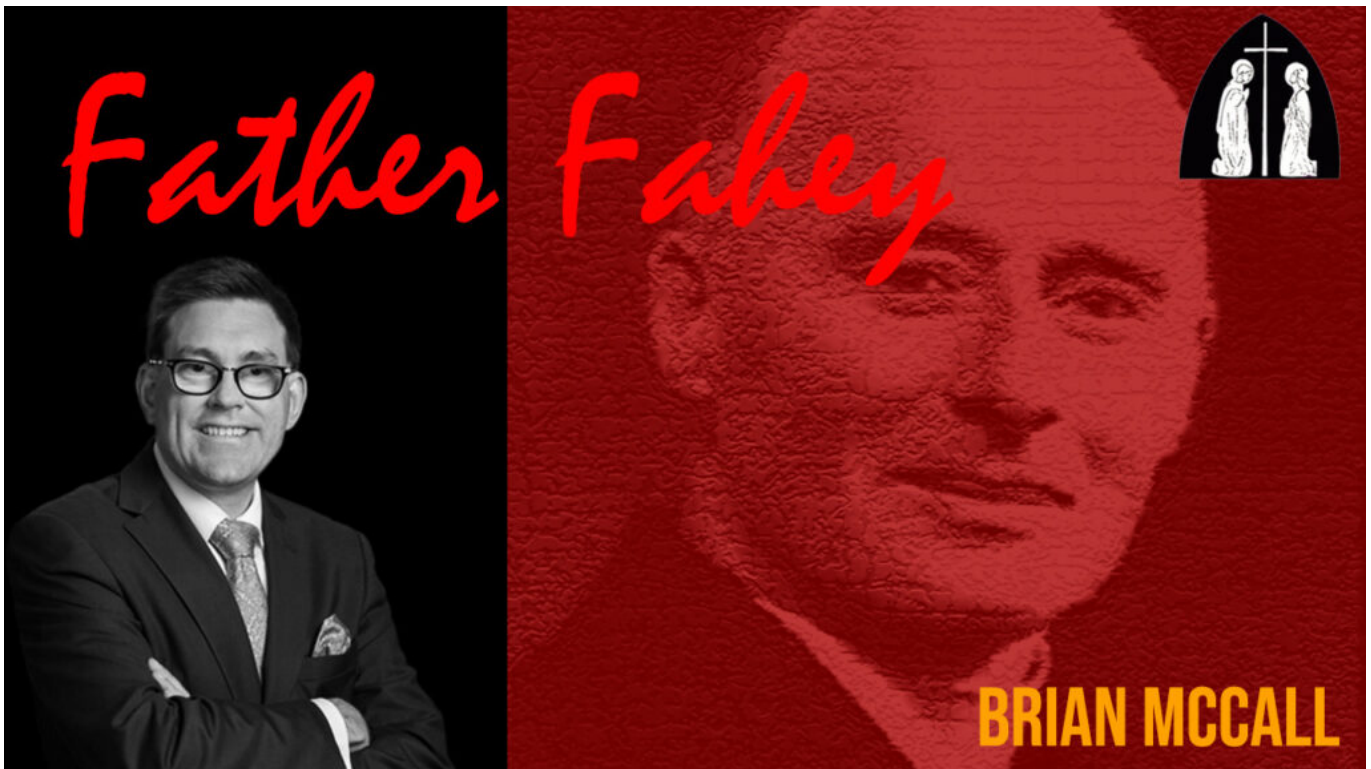


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By Brian McCall

Anyone who has been moving in traditionalist circles at some point will come across someone who will ask his opinion on “Distributism.” The term generally refers to a theory of economics developed by Catholic thinkers in the early twentieth century. It was developed following the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. Two key intellectual figures in the development of the theory were Hilaire Belloc and GK Chesterton. In this article, we will sketch out the main tenets of this movement.

Is it an economic theory?

First, both Belloc and Chesterton would deny that they were developing any new economic theory. They were merely explaining perennial Catholic moral principles and applying them to the current situation in the world. Likewise, Leo XIII would not have admitted that he was developing or creating any new catholic teaching. He was merely stating those

perennial principles and applying them to new situations. Secondly, unlike modern academic economists and Communists (I recognize that might be a bit redundant) Leo, Chesterton, and Belloc would not make a distinction between economics and ethics or morality. Agreeing with Aristotle they understood economics to be a subdiscipline of moral philosophy. Economics is not only descriptive, explaining how commerce or markets work, but also normative. Since all economics involves human activity - animals do not have economies - it is a species of morality which is the science of free human action. It would be equivalent to saying that politics has nothing to do with morality, something most modern politicians probably believe. Pope Leo, and later Pope Pius XI, as well as Belloc and Chesterton saw the Catholic theory, now referred to as distributism, as in opposition to both capitalism and communism. Now, both 'capitalism' and 'communism' are complex and cover many variations. Yet, if we boil them down to their essences, they are based on the same flawed principles. They are both utilitarian and materialist. Their ends are limited to maximizing financial and economic resources and admit no constraint on these pursuits. They place material advancement as the primary end of human activity. As Belloc demonstrates in his book, *The Servile State*, both systems tend to the same end albeit by different means. Classical liberal capitalism and communism, both end in the concentration of wealth and means of production in the hands of a small minority of the population. Communism achieved this end by the civil government, seizing private property and appropriating economic resources, and the means of production into the hands of an oligarchy controlling the state. Capitalism achieves the same, and through an unregulated market for competition that ends with the means of production and other economic wealth, being concentrated in the hands of the few who survive this Darwinian battle of the fittest. From the perspective of the majority of a nation, the results are virtually indistinguishable. Wealth and means of production are concentrated in the hands of the few regardless of whether those few are called government employees or transnational conglomerate executives. The effect is the same. Thus, distributism is attacked on both sides by capitalists and communists alike since it resists both of their attempts to concentrate wealth.



