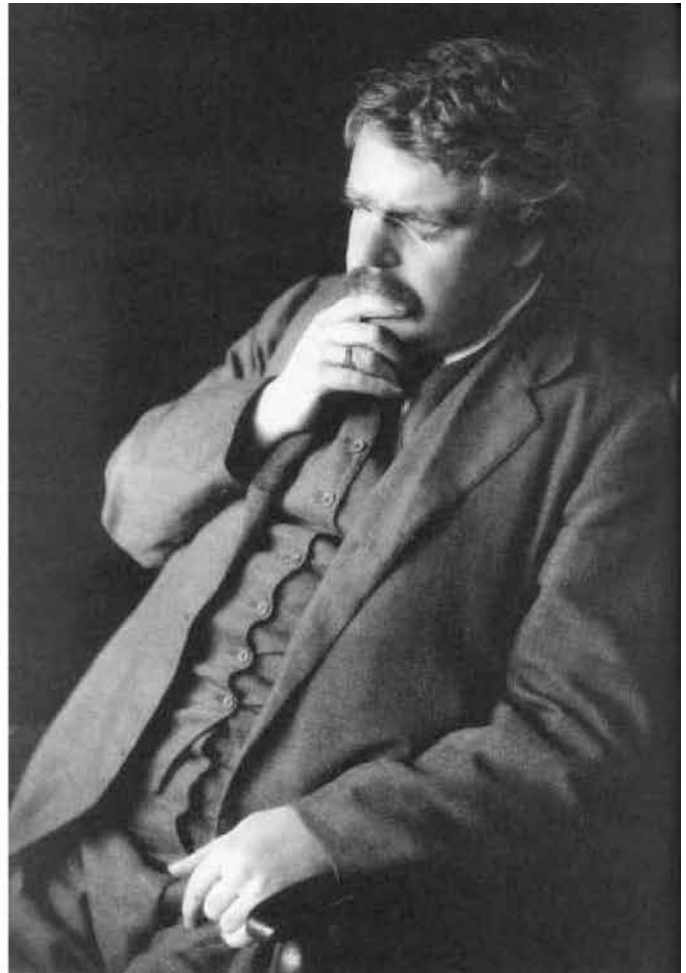


Liberal thought

John B. Davenport analyses the Distributists and their impact.

The Distributists and



Hilaire Belloc
(1870–1953)
G. K. Chesterton
(1874–1936)

ONE OF THE many factions subsumed in the Liberal Party before the First World War were the Distributists, a small, self-conscious, and intellectually influential group of radical High Churchmen, who attempted to marry their understanding of Christian social teaching to a miscellany of traditional Liberal preoccupations of the Edwardian period. These particularly included British land reform on the Irish model, home rule for the entirety of Ireland, limiting plutocratic influence on government, and defining a social programme between ‘collectivism’ and ‘individualism’ – a coherent ‘Liberalism’ between the socialist Scylla and Conservative Charybdis. The Distributists were very much

the product of a period of ideological redefinition – one which allowed individual Liberals considerable intellectual freedom. The failure of the party to define the essence of modern Liberalism, both before the First World War, and thereafter, eventually led, of course, to the disintegration of the party between the wars. The Distributists, as eclectic Radical Liberals, entered the political wilderness after Versailles, eschewing the standard ideologies of the day, whether ‘scientific’ socialism, ‘New’ or ‘classical’ liberalism, or Conservatism – of either the Red Tory or reactionary varieties. The ‘centrist’ quality of pre-war Liberal reform (with which they often sympathised but which, after the war seemed missing from

and the Liberal Party

British politics) they rediscovered, after a fashion, in Catholic social teaching. After the war, a moderate, sometimes Catholic, political stance was present on the Continent (e.g. in the German Centre Party, branches of certain liberal parties, and in various 'peasant' parties) but it seemed to the Distributists to have absented itself from British politics, as the parties became increasingly indistinguishable.¹

Who were the Distributists?

