# Hilaire Belloc's Distributism: A Commitment to Place

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Front Porch Republic Journal 2019

No review of Distributism, regardless of how brief, can avoid discussing the contributions of Hilaire Belloc, one of its most indefatigable and perhaps inconvenient advocates. G.K. Chesterton called him the "founder and father of this mission" and considered him its clearest thinker. A singular intellect and prolific author with more than 140 titles to his name, Belloc had many interests and wrote on them without reservation, from such children's books as *The Bad Child's Book of Beasts* (1896) and *Cautionary Tales* (1907) to his beautifully descriptive travel journals, *The Path to Rome* (1902) and *Hills and the Sea* (1906), which consider the delight and sobriety of encountering other places. He also wrote serious works on politics and faith: *The Servile State* (1912) and *Europe and the Faith* (1920), to name only two.

Belloc was famously opinionated, pugilistic, and unapologetically candid—and certainly a product of his times. Publishers today would likely consider his abuses of the Turkestani Llama (who, unlike the Llama of the Pampasses, is "not lovable nor useful in the least") to be a 'little on the nose.' But his mastery of language, clarity of thought, and his perceptible penchant for seriousness alongside irreverence, for fact enriched by hyperbole, and for intelligence mixed with wit, paradoxically makes him cogent and prescient even today. Above all, he is unrivaled in his serious consideration of how Distributism, more so than either capitalism or socialism, can provide a third and more humane option for building the family and society.

## His Life

*People think it was my French blood that has made me against the rich, but it isn't, it is my Irish blood! A Frenchman's instinct when he sees someone rich and powerful is to want to join him. But the Irishman more strongly wants to fight him.*

—Interview with Douglas Woodruff, *London Tablet*

Though Belloc was part of the British literary establishment of the time, he was technically a Frenchman who bore the marks of both his French and English homelands. Born in La Celle, France, in 1870 to a French father and an Irish mother, he emigrated with his family to England after his father's death in 1871. He attended John Henry Newman's Oratory School in Edgebaston until 1887 and then returned to France to study at the Collège Stanislas de Paris. Near his 20th birthday he met Elodi Hogan, an Irish American who so captivated him that he declared she would become his wife. The feeling was mutual. When Elodi went back home to the United States, the determined Belloc left his apprenticeship and worked his way to New York and eventually to the Hogan's home in Napa, California, selling sketches to buy food and passage. He arrived at the Hogan's in 1891 to request Elodi's hand in marriage but was denied by her practical mother. Belloc would first have to make his way in the world. Never one to be thwarted, he made it his mission to do so. After military service in France as a driver in the 8th Regiment of the Artillery, he left the barracks of Toule and walked to Rome, recording his journey in what would later become perhaps his best work, *The Path to Rome.* He finished part of his journey riding on a cart but still dragging his feet so that he would not technically violate his vow to make it to Rome on foot.

He entered Balliol College, Oxford, in 1892. There he earned first class honors in history and served as president of the Union debating society. In 1896 he went back to California to marry Elodi and then returned to Oxford, where he was denied a hoped-for fellowship at All Souls. (An ardent Roman Catholic, Belloc recollected years later his combative nature: he was known for placing a statue of the Virgin Mary on his desk while taking examinations, partially out of piety but mainly to make his Protestant classmates and professors uncomfortable; he also had a penchant for arguing with his examiners.) After the failure at All Souls, he re-focused his attention on writing to secure income for his family.

In 1902 he became a British subject and turned his attention to politics. After a failed attempt to secure the Liberal nomination in Dover, something he attributed to his being Catholic, he successfully secured the nomination in Salford. He served in the Parliament in 1906 first as a Liberal and then as an Independent. His time in politics was brief but set the foundation for his ideas on Distributism that would fill his later writings. As an MP, he would oppose encroachments of the state into education, mandatory insurance, and the importing of cheap laborers to displace his fellow Englishman. He would also fight monopolies and laws that threatened local breweries. He left the House of Commons in 1910 with a prophetic warning: "I think everyone will agree with me that even the most modest pen in the humblest newspaper is as good as a vote in what has ceased to be a free deliberative assembly."

In 1914 Elodie died suddenly. Her death was a blow from which Belloc never fully recovered. He shut her room and would bless the door in the Sign of the Cross before he went to bed each night. He wouldn't re-enter her room until much later in life when he would retreat there for a respite from writing and work to pray quietly. Notwithstanding his loss, however,

Belloc engaged in precipitous writing that would continue throughout his life, even after he suffered a stroke in 1941.

