

Distributism: A Political Philosophy for Our Troubled Times

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Foundations

In the early years of the twentieth century, the English Catholic writers Hilaire Belloc and Gilbert and Cecil Chesterton embraced the social teachings of the Catholic Church as the basis for the distinctive political philosophy that they named Distributism¹. The basis of Distributism is the belief that a just social order can only be achieved through a much more widespread distribution of property. Distributism favours a 'society of owners', where property belongs to the many rather than the few, and correspondingly opposes the concentration of property in the hands of the rich, as under capitalism, or the state, as advocated by some socialists. In particular, ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange must be widespread. As defined by Cecil Chesterton:

A Distributist is a man who desires that the means of production should, generally speaking, remain private property, but that their ownership should be so distributed that the determining mass of families – ideally every family – should have an efficient share therein. That is Distributism, and nothing else is Distributism. ... Distributism is quite as possible in an industrial or commercial as in an agrarian community²

Distributism emerged as one element of the widespread revulsion and agony of conscience over poverty in nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain. Its distinctive Catholic character stemmed from half a century of Catholic social thought, as drawn together by Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, in part at the instigation of the great English Cardinal, Henry Edward Manning. The encyclical's

¹ Gilbert Chesterton is so styled to distinguish him from his younger and now little remembered brother Cecil, but was more commonly known by the initials 'GK' or 'GKC'.

² Chesterton C. 1917, 'Shaw and My Neighbour's Chimney', in *The New Witness*, 3 May 1917, p 13.

significance has been summarised by the prominent Anglo-Catholic scholar and sometime Distributist of the inter-war period, Maurice Reckitt. Reckitt wrote: '*Rerum Novarum* is the charter of Social Catholicism, and stands to the movement in the same relation as the Communist Manifesto of Marx and Engels does to revolutionary socialism'³.

Manning's long episcopate at Westminster and advocacy of the encyclical anticipated and exemplified the martyred German Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ideal of 'a dissenting church that speaks truth to the state, and does so by giving voice to the voiceless'⁴. His compassion for the poor and championing of social justice and Social Catholicism in turn fired the imagination and idealism of the young Hilaire Belloc, who sat at his feet during frequent visits to Archbishop's House, and absorbed from him much of the thinking that would ultimately find expression in such key Distributist texts as *The Servile State* (1912) and *An Essay on the Restoration of Property* (1936).

A tribute to Belloc's leadership by his close friend and fellow Distributist, Gilbert Chesterton, reads that the world might one day wake up and find 'a new democracy of Distributists':

Now at the fountain of that river, at the root of that genealogical tree, your figure will stand in the history of England. You were the founder and father of this mission; we were the converts but you were the missionary ... you first revealed the truth both to its greater and lesser servants ... Great will be your glory if England breathes again⁵.

³ Reckitt M. 1932, *Faith and Society: A Study of the Structure, Outlook and Opportunity of the Christian Socialist Movement in Great Britain*, London, Longmans, Green and Co, p. 101.

⁴ Rudd K. 2006 'Faith in Politics', *Monthly*, October 2006, No 17.

⁵ Chesterton G.K. 1923, 'Open Letter to Hilaire Belloc' in *The New Witness*, 27 April 1923, as quoted in Pearce J 1996, *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G.K. Chesterton*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press. p 324. That Belloc's involvement should have been so central was not necessarily an **unmixed** blessing for the Distributist cause. To Distributism's advantage, he was a quintessential polymath and public intellectual — a gifted historian, political theoretician, polemicist, novelist and poet whose contributions enriched and enlivened public debate on major issues for more than half a century. Conversely, to the detriment of Distributism, he was also at times conspicuously careless with facts, overbearing, offensive and intolerant. His anti-Semitism in particular cost Distributism support in quarters in which it might otherwise have gained a more attentive hearing. In the 1930s, the admiration he and some associates expressed for Mussolini and their uncritical championing of Franco in the Spanish Civil War divided the Distributist movement and brought Distributism into significant disrepute. Personal tragedies, career setbacks and chronic financial

Like Belloc, Gilbert and his brother Cecil were rising stars of London journalism, published authors and former Socialists, whose schooling in and around the Socialist movements of the day Gilbert saw as having been instrumental in bringing them to Distributism:

It is my experience that the sort of man who does really become a Distributist is exactly the sort of man who has really been a Socialist. ... Mr Belloc himself had been a Socialist; my brother had been a Socialist; I had been a Socialist⁶.

