Distributism?—or,
Three Acres and a Cow?

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There are many, both friends and foes of distributism, who immediately and reflexively identify it with the idea of “three acres and a cow.” And there is some reason for this identification, for Chesterton himself mentioned such a combination of land and bovine ownership more than once.1 Such statements without doubt reveal the agrarian bent of Chesterton’s thought, and may well be considered as defining of our understanding of distributism. And yet there is reason for hesitation. For an authority of almost equal weight, Chesterton’s brother, Cecil, penned what is probably the most succinct and precise definition of distributism in these words.

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 community....2

Is distributism then necessarily agrarian or not? What relationship is there between distributism and agrarianism? That is the subject of our investigation, and a subject as important today as it was in the lifetime
of Chesterton. For within the last twenty years or so distributism has experienced something of a revival, it is on many people’s mental map again, it is a “live option” in one’s choice of social philosophies. Supported for years by the venerable The Chesterton Review and by Gilbert magazine, and now championed by the two websites, The Distributist Review and Practical Distributism, many people, old and young, but perhaps especially young, are seeing in distributism a possible way out or around the sterile debates over economic policy conducted by our two major political camps, debates which always seem to ignore the most important aspects of the question, such as what is economic activity for anyway, or how can stable family and community life exist in an economy that celebrates so-called “creative destruction.” But if people are considering distributism, then we should certainly be able to say what exactly it is, and in particular, how or to what degree it is bound up with agrarianism. For, to be candid, while the notion of three acres and a cow is immensely attractive to some, to others it is repellent, or at least seems impractical to a high degree.

Now, formally speaking, there is no question but that Cecil Chesterton is right. The notion of distributism as meaning that “the means of production should ... remain private property, [while] ownership should be so distributed that the determining mass of families...should have an efficient share therein” does get at the specific economic structure proposed by distributism. I myself have often made this point in my polemical distributist writings on the two websites mentioned above. When readers objected that distributism committed us to an impractical and unnecessary rejection of modern technology or modern urbanisation, I insisted that this was not so, that these were separate questions, and that distributism “is quite as possible in an industrial or commercial as in an agrarian community.” And, as I said, this is correct. But it is not quite the whole story, certainly as regards the thinking of Cecil’s older brother, Gilbert.

For G. K. Chesterton the two issues of distributism and agrarianism are intertwined, but intertwined in a complex way. If we look at distributism solely as an economic system or arrangement, it has much, indeed very much, to recommend it. Capitalism, which Pope Pius XI characterised in Quadragesimo Anno, no. 100, as the separation of
ownership and work, as “that economic system in which were provided by different people the capital and labour jointly needed for production,” has at its heart a contradiction or built-in conflict. While the separation of ownership and work is not necessarily unjust, when it becomes the dominant method of economic organisation in a society it becomes dangerous in that a sharp divide is created around the labour market. For some, the owners, who are now at least partly divorced from the actual process of production, economic activity tends to become simply a means of personal enrichment via the production of whatever will sell, regardless of whether it helps or hurts the common good. And for these owners, labour is now chiefly an item of expense; hence the pressure to reduce labour costs as much as possible. But what for capitalists are labour costs, for workers is a living, their living and that of their families. Moving a factory to a cheaper location may seem to make sense for someone who merely supplies the capital necessary for production, but it can hardly make sense for someone who depends on that factory for the job that supports himself and his family. When ownership of the means of production is distributed among workers and families, then other factors besides the purely economic enter into every economic decision. In an economic downturn, for example, workers who are at the same time owners will naturally look upon themselves and their families as more than mere “labour costs,” and hence consider other options besides simply layoffs or plant closings. They will see the economic factors as part of a complex of factors which necessarily impact much more than questions of money. Each person’s family, immediate and extended, his friendships, his parish, his attachment to his own locale, and so on, are quite as relevant considerations as the level of profit that can be made in any particular place. Indeed, unless those who make such decisions consider more than merely economic factors, they can hardly be regarded as human beings. They are mere calculating machines, and their work can be just as efficiently performed by some sort of electronic device. But as long as the capitalist economic structure is in place, the mass of workers will not even have the opportunity to consider such non-economic factors or make these kinds of decisions. Distributism, then, quite apart from any agrarian or technological features, recommends itself as superior, ethically, and otherwise, to capitalism.
But as I said, this is not the whole question. For the modern capitalist industrial economy also has effects quite apart from the gross ethical violations that occur when workers lose their jobs or are not paid a living wage. Such an economy, any economy in fact, will have an immense effect on all the non-economic aspects of our lives. And when the economy is not subordinated to the more important ends of life, then it has usurped a role that is not properly its own. For earning a living is surely for the sake of living, not the other way around.