The Distributists, at least initially, were more of an intellectual club than a movement. Their members originally included a closely knit group of friends and relations, namely Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953), a journalist, popular historian, novelist, humorous poet, social theorist, and Liberal MP, 1906–10, for Salford South; Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874–1936), a journalist, novelist, playwright, poet, social theorist, and popular theologian; and G. K.'s brother Cecil Chesterton (1879–1918), a journalist, social theorist, and the original ideological sparkplug of the group – all established men of letters and public figures before the First World War.² Belloc was a Catholic by birth, the Chestertons by conviction, with Cecil converting from Anglicanism in 1912 and G. K. in 1922. Catholic social theory, particularly the papal encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), combined with certain idiosyncratic elements of the British Radical Liberal tradition, became the touchstones of the Distributist system. While the most significant elements of Distributism were defined, to the degree that they would be, before the First World War, both Belloc and G. K. Chesterton continued to refine Distributist social philosophy throughout the interwar period.³

Politically, when they made their party affiliations known before the First World War, Belloc was perhaps the most publicly Liberal, both as an author and Member of Parliament, although his experience as an MP, 1906–10, and the Marconi Scandal, 1912–13, left him alienated from the party; G. K. is best described as an increasingly disaffected Liberal supporter, who finally severed his links with the party on Asquith's

death in 1928; and Cecil was a less-focused iconoclastic 'Radical', who embraced Fabian Socialism until about 1911 (while adamantly declaring that a new Labour or Socialist Party needed a programme absolutely distinct from Liberalism) and who generally believed that the Tories historically had promulgated marginally better 'social legislation' than the Liberals – by which he meant legislation ameliorating the poverty of the working class – which for him was the most essential goal of British politics.⁴ His experience as a journalist in attempting to expose 'insider trading' by several Liberal cabinet ministers during the Marconi Scandal, 1912–13, negated any prospective sympathies he might have had for 'Liberal' reform.

Among the Distributists, the influence of Christianity generally, and the Catholic Church's social theology particularly, articulated in relation to contemporary social problems by Pope Leo XIII in the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), was significant. Belloc, a devout reflective Anglo-French Catholic layman, was thoroughly imbued with the sensibility of social Catholicism, which influenced all of his economic and social/political writing.⁵ The Chestertons initially were not influenced, to the degree Belloc had been, by this ideological strain, but as their disillusionment with Anglicanism, and interest in Catholicism grew, under Belloc's tutelage, this became an important element in their worldviews as well. The Chestertons had been raised in a nominally Anglican home, but the family most often had attended the Rev. Stopford Brooke's Unitarian Bedford Chapel in Bloomsbury.⁶ Both Chestertons longed, in their young adulthoods, for greater beauty and historicity in worship and doctrinal certainty than this upbringing provided, something which they eventually found in Catholicism, after an intermediate period spent within the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England.⁷

What did the Distributists believe?⁸

We can glean the essential doctrines of Distributism by examining the seven foundational texts of the movement – listed here by date of publication – and noting in each both proposed

One of the many factions subsumed in the Liberal Party before the First World War were the Distributists, a small, self-conscious, and intellectually influential group of radical High Churchmen, who attempted to marry their understanding of Christian social teaching to a miscellany of traditional Liberal preoccupations of the Edwardian period.

The Distributists and the Liberal Party

policies and recurring criticisms of the contemporary political system:⁹

- Hilaire Belloc, 'The Liberal Tradition,' in *Essays in Liberalism*, by Six Oxford Men – edited by John Swinnerton Phillimore and Francis Wrigley Hirst (1897);
- G. K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (1910);
- Hilaire Belloc and Cecil Chesterton, *The Party System* (1911);¹⁰
- Hilaire Belloc, *The Servile State* (1912);
- G. K. Chesterton, *The Utopia of the Usurers* (1917);
- G. K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity* (1927);
- Hilaire Belloc, *An Essay on the Restoration of Property* (1936).

One most also append to this list two papal encyclicals, which eventually are considered foundational to Distributism:

- Pope Leo XIII (Vincenzo Giocchino Pecci, pope 1878–1903), *Rerum Novarum* (1891);
- Pope Pius XI (Achille Ambrogio Damiano Ratti, pope 1922–1939), *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931).

