form of “moderate equality,” a “peasant state” natural to humanity. Chesterton summons “the whole of the household religion, or what remains of it, to offer resistance to the destructive

discipline of [monopoly] industrial capitalism.” He counsels, “do anything, however small, that will prevent the completion of the work of capitalist combinations.” Save one small farm; shop at one small store. “For it is the essence of [capitalism’s] enormous and unnatural effort that a small failure is as big as a big failure.”⁶²

More broadly, Chesterton offers a practical and detailed action agenda. It may be outlined as follows:

- To support the small retailer and the little shop, boycott the large department stores. This should be as easy as boycotting “shops selling instruments of torture or poisons for private use in the home.”
- To break up monopoly corporations, support the gradual extension of profit sharing or the steady transfer of ownership to worker guilds. “[A]ny reversal of the rush to concentrate property will be an improvement on the present state of things.”
- To redistribute land and other properties, tax contracts “so as to discourage the sale of small property to big proprietors and encourage the break up of big property among small proprietors.” A model would be Ireland’s Wyndham Act of 1903, which successfully transferred farms from absentee landlords to peasants.
- To divide property fairly within families, destroy primogeniture or inheritance preferences for the first-born son.
- To defend the poor against the great, provide the former free legal services.
- To protect certain experiments in small property, provide subsidies and employ tariffs, “even local tariffs.”
- To break up the trusts, mobilize prosecutors to enforce laws banning “cornering,” “dumping,” and loan-sharking. Put scheming capitalists in jail, for “private property ought to be protected against public crime.”

- To encourage agriculture, take schools which have been teaching “town things to country people who did not want to learn them” and instead teach “country things to town people who do want to learn them.”
- To preserve residual healthy sentiments, end urban renewal plans (such as the infamous “Limehouse project”)⁶³ that destroy the jealously held fences, chicken coops, and small gardens of city dwellers and move them into sterile high-rise apartments. “We should seize on these [recalcitrant] slum-dwellers as if they were infant prodigies. . . . We should see in them the seed and living principle of a real spontaneous revival of the countryside.”
- To make peace with the machines, family ownership is to be preferred, followed by cooperative control, or—if necessary—ownership by equal shares. In order to “create the experience of small property,” Chesterton happily accepts “any help that science and machinery can give in creating small property.”
- To decentralize industry, cheapen electricity and expand access grids, “which might lead to many little workshops.”
- To decentralize transportation, discourage the railroads and favor the automobile. In praising the Ford Model T, Chesterton marvels that “nobody seems to notice how this popularization of motoring . . . really is a complete contradiction to the fatalistic talk about inevitable combination and concentration.” In fact, after the tyranny of the railroads, “the free and solitary traveler is returning before our very eyes . . . having recovered to some extent the freedom of the King’s highway in the manner of Merry England.”
- To empty the cities, favor the suburbs. “[I]f possessing a Ford car means rejoicing in a field of corn or clover, in a fresh landscape and a free atmosphere, it may be the beginning of many things. . . . It may be, for instance, . . . the beginning of the cottage.”⁶⁴

The alternative to such an agenda, Chesterton warns, is the final merger of socialism and capitalism: “believing only in combination, they will themselves combine.” In place of Belloc’s language about the Servile State, Chesterton more usefully describes “the new sort of Business Government,” an emerging unity of “collectivist” and “ordinary commercial” orders. Already, “[p]rivate things are . . . public in the worst sense of the word; that is, they are personal and dehumanized. Public things are already private in the worst sense of that word; that is, they are mysterious and secretive and largely corrupt.” As capitalism and socialism consummate their merger, this “new sort of Business Government will combine everything that is bad in all the plans for a better world. . . . There will be nothing but a loathsome thing called Social Service.”⁶⁵

A Reactionary Revolution

Belloc’s *The Restoration of Property* appeared a decade after Chesterton’s tome. While fully compatible with the latter’s direction and theme, Belloc approaches the task of explaining Distributism in a different way. Where Chesterton exuded a relative optimism, Belloc is pessimistic: “The evil has gone so far that . . . the creation of new and effective immediate machinery is impossible.” At best, “it is not quite impossible to start the beginnings of a change.”⁶⁶

