

Interview with a Distributist

デイスチブチストとのインタビュー

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Keyword

- ① distributism ② economics ③ G. K. Chesterton
④ E. F. Schumacher ⑤ Catholic social teaching

Abstract

This interview explores distributism both historically and impressionistically as a *third way* integrating economics with morality and creativity. Unlike communism, private property is the basis of distributism, but unlike capitalism “productive property” is distributed as widely as possible. Distributism was nearly universal before productive property owners became wage earners. This conversation considers distributism’s Christian roots in the Catholic encyclical *Rerum Novarum* and in G. K. Chesterton’s thought, as well as broader applications such as E. F. Schumacher’s “Buddhist economics” and the role of technological innovation.

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Matthew Taylor: Distributism is difficult to discuss. Most people have never heard of it, and when they do, they easily mistake it for socialism. Why is distributism so little known, and how would you describe it to someone first encountering it?

Thomas Turner: Your opening question makes it very difficult to make a good first-impression for distributism. It starts with a very unfortunate name, which immediately calls to mind the well-worn phrase “*the redistribution of wealth.*” It is not the redistribution of wealth, but would end in a much more even distribution as a serendipitous side effect. Ignoring your first question for now, I’d rather start by trying to plant an image to associate distributism with: think warm-fuzzy Norman Rockwell paintings or Walton’s Mountain.¹ *The Homecoming* is, yes, a sappy made for TV movie, but it really does encapsulate distributism. It was our reality, positioned at a real point in history, the precipice between The Great Depression and WWII, and simultaneously at the precipice between a waning distributism reality and a soon to be complete social atomization into individual employment. Winston Churchill gave us the powerful rhetoric of the iron curtain descending upon Europe. That metaphor is far more applicable here, because it was WWII that was the real iron-curtain which forever left distributism as the common way-of-life on the other side of the curtain. Everything on this side, we call modernity, is awesome. Everything on the other side is forgettable and regrettable. And so, distributism remains tainted as a mere retro-romantic fiction. WWII as the iron curtain of history is for me a recurring theme.

Your first question carries with it the unavoidable implication that it is unknown because it is no good. If it were any good, people would know about it.

¹ Earl Hamner’s *Spencer’s Mountain* (1961) was adapted into the movie *Spencer’s Mountain* (Warner Brothers, 1963) then the movie *The Homecoming, a Christmas Story* (CBS: 1971), which became the TV show *The Waltons* (Hallmark: 1971-1981). All of these stories portray a distributist lifestyle which ends with that generation.

History is written by the victor. In the war between big and little, big business and big government won. It is always the winner who writes the narratives. Landed aristocracy, factory owners and taxmen all hate distributism. It is a peasant ideology, which was for the most part finally eradicated at that milestone, the iron curtain.

If the first encounterer can get past all this negative imagery, the basic distributist principle to grasp is this: Distributism is the widest possible distribution of the ownership of the means of production. This is G. K. Chesterton's formal definition.² Man is the tool-wielding animal. He should own the tool he wields.

MT: You invoke Chesterton, who, along with Hillaire Belloc, famously championed distributism.³ Chesterton also famously wrote “Too much capitalism does not mean too many capitalists, but too few capitalists . . .”⁴

Alas, you are dating even me with your media references, but they do make distributism concrete. To put it in my current Japan context, I have noticed many distributist themes in the animated films of Studio Ghibli. In *Whisper of the Heart* (1995), the key male character (the love interest) wants to go to Italy to master violin making. He lives with his grandfather, also a musician and artisan, who owns the workshop attached to the antique shop which the young heroine stumbles upon. This is a “distributist” oasis in the urban sprawl of West Tokyo.⁵ We often see in Ghibli films not only your agrarian ideal, but this yearning for the

² Stated in several different ways by Chesterton, this formulation is actually found in the encyclical of Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra: On Christianity and Social Progress* (Vatican: The Holy See, 1961), paragraph 115, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater.html.

³ See for instance Gilbert Keith Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity* (Norfolk, Virginia: IHS Press, 2001 [1926]), Hillaire Belloc, *An Essay on the Restoration of Property* (Norfolk, Virginia: IHS Press, 2012 [1936]) and Belloc, *The Servile State* (London: T. N. Fallis, 1912).

⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *The Superstition of Divorce* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920) 41. Retrieved from Archive.org, <https://archive.org/details/cu31924021866714>.

⁵ Original release, *Mimi wo Sumaseba* (If you listen closely), written by Hayao Miyazaki, directed by Yoshifumi Kondo (Studio Ghibli, 1995), original comic by Aoi Hiragi (*Ribon*, Shueisha 1989). Released in English as *Whisper of the Heart* (Walt Disney Pictures, 1996).

small, human scale, for labors of love, for self-ownership.

To restate your observations, communism (or socialism) and capitalism both concentrate wealth, specifically productive property, in the hands of a few. By contrast, in distributism, most households would be self-supporting or even self-sustaining, with their own farm, businesses, shops or restaurants.

TT: I love that quote. I can imagine Chesterton, that mountain of a man, boom out in a deep voice “More Capitalists!!!”

That quote demands a definition of capitalism. “*Capital*” stems from a root meaning “*head*” and came to refer to livestock, usually cattle. They were an early form of money, or transferable wealth, supposedly, the first liquid asset. So the common conception of capitalism is investment, to participate in human enterprises by doing none of it, except metaphorically walking your cow to market, investing liquid assets.

This, I think, is how Chesterton uses “capitalism,” a bad thing, but it is unclear the distinction he makes with (many) “capitalists,” a good thing. If many capitalists is the same as many investors, then Chesterton would have applauded the boom of investment in the twenties which led directly to the crash.

I can only give my definition of capitalism. Because of my decades in manufacturing, my perspective is from the work side. In this realm (and manufacturing is at the heart of everything we are talking about) capital is the machine or special tool, equipment, automation, etc. that gives you an advantage to produce more efficiently. My whole career was spent inventing, designing and building advantages for the owners. I always had to ask nice for their capital (money), so that I could build my capital (equipment). I had to have good ROI’s (annual percent Return On Investment), and Payback (when do we get our money back before our new equipment [our new goose] starts laying it’s golden eggs?).

I see pure capitalists in the men who, shortly after the agrarian revolution,

spent a whole summer digging a well. No money, no investors, just an investment of one's life energy which yields no immediate return but an advantage at the end. Everything that a wage-earner does has an immediate return and nothing at the end. He will forever be disadvantaged, because he will never own and control the tool he wields. From my perspective that is a tragedy. It strips him of his creativity as homo-faber, because he is not sovereign over the tool he wields. He must wield it towards someone else's goals, not his own. Wage servitude strips him of his sovereignty, creativity, sense of self, or just simply strips him of his dignity.

To set straight a misunderstanding, you wrote of most households having "their own farm, businesses, shops or restaurants," implying it was one or the other. In reality, everybody was a farmer, everybody grew or raised a large portion of their food. My grandfather was a blacksmith; he had six sons and a ten to fifteen acre farm of hay, milk cows, steers, pigs, and everybody, even town dwellers, had chickens and vegetable gardens. WWII ended it even as it promoted "*Victory Gardens*."⁶

MT: Since you mention cows, Chesterton, again, made an amusing observation about "Jack and the Beanstalk":

That story begins with the strange and startling words, "There once was a poor woman who had a cow." It would be a wild paradox in modern England to imagine that a poor woman could have a cow . . .⁷

The self-reliant peasant was indeed the great instantiation of distributism for Chesterton. To return to the misperception of distributism as a kind of communism, we cannot fail to mention the genocidal war on the peasantry under communist totalitarianism, particularly Mao's and Stalin's. (Of course, they

⁶ The US government promoted public and private land being used for food production ("*Victory Gardens*") during World War II, as part of the war effort.

⁷ Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity*, 97.

declared themselves *champions* of the peasantry.) This parallels the hostility of capitalism you just described. How do you view the socialist or Marxist side of the equation?

TT: Distributism is the third way. In the last round we focused on how distributism is like capitalism. That was easy because we all like capitalism, or at least the wonderful consumer items that we get from it. But now you ask how distributism is like communism. That's not so nice because being associated with communism is socially unacceptable.

