

## RECLAIMING THE TRADITION

### Introduction to the *Distributist Perspectives* Series

In July of 1934, Fordham University Professor of History, Ross J. S. Hoffman, wrote in the Catholic magazine *The Sign*: “It is not an uncommon circumstance for people to talk and argue a great deal about something without anybody bothering to define precisely what it is.” It is unfortunate that Dr. Hoffman’s words apply today to discussions of Distributism, and especially to those discussions that purport to deal with its alleged flaws, defects, and “unacceptable” baggage. Much of the confusion stems from the sloppy habit of mind that moderns have inherited from the degraded state of intellectual activity that characterizes the post-Renaissance West, and to which Prof. Hoffman partially refers. Another source of the confusion is the relative absence of committed, scholarly advocates of Distributism who are capable of articulating its wisdom with an objective and yet real sympathy. In their place are found so-called historians of ideas whose bias is inherently in favor of modernity and all its trappings, such as the near worship of liberal democracy, the “free” market, and industrialism.

What permits this sad situation to continue is the absence of accessible primary source material that allows the defense to speak for itself; that allows Distributists to explain what Distributists thought, believed, and worked for. Aside from a few of the more popular and happily available titles by Chesterton and Belloc – such as *What’s Wrong With the World*, *The Outline of Sanity*, and *An Essay on the Restoration of Property* – that deal with general aspects of the Distributist vision, the huge volume of material, in the form of articles, pamphlets, lectures, etc., that was produced by the Distributists and their supporters during the Inter-War years is simply unavailable to all but the most determined archival sleuth.<sup>1</sup> This paucity of primary material leaves the defense and, more frequently, the criticism of Distributism to secondary “scholars” who themselves suffer either from ignorance of much of what was written by the Distributists, or, more frequently, from modern pre-conceptions which take the politically correct world of the third millennium for granted and who *cannot* appreciate or sympathize with the combat that the Distributists waged against modernism, because they neither see with the eyes of Faith nor reason with the Philosophy of St. Thomas. In a word, the majority of modern “scholars” who deal with the history and philosophy of the Distributist Movement are *liberals*, in the sense of that liberalism frequently condemned by the Church and refuted by her theologians. Nevertheless, it falls by default to these “scholars,” animated by motives pure or otherwise (ultimately only God can judge), to distill the content of Distributism for the modern reader who, absent a heroic act of reading between the lines, has little choice but to swallow the ideological bias in favor of liberal democracy, pluralism, and religious indifferentism – all cloaked as true “progress” and authentic “social reform” – that is proffered along with the simple facts of Distributist history and philosophy that are conveyed, awash in modernist propaganda, by most all modern writing done

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<sup>1</sup> Even among secondary works, the ones that are reliable are almost impossible to find. W. R. Titterton’s 1936 memoir of Chesterton is full of useful anecdotal information but long out of print. John Sullivan’s 1974 *Centenary Appraisal* of Chesterton contains some interesting testimony by Distributists such as G. C. Heseltine and others, but it too is relatively scarce. Even more so are the illuminating volumes by Fr. Brocard Sewell, an English Carmelite priest who, as Michael Sewell (before he took religious vows), worked with the staff of both *G. K.’s Weekly* and the *St. Dominic’s Press* of Hilary Pepler at Ditchling. Among these are *G. K.’s Weekly: An Appraisal* (1990), *Saint Dominic’s Press: A Bibliography* (1995), and his own memoirs, *My Dear Time’s Waste* (1966).

on the Distributist question.

Though this is not the place to offer a wholesale rebuttal to errors of philosophy and perspective that plague most modern writers as regards Distributism, some trends may be profitably identified. The first is the frank hypocrisy that characterizes discussions of the Distributist approach to liberal democracy and the authoritarian governments of 1920s and '30s Europe. In a recent issue of a journal dedicated to all things Chestertonian, leading contemporary commentators discuss the reaction of the Distributist circle to the so-called "rise of fascism." Therein it is maintained that those who, with Belloc, supported Franco's rebellion against the Spanish "Republican" Marxists were "ideologically driven," "reactionary," "crusaders," and "integralists," who engaged in "vitriolic attack." Meanwhile, the ideological biases in favor of parliamentary democracy, liberalism, and pluralism possessed by the writers of these critiques (along with the biases of those who opposed the Catholics like Belloc who supported Franco's Nationalists, and who effectively argued for "neutrality" in the face of Communist aggression) are not admitted as such, but are presumably to be accepted as neutral and objective positions.