All three were as one in the moral revulsion over the predicament of the poor to which Gilbert gave expression:

To say that I do not like the present state of wealth and property is merely to say that I am not the devil in human form. No one but Satan or Beelzebub could like the present state of wealth and poverty⁷.

And it was again Gilbert who spoke for them all in a resounding challenge to the established order that reads:

The thing to be done is nothing more or less than the distribution of the great fortunes and the great estates. We can only avoid Socialism by a change as vast as Socialism. If we are to save property, we must distribute property, almost as sternly and sweepingly as did the French Revolution⁸. ... If we leave things as they are, there will almost certainly be a crash of confiscations. If we hesitate, we will soon have to hurry. But if we start doing it quickly, we shall have time to do it slowly⁹.

Their attributes were complementary. If Belloc was the St Paul of Distributism and Gilbert its St Francis, Cecil was its St George, perpetually

insecurity frequently distracted him from his Distributist obligations and undertakings, and denied the movement his support and encouragement at stages when its need for them was most acute.

⁶ Chesterton G.K. 1935, 'Conversion and Conquest' in *G.K.'s Weekly*, Vol XXII, No 566, 28 November 1935, pp 143-144.

⁷ Chesterton G.K. 1908, 'Why I Am Not a Socialist' in *New Age*, 4 January 1908, pp 189-190.

⁸ Chesterton G.K. 1910, *What's Wrong with the World*, London, Cassell and Company, p 275.

⁹ *Ibid*, p 293.

carrying the fight into the camps of its adversaries, and laying about him through its publications with a deadly turn of phrase.

The Servile State

Reckitt saw *The Servile State* as having been seminal: 'I cannot overestimate the impact of this book on my mind, and in this I was but symptomatic of thousands of others'¹⁰. Belloc argued that there was no likelihood of Socialism achieving its objectives. Nor did he believe that Capitalism in its current form could survive its inherent instability. What he profoundly feared was that the interplay between Capitalism and attempts by Socialists to create an ideal Socialist society – 'the Socialist ideal, in conflict with and yet informing the body of Capitalism'¹¹ – would result instead in the wholly different and perverse outcome of a social order where 'those who do not own the means of production shall be legally compelled to work for those who do, and shall receive in exchange a security of livelihood'¹². It was Capitalism in this new form – and not, as is so often mistakenly supposed, Socialism – that he saw as constituting 'the Servile State'.

There was in theory a choice between a Socialist or collectivist society, a Distributist 'society of owners' and the Servile State, but in reality the options were more restricted, as there was no likelihood that the Socialist objective – 'the placing of the means of production in the hands of the political officers of the community, to be held in trust for the advantage of all'¹³ – would be achieved. In as much as the means of production might to a limited extent be taken out of the hands of their present owners, the owners would be fully compensated for their losses, and their position relative to the great majority of the community who had little or no property would be no less privileged.

What was more likely in England was a future in which the Socialists would settle for the achievement of a security and sufficiency of income for working people consonant with the means of production remaining the property of their present owners. In return, the many would be required by law to work for the benefit of the few – to observe contracts 'which

¹⁰ Reckitt M. 1941, *As It Happened*, London, J.M. Dent & Sons, pp 107-108.

¹¹ Belloc H. 1912, *The Servile State*. This edition 1927, London, Constable & Co. p xi.

¹² *Ibid*, p 6.

¹³ *Ibid*, pp 5, 105.

one man was free to take or leave, but which the other man was not free to take or leave, because the second had for his alternative starvation'¹⁴. The conditions workers experienced under such a system – ‘how the system would administer, would pay wages, would promote, would pension off, would fine’¹⁵ – would not seem to then to differ significantly from those to which they were already accustomed.

Nor was the loss of freedom it entailed likely to be unacceptable to them:

The great mass of wage-earners upon whom our society now reposes understands as a present good all that will increase even to a small amount their present revenue and all that may guarantee them against those perils of insecurity to which they are perpetually subject. They understand and welcome a good of this kind, and they are perfectly willing to pay for that good the corresponding price of control and regimentation, exercised in gradually increasing degree by those who are their paymasters¹⁶.