Distributism does share some or rather *much* common ground with communism. Chesterton's and Marx's lives overlapped by 9 years;⁸ both lived in England; both witnessed first-hand the horrors of early industrialization, and the 'White Hell' of the cotton industry.⁹ There is much in common in their critiques against capitalism. But their proposed solutions were radically different. Where Marx called for the abolition of private property, Chesterton wanted to enshrine it as the bedrock foundation of society. Distributists are the only ones who have ever earnestly called for true private property.

Etymologically, communism is based on the medieval institution of common property. Both Marx and Chesterton were very close, in both time and place, to the thoroughly immoral *enclosure movement* by which the aristocracy stole land from the commoners, kicking them out into the streets. This is where the factory owners found the fodder for their factories. Marx emoted that ALL should be a common collective, controlled, of course, by a guiding hand, a soviet (council), or an aristocracy by any other name. This, as we witnessed, led to a great dystopia.

There is another way of seeing communism/capitalism. Communism has the controlling elite in government. Capitalism has the controlling elite in business.

⁸ Marx 1818 to 1883, Chesterton 1874 to 1936

⁹ Extremely harsh working conditions in textile factories during the industrial age.

Chesterton called these types Hudge and Gudge, purposely similar names. They are often embodied in the same person as they make career transitions from business to politics and back again, usually dwelling in both realms at the same time. This false distinction even underpins our left/right political divide. Recent protests have seen the Left's Occupy Wall Street protest the abuses of big-business, or Gudge. The Right's Tea Party protest the abuses of big-government, or Hudge. The Left/Right battle is a battle between Hudgians and Gudgians, a diversion which both Hudge and Gudge welcome. Distributism makes no distinction between Hudge and Gudge.¹⁰

Yes, of course I agree with your peasant-phobia of all established interests. It is almost a universal maxim: *The little guy gets screwed!* The only way that the little guy can avoid this is to deal only with other little guys. That's Distributism! As for cows, the regulation of privately owned livestock has already begun. It will follow the course of all regulation, which is simply to increase until only big companies can afford trained regulation compliance specialists. That protects the big livestock factories and feed lots which cause serious pollution problems, and with so many singular types of animals packed into close quarters, it is very fertile ground for disease epidemics, like mad-cow. The poor woman with a cow is the much preferred system, from an environmental standpoint. The small subsistence farmer is always embedded in *extreme* biodiversity. Agribusinesses *hate* biodiversity! Drive Interstate 80 and from Western Nebraska to Chicago, it is

¹⁰ G. K. Chesterton, "The History of Hudge and Gudge, in *What's Wrong with the World* (London: Cassell & Company, 1910) 61-67. Retrieved from Archive.org <https://archive.org/details/whatswrongwithwo03chesuoft>.

See Phillip Campbell, "Collusion of Big Business and Big Government," *The Distributist Review* (December 5, 2017), <http://distributistreview.com/collusion/>. See Turner's commentary on the article, "Hudge and Gudge, The Amoure Between Businessman and Statesman," *Distributism, Delphi Forums*, <http://forums.delphiforums.com/distributism/messages/?msg=1.1>.

one corn field the whole way.

MT: I had not considered distributism in relation to “environmental impact.” That is very compelling. At any rate, now that we have situated distributism in relation to capitalism and communism, the other elephant in the room is Christianity, or more specifically, the social teaching of the Catholic Church.

Modern Catholic social teaching arose in response to industrial and economic dislocation, and to revolutionary ideology. It began with Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (“of new things”) in 1891.¹¹ The teaching developed extensively, and culminated in John Paul II’s encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (“one hundredth year”) in 1991, issued shortly after the fall of that other, more famous “iron curtain.”¹²

Early on, in the age of Chesterton and Belloc, distributism emerged in direct response to Pope Leo’s encyclical, a plan to put its moral principles into action.¹³ Distributism later came to be advocated, as well as practiced, by others, including Dorothy Day and her Catholic Worker movement (in the United States).¹⁴ Since our discussion is for a Christian venue, how do you see distributism in relation to Christianity?

TT: Now the question I’ve been dreading. Pope Leo had the same apprehension as he wrote *Rerum Novarum*- “*The discussion is not easy, nor is it*

¹¹ Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum: On Capital and Labor* (Vatican: The Holy See, 1891), http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html.

¹² Pope John-Paul II *Centesimus Annus* (Vatican: The Holy See, 1991), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html.

¹³ Note 3.