Joseph Pearce labels the result “essentially libertarian.”⁶⁷ This is correct in its estimation of Belloc’s love of true liberty, but misleading given his resort to massive state intervention. John P. McCarthy sees in Belloc’s scheme “a people’s capitalism.”⁶⁸ This is true, if capitalism means property, but it is also misleading given the historical and linguistic context. Belloc himself calls his project “a reactionary revolution,” one mounted against “Capitalism, and its product, Communism.” The immediate task was “forwarding the spirit of that reaction in a

society which has almost forgotten what property and its concomitant freedom means.”⁶⁹

Following both Leo XIII and Chesterton, Belloc opens with an appeal to the household as the foundation of liberty. “The family is ideally free,” he writes, “when it fully controls all the means necessary for the production of such wealth as it should consume for normal living.” While this ideal freedom would necessarily be tempered by a natural specialization in trades and reasonable state regulation, the family “retains its freedom, so long as the social structure, made up of families similarly free, exercises its effect through customs and laws consonant to its spirit.” Such households enjoy “widely distributed property.” This is the Distributist state.⁷⁰

However, “widespread property has been lost” in England, with society falling “into the diseased condition known as ‘Industrial Capitalism.’” The resulting “insecurity and insufficiency” now led either toward communism or—more likely—the Servile State. In the latter, the “masses are kept alive, they are taught by a subsidy in childhood, treated by a subsidy in illness, and maintained by a subsidy in old age, widowhood, and incapacity from accident.”

The only other option was to restore economic freedom; to do so, paradoxically, the powers of the state must be summoned. Belloc reasons that since capitalism evoked “all the powers of the state” to create servile conditions, “we must [now] avail ourselves of the same methods.” Restoring property requires “a deliberate reversal of economic tendencies,” for market processes left unchecked lead to monopoly control of the means of production. Hence, “[w]ell-divided property will not spring up of itself in a Capitalist society. It must be artificially fostered.”⁷¹

Belloc offers seven reasons why monopoly capitalism wins out over well-distributed property in the middle and long runs:

1. *Overhead*. “The larger unit is in proportion less expensive than the smaller in management, rent, [and] upkeep.”
2. *Information*. The larger unit is better able to purchase “machinery . . . and information.” It also dominates advertising, “one of the worst plagues of English modern life.”
3. *Credit*. The larger unit can borrow more easily than the smaller one. It can better bargain for special interest rates, and is more likely to see the bank throwing “good money after bad.”
4. *Dumping*. “The larger institution can undersell the smaller one at a loss, until the smaller one is imperiled or killed.”
5. *Capital*. “[Y]ou cannot tempt small capital to make the beginnings of serious accumulation at the rates which are sufficient for large capital.”
6. *Corruption*. “Plutocracy once established will corrupt the legislature so that laws will be made in its favor.”
7. *Justice*. “The cost of recovering a small debt is out of all proportion to the cost of recovering a large one.”⁷²

In response, Belloc summons the state to counter these inevitable tendencies with positive action. He seeks to restore the small cultivator, wholesaler, shopkeeper, and artisan. He wants to divide large properties into smaller units. And he desires to confirm such division by defensive institutions. His specific policy proposals include:

- To restore the small shop, use differential taxation against chain stores (no more than a dozen shops) and department stores (he specifically cites Harrods) and also employ li-

censing to limit the number of products that each shop can sell;

- To decentralize distribution, apply a turnover tax to large wholesalers, with the money raised put into a “Guild Credit Union” to finance new small suppliers;
- To restore craftsmen, subsidize “the small artisan at the expense of Big Business.” In addition, bring back the trade guilds, “chartered and established by positive law.”
- To break up large industrial combines, change the legal rules that favor consolidation. Where existing laws encourage centralized steam and water power, electrical power offers a decentralized alternative: “A differential tax on power used would effect this.” Where amalgamation is not the result of technology, “[w]e must penalize amalgamation and support division of units” through differential taxation. If shares are to be divided, “we should aim at creating the largest possible number of shareholders” and prevent the accumulation of large blocks of stock, again through differential taxation. The proceeds of this tax would subsidize “purchase by the smaller holders.”
- To guarantee popular corporate governance, a supermajority of stockholders would be needed for key decisions, so that a “small proportion of individual shareholders” could block a policy change. Moreover, no corporation or affiliation of companies could buy shares in another company.
- To encourage agrarian resettlement, “agricultural land shall be treated differently from urban land.” There must be “a radical difference in the burdens imposed upon the land occupied, as land (according to our view) should be occupied, by a human family living thereon, and land occupied by others from whom the owners draw tribute.”
- To encourage subsistence agriculture, where each family largely lives off its own produce, the “peasantry must be privileged as against the diseased society around it.” This

new peasantry “must begin as a social luxury” and “like all luxuries, be extravagantly paid for.” This means that the burdens of taxation and borrowing laid upon the peasantry must be light . . . or nonexistent. It must be easy for the small holder to buy land from the rich, and difficult to sell the other way.

