Jackson Lockhart

Bibliography:

Jebb, Reginald D. “PRIVATE PROPERTY AND THE DISTRIBUTIST THESIS.” *Blackfriars*, vol. 31, no. 364, 1950, pp. 324–330. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43813109.

The first task of distributists should be to prove that private property is in accordance with natural law, as man was created to be the masters of the earth, therefore the world exists to serve our needs. Jebb states that “reason and experience” prove communal ownership is unsatisfactory (Jebb 324). Equally distributed private property, with no excessive powers provided, has none of the downfalls that Aristotle claims come with communal ownership, and the teachings of the church favor it as well. Instead of socialism, working from a single point and spreading out, distributism sees multiple units either separately providing for themselves or combining of their own will to form a single center of activity. It’s also opposed to laissez-faire economics, with big corporations using the excuse of the competitive market to stomp out small businesses. Jebb argues that as the Proletariat grows and the desire to possess more material wealth rapidly increases production, the state will inevitably take over the market to try and stabilize it, leading to socialism. Jebb also strongly opposes the welfare state, stating that it works against local opinion and stifles local initiative. Given that this was written in 1950s England, yet he still claims distributism to be the last genuine opposition to stop the transition of society towards central planning, this is a critically important statement. He claims that it’s not untested like socialism, as it has roots in mankind’s history and natural law, “the distributist revolution is a return to the normal from the abnormal” (Jebb 326). Jebb states that revolutions success hinge on its aims being constructive, in accordance with natural law, and its ability to influence government. Jebb explains how since the modern world is built on the wealth generated by capitalism, distributists face a difficult task in explaining their views to anyone who accepts modern finance economics. Jebb agrees with Chesterton that the family is the basic unit of society. Jebb argues for bottom-to-top decision making and a federated, locality-based system of government. He ends his argument by stating Britain would live better if it “lived more simply” (Jebb 330).

Carpenter, Hilary J. “WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT.” *Blackfriars*, vol. 18, no. 209, 1937, pp. 611–615. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43813929.

Carpenter repeats the argument of Donald Attwater that socialism is so popular because its tenants and propaganda appeal to “‘eminently calculated to appeal to men suffering under poverty, distress and injustice,’” (Carpenter 611). She argues that the real reason it “gets away with it” is because it recognizes the mistreatment and poor conditions of the workers, which are ignored by capitalists in Christian countries; this ignoring is the true crime, as it leads the downtrodden worker to turn his back on freedom and Christian values to seek salvation in communism (Carpenter 611-612). She claims it isn’t enough to merely be anti-communist, as this endangers the public towards swinging like a pendulum to the opposite side of the spectrum and supporting its staunchest enemies, fascists. “Most of the contemporary efforts to deal with very real and domestic evils show the wrong approach” (Carpenter 613). Carpenter is wary of all -isms. She agrees with Penty that distributism is “in danger of being much too narrow in its view of what is fundamental” (Carpenter 613). While she does say that Penty and distributism’s ideals in “‘back to the land’, private property and home industry” are entirely good things within human society, but they are not “the *source* of all good things in human society” (Carpenter 613). Carpenter supports Barbara Wall’s argument that the “true basis of distributism” will be founded on simple, Christian people joining together for the common good, and that the church will help provide the foundational structure and spread the teachings of distributism.

Sparkes, Russell. "The Distributist Alternative."