This obvious slant, with its accompanying hypocrisy in pretending that only (what is loosely, and often inaccurately, referred to as) the "Right" is motivated by ideological considerations, stems from a preconceived notion – if only implied – that genuine social reformers have agitated, since 1789, for the extension and expansion of democracy and the socio-political codification of liberal "rights." Through such a lens, the attempt is made to re-interpret Chesterton as a great "democrat" who – rather than simply demanding that men be given the opportunity to manage their own affairs, in the best tradition of the decentralized, medieval social and political order – insists upon the penetration of society with liberal reforms and a commitment to indifferentist pluralism. This "Christian Democratic" Chesterton, however, bears little relation to the historical Chesterton, much the way the pacifist and liberal Jesus of the Modernists bears little resemblance to the historical Jesus who cast money-changers from the Temple and declared the Scribes and Pharisees to be "full of dead men's bones." The agenda of these modern critics is thus all too apparent as an exercise in propaganda for the politically correct vision of modern society.

If Chesterton and his Distributist contemporaries weren't Catholics, but rather Fabian social engineers or Marxist utopians, then the project to make them "politically correct" might stand a chance of success. But they weren't. As Catholics, they were committed to a particular vision of society dictated by the unchangeable Faith to which they professed adherence. Among other things, that Faith taught them that

the advent of universal Democracy is of no concern to the action of the Church in the world; ...the Church has always left to the nations the care of giving themselves the form of government which they think most suited to their needs. ...*it is an error and a danger to bind down Catholicism by principle to a particular form of government.* This error and this danger are all the greater when Religion is associated with a kind of Democracy whose doctrines are false (emphasis ours). (Pope St. Pius X, *Notre Charge Apostolique*, §31, 1910).

Pluralism was therefore *never* an objective of the Distributists, because insofar as they took their Faith to be the foundation of their movement, they were obligated to devise social structures to "thwart the efforts of the unscrupulous and enable all men of good will to attain their legitimate share of temporal happiness" (§44). In the words of one of their greatest theorists, they were all about laws and social structures designed to "enable good men to live among bad."

The second illustration of the inadequacy of most modern treatments of Distributism follows from the first. The assumption that real social reform equates to agitation for "more democracy" – which assumption lies behind the attempts to contrast the allegedly "liberal," "friendly" Distributism against its more sinister "authoritarian," "Latin," "Bellocian" variety – is read into the history of the Catholic Social Movement. In this way the alleged dichotomy between genuine

liberals (the “friends of the people”) and the authoritarians (dismissed as romantics, nostalgists, and misfits) is imagined to exist not only between the “good” and “bad” Distributists but between “enlightened” and “reactionary” Social Catholics who predated them by almost one hundred years.

Such a conception is as simplistic as it is unhistorical. That it is insisted upon as “real” history by many “professional” historians reveals the degree of ignorance or ideological bias (or both) that plagues this field of study. The great German Bishop von Ketteler (1811–1877), for instance, is put forth as an example of an “enlightened” and “democratic” reformer. Yet his hatred of liberalism was as fierce as that of his “integralist” French counterpart Cardinal Pie (1815–1880), and his commitment to pure corporatism was as staunch as that of the “authoritarian,” *Action Française* sympathizer, René de la Tour du Pin (1834–1924).<sup>2</sup> These same writers even number the great English ultramontane and social reformer, Cardinal Manning of England (1808–1892), among the “liberals”! That such misconceptions exist among the contemporary writers on Distributism is evidence of a deeper failure to understand (1) the complexity of the Catholic social movement, (2) the subtle differences between the schools of Catholic social reform, (3) the diverse and varied issues that confronted Catholic social reformers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and – most importantly – (4) the essential opposition of all orthodox Catholics, Distributists included, to not only theological modernism but also its social expression. Much of what modern writers imagine to be a perfectly acceptable, nay, a desirable Catholic liberalism, allegedly espoused by the “nice” Distributists like the imaginary liberal-democratic Chesterton, is nothing other than social modernism. The same modernism condemned by Gregory XVI, Pius IX, Leo XIII, St. Pius X, Benedict XV, and Pius XI, the latter of whom wrote in his first encyclical (which many Distributists were sure to have read) that “There is a species of moral, legal, and social modernism which We condemn, no less decidedly than We condemn theological modernism.”<sup>3</sup>

As we have noted, the so-called liberal Distributists are often contrasted by modern writers with their less desirable “fascist” counterparts, in an attempt to demonstrate the existence of an allegedly “distasteful” strain of Catholic social thought which was tolerant of violence, oppression, and coercion, in ways which call to mind images reminiscent of other historical canards like the Spain of the Inquisition and the Italy of the Papal States. This approach to Belloc and his “Latin-minded” colleagues, who dared to utter things not wholly negative about the Italy and Spain of the late 1930s, illustrates yet a third aspect of the ahistorical approach that most modern treatments of Distributism characteristically take. Their notion of “fascism” is vague, rarely defined, and almost mythical. “Fascism,” it would seem, is something that everyone is supposed to recognize as evil, regardless of what it means. It is frequently equated with something else, i.e., with Franco’s Spain or Mussolini’s politics, but the “something else” is never substantially discussed. The bottom line is simply that whatever fascism happens to be equated with, it is evil. Not something that reasonable men can analyze, discuss, and form various educated opinions about. Underlying this vague sense of evil is the implied notion that fascism