## The Third Way

> *We must seek political and economic reforms which shall tend to distribute property more and more widely until the owners of sufficient Means of Production (land or capital or both) are numerous enough to determine the character of society.*
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> —*On the Restoration of Property*

"Distributism" was the term given to the political system proffered as a genuinely Catholic alternative to the excesses of capitalism, the tyranny of socialism, and the slavery they both imposed. In its most basic form, Distributism is the belief that man is more likely to flourish when the means of production are disseminated as broadly as possible and when family and local culture are placed before—and accorded more value than—the collective body, which is composed of families and local cultures and follows from them. In the thought of Belloc and the brothers Chesterton (G.K. and Cecil), both economic and political systems ultimately limited freedom, one through the dependence on wages set by those who control the capital and the other through the ever-increasing forfeiture of individual rights and responsibilities to a Lernaean state. Distributism was initially an attempt to take seriously the insights of Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* and those of other prominent writers who questioned the validity and sustainability of the status quo. These considered whether either capitalism or socialism

embodied the basic tenets of Christ's teaching. Though both systems promised and were purported by their devotees to be consistent with the highest Christian ideals of freedom, justice, and community, they both tended towards increasing the dependency of man on things secondary and tertiary to his *telos*.

Belloc's and the Chestertons' ideas on Distributism appeared in several books and in their popular weekly periodical, *Eye Witness,* which famously broke the Marconi Scandal in 1912. Many of these works engage various interlocutors who accuse the Distributist Movement of naïveté, impracticality, and nostalgia. Forming the core of Belloc's own thought on Distributism are *The Servile State* (1912), *An Essay on the Restoration of Property* (1936), his undated *The Alternative* (first published for the *St. George Review* while Belloc was in Parliament), and a primer titled *Economics for Helen* (1924); alongside these are many other essays, letters, and debates. Readers perturbed by how widely dispersed Belloc's Distributist writings are might consider that in the same year he published *The Servile State* he also penned three books on British Battles, a collection of essays, and a novel about a Professor Higginson, whose singular fascination with and theft of a "magnificent green overcoat" gave the Devil an unexpected toehold on an otherwise simple and shy psychologist. (It is a novel well-suited to admirers of *The Screwtape Letters* who also happen work in men's textiles.) Belloc also finished an eleven-volume set on the *History of England* with the British historian and Catholic priest John Lindgard.

It is worth noting that *The Servile State* is less a defense of Distributism than an examination of the limits and failures of the political and economic systems that Belloc saw as two heads of the same Cerberastic beast bent on returning us to slavery, albeit of a new sort. This slavery is ultimately a turning over of man's freedom to arbitrary, or at least secondary, forces

far outside his control. The servile state is the "arrangement of society in which so considerable a number of the families and individuals are constrained by positive law to labor for the advantage of other families and individuals as to stamp the whole community with the mark of such labor." While Nazi Germany was the most direct analog to Belloc's description of the servile State and a most vicious form of its corruptive poison, Distributism sees the same conditions in other places much less convenient and much less easy to condemn. These include over-regulated markets that prevent the distribution of capital and the broad dispersion of the means of production (over-regulated not because they constrain too much, but because they favor too few); they also include fattened governments that are in the business of guaranteeing things far outside their capacity and purview (fat not because they are big and centralized, but because in their obesity they feed on violations of subsidiarity and are therefore prevented from doing their duty, which is to protect and advance the common good). In each case, Distributism is not merely an affinity for the small, lean, and unregulated but also a careful acknowledgment that the collective is built up of many cells that ought not be usurped. Distributism acknowledges the collective needs of the many; it recognizes *proper* centralization—that is, the centralization necessary to secure and advance the common good—but it rejects the broad consolidation of the means of production. In an *Essay on the Restoration of Property*, Belloc laid out the two central principles of this Distributist "third way": (1) a broad distribution of the means of production and (2) the accountability and freedom that come from the responsible ownership of private property. These two ends are distinct from the stated and natural ends of the various forms of capitalism and socialism. "There is a third form of society," Belloc explains, "and it is the only one in which sufficiency and security can be combined with freedom, and that form is a society in which property is well distributed and so large a proportion of the families in the state severally own

and therefore control the means of production as to determine the general tone of society; making it neither Capitalist nor Communist, but Proprietary." Here he used the term "proprietary" to underline the wide distribution and ownership of property, a term perhaps more apt than "Distributist," which merely denoted the effects and not the cause of such a system.