Sparkes is explaining distributism at a 2010 conference. Distributism’s canon texts are Chesterton’s 1926 *Outline of Sanity* and Belloc’s 1936 *Essay on the Restoration of Property*. Distributism was almost forgotten after Chesterton’s death, his magazine’s ending, and WWII. Chesterton and Belloc did not so much disagree with modern technology as they did with its plutocratic economic system. He cites Chesterton’s statement that “‘Capitalism is contradictory as soon as it is complete; because it is dealing with the mass of men in two different ways at once. When most men are wage-earners, it is more and more difficult for most men to be customers. For the capitalist is always trying to cut down what his servant demands, and in doing so is cutting down what his customer can spend.’” (Sparkes 3). Sparkes notes that distributists were critical of Smith and capitalism’s emphasis on specializing and trade, claiming that overlooking local production caused neglection in transport costs, and thus a more dependent and less sustainable society with a more damaging environmental impact. Chesterton and Belloc noted how the economic system unfairly impacted “the politically weak ordinary person” (Sparkes 4). They both warned against the spreading trend of concentration of wealth and the destruction of small, local businesses, a prophecy that has come true across the world. The result of this has been “a colossal loss of economic freedom” (Sparkes 5). One of the key concerns of distributism was the people were working for others, rather than themselves or their communities. Sparkes states that Belloc noted that the only real difference between communism and capitalism, as in both the masses worked for the benefit of a few, was why they worked. In capitalism, it was for wages, in communism, it was forced. Belloc felt distributist should give the means of production (private property) to the family, to be traded with other families, essentially a guild. Belloc and Chesterton noted that the advantages of capitalism are outweighed by the exploitation of financial power. Sparkes notes the Distributist League’s stand against primogeniture, in an egalitarian ideal. He ends by noting the revival of distributism.

Minor Incorporation: The History of Distributism

Boyd, Ian. “Chesterton and Distributism.” *New Blackfriars*, vol. 55, no. 649, 1974, pp. 265–272. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43246146.

Chesterton’s idea of distributism revolved around the widespread distribution of private property. Chesterton and Belloc felt that both capitalism and socialism would inevitably lead to power concentrated in the hands of an elite few, and saw their distributist state, comprised of “small peasant ownership and workers’ guilds” as the only alternative to the “‘slave’ state” (Boyd 265). Therefore distributists must be prepared to forego modern industrialism, at least in its “present form” (Boyd 265). Chesterton believed that public life existed to protect private life, all political and social efforts must be devoted to serving the good of the family, the basic unit of society (Boyd 265). Distributism as a political movement began in 1925-1926 with the publication of *G.K.’s Weekly* and the founding of the Distributist League. Chesterton, after the First World War, shifted from attacking the current system to favoring his own agrarian, pro-worker distributist ideals. Boyd states that if there ever was a “classical period of Distributism” it was between 1926 and 1936, when Chesterton was both president of the Distributist League and editor of *G.K.’s Weekly* (Boyd 267). Apparently, among the large amount of distributist literature published in this time, critiquing and attempting to offer solutions to the modern problems of the time, there was little agreement among them, and the range of opinion was vast and diverse in relation to its meaning, core tenants, and common policy (Boyd 267). Chesterton, perhaps setting the line that Penty would later use in his *Distributist Manifesto* on how distributists are not in any one political party, did little to establish a central party line. Chesterton ignored many of the arguments among his followers, focusing instead on writing on the principles of distributism. To him, it was not a political philosophy, but rather “‘( … ) Chesterton’s reaction to life’” (Boyd 268). He would often use his fiction to express how he felt and what he meant by distributism. Here, Chesterton even questioned what returning to the “medieval past” would look like and how it might work (Boyd 268). Although the medieval society might be the example that he and other distributists touted as idealistic, he was wary of how his movement could be taken advantage of or misused, it also shows how he was distrustful of concentrated political power, even in the hands of the people. This pessimism is pervasive throughout Chesterton’s fiction, along with tones of anarchism, with “the distrust of the modern state and the belief in the value of free and self- governing social units” (Boyd 271). However, there are also themes of the common man rising up and working together against an unjust system.

When I think about Distributism and what we have learned about it, this makes a lot of sense. Distributism doesn’t need a CCCP or a World Bank to oversee it, what it really needs are just ordinary people with the basic skills to provide for themselves and work together as a community. Something like a farmers market is their World Bank. The fullness of their silos tells them how much they need to grow, not the CCCP. One of the greatest strengths of distributism is that it doesn’t need to be unified and organized, it can work on almost any level, to any degree of sophistication, anywhere in the world. Of course, a unified, organized distributist system would be more efficient and could be accomplishable, but it doesn’t need to be from the start, especially not on the level of socialism and capitalism. Distributism could work for America on a national scale, as the main economic policy of our government, but it could also work for an isolated community of Nebraska farmers just trying to feed their family’s. I also noted that Chesterton, like Cohen, noted the faults and flaws in his arguments and proposals. He acknowledges that he doesn’t quite know where adopting a medieval type system would lead or exactly how to accomplish it. Unlike Cohen, however, he doesn’t just say that that doesn’t make it not worth trying. He, through his fiction, disavows attempting to construct any kind of Utopia, the key difference that separates distributism from socialism and makes it much more feasible. As stated by Boyd, distributism isn’t a utopian philosophy or political doctrine, just a simple and responsible way to live our lives in reaction to the corruption of capitalism and socialism. Like Cohen, he also notes that human selfishness is holding distributism back and that until we disavow it, rather than learning to utilize human kindness like Cohen, the common man will continue to be oppressed by corrupt systems (Boyd 272). Chesterton is much more willing to acknowledge fault and hardship, that his system is limited by the sin of humanity, than Cohen is. However, Chesterton still presents a much more feasible approach to healing the ills of mankind than the utopia of socialism and the destruction of capitalism.