¹⁴ The life of Dorothy Day and the history of the Catholic Worker movement are well documented in Jim Forest’s *All Is Grace: A Biography of Dorothy Day* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011).

void of danger."¹⁵ To be clear, I'm not a Catholic nor religious. But I accept the Church as the moral authority. God is, or was, the repository or embodiment of our highest ideals, or first principles.

So this question is in essence to find the principles of distributism in Christianity. And of course we can. But I think it is fair to say that we can also find the principles of capitalism in Christianity as Max Weber has done.¹⁶ And the principles of communism can also be gleaned from Christianity. More specifically, the question seeks to find these principles in Catholic social teachings, and in *Rerum Novarum*.

In paragraphs 1-5 Pope Leo lays out the social problems of industrialization. He and Marx would share the same evaluation. Then in paragraphs 5-15 he sets down a comprehensive premise about the state of mankind and human nature.¹⁷ This premise is saturated with distributist principles. Pope Leo's writing style doesn't lend itself to snippets, but here is a taste of it:

... every man has by nature the right to possess property as his own ...

... it must be within his right to possess things not merely for temporary and momentary use . . . but to have and to hold them in stable and permanent possession ...

... this stable condition of things he finds solely in the earth and its fruits. There is no need to bring in the State. Man precedes the State, and possesses, prior to the formation of any State, the right of providing

¹⁵ *Rerum Novarum*, paragraph 2.

¹⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: Routledge, 2001 [1930]).

¹⁷ *Rerum Novarum* (note 9).

*for the substance of his body..*¹⁸

Truly, that which is required for the preservation of life... is produced ... from the soil, but not until man has brought it into cultivation ... it cannot but be just that he should possess that portion as his very own, and have a right to hold it without any one being justified in violating that right.” (emphasis mine)

Paragraph 16 begins Pope Leo’s proposed solutions. They are basically a living wage, and responsible unionization, with the Church acting as a mediator between “capitol” and “labor.” These are very pragmatic and common-sense solutions that are still very much with us today. But it is also a declarative act of throwing distributist principles, and Pope Leo’s excellent premises on human nature, *under-the-bus!* The very first thing a Union concedes to Capitol is that Labor will be their servants. Then, after establishing this inescapable standing order, they then negotiate for better conditions. From the very title, “*Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor,*” Rerum concedes the wage-servitude of Labor. Pope Leo explains: “...*Each needs the other: capital cannot do without labor, nor labor without capital.*”

The former is true. Yet Capitol will invest huge sums to do away with labor. That was my whole career, to eliminate “*man-hours.*” So the latter is in direct conflict with distributism!

Catholic social teachings are really the only rallying point for distributism. I don’t want to argue against them. Pope Leo emotively lays out for us the absolute primacy of holding to principles. In the observation of our current problems, or rather *the challenges of our age* (paragraphs 1-5);¹⁹ also in the analysis of Man’s

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

nature (paragraphs 5-15);²⁰ and in the moral judgments scattered throughout all 64 paragraphs;²¹ in all this the Church and *Rerum Novarum* is spot on! That the solutions may not be is why practical men like Chesterton and Belloc stepped to the helm and leaned on it a little bit. I don't think Pope Leo would object. The continued evolution of technology has created a new potentiality for distributism that didn't exist in Pope Leo's age. It calls for a new *Rerum Novarum* (*of the new things*).

MT: Those are excellent foundational passages for distributism. I understand, too, how you see Pope Leo as conceding too much to what you call “wage servitude.”

I'd like to turn to another enigmatic figure, who “covertly” introduced me to distributism back in the 1970s, the economist E. F. Schumacher and his well-known book *Small Is Beautiful*.²² Much later, I found out that Schumacher was a convert to Catholicism, and that the book was based on distributist principles, and the very encyclicals and thinkers we have been discussing.²³

I would like to delve further into this, since it touches on religion in a different way. “Buddhist Economics” is, I think justifiably, the most famous chapter of Schumacher's book.²⁴ His pretext was the “economic development” of Burma, now Myanmar, a Buddhist society which was preparing to “modernize” its economy. Though a Christian, Schumacher's application of Buddhist ethics

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ernest Friedrich Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (New York: Harper, 2010 [1973]).