- To encourage urban home ownership, “there ought to be a simple rule: every lease should automatically contain the power of purchase by installment.”⁷³
- To encourage easy credit, the state should create and subsidize “chartered cooperative banks” or credit unions under local control.

Belloc’s almost promiscuous use of “differential” and progressive taxation to achieve his goals may well frighten the modern libertarian. However, the details of his plan are interesting. “High taxation is incompatible with the general institution of property,” he remarks. Truly high progressive rates of taxation are possible only in “a society like our own in which small property has decayed.” Put another way, “high taxation destroys the Middle Class. It dries up the stream by which a middle class is brought into existence and maintained. It breeds plutocracy.” As he notes, the high taxes of his era were due entirely to the waging of war “financed by bank credit” and to “the increase of State Socialism [the welfare state] for the purpose of guaranteeing capitalism against a revolt of a proletariat.” Meanwhile, Belloc’s transitional scheme for moving from monopoly capitalism to Distributism would use outrageously high tax rates (as an “outrageous” example, he cites 25 percent—actually a modest figure by twenty-first century standards!) only for a time. Once widely distributed property was the rule in society and *the need for a welfare state had been eliminated*, he calculates that the state could survive on a “flax tax” of just 2 percent!⁷⁴

Roll together the policy ideas of both Chesterton and Belloc, and one has a remarkably complete and integrated political program. It could be labelled unrealistic, but complaints over its incoherence or lack of specificity simply hold no water.

Moreover, during the early 1920s, Chesterton and Belloc entered real political battles. For example, they fought “furiously” in the “London Omnibus War,” favoring the small, private bus companies that challenged the monopoly held by Lord Ashfield’s London General Omnibus Transportation Company.⁷⁵ After Chesterton founded *G. K.’s Weekly* in 1925 to promote Distributist thinking, the little journal poured out an impressive series of commentaries applying Distributist principles to concrete issues. In an editorial on “Hitler as Distributist,” the *Weekly* examined new German policies favoring births and stay-at-home mothers. Was the family truly valued by the Nazis? No, “the purpose is *not* to create a primary political unit; the purpose is to create the birth-rate,” to manufacture human fodder for war.⁷⁶ Concerning structural unemployment, the magazine proposed an ingenious scheme to turn unemployment insurance benefits into a stipend that would settle affected families on twenty-five acres and provide them livestock, seed, and fifteen months of salary, so getting them started as property-holders.⁷⁷ Turning to “The Drink Problem,” *G. K.’s Weekly* proposed reforms “so that the supply [of alcoholic beverages] may be as good, cheap, and wholesome as possible.” Specifics included a “demand” that all state restrictions on the manufacture, sale, and consumption of alcohol imposed since 1914 be scrapped; that the government issue many more licenses for “public houses”; and that taxes on liquor, wine, and beer be slashed.⁷⁸

Legend or Libation?

Speaking of beer, the Distributists' reputation for excessive consumption also needs clarification. That meetings of the Distributist League were occasions for spirited debates on issues both practical and "deeply theoretical" (e.g., "Should we abolish the machines?"), for camaraderie, and for "the drinking of a good deal of beer" seems clear. Despite being a cofounder of the League, though, Belloc rarely attended these events and kept his distance from the Leaguers. He particularly disliked the beer-swilling legend. Slated to discuss "monopoly" at Essex Hall, he heard the chairman of the event announce that "Mr. Belloc will speak about beer, about which he knows a good deal." He rose and, addressing the reporters present, snarled: "Let me warn you gentlemen, that if any of your masters prints any vulgar sneer about me and beer, they will live to rue it."⁷⁹

Chesterton, however, obviously favored the convivial atmosphere of the Distributist League, which he served as president. During these "Devereux Nights . . . politics and economics were put aside in favour of song and good fellowship." Chesterton particularly relished the League's Annual General Meeting, when provincial delegates joined London members for a business session followed by a grand dinner at Carr's Restaurant in Aldwych. As Brocard Sewell recalled, "[a]fter the meal, and the customary toasts and speeches, the evening would be rounded off with song. Chesterton joined in all the choruses, and thoroughly enjoyed the whole affair." The songs were mostly originals written by the Distributists themselves, such as "King Solomon's Wives":

King Solomon had ten thousand wives
In his house of cedar wood.
There was Sheba's queen, and Helen of Troy,
And Little Red Riding Hood.