Chesterton is not shy about identifying living simply with happiness.

The aim of human polity is human happiness.... There is no obligation on us to be richer, or busier, or more efficient, or more productive, or more progressive, or in any way worldlier or wealthier, if it does not make us happier.  

Of course, the question of how to achieve happiness has been one that has occupied and perplexed mankind since the beginning of recorded thought—and doubtless before that. And no one can really make another person happy against that person’s will. But it is possible to create conditions in which the majority of people have the greatest chance of obtaining happiness both in this world and the next. How does distributism, conceived as something more than an arrangement of who owns what, speak to this? G. K. Chesterton yet again:

Now all human things are imperfect; but the condition in which [our] hobbies and secondary talents do to some extent come out is the condition of small independence. The peasant almost always runs two or three side-shows and lives on a variety of crafts and expedients. The village shopkeeper will shave travellers and stuff weasels and grow cabbages and do half a dozen such things, keeping a sort of balance in his life like the balance of sanity in the soul.

But the condition of all modern industry, indeed of modern life, militates against this. Even a distributist worker-owned factory, for example, although it would not attack the worker on the purely economic level, might indeed make it difficult for him to keep “a sort of balance in his life like the balance of sanity in the soul,” just as an individual
shop owner or professional can work such long hours that he too fails to keep any balance in his life or his soul. For if life is about more than obtaining economic goods, then even achieving justice in our economic arrangements, absolutely vital though this is, fails to fulfill the whole nature of man.

Chesterton is quite shameless, however, in his promotion of the pursuit of happiness.

If we can make men happier, it does not matter if we make them poorer, it does not matter if we make them less productive, it does not matter if we make them less progressive, in the sense of merely changing their life without increasing their liking for it.\(^5\)

I say “shameless,” because modern thinking not only largely equates happiness with riches, but looks askance at anyone who might assert a right to be poor and unproductive and backward in the name of happiness. Why the lazy bum! Indeed, the vast majority of economists, though claiming that their subject is merely descriptive and “value free,” in fact moralise over our duty to be as productive as possible.

Paul Samuelson, Nobel Prize winning economist, gives us his rule for the conduct of our life:

There is one rule that gives correct answers to all investment decisions: Calculate the present value resulting from each possible decision. Then always act so as to maximise present value. In this way you will have more wealth to spend whenever and however you like.\(^6\)

Notice that Samuelson tells us what the “correct” answer is; not merely the one he prefers, but the one that is “correct.” In this the modern world with its gospel of wealth and more wealth is set against not only Chesterton’s precepts but against our own experience. For it would be hard to argue that modernity as a whole exhibits any especial signs of happiness.

The chief objection both in Chesterton’s lifetime and now is that a way of life that really pursues happiness, not efficiency or growth, a life
on the land, say, or close to the land, is impractical or even impossible in our day and age. Even when examples of people successfully doing what was deemed impractical or impossible are right before our eyes, this did and does not deter critics. In the Canada of the 1920s and 30s numerous families were living a life that was a direct rebuke to the pieties and certainties of modernity. But the critics for whom such families with their old-fashioned farms were unpleasant realities, could easily ignore them and pretend that ever-growing cities and factory farms were necessary for human welfare.