It followed that: ‘The pursuit of this ideal Collectivist State which is bred of Capitalism leads men acting upon a Capitalist society not towards the Collectivist State nor anything like it, but to that third utterly different thing – the Servile State’:

The future of industrial society, and in particular of English society, left to its own direction, is a future in which subsistence and security shall be guaranteed for the Proletariat in a status really, though not nominally, servile. At the same time, the Owners will be guaranteed their profits, the whole machinery of production in the smoothness of its working, and that stability which has been lost under the Capitalist phase of society will be found once more. The internal strains which have threatened society during its Capitalist phase will be relaxed and eliminated 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 faith it naturally returns¹⁷.

¹⁴ Ibid, p 85.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid, p 143.

¹⁷ Ibid, p 183.

The Distributive State

As much as was *The Servile State* a searing indictment of Capitalism, it was also an urgent plea by the Distributists for the establishment of the alternative social order that Belloc named the Distributive State. Its key elements – widespread ownership of productive property, parity of esteem for labour and capital, protection of the rights of workers and unions and self-help through co-operatives and other mutualist bodies – informed and suffused the Distributist vision of a ‘society of owners’, as had they previously *Rerum Novarum*.

Distributism anticipated the E.F. Schumacher doctrine of ‘small is beautiful’¹⁸. It adhered axiomatically and uncompromisingly to the doctrine of subsidiarity that *Rerum Novarum* foreshadowed – albeit in an incompletely developed form – and Pope Pius XI subsequently elaborated in his 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*. *Quadragesimo Anno* reads as regards subsidiarity:

Just as it is wrong to withdraw from the individual and commit to the community at large what private enterprise and industry can accomplish, so, too, is it an injustice, a grave evil and a disturbance of right order for a larger and higher organization to arrogate to itself functions which can be performed efficiently by smaller and lower bodies. This is a fundamental principle of social philosophy, unshaken and unchangeable, and it retains its full truth today. Of its very nature, the true aim of all social activity should be to help individual members of the social body, but never destroy or absorb them¹⁹.

The Distributive State was to be pluralist and supportive of diversity and the mixed economy. In practical terms, small shops were preferred to chain stores, smallholder farming to agribusiness, and self-employed craftsmen and small workshops with working proprietors to larger enterprises and corporations. There would be guilds – ‘chartered and established by positive law’²⁰ – through which the various categories of small businesses could protect their hard-won economic freedom.

¹⁸ See E.F. Schumacher *Small is Beautiful*, Anthony Blond, London, 1973, and B. Wood, *E.F. Schumacher: His Life and Thought*, Harper and Rowe, New York, 1984.

¹⁹ Pope Pius XI 1931, *Encyclical on Social Reconstruction*, Boston, Mass., St Paul’s Editions, p. 40.

²⁰ Belloc H. 1936, *An Essay on the Restoration of Property*, London, The Distributist League, p 83.

Agrarian living and livelihoods were preferred, albeit subject to a realistic appreciation of the futility of attempting to win over largely urban and industrialised populations such as in Britain with arguments largely stated in terms of their application to agriculture and the land. Gilbert wrote:

Even my Utopia would contain different things of different types holding on different tenures. ... There would be some things nationalised, some machines owned co-operatively, some guilds sharing common profits, and so on, as well as absolute individual owners, where such individual owners are most possible. ... Even while we remain industrial we can work towards industrial distribution and away from industrial monopoly. ... We can try to own our own tools. ... In so far as the machine cannot be shared, I would have the ownership shared, and the profits of it shared²¹.

Responding to a claim by the best known Socialist of the day, Bernard Shaw, that Distributism could not distribute a factory owned by a major engineering firm among the firm's workers – that it could not 'distribute Armstrong's works among Armstrong's men' – Cecil retorted:

If Mr Shaw means, as I suppose he does, that it cannot distribute the ownership of the works, it might be as well to inquire first whether the ownership is already distributed. I am writing far from books of reference but I must confess that I shall be surprised to learn that Armstrong's works are today the property of a single man named Armstrong. Perhaps they are the property of half a dozen Armstrongs, but I should think that the chances are that by this time they are the property of a limited company of some sort. That means that while the works are one the ownership is already widely distributed. I do not see why it should be harder to distribute it among Armstrong's men than to distribute it among a motley crowd of country clergyman, retired Generals, Cabinet Ministers and maiden ladies such as provide the bulk of the share list of most industrial concerns²².