But whether their skins were white as milk,
Or black as a chimney-sweep,
There were no flies on the shy gazelles
King Solomon used to keep.
Yo ho! Yo ho! Yo ho!
Then send the drink around.
And here’s to every fancy lass
In London to be found!

Such details help explain why few women attended Distributist events. All the same, “they were gatherings of friends,”⁸⁰ and they exerted a powerful hold on later, sympathetic imaginations.

What Legacy?

If drinking songs were all that Distributism left behind, then the conventional wisdom about the movement’s frivolity would be sound. In truth, Distributism has had real, even profound effects on a number of nations, and it stands to this day as a powerful tool of analysis and a compelling program of reform.

In Great Britain as early as 1916, Prime Minister David Lloyd George adopted Chestertonian language to promise soldiers in the trenches “three acres and a cow” after the war. While he failed to deliver, supporting only a few chicken farms, Britain’s Conservative Party adopted Distributist language and goals after World War II with greater effect. At the 1946 party conference, Winston Churchill rejected the establishment of a socialist state controlling the means of production. Instead, he said,

Our Conservative aim is to build a *property-owning-democracy*, both independent and interdependent. In this I include profit-sharing schemes in suitable indus-

tries and intimate consultation between employers and wage earners. In fact we seek so far as possible to make the status of the wage-earner that of a partner rather than of an irresponsible employee . . . *Our ideal is the consenting union of millions of free, independent families and homes.*⁸¹

In his 1955 address to the party, Anthony Eden also extolled “what I have many times described as a property-owning-democracy.” This ownership, he said, could “be expressed in the home, in savings or in forms of partnership in industry.” Conservatives stood “against increased ownership of power and property by the State. We seek ever wider ownership of power and property by the people.”⁸² Even in the party’s manifesto of 2005, “expanding our property-owning democracy” remains a central theme. The Conservative focus today is on the “Right to Buy for council tenants,” “plans to boost shared ownership schemes,” and giving “social housing tenants the right to own a share of their home.”⁸³ Such policy ideas are right out of the Distributist playbook.

In the United States, Distributism also had a strong and lasting effect on public policy. A key intermediary was Herbert Agar, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his book *The People’s Choice* (1933). For six years, he held a junior editorial position at *G. K.’s Weekly* and absorbed the Distributist ethos. Returning to America, he crafted a 1934 essay for the *American Review* titled “The Task for Conservatism.” Using language borrowed directly from Belloc and Chesterton, he showed how the American founders had believed “that a wide diffusion of property . . . made for enterprise, for family responsibility, and . . . for institutions that fit man’s nature.” During the nineteenth century, however, plutocrats despoiled small-property holders, leaving most Americans in wage-earning “servitude.” Agar concluded that a “redistribution of property” could yet

be achieved, which would form “the root of a real conservative policy for the United States.” This goal would need to be “produced artificially” and protected by special legislation. The choice was clear: “Either we restore property, or we restore slavery.”⁸⁴ With homegrown American Distributists such as Ralph Borsodi, he cofounded in 1937 the monthly *Free America*, which became a mouthpiece for the cause. The journal was “the meeting ground for those who are equally opposed to finance-capitalism, communism, and fascism,” with “decentralization” as its “fundamental principle.”⁸⁵