²³ Schumacher's conversion and influence are usefully documented by Joseph Pearce in *Literary Converts: Spritual Inspiration in an Age of Unbelief* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999) 362-379.

²⁴ Schumacher's chapter/essay “Buddhist Economics” has been made available online by the Schumacher Center for a new economics, <https://centerforneweconomics.org/publications/buddhist-economics/>.

was much more than superficial.

TT: Buddhist Economics gets right to the fundamental principles of distributism. He doesn't back down and makes a clear moral judgment against consumerism as the highest good and the consumption of non-renewable resources. I love how Schumacher characterizes Buddhist economics as "The Middle Way" which has the connotation of a compromise ... "*between 'modern growth' and 'traditional stagnation'*" (*without giving up too much comfort*).²⁵

I see it differently, perhaps because my perspective is from engineering. I want as much "*modern growth*" as possible. Just as Chesterton wants *More Capitalism!* I want *More Technology!* The example Schumacher used is one that I've often thought about. And it's the one that really kicked off the factory system, if not the industrial revolution: clothing. Schumacher suggests simple easily manufactured clothing, not complexly tailored western styles. I envision home-made clothing. The pieces are cut on a computerized X/Y table with a low-powered laser. The patterns are on software that automatically adjusts for the exact sizes of individual family members. The laser-cutter also indicate all alignments for assembly after sewing. That sounds extravagant, but it's not a huge investment, and if home-made clothing becomes the norm, then the costs of such tools would plummet. Women are very much into fashion, but most limit their involvement to shopping. Empower them through technology to be involved in the creative process itself. That is only one example, but everything in our technological consumer society can be rethought from this other Buddhist/Distributist perspective.

Home-made clothing is not a very radical idea. It would move economic activity from the third world sweat shop factory to local mills, and to home based productive activity. The woman who is very good with her laser-cutter and sewing

²⁵ Ibid., paragraph 22.

machines easily finds work for locals not so gifted.

Computerization and the internet are fantastic tools for the distributist. The internet provides easily accessible markets for buying and selling. The accessibility of information really does turn modernity's myth of specialization on its head, making DIY, and truly being a jack-of-all-trades, a reality. There is nothing that a small naturally-occurring group can't figure out. Most people think of automation as limited to big corporations. But the competence in and cost of computerization has made it easily reachable by every cottage industry; small farmer; dairyman; animal husbandry; aqua-culture; tailor.

Let me add one thing to the Buddhist threefold definition of work which is personal development, teamwork, and supplying needs/wants. Add: Who you perform the work for is incredibly important. It is much more satisfying to perform labor for those you love, as a mother does. Or for those you respect, or at least those you know. And to receive back sincere thanks and praise is the ultimate compensation. Working for a total stranger, and perhaps even knowing that what you have made, or what you have sold, is severely flawed, is inhumane and soul-crushing.

MT: Let me play "devil's advocate" for a moment. I hear this in distributism debates:²⁶ the market system has lifted more people out of poverty than ever before in history. It has improved health, longevity, and the quality of life for billions. Why, then, insist on this regressive idea of "distributism," when humanity is finally being freed from deprivation?

TT: You have framed the modernist's argument with certain terms. There are a variety of terms used, but the arguments are always framed in the same

²⁶ See for instance Jay Richard's opening remarks in the debate with Joseph Pearce in "A gentlemen's debate: Distributism vs. Free Markets (February 18, 2016) hosted by the Acton Institute, Acton Video, <https://acton.org/video/gentlemans-debate-distributism-vs-free-markets>.

way. They all have two things in common: First the “effect” in the modernist’s argument. There are monumentally huge negative aspects of our modern society which get filtered out. The systematic consumption, destruction and poisoning of the Earth is a 600 pound gorilla in the corner of the room. The dogmatic faith of the modernist is this: whatever problems we create we will become able to solve in the future—there is no possible way that we can cause irreparable damage. According to this faith, even our irrational, unsustainable consumption and continual economic growth on a finite planet can’t cause an irreparable problem for future-man. Include the rapidly growing list of our modern social pathos, and you then get a good look at the 600 pound gorilla, which the modernist will quickly look away from.