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<sup>2</sup> Sadly this is a trend that plagues not only modern writers but to some extent mars the work even of legitimate scholars, such as Heinrich Rommen (1897–1967), who dismisses the writings of great counterrevolutionaries such as Taparelli (1793–1862), de Maistre (1753–1821), de Bonald (1754–1840), Donoso Cortes (1809–1953), and Adam Müller (1779–1829) as mere “product[s] of the romantic movement” and undervalues the defense they made of institutions such as the traditional French monarchy, the hierarchical, medieval state, and feudal agrarianism. In Joseph Moody’s allegedly definitive *Church and Society: Catholic Social and Political Thought and Movements 1789–1950*, the essay on the German Catholic Social movement dismisses Voglesang (1818–1890) as a romantic and his corporatism as “medieval” and “reactionary,” going so far as to call Dollfuss’s attempt to incarnate the teaching of *Quadragesimo Anno* in a Corporate State as a “petty and faulty attempt to perpetuate [Voglesang’s] great sociological and political misunderstanding.”

<sup>3</sup> *Ubi Arcano Dei*, §61, 1922.

really refers to anything or anyone who does not accept the reigning orthodoxy of political correctness, which dictates subservience to popular notions such as the inevitability of British- or American-style liberal democracy; the indispensability to a healthy social order of Revolutionary freedoms of the press, speech, and public religious worship; the unquestionable desirability of the unrestrained free market and rampant industrialism; and the outmodedness of notions such as national and cultural identity and sovereignty. Under this conception all real Catholics are necessarily fascist; Belloc, Chesterton, and the Distributists certainly would be. As a useful historical descriptive, however, the term used in this way is *worthless*.

But one should not assume that an accurate treatment of the relationship between the Distributists and the historical fascist movement is impossible. As Michael Derrick maintains in his study of Salazar, Fascism was first of all “something Italian.” To expand the meaning of the term beyond its Italian context makes it a mere tool of unenlightened criticism and polemic, as do those who equate support for Nationalist Spain with some kind of generic “fascism.” Professor Hoffman’s comment, that so many arguments occur “without anybody bothering to define precisely what it is” that is being discussed, seems directed precisely at the lack of precision with which “fascism” is used today. In spite of the confusion, however, Hoffman did not find it impossible to define the term, if only in a general way. Modern critics of the allegedly “dark” side of Distributism would certainly profit from exposure to his understanding, which, if it is to be believed, explains why many opposed to modernity – among whom we would obviously include the Distributists – would have sympathized generally with the Italian movement of the 1920s and ’30s. For Hoffman says that fascism was essentially a “revolt” against the “atomistic and mechanical philosophy of liberalism;” it was “opposed to the individualist concept of society;” it was “nationalist;” and it was “a movement in defense of spiritual values....”<sup>4</sup> Though not every thoughtful person will necessarily agree with Professor Hoffman, he is certainly not alone in his opinion. A recent review of Dr. Robert Paxton’s new book, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, reveals that the author, an Emeritus Professor of Social Science at Columbia University (and by no means a sympathizer with fascism), sees it not as the “flukish triumph of ‘thugs’ but the result of anti-modernist sentiment....” And the point is further confirmed by Nicholas Farrell, a mainstream (and Cambridge-educated) English journalist, in his new 533-page biography of Mussolini.

What is disturbing about the ruckus raised by those who claim to sympathize with Distributism, while taking Belloc and his colleagues to task for their “tragic” support for Franco and their qualified sympathy for aspects of Italian fascism, is its essentially ideological and correspondingly ahistorical nature. It is a *fact* that serious social thinkers like Belloc, Chesterton, and their colleagues, who longed for a third way beyond the evils of corporate Capitalism and state Socialism, beyond plutocracy and bureaucracy, recognized attempts made by various European political movements (and even by governments) in places as varied as Austria, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and elsewhere to transcend the dichotomy between those two poles as steps in at least the right general direction.<sup>5</sup> That fact is ignored, however, while the “unfortunate” nature of Belloc’s assessment of Franco and Mussolini is lamented and fretted over, based not upon a consideration of what Belloc actually supported or opposed, but rather upon an implied, out-of-hand rejection (which seems both emotional and ideological) of anything that “sadly” fails to conform to a liberal democratic mold. Never mind that Douglas Hyde, a real “fascist-hunting”

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<sup>4</sup> Prof. Hoffman’s contention should not be misunderstood. The reference to spiritual values is not intended to imply an overt commitment to Christianity. Rather, Hoffman says, the Italian fascist attachment to spiritual values was merely a “revival of enthusiasm for the heroic life, for the supremacy of the will and human personality over the material factors in life; or perhaps...only an irrational and instinctive reaction of fright at the vision of a mechanized human society denuded of spiritual values.” One would obviously have had to look to the Catholic element in the Italian society of that period for the remainder of its spiritual content.