²¹ Chesterton G.K. 1962, *The Outline of Sanity*, London, Methuen & Co, pp 108,151, 148.

²² Chesterton C. 1917, 'Shaw and My Neighbour's Chimney', in *The New Witness*, 3 May 1917, p 13.

Mutualism

Where ownership of productive property on an individual or small-scale basis was impractical, a mutualist or co-operative model was preferred. Credit co-operatives and co-operative banks would provide an alternative source of capital to that of conventional financial intermediaries. As the US Social Catholicism and Distributism scholar Dermot Quinn has noted:

Co-operatives were essential to the Distributist ideal. They combined ownership, labour for profit, reward for initiative, a degree of self-sufficiency, elimination of waste (as in the duplication of equipment and use of unnecessary middle-men), and a strong commitment to reciprocal self-help²³.

The mutualist and co-operativist connection was a source of major strengths for Distributism, but also of significant vulnerabilities. Co-operatives and other mutualist bodies are best understood as exhibiting the attributes of both businesses and social movements. In modern management parlance and agency theory, the competitive advantage of Distributism and mutualism in their business capacity lies in their ability to minimise the 'basic agency dilemma' whereby divergences of interest between principals and agents incur costs which defeat or detract from the purposes for which the contracts between them have been created. Distributism and mutualism give rise to a 'virtuous circle', whereby all principals become agents and agents principals²⁴.

Conversely, Distributist and mutualist enterprises are disadvantaged in their social movement capacity. Consistent with social movement theory, the typical lifecycle of mutualist and Distributist enterprises falls into three stages. There is, in the first instance, a utopian stage where the urgency of the need and the vision and commitment of the founders energise their followers and bring the enterprise into being; secondly, a stage when the enterprise assumes a more formal and institutional character in order to more effectively go about achieving its objectives; and, finally, a stage – usually referred as the 'system' stage – where

²³ Quinn D. 1985, 'The Historical Foundations of Modern Distributism' in *The Chesterton Review*, Vol 21, No 4, November 1985, p 464.

²⁴ For Distributism and agency theory, see Mathews R.1999, *Jobs of Our Own: Building a Stakeholder Society*, Sydney, Pluto Press (Aust)pp. 10-12.

bureaucracy takes over, and the survival and well-being of the enterprise assumes precedence over its original intended purpose. Social movement theorists characterise the cycle in its entirety as comprising a ‘generation-degeneration process’²⁵. The system stage invites either commercial failure as in the case of some major European consumer co-operatives – the one-time elite of the co-operative movement – or being taken over and looted either from without or within by predatory demutualisers²⁶.

Impediments

And Distributism’s development was impeded in part by inconsistencies and changing attitudes on the part of the Vatican, and insufficiencies of episcopal support. The biographer of Albert, Cardinal Hinsley – Archbishop of Westminster from 1935 until 1943 - has described how, as a young student in Rome in 1891, Hinsley awaited the publication of *Rerum Novarum* with ‘restless longing’:

He arranged with the young Monsignor Merry del Val to receive a copy in the morning of its release from the Vatican Press. Merry del Val arrived with the Encyclical at the English College early on the morning of May 15. The young men spent the whole morning poring over *Rerum Novarum*, already thinking of it as the ‘Workers’ Charter - the name soon to be given to it by general consent of the poor in every country²⁷.

Twenty years later, the same Merry Del Val, as Pope Pius X’s Secretary of State, was instrumental in the suppression of the Social Catholicism-minded French organisation, *Le Sillon*, and the rebuking of its close affiliate, Catholic Action for French Youth, for offences that admit interpretation as having been to take the teachings of the encyclical too seriously – namely, for ‘the unreasonable enlargement of the domain of justice to the detriment of that of charity, and the subordination of the right of property to its use, usage being made into a function, not of charity, but of justice’²⁸.

²⁵ For co-operatives and other mutualist bodies as social movements, see P. Develtere, *Co-operative Development: Towards a Social Movement Perspective*, University of Saskatchewan Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, Saskatoon, 1992.

²⁶ For the Rochdale cul-de-sac see Mathews 1999, pp. 169-173.

²⁷ Heenan H. 1944, *Cardinal Hinsley*, London, Burns, Oates and Washbourne, p 153.