Chesterton quotes from an article by a Canadian, Hugh Martin, professedly “not a religious man,” to the effect that the French Canadians who are living and staying on the soil are “a century behind the times and a century nearer happiness.”7 Indeed, they are “content to be happy without being rich.”8 To assert that one can “be happy without being rich” is to directly oppose the main thrust of modern thought and modern life. But while most moderns may think that riches—as opposed to a generous sufficiency—are necessary to happiness, is there any evidence that this is so? Especially is there any evidence that more and ever new gadgets are necessary to happiness, or even compatible with it? Here once more is Paul Samuelson uttering again some of the dogmas of modernity.

An objective observer would have to agree that, even after two centuries of rapid economic growth, production in the United States is simply not high enough to meet everyone’s desires. If you add up all the wants, you quickly find that there are simply not enough goods and services to satisfy even a small fraction of everyone’s consumption desires. Our national output would have to be many times larger before the average American could live at the level of the average doctor or big-league baseball player.9

Few French-Canadian peasants lived, one may suppose, “at the level of the average doctor or big-league baseball player,” but they were happy. This raises the question that if it is in fact true “that there are simply not enough goods and services to satisfy even a small fraction of everyone’s consumption desires” in the United States, who it is who has taught Americans not only to regard satisfaction of our “consumption desires” as the summum bonum, but who has taught us that those
Desires can never really be satisfied because ever new and allegedly better gadgets, devices, contraptions, doodads and thingamajigs are being invented every year? Who has corrupted our souls, along with so much else? And why and how have they done so?

As to who, that is not difficult to discover. Above I quoted Pope Pius XI’s definition or description of capitalism, as “that economic system in which were provided by different people the capital and labour jointly needed for production.” If this is correct, what follows from it? If God has given the human race the need and capacity for economic activity, then that capacity clearly exists for the sake of satisfying our obvious needs, for food, shelter, medical care, as well as the need for those things which properly enhance human life beyond mere survival, churches, books, musical instruments, and so on. Throughout the history of mankind most economic activity was for the sake of supplying those needs. The work of a peasant, a craftsman, a musician, was in immediate reference to such real needs. But when someone, or especially when a large number of people, merely supply the capital and hire the workers, their relationship to economic activity is one step removed from supplying our real economic needs. They are quite as satisfied if the workers they employ produce iPods or new varieties of breakfast cereals or driverless cars as much as food or shelter or books. For whatever one’s opinion of these first type of products, I do not think anyone would be so bold as to claim that without them that mankind would perish in agony or artistic genius no longer arise among us.

The why and the how are equally easily answered. Those who became less and less involved with actual production for human needs just happened to be those who held most of the economic power. It was in their interests, as far as they had the wit to understand their interests, to produce anything that would sell, and to use advertising to sell it. But more than this, more than simple cause and effect between advertising and sales, the ethos itself of society has been changed, slowly it is true, and imperfectly, but changed all the same. Here some words of Chesterton’s friend and fellow distributist, Hilaire Belloc, are to the point.

But wealth obtained indirectly as profit out of other men’s work, or by process of exchange, becomes a thing abstracted from the
process of production. As the interest of a man in things diminishes, his interest in abstract wealth—money—increases. The man who makes a table or grows a crop makes the success of the crop or the table a test of excellence. The intermediary who buys and sells the crop or the table is not concerned with the goodness of table or crop, but with the profit he makes between their purchase and sale. In a productive society the superiority of the things produced is the measure of success: in a Commercial society the amount of wealth accumulated by the dealer is the measure of success.¹⁰

There can be no doubt that not merely constant advertising, but the constant inculcation in our schooling, most of our journalism and popular media, devoted to the notion that more is better, newer is better, has created what Belloc called “a Commercial society,” in which standards of value are in fact different from standards of value in what he called “a productive society.” In fact, in Belloc’s “Commercial society” the market has taken over the role that society as a whole ought to have.