<sup>5</sup> Happily, other scholars have recognized this point in a more objective and honest way. Cf., for instance, Martin Conway, *Collaboration in Belgium* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press), 1993, p. 5.

English Communist – who as news editor for *The Daily Worker* was assigned, in the mid-1940s, to cover the clandestine “fascists” behind the *Weekly Review* (a crusading Distributist paper then run by Reginald Jebb and Hilary Pepler) – was so “appalled” by the Distributists and their Faith that he decided, in 1948, to become a Catholic and a Distributist himself!<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, this kind of shoddy approach – which prefers “P.C.” hand-wringing to inconvenient facts – that many modern writers take to the Distributist-fascist “problem,” may be an inevitable result of their being neutral (at best) to the Faith, while being at the same time saddled with a fair amount of modernist ideological baggage. But it hardly makes for useful or accurate intellectual history.

As for real history, it might be worth remembering that we moderns have long ago been trained to recoil in fear at the sound of a term (like “fascism”) that we don’t even really understand. A famous Italian-American Communist wrote, in her autobiographical exposé of Communist activities before and during the Spanish Civil War, that the “[Communist] propaganda machine ground out an endless stream of words, pictures, and cartoons. It played on intellectual, humanitarian, racial, and religious sensibilities until it succeeded to an amazing degree in conditioning America to recoil at the word fascist *even when people did not know its meaning*” (emphasis ours).

One might have hoped that the mesmerizing effects of such propaganda had largely worn off. The fact that there are slowly appearing, more than fifty years later, more objective assessments of the pre-World War II European political scene is encouraging. What is *not* encouraging is that the self-appointed “scholars” of the Distributist movement do not themselves seem to be exposed to this the more nuanced vision of the past that some of today’s real, ground-breaking scholars have arrived at. Those on the left who have ever been and always will be enemies of the Faith and its Social Vision continue to skewer the Distributists for their failure to tow the “P.C.” line. Meanwhile, the so-called “Conservatives,” who should be supporting the Tradition that Belloc, G.K.C., and friends fought for, are busy apologizing for the regrettable “fascism” of those they claim to defend. Too busy, in fact, to actually present, in a persuasive and coherent way, the comprehensive view of the world that the Distributists struggled to uphold. As a result, the work of many of the modern “Chestertonians” ends up being simply a sterile exercise in reconstructing the past (a past which is viewed, of course, through a contemporary ideological lens), and a vindication of only those few “square pegs” of the Distributist program that can be crammed into the modernist “round holes.” What their work should be – a heartfelt, sympathetic, and manly passing to the current generation of the torch that the Chesterbelloc fought to keep lit – it, sadly, is not.

We are delighted, therefore, to be able to present to modern readers, through the *Distributist Perspectives* Series, a sampling of authentic Distributist texts. Their availability, we hope, will mark at least the beginning of the important process of setting the record straight, enabling those who are so inclined to make an accurate, objective, and honest assessment of the wisdom of the Distributist vision, as it is expressed by the pure, compelling voices of its true spokesmen. Spokesmen who, though now dead, can speak again, loud and clear. And how ironic it is that allowing these voices to be heard and their message considered is a practice which Chesterton referred to as “the *democracy of the dead*” (emphasis ours)!

There is however a further purpose to liberating the Distributist idea from the context in which it is so frequently presented by the agenda-driven doublespeak of apologists for modernity and enforcers of politically correct orthodoxy. *Distributist Perspectives* are not simply interesting

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<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, Hyde made accusations that many of our modern “historians” of Distributism have made more recently. The former, however, began to rethink his position as his Communism gave way to Catholicism. In a 1948 article for the *Catholic Herald*, he wrote: “[In 1943] I had accused [the *Weekly Review*] of providing a platform for Fascists at a moment when Fascist bombs were raining down on Britain. I came in time to realize that not only had I libeled it in law but also in fact.”

milestones in the history of ideas. They are speculative and practical truths that answer to a need that is felt today with an incredibly greater intensity than when they were first put to paper. That need is for true restoration and reconstruction in all departments of society. And it was and is the glory of the Distributist vision to articulate a clear framework for that work of reconstruction which, no matter how humbly begun, *must* tend towards the rebuilding of Christendom if our world is to survive at all. “There is no third issue,” as Belloc said. It will be the Faith, and the Social Vision that flows from it, or we will perish. We commend to our readers, then, this Series which in its totality forms not the final word, but merely the first word – and yet a vital word – on the long road back to a truly Catholic Society.

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