Capitalism:

Capitalism is an economic system that states the will of the people influences the market, what they want, those participating in the market will have to provide or lose out to their competition. This is known as the invisible hand of the market. It also claims everyone has an equal chance to rise through the corporate system and become rich, but the rich are just as liable to end up poor. Rather than the government making decisions, companies and people do based on demand.

Socialism:

Socialism is an economic system and government system. Unlike capitalism where the government takes a back seat to the market, in socialism, a central group of planners standardizes the market in a fair manner in response to demand from the people. Socialists have wide egalitarian values, believing in universal equality, equal distribution of wealth and property, and returning the means of production to the people. They are abhorred by the poor treatment of workers under capitalism.

Distributism:

Distributism is an economic and philosophical system that does not believe in the concentration of economic power in capitalism or its favor of specialization and trade over local production, they also stand against centralized planning in socialism. Instead, they argue for the means of production to go to the family, and for local industry over global trade. They too are disgusted by the poor treatment of capitalist laborers but think socialism is just as bad as it will force the people to work for the state where capitalism at least provides wages. The movement is largely influenced by Christian teachings.

My Argument:

My argument is that our country should pursue distributism, but with capitalist industry. Allow me to explain. The next president can’t run on a distributist platform, they wouldn’t win. We like our stuff too much to elect them. What needs to happen is, to use a quote from a book you should really read, *World War Z*, “not so much a revolution as an evolution” (Brooks 232). As Davis argues, we are all, in a way, already distributists. The main barrier is taking action. By its nature, distributism not only functions best when decisions are made from a bottom-to-top federalist nature but also when it spreads as a movement; not through political parties but through the small actions of individuals. A mother growing a vegetable garden in a small rural town, a man taking his furniture to be repaired at a local carpenter’s shop rather than buying new furniture. These are the actions that can lead to the spread of distributism.

Capitalism, while able to produce immense wealth and material goods, and while able to lift many out of poverty, still oppresses the worker. The culture it creates around consumerism will always lead the laborer to be working more so that they can consume and possess more, often doing labor that is degrading physically or mentally. Its advantages just aren’t able to overcome its disastrous effect on the environment and human psyche, and how it inevitably leads to the concentration of wealth in the few.

Socialism, while I agree with its basic ideals of equality and to some degree egalitarianism, is for the large part unfeasible. The central planning is inefficient, as demonstrated by Otteson in issues such as the Day Two Problem and the Knowledge Problem (Humans upset patterns, central planners lack local knowledge, by day two of redistribution we will have already created new inequalities, the central planners will always be one step behind). Those who argue that we should still strive for its ideals of utopia may actually find themselves agreeing with me as the steps I will outline could, hypothetically, make possible the conditions necessary to enact a socialist utopia, or at least, a much more efficient distribution system enacted by a federal socialist government.