Second, the “cause” in the modernist’s argument: In every argument the cause, or who/what we must thank for our rose-tinted wonderfulness, is a nebulous system of some kind. You called it *the market system* but *capitalism*, *industrialization*, or a generalized “*technology*” are also used. Other more politically-minded might call it *democracy* or *liberal democracy*. Here in the terms we can see left/right tendencies, some credit Hudge and others credit Gudge. Inevitably it can be distilled down to simply *the status quo*. The standing order is the cause of your “*longevity*.” The irrationality of this isn’t always apparent to people. It is the logical fallacy of *Cum hoc ergo propter hoc* (Latin for “with this, therefore because of this”), or that correlation proves causation: Technological progress occurred with capitalism/the market/good government, so it therefore occurred because of capitalism/the market/good government. The left-leaning statist observes that governments grew at the same time as the factories, and so concludes that our wonderful things are due to our abundant government. The right-leaning capitalist observes that investment capitalism arose at the same time as the factories and so concludes that our wonderful things are due to Wall

Street (investment capitalism). Both think that the wonderfulness is due to Hudge or Gudge, and it happened in spite of the other, Gudge or Hudge. This fallacy gets enshrined in our almost universally held false dilemma (and hyperbole ever-present) that either we have technology with capitalism/government, or we go back to the stone-age. Neither of them ever entertain the idea of a third option, that it could have happened without either Hudge or Gudge, because after-all, neither of them were in the hole digging the well.

We should look at reality as it exists. Just one of a million examples: The diabetic achieves your “*longevity*” because of the process of extracting and refining the insulin from pigs. This process and the pigs owe nothing to the standing order (capitalism/the market/good government), despite the fact that the standing order controls it. An absolutely valid analogy is the armed guard at the well who charges by the bucketful. Do we thank the guard for the water? No, we thank the ones who dug the well. And that brings the focus correctly back to the well diggers, not the corporation or institution that employed the well-diggers, but the actual people who dug the well. These are the ones that distributism thanks and seeks to empower, seeks to leverage.

When one gets past your (as devil’s advocate) illogical and bogus arguments, we can finally see the good and bad in the past and present. We can choose the good from both and reject the bad from both. The possibilities explode. Hope reigns supreme once again. It’s a win/win for everybody . . . except of course for the guard at the well.

I want to be sure not to misrepresent distributism, and make something very clear:

Distributism is an inferior system of providing the consumer with the most goods and services possible.

The Market as it exists today is the ultimate system for consumption. Production

is maximized by keeping the maximum number of people employed “*full-time*,” literally to devote one’s *full* life towards production, whether directly in manufacturing or through services. Unemployment rates are usually single digit, meaning that 90%+ of total collective human-power is devoted to the production of consumer items.

So these 90%+ers, who are devoting their lives to production are also wage-earners, who are serendipitously empowered to consume. And we have been very successful at this, and now can buy things we don’t even have the time to use, because we have devoted our lives to production. And so the system is performing at it’s maximum level, or what might be called saturation.

Add together the above two aspects, production and consumption, and the 90%+ers complete the circle of *devoting our lives to consumption*. It is not surprising then, that we make The Market sacred. In any crisis the first thing we ask is how this will affect The Market, or The Economy. On September 12th George W. Bush told us, “*we can’t let this stop us from shopping.*”²⁷ Any criticism of The Market is usually met with an emotive righteous indignation: *How dare you attack what nourishes you!* It makes the critic feel like a blasphemer.

Distributism can NOT compete with that ultimate system, what art historian Kenneth Clarke called *Heroic Materialism*. As an observer of modernity, I join Clarke in his concluding judgment at the end of his masterpiece *Civilization*:

*The moral and intellectual failure of Marxism has left us with no alternative to Heroic Materialism, and that isn’t enough. One may be optimistic, but one can’t exactly be joyful at the prospect before us.*²⁸

But as a distributist, I at least have hope, if not actual joy, because there IS an

²⁷ George W. Bush, Presidential news conference (October 11, 2001), archived at C-Span.org, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4552776/bush-shopping-quote>.

²⁸ Kenneth Clarke, *Civilisation*, Episode 13: “Heroic Materialism” (BBC, 1969).

alternative.

MT: How do you see the state of distributism today? Where does it exist in practice? Also, how plausible is it as something the world would ever adopt?