²⁸ McManners J. 1972, *Church and State in France, 1870-1914*, New York, Harper & Rowe. p.170
As quoted in Duncan 1991 Op Cit., p 99.

Few setbacks can have been as crushing to Distributism or prejudicial to the morale of its adherents as the English Hierarchy's having turned its back on so early an example of practical, hands-on Distributism as the Catholic Rural Land Movement, in a decision to which Hinsley may have been party. A summary of the thinking of the Land Movement and its Catholic Rural Land Association affiliates by their principal spokesman, Harold Robbins, reads:

If men were taught to farm, primarily to feed their families, secondarily to feed neighbours grouped in social communities round them, and only finally to market their surpluses co-operatively, it seemed not only would the marketing problem assume more modest proportions but the revival of social contacts would reverse the rural decline²⁹.

The Movement was accorded papal approval in 1933, in a letter over the signature of the then Vatican Secretary of State – and future Pope Pius XII – Cardinal Pacelli. Pacelli wrote:

The Holy Father has heard with satisfaction of the progress already made by the five Catholic Land Associations of Great Britain, and prays this important work of restoring the sane and healthy life of the countryside may be abundantly blessed by God and result in a diminution of unemployment through the development of the agricultural resources of the country to the fullest possible extent. As an encouragement to persevere in this good work, His Holiness most gladly imparts his Apostolic Blessing to all who are engaged in helping to further this most praiseworthy enterprise³⁰.

Unhappily, no comparable expressions of good will – much less more tangible support – were forthcoming from the Catholic authorities in England. The Movement and the Associations effectively had to discontinue their activities when the Hierarchy refused its permission for an annual nationwide collection to pay for the properties that the trainees were now ready to occupy. Robbins commented bitterly that 'The Catholic authorities in England have never shown any other sentiment

²⁹ Robbins H. 1933, 'A Land Movement' in *GK's Weekly*, 3 August, 1933, p 349.

³⁰ Quoted in Robbins H. 1948, 'The Last of the Realists: G.K. Chesterton and his Work' Part III, in *The Cross and the Plough*, Vol 15 No 3, Michaelmas 1948, p 16.

than embarrassment to have their principles stated so eloquently³¹. As a more recent account so acerbically concludes:

Although the Catholic hierarchies were happy to support the initiative on the moral level, they were not prepared to back up that support on the practical level. It was a grievous misunderstanding of the true situation of society in that day. ... The answer was a categorical 'no'³².

Distributism's difficulties also were reflective of its gestation having coincided with a retreat from the social concerns and priorities of the Leonine pontificate. Faced as Leo's successors found themselves with the onset of the cataclysmic 'Short Twentieth Century' from the start of World War I in 1914 to the fall of Communism in 1991, their response was the Anti-Modernist conservatism and rejection of change that the contrast between the young and older Merry del Val – and perhaps as well the young and older Hinsley – so richly exemplified³³. The papal mood and mindset were reflective of an antipathy towards innovation and experimentation from which social movements such as *Le Sillon* and the Distributist Land Associations could not hope to be immune.

Evolution

In the event, British Distributism withered on the vine with the death of Gilbert Chesterton in 1936 and the coming of the Second World War. Cecil, had pre-deceased him as a World War I casualty, in 1918. The movement's demise occurred largely because its adherents were interested far more in talking about it than in giving it effect. As Gilbert's biographer, Maisie Ward, has noted, when a Distributist League ultimately came to be formed in 1926, it was begged to spend more time clarifying its principles, less time in criticism:

But much more fundamental for the League was the constantly recurrent question of when it was going to begin to do something?

³¹ Robbins H. 1948, 'The Last of the Realists: G.K. Chesterton and His Work' Part II, Appendix A, in *The Cross and the Plough*, Vol 15, No 2, Saints Peter and Paul, 1948, p 17.

³² Lanz T. 2003, 'Introduction' in McQuillan J and Others 1934, *Flee to the Fields: The Founding Papers of the Catholic Land Movement*, London, Heath Cranton. This edition 2003, Norfolk VA, IHS Press, pp 10-11.

³³ Hobsbawm E. 1994, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, London, Michael Joseph.