Belloc directly addressed his critics who claimed that Distributism is merely naïve nostalgia or that it would make us all into medieval peasants again. Distributism, or the "Proprietary State," as he more often called it in the *Essay on the Restoration of Property*, is not averse to industry, credit, or proper centralization. It seeks to build these on the humane principals of freedom, on the ownership of private property, on keeping the means of production as local and non-abstract as possible, and on subsidiarity and solidarity in healthy tension with mutual reciprocity.

He prefaced his schema with the following three provisos, which, in many ways, serve to explain the whole. The first is that the restoration of property is not meant to reach a "mechanical perfection." "Property being a personal and human institution, normal to man, will always be, and must be, diversified. There is no advantage moral or social in land and capital being exactly distributed, and there is no possibility of their being universally distributed." Unlike the contrived systems of social and market engineering, Distributism recognizes that humans are creative, fickle, and dignified, in other words complex. The goal is to "change the general tone of society and restore property as a commonly present, not a universal, institution." This commonly present institution recognizes the physicality and reality of the material world and our dependence on it. Unlike the commoditization of everything, which tends to abstract and remove things from their real and present value, Distributism operates in the real. (Belloc shared with the Southern Agrarians and the Scottish Catholic Land Movement some of the sentimentality toward

and all the appreciation for the land. His essay "Mowing of a Field" is as beautiful as it is rich in proper sacramental theology that sees grace operating in and through nature and thereby consummating and perfecting it.) )

His second proviso was that such a work of reform (or *return*, in this case) requires a "desire to own property, sufficient to support and maintain the movement and to nourish institutions which will make it permanent." We must think beyond mere employment and wages to production and application of our talents for both our own and the common good. Belloc saw nothing wrong with owning a business or working for an employer, so long as the corruptive tendencies of greed, exploitation, and the consolidation of property and capital were kept in check by the State—and certainly not favored by it. Distributism requires a change in our understanding of business, industry, and the nature of work. It also requires a desire to increase private property and widen the ownership of the means of production. The challenge is that the "increase of revenue, not ownership, is the object of most men. Ownership is certainly not the object of *most* men"; "if it were," he said, "there would have been successful protest long ago against the wage-earning system." This second proviso called into question what was gained and what was lost in the industrial revolution. Despite what Belloc's critics, then and now, say about him, he was not—in the commonly pejorative sense of the word—a "Luddite," nor was he opposed to the blessings of modernity. But by the same token he was also certainly not a pushover, nor a cut-rate historian who refused to see the real excesses and abuses of the industrial revolution, which, in addition to its effects on the material and moral state of society, ultimately separated men from property and, in so doing, denied them the means of providing the goods by which they could serve both themselves and their community.

His third and perhaps most controversial proviso was that "to restore Economic Freedom, the powers of the State must be invoked." Afterall, we are not just individuals; we are members of communities who must work together to support and maintain the collective needs of the common good. The State ought to serve this end. It ought to protect our freedom, not interfere with it. These protections include the protection of private property. "There must be," he said, "some official machinery for fostering the propagation of small property just as there is official machinery today fostering the destruction of small, widespread property by large owners: and the effort at restoring property will certainly fail if it is hampered by a superstition against the use of force as the handmaid of Justice."

This "use of force" has concerned many who wonder if Belloc's vision of a Proprietary State would devolve into government-sanctioned redistribution. However, his own words explain the use of force he envisioned, namely, the development of laws that favor families, local governments, and the general distribution of property ownership and means of production, as opposed to their corporate and governmental consolidation. His "force" is the democratic process relieved of the bewitchment that bigger is always better, and that all property, production, and participation ought to be controlled and held by only a few.

It is important to note that in these and other essays Belloc did not overtly appeal to his Catholic faith, though he clearly drew from her wellspring. His contributions to the critique of capitalism and socialism—while strongly influenced by *Rerum Novarum* and his belief that the Church was the only institution addressing the sufferings caused by socialism (see, e.g., his essay *The Church and Socialism* [1909])—are not definitively sectarian. His insights find broad agreement and application well beyond the scope of well-read Catholic homesteaders. He admittedly does not provide a complete social-economic system, but rather the idea and

foundation of another more humane way that ought to be tried before being rejected outright. Belloc likened this reform to how one might "re-afforest poor ground by taking advantage of exceptional patches, establishing the new growth there, sheltering its beginnings, and leaving it to propagate itself when it shall have sufficient strength." He reminded his would-be followers that "the restoration of property must essentially be the product of a new mood, not of a new scheme. It must grow from seed planted in the breast. It is too late to reinfuse it by design, and our effort must everywhere be particular, local, and, in its origins at least, small."