TT: I grew-up among many distributists, but the word was not part of any of their vocabulary. “*Distributism*” existed in the family farm and the dream of “*own your own business.*” An equal and parallel option to this was “*get a job.*” So with the fall of the iron curtain, the competition began as to which was the better path. Industry easily won the competition for the individual’s choice. The speed in which we rushed into modernity was incredible. It was the ultimate rash decision.

The choice the individual made was for a job or business, but unwittingly, they also chose the social structure for themselves, and more importantly, for future generations. Unwittingly, they also chose life imprisoned in the gilded cage of the human artifice over a synergy with nature (after-all God did place Adam to “tend” the Garden). After the iron curtain fell, the overwhelming advice young people heard was “*Get a Job.*”

Even in the midst of the battle between distributism and wage-servitude, the advocates for distributism never used the word or articulated the principles at stake. So here’s a survey of where I have found that certain attitude, the distributist vibe:

Construction is fertile distributist ground because the work is organized around discreet projects. It is not an on-going process like a factory. There are many small family sized contractors who still survive among the larger corporations because of lower overhead.

Manufacturing has often supported cottage industry because the small shop has much lower overhead and so lower prices. In the gas crisis of 1973, Japan’s industry was heavily distributed in a vast system of cottage industry and tiny

family machine shops.²⁹ While Japan's auto industry had an advantage in that they were already tooled-up to make fuel-efficient cars, it was the quality of their cars that ultimately won over the consumer. More than a battle between Toyota and GM, it was a battle between distributism and big vertically integrated industry. And in the 1973 contest, distributism won! Cottage industry still exists but is very much waning.

Farming has become project management. The farmer is a landowner, yet the bank actually owns the land. Deciding what to grow isn't much of a decision, because it is either corn or soybean and the soil analysis corporation tells them when it's time to do soybean and not corn. The farmer then gets bids from the big seed and chemical corporations who calculate grow plans. Corporations then will buy the produce and they set the price. Harvest is often organized by the corporation buying the product. The farmer's tractors and equipment are all high tech machinery, which is purchased/financed from big equipment corporations with the technical know-how, to set the farmer up for a certain crop. In the arid West the farmer needs irrigation, and again relies on corporations to engineer it, and the bank to finance it.

The dwindling number of so-called family farms are not a distributist ideal; they are more like corporate sycophants. No wonder they are continually going belly-up while they poison the earth as directed by the chemical corporations. The distributist farmer opts out of this dependence on corporations and are usually found under the Organic banner: CSA's (community supported agriculture) and other niches.³⁰

²⁹ See for instance Konosuke Odaka, "Technology, Management and Market Factors in the Development of the Japanese Machine Industry: A Study of the Interwar Decades, *Hitotsubashi Journal of Economics* 27, no.1 (1998): 1-22, Hitotsubashi University Repository, <https://hermes-ir.lib.hit-u.ac.jp/rs/bitstream/10086/7728/1/HJeco0390100010.pdf>.

³⁰ See for instance "Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) (IFOAM Organics International, n.d.), <https://www.ifoam.bio/en/community-supported-agriculture-csa>.

Permaculture is driven by a moralizing ideology which holds a primacy of sustainability. It drives the need to cooperate with nature, not to dominate it. With each problem of survival the Permaculturalist faces, he finds himself opting out of the modernist rubric, and simultaneously discovers that survival is best won as a group activity.³¹ The permaculturalist and the distributist end in the same place, but for different reasons.

The people who call themselves “*distributists*” are generally academics or men of words. Their tools are nothing but a pen and paper. Was G. K. Chesterton a distributist? He advocated *three acres and a cow* yet had neither, though he could well afford it.

I think there is a basic problem with any ideology of how the peasant should live. Those who easily swim in the abstract waters of ideology don't do well on the dry land of reality. Amphibians are needed to articulate a guiding peasant ideology.

As an amphibian myself I very much enjoy delving into abstract ideology, and I also have a material side, which wants to spend my retirement doing engineering design projects for permies, distributists, back-country dwellers and others, not for the well-funded elitists I served in my career. (Remember in the Buddhist Economics work ethic I added who you work for as an important element.) One of my many planned projects is wheat-straw house construction. A taste of this project is in this discussion forum thread on Permies.com.³²

Is distributism plausible? I know I'm not going to see it in my lifetime ... Well, I did see it when I was young, but I'm not going to see it again, except in isolated pockets of extraordinary people. From the practical side, distributism

³¹ See for instance *Permaculture and Homesteading Goofballs*, <https://permies.com/>.