Distributist ideals even shaped key New Deal initiatives. The Subsistence Homestead program—which provided a house, garden, and five acres in villages to displaced families—drew direct inspiration from Distributist activists in England and America.⁸⁶ By 1940, more than two hundred of these federal projects were underway. Of greater long-term importance were the new housing programs that also derived from Distributist ideals. The Home Owners Loan Act of 1933 introduced a novel type of long-term, low-interest loan. By 1936, over one million mortgages of this sort had been issued. The Housing Act of 1934 “revolutionized” home financing by—as Belloc had once urged—calling into play “the credit of the community” and sparking “a revolution upon a great scale” in “the suburban field.” The new Federal Housing Administration (FHA) perfected the long-term amortized mortgage with a low down payment; after World War II, FHA loans—in conjunction with their Veterans Administration counterparts—seeded the suburbanization of America. Between 1945 and 1960, the number of owner-occupied homes nearly doubled, transforming America from a land of renters into a land of owners. The same years saw a marked increase in economic equality among Americans: there were fewer of the poor and the very rich and a mighty advance by the middle class. Belloc and Chesterton would have been pleased (although the latter would probably have wisely

recommended the placement of more “public houses” in the new suburban neighborhoods).

In Canada, two Distributist Catholic priests—Jimmy Tompkins and Moses Coady—launched the Antigonish movement among the Acadian French of Nova Scotia. Focusing on cooperative marketing ventures, they organized by 1939 some 342 credit unions and 162 other co-ops, involving 20,000 members. Lobstermen, fishermen, and weavers all experienced improvements in their living standards.⁸⁷ Meanwhile, in Australia, the Champion Society of Melbourne formed in 1931 to discuss the works of Chesterton and Belloc. Among other effects, the society launched the career of B. A. Santamaria as an active Distributist. First as a rural organizer for the Catholic Social Movement, then as leader of “The Movement,” which successfully countered Communist influence in the labor unions, followed by his role as an inspiration for the formation of the crucial Democratic Labour Party and its “model Distributist program,” and finally as founder of the Australian Family Association, Santamaria had an undeniably significant influence on Australian life.⁸⁸

True, efforts at the restoration of peasantries mostly failed. All the same, the results noted above by themselves lift Distributism out of the “ludicrous” and “frivolous” categories. Moreover, Belloc’s concept of the Servile State and Chesterton’s of the Business Government bear new relevance in the early twenty-first century. For example, leading corporate consultants such as Stewart Friedman and Jeffrey Greenhaus now argue that work-family conflicts demand a state-imposed “revolution” in gender roles. Women must be pulled more completely into the corporate world, while men must be retrained to work as caregivers. Meanwhile, the state must assume “responsibility for all children, even other people’s children.” Such gender engineering and fresh expansion of the welfare state are “the brave new world” lying within “the workplace revolution.”⁸⁹ This would surely be a Business Government at work.

Even Belloc’s seemingly extreme claim that compulsory labor would soon return has now come true, most visibly for women. The American welfare reform of 1996, for example, ended a system that had supported poor mothers staying at home with their children. The new plan ties state benefits for mothers to mandatory work at the minimum wage: a perfect definition of the Servile State. More broadly, Sweden’s Treasury Minister a few years ago dismissed a proposed monthly stipend for stay-at-home parents caring for toddlers. “Mothers at home do nothing for the state,” he argued. All adults must work, for only then can the state gain tax revenue to pay for welfare benefits: again, a perfect expression of the new servility. American advocates for “equal opportunity and equal access” in the workplace agree: all able adults must work, and all nonworking dependents must receive care from “society,” meaning—of course—the state.⁹⁰ On this very point, Theda Skocpol declares that “it is a myth that vibrant capitalism and adequate social supports for working families cannot go hand in hand.”⁹¹

As Chesterton warned, when monopoly capitalism and socialism consummate their merger, nothing would remain “but a loathsome thing called Social Service.” This we now have. Nor would Belloc and he have been surprised when in 2001 the Communist Party of China opened its membership to capitalists. Rather than marking the advance of liberty, this would have been seen by the two Englishmen as but deepening the slavery of atomized individuals, now dependent jointly on megacorporations for a minimum wage and on the nanny state for security and care.⁹²

These developments also open a new perspective on the model of the beer-swilling Distributist League. As Michael Ffinch reports, the “influence the Distributist movement had on the generation of young men who had grown up during [World War I], but had been too young to have taken part

in the fighting, cannot be overestimated.”⁹³ The camaraderie and the celebration of something fresh in the dismal worlds of politics and economics were surely part of the attraction. As the Servile State now consolidates its triumph, perhaps a new generation of young men—joined this time also by threatened young women—might find purpose again in another “gathering of friends.”