A market economy can exist only in a market society, that is, a society where, instead of an economy embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economy.¹¹

A cultural change has been effected, aided certainly by the predominant scientistic outlook endemic to modernity, but fueled by the capitalist mentality that has divorced economic activity from its natural end, from its nexus with supplying genuine and appropriate human needs. Now we are told that it is perfectly proper for all of us to desire to “live at the level of the average doctor or big-league baseball player.” That there might be any difficulty harmonising such desires with the tenets of the Christianity which until recently most Americans professed, or pretended to profess, is simply ignored as a silly quibble. For surely when St. Paul wrote that “those who desire to be rich fall in temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction” he was limited by his pre-modern outlook, and when St. James told the rich to “weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you,” he, likewise, can be excused on account of his ignorance of modern economic theory.
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But with all said and done, can we really promote something like Chesterton’s agrarian vision for today. If his ideal was a way of life somewhat like that of the French in Canada, did he demand this for all of us, even for those who have not the slightest idea of what to do with three acres or how to milk a cow? Not exactly.

We certainly should not say that the meaning of a peasant state is that all people are peasants. We should mean that it had the general characteristic of a peasant state; that the land was largely held in that fashion and the law generally directed in that spirit; than any other institutions stood up as recognisable exceptions, as landmarks on that high tableland of equality.12

If we really desire what can, I think, be reasonably termed an agrarian society, or better, an agrarian spirit in society, it certainly need not be a society entirely agrarian. The character of such a society would be shaped not necessarily by how the majority lived, but simply by a large enough minority that set the tone for the rest of us. And of course, such a society would simply laugh at the silly utterances of a Samuelson and his tribe, and its education would be directed toward things of more value than trying to figure out how to satisfy everyone’s artificially swollen “consumption desires” so that we all “could live at the level of the average doctor or big-league baseball player.”

One more matter. Chesterton, as well as Belloc, frequently spoke of distributism along with freedom. But freedom is not a simple word, nor a simple concept either. For many Americans distributism is the opposite of freedom, because, in some way or another, to some degree or another, a distributist society would restrict, or at least discourage, certain types of economic conduct which Americans are accustomed to regard as the birthright of a free man. But as a matter of fact, they are not the right of birth of a free man, but the privilege of birth of a rich man. To limit the ownership of property, for example, in order to keep it widely distributed, is no infringement on the genuine property rights of a freeman.

One would think, to hear people talk that the Rothchilds and the Rockefellers were on the side of property. But obviously they are the enemies of property; because they are enemies of their own
limitations. They do not want their own land; but other people’s...
It is the negation of property that the Duke of Sutherland should
have all the farms in one estate; just as it would be the negation of
marriage if he had all our wives in one harem.¹³

If we remember that economic goods exist to satisfy our natural
needs, then we can perceive that it is no infringement on any of man’s
natural rights to limit his economic activity or his amassing of property
according to those natural needs. Of course, this must be done with
prudence, and it is usually best done not by any distant or centralised
authority but by bodies and entities close to the situation. But if we
deny or equivocate about this, then, in the long run, we might as well
concede to the Duke of Sutherland our wives as well as our farms.

To say No to the juggernaut of modernity is daunting, even more
daunting to actually do anything about it. And right now, it must be
conceded, for many there is little that can be done. But there is one thing
that all of us can do, and that is to set our thinking in order. For if each
one of us mentally rejects the kind of society which sees wealth and new
gadgets as its beau idéal, who knows how far such a revolutionary act
of truly free thought can take us? It might even lead us to pursue that
happiness which we were told is one of our birthrights, but for which we
have been looking in all the wrong places for a very long time.

¹ See, for example, *What’s Wrong With the World*, (Ignatius Press: San Francisco,
² Cecil Chesterton, “Shaw and My Neighbour’s Chimney,” *The New Witness*, May
⁷ For some idea of the life of French Canadian farm families in this period, see the
charming 1943 documentary by the National Film Board of Canada, *Alexis Tremblay*: 
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Habitant. www.nfb.ca/film/alexis_tremblay_habitant_en/ I am grateful to Mr. Paul McCleary for bringing this film to my attention.


An archive of Mr. Storck’s writings can be found at http://www.thomasstorck.org/

Aerial view of Mitta Mitta Valley, Victoria, Australia