³² “The ultimate potential of wheat straw construction, *Permaculture and Homesteading Goofballs*, Permaculture Forums (2016), <https://permies.com/t/54517/ultimate-potential-wheat-straw-construction>.

requires a re-engineering of technology. It requires recruiting engineers away from well-paid jobs for the rich, to poorly paid jobs for the peasants. That's a battle for hearts and minds. One thing that can be done to recruit experienced engineers disillusioned with their jobs is to develop design parameters for distributist products. Engineers can't resist design problems, so the academic distributists, permies, theologians, amphibians and everybody else who are disillusioned with the myths of modernity should at least begin the dialog of articulating the design parameters for reengineering technology for people.

To prognosticate, I think more along the lines of the plausibility of modernity continuing. I find it remarkable how so few take seriously the irrationality of continual economic growth on a finite planet.

In Kenneth Clark's concluding judgment he holds:

above all I believe in the God-given genius of certain individuals. And I value a society which makes their existence possible.³³

"Genius" is a concept we can't entertain today because of the ideology of egalitarianism. It nonetheless exists. It is in the Ghibli character seeking to perfect the art of violin-making.

At first take, Clarke's praise of genius is about the great artists he showcased. Now I see this passage differently. Clarke's "*society*" is about the basic, most fundamental nature of society. I co-opt Clarke as a distributist. Clarke's society is the small naturally occurring group, bound by love and commitment. Any spark of genius is cultivated by the group. They work as a team for the benefit of all, which is greatest when they cultivate genius; a champion of their very own; "*Make us proud!*" It is Walton's Mountain, and the unconditional support that the family has for John-Boy as a writer.

Corporations do not invest in the personal development of their employees

³³ Clarke, *Civilisation* (note 26).

(so-called continuing education programs notwithstanding). Average lengths of employment are just a few years. Any development a corporation sows in an employee will be reaped by their next employer. Corporate management actually hate genius, because it is nothing but a threat to their tenuous control. I witnessed this first hand many times.

It's important to highlight what is wrong with our capitalist society, but avoid the trap of seeing distributism as merely an alternative to avoid the bad. More than anything *cultivating greatness with love* is what distributism is all about. That impulse is in us. We should cultivate it. That's distributism!

MT: I think this is what Schumacher was getting at, expressed in the subtitle of his book: *Economics as if People Mattered*.³⁴ Can we say that distributism is an economics based on human values, rather than human values being based on economics?

TT: It is so important to begin with an honest introspection of our humanness.³⁵ It's the metaphysics (*what is and what it is like*) of humanness, of which I think Pope Leo and all these men of genius we have discussed here; Schumacher; Clarke; Chesterton (all converts to Catholicism) have a firm grasp. I'm *A* distributist. I'm *not* a spokesman for a distributism which is the movement of a group of people. I'm a spokesman for a distributism which is an abstract idea, a principle based on or abstracted from reality. Here is the reality:

Man is the tool wielding animal. (Understand that since the agrarian revolution, land is a tool.) So here is the basic and simple abstract idea of distributism:

Man should own the tool he wields. The 'should' part is of course a moral

³⁴ Schumacher (note 20).

³⁵ See the argument elaborated in "Truth" (April 8, 2019), Distributism, *Delphi Forums*, <http://forums.delphiforums.com/distributism/messages/?msg=5.1>.

judgment. Why ‘*should*’?

If he does not, then the tool will own him. The tool IS our survival. If another man owns it then he owns your survival, he owns your very life. Why would anyone choose this? Do we think the other-owner is benevolent, like the communists, socialists and statists (Gudge) want us to believe? Or are we insecure and don’t trust our own abilities in tool-wielding? That we need to prostrate ourselves to the so-called experts (Hudge), as capitalists want us to believe? Or are we merely sheep and just do whatever we are told? Ironic isn’t it, that in our society where almost no one owns/controls their own tools of survival, the collective narrative, the myth of modernity, which is told with great emotion, is all about liberty? The *ONLY* path to liberty is through distributism! Own the tool you wield!

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