To this the answer, given often by G.K. himself, was that, while the League hoped in time to create the community of which he had written, its own work was only that of Propaganda – of a wider and wider dissemination of the principles of Distributism. Their work, they said, was to talk. ... One sees the point, of course; yet I cannot help feeling that it would have been better if the majority of the League had done some bit of constructive work towards a Distributist world and sweated out of their system the irritability that found vent in some of their quarrels. ... The main body of Distributists would have learnt their own principles better by trying to act on them, and been far more effective in conveying them to others³⁴.

However, the Distributist idea did not die with Gilbert as many supposed, but rather had immigrated earlier on to Canada. It was alive and well in Nova Scotia, and being carried forward there by the Antigonish Movement which two remarkable Catholic priests, Father Jimmy Tompkins and Father Moses Coady, established there in the 1920s and 1930s. Coady and Tompkins created a new Distributism on the basis of adult education, Rochdale co-operation and Raiffeisen credit unionism³⁵. Their aim was to enable local communities to become ‘masters of their own destiny’ and enjoy ‘the good and abundant life’, by mobilising local and regional resources for regional economic development. Coady wrote:

We start with simple things that are vital to human living and move on up the scale to the more cultural and refining activities that make life complete. Through credit unions, co-operative stores,

³⁴ Ward M. 1944, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, London, Sheed & Ward, pp 435-436, 442.

³⁵ For a detailed account of the Antigonish Movement, see Mathews 1999, *Op Cit*, Chapters 7 & 8. The indebtedness of the Antigonish Movement to the British Distributists is acknowledged in explicit terms by its co-founder, Father ‘Jimmy’ Tompkins, in a 1938 draft sermon that reads:

We of St Francis Xavier have learned valuable lessons from the Distributist followers of Chesterton and Belloc. The British Distributists told us that their idea is to preach the restoration of liberty by the distribution of property – restoring family and individual liberty in national life by a revival of agriculture, favouring small industries, attacking monopolies and trusts, opposing a servile press owned by the rich and denouncing the anonymous control of finance.

Tompkins J.J. 1938, Tompkins Papers, Beaton Institute Archives, University College of Cape Breton.

lobster factories and sawmills, we are laying the foundations for an appreciation of Shakespeare and grand opera³⁶.

The magic and magnetism of the Antigonish Movement in its heyday is now insufficiently remembered or understood. Maisie Ward credits the Movement with 'a happy blending of theory and practice':

For the University itself has its Extension Movement and by its organ *The Maritime Co-operator* provided the theory, while up and down the country co-operative groups have built their own houses and canneries, started their own co-operative stores and savings banks and made the Maritime Provinces a hopeful and property-owning community of small farmers and fisher folk³⁷.

As Coady's biographer, Michael Welton, has so vividly recalled:

Antigonish, now a rural town like so many others, graced by malls and fast-food outlets, glowed with a radiant light in the 1930s and 1940s. ... For an evanescent historical moment, the Antigonish Movement captured the imagination of the world. Journalists, liberal-minded religious leaders, papal authorities, eastern seaboard intellectuals, professors, theologians, social reformers, wild-eyed dreamers, co-operative leaders and innocent youth came from far and wide to witness the 'miracle of Antigonish'. Hard minds and doubting hearts were transformed by the co-operative miracle as tourists witnessed rustic lobster factories springing up in communities with previously unremarkable histories³⁸.

If Antigonish ultimately asked more of consumer co-operation and credit unionism than they were able to deliver, that in no way detracts from the energy its adherents devoted to their cause, nor from the short-to-medium term alleviation of endemic poverty, the enhancement of human dignity and the restoration of hope that they accomplished, and the

³⁶ Coady M.M. 1939, *Masters of Their Own Destiny: The Story of the Antigonish Movement of Adult Education Through Economic Co-operation*, New York, Harper & Rowe. This edition 1980, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Formac Publishing Co, p 68.

³⁷ Ward 1944 Op Cit, pp 435-436, 442.

³⁸ Welton M.R. 2001, *Little Mosie from Margaree: A Biography of Moses Michael Coady*, Thompson Educational Publishing Inc, Toronto.

inspiration and encouragement they afforded for others after them and afar off.