The best way for this evolution to begins is with local, small-scale decisions, as mentioned above. A return to ownership of our own land and property would be the next step. Once the movement and its ideals have begun to spread to different communities, and they have begun to take the earlier-mentioned actions, someone will inevitably end up running for local office on a platform with distributist elements. They might propose taxing businesses like Walmart higher than local businesses, or even enacting laws similar to that of the UK’s Sunday Trade Laws. Previously, buying and selling had been illegal on Sundays, except for small, local businesses (like butcheries, bakeries, and farmers markets). However, larger corporations found this too restricting, and broke the law by opening on Sundays. The British government compromised, larger businesses could open on Sundays, but only for no more than six hours. The damage was still felt by local businesses. Putting minor restrictions on big businesses like this in small communities might not immediately draw the attention of their leaders, allowing for the movement to gain further traction. Once the ideas of buying and producing locally, and repairing rather than replacing have spread even further, they will begin to take hold in the market. Not in large ways, there will still be department stores and supermarkets, but we might see more repair shops opening up, used goods stores will become more popular and successful, and companies who produce higher-quality, longer-lasting goods with conservative values like this will see an increase in customer traffic.

I am aware this involves a lot of hypotheticals and assumptions, but it is still more practical than socialism, which to operate in its perfect utopian fashion would essentially require an instant, worldwide change in the mentality of our entire species where we are suddenly willing to sacrifice anything and everything for the betterment of our fellow man. The localist, distributist evolution just requires people to make the decision to be more self-sufficient and to support their friends, neighbors, and community over consumerism and big business. That’s not utopian, that’s honestly just practical, especially in today’s economy, where the recession and rising oil prices have lead to many Americans to frugality. Distributism is just another step on the path frugality has set them on.

Eventually, distributist policies will reach the level of state governments. They could implement further changes, such as choosing to import less material and focus on production, or to encourage such behavior through taxes on imports from other states or countries. They could also implement the policies that have proven themselves successful on a local level. Other states, who might not want to pay those taxes, might start sending those goods to other states or to send them to that state in lesser amounts. Nonetheless, the taxes and higher prices could eventually lead to lower demand, and thus, lower production.

Finally, the distributist movement would eventually make its way into Congress and the White House. The national government, seeing that local industry had recovered, would begin to impose tariffs on imports, as we as a nation would be able to produce more and therefore need to import less. Companies like Amazon or Walmart that be taxed severely to limit their ability to crush their local competition. Delivery companies would be forced to take a backseat to the USPS, having your products shipped by Fed-Ex would now be more expensive due to taxes. They would tax companies that have outsiders in control of factories and other industrial plants, and that devalue the nature and value of their labor. Ford’s Detriot factories would now be owned by Detroit locals, eventually, the workers, satisfied with their improved pay and more humane style of labor, could seek to climb the corporate ladder, but most wouldn’t. But how would we be able to support demand? The demand would lessen itself. Higher production leads to cheaper goods, cheaper goods leads to higher consumption, higher consumption leads to more demand, and the cycle continues. With taxes raising prices, people wouldn’t see a need for a three-car-garage, or for more than one or two cars. Practicality would eventually replace excess. Keep in mind, this is a process that could take generations. When I say that their pay is raised and their labor revalued, I mean by pennies at first, and by making the assembly line move just a bit slower. Eventually, though, these would most likely lead to results similar to what I have stated.

Now, I said above that I thought we should retain our capitalist industry. This is mainly because the demands of modern society require it. However, it would be highly regulated and limited. A company shouldn’t be able to come anywhere close to a monopoly on anything. To use a local example, Dominion Energy is the primary supplier of electricity in Virginia, but they also operate extensively in other states and have begun to become a parent company to suppliers in other states. In my distributist USA, they would have to choose a single state to provide power for, and that would be it. They could then focus exclusively on providing power to everyone in the state at a rate and price appropriate for the state (combatting the knowledge problem). We would need to maintain our industry for the purposes of trade. Global trade is an inescapable reality in today’s world. However, we would export only what we need to be able to import what we need. If the government becomes a distributist one, they still have a mandate to promote the general welfare. They will need to import rubber to support the transportation of goods between communities and states. They might need to import tungsten for military equipment (I’m not informed on the USA’s tungsten deposits). However, to protect against cheap foreign goods, tariffs would be maintained at a high rate. If demand is high enough for goods like coffee, for example, the government could slightly lower the tariffs, and use the money saved and earned to invest in greenhouse projects to either start corporate greenhousing or to possibly research new technology to make it more affordable for the hopeless caffeine addict to grow their own coffee beans. This is now feasible because under a distributist government, finding a way to produce your own goods, specifically at a local level, and in a humane way is now the dominant economic philosophy.