## Distributism and Place

> *The mountains from their heights reveal to us two truths. They suddenly make us feel our insignificance, and at the same time they free the immortal Mind, and let it feel its greatness, and they release it from the earth.*
>
> —*The Path to Rome*

Leaving aside the considerations of how best to apply the principles of Distributism and in what form and shape they could or ought to take hold, we might also reflect for a moment on what could be considered one of the more important aspect of Belloc's contribution to the discussion. For some it may seem paradoxical that Belloc, so celebrated for his candid pugnacity and for his beautiful, romantic, yet earthy descriptions of his travels, would yet be so committed to the idea of place—to the idea that honoring the idiosyncrasies and contributing to the enrichment of the specific community is both noble and natural, or that a viable economic system could be built upon something small, local, and decentralized. This indeed would be a paradox if one confuses

Belloc's travels for escapism, or his encounters with other places as mere fascination or, worse, as cheap tourism. But for Belloc travel was a *celebration* of the regional and local. It affirmed how local economies built upon local industry presented a more authentic expression of the people, the place and their priorities than did large industrial factories owned by the faceless and distant. It gave him hope in his sometime hopeless world that things were not all as bad as they seemed. Our dignity and agency, though diminished by the confusion of our age, echoes still. "These are the advantages of travel, that one meets so many men whom one would otherwise never meet, and that one feeds as it were upon the complexity of mankind." That up in the mountain passes of the Pyrenees "the endless debate as to whether race or government will most affect a people can here be tested, though hardly decided." That Cerdagne and Carcassonne are different towns but grounded in those primary things that occupy all humans; family, faith, work and wine etc. Everywhere he went he saw the creativity of man reminding him of the inescapable truth, we are in relationship with the environment and people who surround us. It is these things he wrote about, and one could argue it is these things which buttressed his views on Distributism and added texture and resonance to the conversation. For Belloc, travel provided a deeper appreciation of all those things dependent upon the people who own the means of production and who live with the satisfaction and consequences of their labor. As an English subject he also saw in them something that could be improved if this local diversity were the norm, usually improved by a British model. Belloc's Distributism can be seen as a profound respect for the relationships, the creativity, and diversity that come from a commitment to a place and the people who live there. This is what ownership provides.

But will men want to own?

At the heart of Belloc's and Chesterton's concern is whether we will give up too much of who we are as free men and women created in God's image and likeness, of who we are as members of communities of people committed to each other and the land we have been given. Will we abdicate our freedom willingly in the name of comfort or for what Chesterton called "the catastrophe of contentment"? Will we lie down and trade liberty for the promises of security and sufficiency promised by capitalism and socialism? Will we become slaves again because we are too afraid, too lazy, too satisfied, and too apathetic to do the work necessary to live freely? In *The Crisis of Civilization* (1937), based on a series of lectures he gave while a visiting professor at Fordham, Belloc wrote:

> the task of restoring private property as a general institution in society is impossible unless there be still left in the mass of men a sufficient desire for economic independence to urge them towards its attainment. You can give political independence by a stroke of the pen; you can declare slaves to be free or give the vote to men who have hitherto had no vote; but you cannot give property to men or families as a permanent possession unless they desire economic freedom sufficiently to be willing to undertake its burdens.

"Will men want to own?" Belloc asks. Will they want the cost of this freedom? Belloc was not so sure, and he refused to give the hope-infused platitudes of his days as a politician. He explained: at best "our effort at restoring property does not aim at perfection nor even at any large universal upheaval of the existing system. It aims at making a beginning. We can plant a seed and we may doubtfully hope that this seed will grow."

Belloc's proposal is less a program and more an appeal to something more deeply seated, at once a desire for something that we know ought to be, a correction of some injustice, and simultaneously a lament that we know our current course is headed in the wrong direction—a

realization and acknowledgement of the mess we have made for ourselves. This two-fold movement of the heart, a desire for something more and the humility to admit we will not get it from our current state of affairs, leaves room for creativity, variety, and prudential judgement on how to achieve the ends of Distributism. Ever the pugilist, Belloc, after having punched us in the face a few times, invites us to have this conversation.