It remained for a further notable priest, Don Jose Maria Arizmendiarieta, to bring an evolved Distributism to triumphant success, through the great worker co-operative complex – now the Mondragon Co-operative Corporation – that he founded at Mondragon in the Basque region of Spain³⁹. The essentials of the Mondragon story are simple. What began in 1956 as a handful of workers in a disused factory, using hand tools and sheet metal to make oil-fired heating and cooking stoves, has now become a massive conglomerate of some 160 manufacturing, retail, financial, agricultural, civil engineering and support co-operatives, with jobs for 71,000 workers, assets of \$US22.3 billion and an annual \$US12.6 billion in sales.

Consistent with Cecil's retort to Shaw, all workers are members of the businesses in which they are employed, with an equal say in their governance on a one member/one vote basis and sharing on a proportionately equal basis in the profits or losses. The key Distributist objective of a sustainably widespread distribution of property has been achieved by the co-operatives, in as much as members have property of four kinds:

- ownership of their jobs;
- direct personal ownership of capital held for them in individual capital accounts;
- a shared ownership of the assets of their co-operatives such as buildings, equipment and reserves; and
- a further shared ownership – albeit less direct – of the unique secondary support co-operatives in which the primary co-operatives are major stakeholders.

³⁹ For a detailed account of the Mondragon co-operatives, see Mathews 1999, Op Cit, Chapters 9 & 10. The Antigonish link with Mondragon is verified by Tom Webb, a successor of Moses Coady as Director of the Extension Department at the University of St Francis Xavier in Antigonish. When Webb visited Mondragon with a study group in the early 1980s, a fellow member of the group identified him to their hosts as having come from Antigonish, and he was then singled out for special welcome, and entertained at dinner where reference was made to the importance of the Antigonish example for Mondragon, and to representatives of the Mondragon co-operatives having visited Antigonish. Interview with the author, Antigonish, 7 June, 1996.

Modern, evolved Distributism as exemplified by Mondragon is, in a sense, most usefully to be understood as the form in which Socialism of the mutualist, associative and communitarian kind originally embraced by Belloc and the Chesterton brothers and countenanced by Manning and *Rerum Novarum* has been re-born, following the well-intentioned but ultimately counter-productive flirtation with statism that so comprehensively distracted it throughout the greater part of the twentieth century.

Australia

And what of Australia? Maisie Ward concluded her 1944 biography of Chesterton with an assessment that today cannot be read without emotion. She wrote:

There has been a great stirring of the waters in every country: each has taken and has given to the other, and most of those thus co-operating have been the 'little' men whom G.K. loved In Australia Distributism has given a fresh slant to both Labour and Catholic leadership. The Campion Society founded in Melbourne in 1931, the Catholic Guild of Social Studies in Adelaide, the Aquinas Society in Brisbane, The Chesterton Club in Perth and the Campion Society in Sydney have all based their thinking and their action on the Chesterbelloc philosophy, These groups have closely analysed Belloc's *The Servile State* and *Restoration of Property* and have applied its principles in their social action in a most interesting fashion. ... Most important, however, of all the Australian developments has been the approval of the main Distributist ideal by the Australasian Hierarchy as the aim of Catholic Social Action⁴⁰.

How far short has not reality fallen of Ward's hopes for us? How sixty and more years later cannot but we be haunted by a profound sense of lost opportunities and defeat snatched from the jaws of victory? How indeed shall not her words resonate for us with that most prescient and terrifying of all passages from Tolkein: 'We have fought the long defeat'?

⁴⁰ Ward 1944, Op Cit, pp 446-447

Yet standing by the grave of the founder of the co-operative movement, Robert Owen, as I did in the northern hemisphere summer of 1989, standing in 1996 by the graves of Jimmy Tompkins and Moses Coady on the hillside above the university at Antigonish, and standing in 1997 by the statue of Arizmendiarieta in the courtyard at the university in Mondragon, it seemed to me that no good idea is ever wholly lost. Buried as Distributism has sought to be by many, it has re-emerged at Mondragon as a beacon of hope for a world where hope has become a rarity. Were the original Distributists alive today, the shape of modern, evolved Distributism as at Mondragon – the synthesis between Distributism and mutualism that is Arizmendiarieta’s legacy to us – might well surprise them. It is unlikely that they would be disappointed. And as the world once again teeters on the verge of convergent catastrophes, may not it yet come to be affirmed of Distributism in the words of Victor Hugo, that ‘nothing is so powerful as an idea whose time has come’?

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