



What's the Use of Having Stuff Anyway?

by Thomas Storck

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. —G.K. CHESTERTON, *WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE WORLD*

If we look at the animal called man we might notice certain things that we don't observe in the case of the other animals. We share a lot of characteristics with those other animals. We all need nourishment and shelter, we all reproduce to continue our kind, and some, such as ants or bees, even live in complex aggregations and build rather remarkable dwellings. But there is one big difference.

Bees and ants do what they do to create conditions for their survival: food, shelter, continuation of the species. We do that too, of course. But much of our activity is devoted to other ends. Ants work and sleep; we work and sleep, but we do all sorts of other things besides that make our lives really *human*. God created us in such a way that we need food, water, shelter, and clothing just to survive. But to live in a human way, to fulfill our natural needs for family and social life, we need other objects, things for recreation and education, things of beauty. Without all these our lives would be lacking, even if we had enough simply to survive. For although human beings are animals, we are *rational* animals, and as such we

transcend the merely material level at which other animals live.

Now the way God created us requires that in order to obtain the things we need, both for mere survival and for truly human life, generally we must do work. Even in climates warm enough that food and shelter are there for the taking, should their inhabitants want to make musical instruments or anything else to enhance their lives, they must exert at least a little effort of their own.

The kind of activity we engage in, both for survival and for living fully, is what we call economic activity. By approaching economics as we just did, we've already come to see what its purpose is, what it is for. Economic activity exists to provide what we need for survival and for living our lives in a more human way. It's for the sake of human life and therefore subordinate to human life. Economic activity fulfills its purpose only when it helps us to survive and to live as rational animals whose ultimate purpose is to live forever with God.

Some might think that this is obvious. What else would economic activity be for? But I think that if we consider carefully what this purpose implies, we'll be able to say a lot about the rightness or wrongness of our own economy. Does it do a good job of fulfilling this purpose, that is, providing at least the minimum for survival and the enhancement of life in a human way? That might seem like a silly question. Of course, it does—don't we have all kinds of cheap goods and abundant food, too? I'm afraid that if we look more closely we might find this judgment is not quite accurate.

External goods are necessary for survival and for human living; we need them not for themselves, but for their use. We don't need shoes to stick in our closets, for example, but to wear. There is a rational relation between these external goods and human need. We can use only so many of them and at some point we simply don't need more. Even storing them becomes a problem. We have only so much closet or bookcase space. How does the U.S. economy stack up with regard to this? Does it produce pretty much what we need or does it produce a lot of junk, stuff that we have to throw away just to make room for new junk? And does the commercial spirit that our economy fuels keep us satisfied with what we need for the twin purposes of the economy that we've been talking about? Or does it make us ever less satisfied, even though we may have much more than we'll ever need? For some people, shopping has become recreation, and consumer spending constitutes around three-fourths of the total economy.

One of the reasons the economy is stuck in the recession, so we are told, is that people aren't buying enough. In some cases this means that people aren't getting what they truly and reasonably need. But I'm afraid in other cases it means that people aren't buying the latest gadgets or newest clothes for the season or this year's car, things that likely serve neither our need for survival nor a reasonable standard of life. For surely we have a wrong idea of human good if we think that it consists in having more and more stuff, rather than in having enough that we may enjoy life with our families and friends, read good books, give thanks to God. If someone invented a machine that turned out ten pairs of shoes every minute, sooner or later we'd have to stop the machine or be smothered in shoes. It's irrational to make or buy more than we can reasonably use or reasonably store for later use; at some point the acquisition of more stuff no longer serves its purpose. Similarly, it is irrational to expend effort, to do work, to produce more than we can reasonably use or store for the future. But our economy promotes such a spirit of acquisition that we are

not satisfied with what we need. We want more. We have developed the art of promoting dissatisfaction, of making people feel the need to buy, to such a degree that even when it doesn't convince someone to buy the product advertised, the experience tends to leave an impression of want.

The following words from G.K. Chesterton's friend, Hilaire Belloc, from "An Essay on the Nature of Contemporary England," hint at the implications for our present economic system.

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.

The chief reason our economy requires that people buy more and more, without reference to any reasonable need, lies in its separation of ownership from work. Those who own the means of production generally do not do the actual work of making things. And so, "as the interest of a man in *things* diminishes, his interest in abstract wealth—money—increases."

When producers see their role as simply providing the goods that human society needs then production has a natural limit. There is no need to persuade people to buy something, because they already know their needs. And the producers themselves tend to limit their own desire for wealth to what they need to survive and live in a truly human manner. When our economic activity becomes an end in itself, and we produce and sell and buy only for the sake of gain—getting more stuff—then the economy has been turned against its real purpose. It has turned on itself and turned on those it is supposed to serve. Should a few individuals claim that they themselves are largely immune to the blandishments of the commercial society, can anyone honestly say that most people are

immune? And if this arrangement has such an effect on average people, is it a healthy way of conducting our economic affairs?

If we want a "productive society," as Belloc termed it, then the surest way of achieving it is an economy in which, as much as is feasible, ownership and work are not separated, and producers are related to their products as more than salesmen, taking pride in a product well-made. The commercial spirit, the endless desire to buy and sell, would no longer be fed by our economic system. Expecting to provide for their needs by means of their work, producers would feel less desire to accumulate more and more without relation to their actual needs.

When we pay attention to the purpose of a thing only then can we judge whether that thing is doing its job. When we examine the purpose of an economy, I think it becomes clear that our current system does a poor job. But Distributism offers a way of restoring the balance and subordinating human economic activity to its purpose again. If the human race is to escape from its many present difficulties, then surely that is a good place to begin. ☞

Distributism and Marxism

by Donald P. Goodman III

Too often Distributism is accused of being a species of Marxism. It is hard to imagine an accusation further from the truth. Distributism has nothing in common with Marxism beyond the fact that it's not capitalism. Sadly, that fact is sufficient for many capitalists to attack Distributism as some strange brainchild of Engels and Lenin. But Distributism specifically opposes *all* the primary tenets of Marxism; indeed, it could be accurately described as the anti-Marxism, fundamentally opposed to the most significant points of Marxism.

Marxism is primarily composed of three basic tenets. First, its critique of

capitalism; second, its philosophical background, which is dialectical materialism; and third, its specific brand of proletarian revolution, leading, its partisans say, to collective ownership and the abolition of private property. Various forms of Marxism—Leninism, Trotskyism, and so forth—differ according to details, but any system that does not embrace the philosophies in these three fundamental tenets cannot accurately be called Marxism.

Distributism can only be described as adhering to one, and even then only tenuously; it is so different from Marxism that equating the two, or even ascribing a real relation

between them, is at best philosophically myopic.

The first fundamental precept of Marxism, its critique of capitalism, does share some similarities with Distributism's critique of the same. Marx held that capitalism involves the domination of the bulk of the workers (the proletariat) by a minority (the owners, or the bourgeoisie). Marx opposed the commodification of labor, as Distributism opposes it. He held that it rendered the worker politically and economically powerless. At that precise point, however, the similarity between Marxism and Distributism ends.

Distributism's critique of capitalism, like Marx's, does indeed begin with the observation that capitalism concentrates productive property into the hands of the few. The solution