

What is Distributism?

Distributism is the name given to a socio-economic and political creed originally associated with G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc. Chesterton bowed to Belloc's preeminence as a disseminator of the ideas of distributism, declaring Belloc the master in relation to whom he was merely a disciple. "You were the founder and father of this mission," Chesterton wrote. "We were the converts but you were the missionary... You first revealed the truth both to its greater and its lesser servants... Great will be your glory if England breathes again." [1] In fact, *pace* Chesterton, Belloc was merely the propagator and the populariser of the Church's social doctrine of subsidiarity as expounded by Pope Leo XIII in *Rerum novarum* (1891), a doctrine that would be re-stated, re-confirmed and reinforced by Pope Pius XI in *Quadragesimo anno* (1931) and by Pope John Paul II in *Centesimus annus* (1991). As such, it is important, first and foremost to see distributism as a derivative of the principle of subsidiarity.

Since there are many who will be unaware of terms such as "subsidiarity" or "distributism," it might be helpful to provide a brief overview of the central tenets of each. In the [Catechism of the Catholic Church](#) subsidiarity is discussed in the context of the dangers inherent in too much power being centralized in the hands of the state: "Excessive intervention by the state can threaten personal freedom and initiative. The teaching of the Church has elaborated the principle of *subsidiarity*, according to which *a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to co-ordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good.*" Put simply, the principle of subsidiarity rests on the assumption that the rights of small communities—e.g., families or neighbourhoods—should not be

violated by the intervention of larger communities—e.g., the state or centralized bureaucracies. Thus, for instance, in practical terms, the rights of parents to educate their children without the imposition by the state of ‘politically correct’ school curricula would be enshrined by the principle of subsidiarity. Parental influence in schools is subsidiarist; state influence is anti-subsidiarist.

“Subsidiarity” is an awkward word but at least it serves as an adequate definition of the principle for which it is the label. Distributism, on the other hand, is an awkward word *and* an awkward label. What exactly does it advocate distributing? Are not communists and socialists “distributists” in the sense that they seek a more equitable distribution of wealth? Yet Belloc argues vehemently that distributism is radically at variance with the underlying ideas of communism and socialism. It is for reasons of clarity, therefore, that modern readers might find it useful to translate “distributist” as “subsidiarist” when reading Belloc’s critique of politics and economics.

Belloc’s key works in this area were [*The Servile State*](#) (1912) and [*An Essay on the Restoration of Property*](#) (1936), whereas Chesterton’s [*The Outline of Sanity*](#) (1925) and his late essay, “Reflections on a Rotten Apple,” published in [*The Well and the Shallows*](#) (1935), represent further salient and sapient contributions to the distributist or subsidiarist cause. It should also be noted that Chesterton’s novel, [*The Napoleon of Notting Hill*](#), is essentially a distributist parable.

Put succinctly, distributism was the name that Belloc and Chesterton gave to the version of subsidiarity that they were advocating in their writings. Thanks largely to their efforts, and those of others such as Father Vincent McNabb, distributism became very influential in the period between the two world wars. At the peak of its influence, the Distributist League had branches throughout the length and breadth of the United Kingdom. Its influence crossed the Atlantic under the

patronage (and matronage) of Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day and came to prominence in the policies of the Catholic Worker Movement in its formative years. There are also significant parallels between the ideas of the distributists and those of the southern Agrarians, though the similarities should not be overstated. Similarly, there are parallels with the vision of “economics as if people matter” outlined by the economist E. F. Schumacher in his bestselling book, [*Small is Beautiful*](#).

Unlike the socialists, the distributists were not advocating the redistribution of ‘wealth’ *per se*, though they believed that this would be one of the results of distributism. Instead, and the difference is crucial, they were advocating the redistribution of the means of production to as many people as possible. Belloc and the distributists drew the vital connection between the freedom of labour and its relationship with the other factors of production—i.e., land, capital, and the entrepreneurial spirit. The more that labour is divorced from the other factors of production the more it is enslaved to the will of powers beyond its control. In an ideal world every man would own the land on which, and the tools with which, he worked. In an ideal world he would control his own destiny by having control over the means to his livelihood. For Belloc, this was the most important economic freedom, the freedom beside which all other economic freedoms are relatively trivial. If a man has this freedom he will not so easily succumb to encroachments upon his other freedoms.

Belloc was, however, a realist. Indeed, if he erred at all it was on the side of pessimism. He would have agreed with T.S. Eliot’s axiomatic maxim in “The Hollow Men” that “between the potency and the existence falls the shadow.” We do not live in an ideal world and the ideal, in the absolute sense, is unattainable. Yet, as a Christian, Belloc believed that we are called to strive for perfection. We are called to imitate Christ, even if we cannot be perfect as Christ is perfect. And

what is true of man in his relationship with God is true of man in his relationship with his neighbour, i.e. we are called to strive towards a better and more just society, even if it will never be perfect. Therefore, in practical terms, every policy or every practice that leads to a reuniting of man with the land and capital on which he depends for his sustenance is a step in the right direction. Every policy or practice that puts him more at the mercy of those who control the land and the capital on which he depends, and therefore who control his labour also, is a step in the wrong direction. Practical politics is about moving in the right direction, however slowly.

In practical terms, the following would all be distributist solutions to current problems: policies that establish a favourable climate for the establishment and subsequent thriving of small businesses; policies that discourage mergers, takeovers and monopolies; policies that allow for the break-up of monopolies or larger companies into smaller businesses; policies that encourage producers' cooperatives; policies that privatize nationalized industries; policies that bring real political power closer to the family by decentralizing power from central government to local government, from big government to small government. All these are practical examples of *applied distributism*.

As the foregoing practical examples would suggest, distributism/subsidiarity is not an esoteric ideal without any practical applicability in everyday political and economic life. On the contrary, it is at the heart of politics and economics. In all politics and economics there is the tendency for power to become centralized into the hands of fewer and fewer people. Subsidiarity can be seen as the antidote to this centralization, i.e. it is the principle at the heart of the forces of *decentralization*, the principle that demands the rights and protection of smaller political and economic units against the encroachments of central government and big

business. Other practical examples can be given.

The constitution of the European Union is fundamentally centralist in its very nature, so much so that all reference to “subsidiarity” in EU documents amounts to a scandalous employment of Orwellian doublethink. As such, what has become known as ‘Euro-scepticism’, the view that the European Union is a gross monolith that needs to be dismantled, is fundamentally subsidiarist. Similarly the rights of rural cultures to enjoy their traditional ways of life are essentially subsidiarist, whereas urban-driven legislation banning traditional rural pursuits is a violation of subsidiarity. In the United States the right to gun ownership and in the United Kingdom the right to hunt foxes would fit into this category. (It is not a question of ‘gun control’ or ‘animal rights’ but of the right of rural cultures to choose their way of life without the imposition of unwanted urban value-judgments.) The continual erosion of states’ rights within the United States and the consequent increase in the power of the Federal Government and the Supreme Court is a violation of subsidiarity. Many more examples could be given but these should suffice for our present purposes. In short, and in sum, distributism as a variation of the principle of subsidiarity offers the only real alternative to the macrophilia and macromania of the modern world.

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