G.K. Chesterton, left, and Hilaire Belloc, right. Key figures in the Distributist movement.

What Are Distributism's Core Principles?

We can distill distributism into three core principles. First, the primary and essential element, not only of political society but also of economic society, is the family. The very word *economics* is derived from the Greek meaning household management. The primary

focus of economics should be the family. Recognizing that families are not self-sufficient economics contains principles, governing economic transactions between families, but the primary unit is the family.

The second core principle is related. It is the principle known as subsidiarity. According to these principle decisions, laws and regulations should be made by the authority that is closest to the activity and should only be taken by a higher or more distant authority when the closest authority is not capable of making the decision or making and enforcing the laws or regulations. This means the primary regulation of economic activity should occur on the local level. Local is, obviously, a relative concept. What is local can be determined by many factors such as the state of communication and travel. Thus 'local' in the 21st century can have a wider net than in the ninth century. Yet the principle is the same. Most economic activity and exchange should occur among families in close proximity. This principle is an example of much common sense that is not very common today. Does it not make more sense for a family to buy its produce from a local farm rather than having to pay for the same produce to be shipped across the globe? Yet this is often what happens in our so-called modern sophisticated economy. As to laws and regulations, these will be more suited to the problems at hand and less authoritarian to the extent they are adopted by local authorities, who know the particularities of the local situation better than distant authorities. The primary regulators of economic activity in the medieval ages were the guilds. We could dedicate an entire article to the topic of the guilds, but for now, we must remember that our concepts of labor unions or large national organizations like the American Medical Association. There is no relationship to the guilds. The guilds were fundamentally local. Their jurisdiction was often coterminous with a parish or at most a diocese. These guilds would supervise economic activity within their scope and geographic location. They would work to prevent the monopolization of resources or trade. The local blacksmith guild would concern itself with the blacksmiths within its territory. Certainly, there would have been communication and some coordination among the guilds, but their focus remained local. The history of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries has been one of aggregating power to control economic activity at the national and globalist levels. Even within the United States, we've seen in our short history, a massive transfer of power from local municipalities and states to the federal government.

Before leaving this principle, we must note that there is a limit on subsidiarity. To the extent any problem is greater than can be solved by a local authority, then, and only then, can a higher authority intervene. Thus, for example, the regulation of the weights and measures of coinage was the province of the king. In order to facilitate the necessary trade between local communities for items that could not be procured locally a standardized system needed to be developed. No individual locality would be able to develop and enforce such a

system. Therefore the regulation of the monetary system was rightly within the domain of the national authority.

The third core principle of distributism is the wide distribution of property. Yet by the word property, they were not referring to a wide distribution of consumer goods. The Distributist focus was on economic property, property that is used to generate things to satisfy human needs. The communists will apply the term the means of production to this concept. What property constitutes economic property depends on the nature of the specific economy. In a primarily agrarian economy, the most significant element of property is arable land. As an industrial economy develops this would include raw materials, energy, and other mechanical equipment. The three fundamental tenets of the theory or related. The family and local community should be the primary focus of economic activity. Individual families and communities should have the ability to acquire and retain economic resources and the freedom to regulate their use. Recognizing that many resources are distributed unevenly around the world, the theory encourages a free and fair system of exchange on the national and international levels so that local communities and families can have access to acquire necessary resources that are not within their proximity. The primary goal of law and regulation is to prevent the monopolization of these economic resources. It is to prevent either the communistic government or corporate elites from cornering access to these resources, and therefore creating a globalist one-world economy that is not oriented to the family or the community but to the ends or goals of the globalist elite.

As with all principles, there can certainly be an acceptable range of discussion and disagreement about the precise policies directives, or means to achieve the implementation of these principles. Therefore, any individual adhering to the Distributist understanding of economics could certainly disagree as to matters of detail with others of the same persuasion. One of the most difficult practical issues on which there can be disagreement is how to implement these core catholic principles once a society has degenerated so far away from them like our own. It is easier to discuss principles to prevent the corruption of economics by liberalism or communism, but harder to theorize how to put the genie back in the bottle. Analogously it is easier to see how modernism and liberalism have corrupted the church and then it is to devise a practical plan to reverse this damage. It is not enough to say 'teach the truth' again when there are hundreds of millions of Catholics, who are malformed now both liturgically and doctrinally. This is an important point to understand because the enemies of distributism will attempt to refute the principles by claiming its adherence does not have a unified agreed plan for implementing its principles. This is a red herring argument. It is liberal and communist thinking that has concentrated wealth in the hands of governments and multi-billion dollar transnational corporations. Liberals then blame those advanced and Catholic principles for struggling to articulate ways of undoing

this damage.

Conclusion and Recommendations

If one wants to read more about Distributism, I would recommend the following to get started: *Rerum Novarum*, *Quadregesimo Anno*, Hilaire Belloc's *Economics for Helen* and *The Servile State*, Father Dennis Fahey's books on Catholic social order, Father Vincent McNabb's several good books on Catholic economics. For contemporary discussion and debates on topics timely today the Distributist review <https://distributistreview.com/> is an interesting source, although readers should be aware it is tainted with some post-Conciliar errors in the area of social doctrine. A more reliable contemporary source is *the Josias* <https://thejosias.com/about/> which is more traditionalist in outlook. The most significant hurdle to coming to grips with these issues is that we have all been indoctrinated with liberal ideas that claim to promote freedom, but really promote servitude to concentrated monopolies.

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