We first will examine the texts by Belloc and the Chestertons, and thereafter briefly relate them to the two papal encyclicals.

Belloc was one of six Oxford alumni who contributed to Phillimore and Hirst's *Essays in Liberalism*, providing the introductory overview, 'The Liberal Tradition'. While there was inevitable ideological diversity amongst these representatives of the Liberal camp, Belloc identified the following elements as constituting a commonality: individual responsibility rather than the acceptance of deterministic 'environment' as a necessary predication for social change; anti-imperialism; suspicion of an increasingly capricious and overbearing central government; an objective moral basis for government and politics (for Belloc the social theology of the Catholic Church); an economy based on autonomous small producers, whether in business or agriculture; local control of government (particularly for ethnic minorities, like the Irish); land reform, predicated on the breakup of large estates through the removal of legal entail and primogeniture, application of market forces, and (if necessary) government intervention, as in the case of Ireland; universal male suffrage; a qualified acceptance of free trade; local non-sectarian control of education; the breakup of corporate monopolies (by unspecified means); and rejection of 'socialism,' meaning for Belloc the administration of all property on behalf of society by representatives of the state.¹¹ One can see here, in a nascent form, many of the tenants of what would become 'Distributism' over the next decade or so.

G. K. Chesterton's *What's Wrong with the World* (1910), dedicated to the Liberal MP Charles F. G. Masterman (1873–1927), generally is identified as the earliest 'comprehensive' Distributist work. In it, Chesterton identifies the following necessary elements as then missing from British politics: (1) a

moral sensibility, based – like G. K.'s remembrance of Gladstonian Liberalism, and unlike Lord Rosebery's secular 'Efficiency' – in a composite orthodox Christianity;¹² (2) local autonomy in government, including the autonomy of smaller national or ethnic groups (like the Irish), and an abiding suspicion of 'big' or 'central' government;¹³ (3) protection of government at all levels from the intrusions of plutocratic manipulation;¹⁴ (4) the sanctity of the nuclear family as the basic 'building block' of civilised society and provision for the family of the requisite private property necessary to preserve its autonomy;¹⁵ (5) The necessity of home and plot ownership as the minimum of required family property;¹⁶ (6) individual responsibility and support for cooperative movements over and against socialist collectivism as the basis of the amelioration of social problems;¹⁷ (7) opposition to contemporary imperialism, of 'the attempt of a European country to create a kind of sham Europe which it can dominate, instead of the real Europe, which it can only share ... I do not believe in Imperialism as commonly understood';¹⁸ (8) a middle ground in the licensing question, pro-public-house but evidently with regulation, to insure some standard of 'wholesomeness';¹⁹ (9) opposition to 'big' capitalism and amoral business practices;²⁰ (10) ambivalence toward modern feminism, based in uncertainty concerning women's 'real' attitude toward the franchise, a belief in Christian 'complementarianism' regarding some family and vocational roles, a strong belief in the need for a dedicated female domestic 'administrator' of the complex (middle-class) Edwardian home, and the inevitably exhausting nature of the 'double-standard' inevitably 'required' of working women (the perceived 'perfection' required of working women both at home and in the workplace – a prescient observation still being addressed today);²¹ and (11) the wrong-headedness of primary and secondary education that neglected Christianity. Chesterton tried, once again, to establish middle ground in this regard. His point ultimately was that it mattered little who 'controlled' education, as long as it *was* universally available, that there was some element of 'local' control – whether by secular education boards or local boards administered by the Anglican, Nonconformist, or Catholic Churches – and that provision was made for orthodox Christian instruction within the curriculum.²²

The Party System – unsurprisingly, given the well-known bellicosity of both its authors – was a relentless, scathing attack on 'corruption' in British politics and the increasingly meaningless nature of Conservative/Liberal party distinctions during the period of Balfour's, Campbell-Bannerman's, and Asquith's early governments.²³ The authors pointed out, firstly, that the members of both the Lords and Commons, and particularly of the front benches of the latter house, were familiarly linked in an almost incestuous manner and

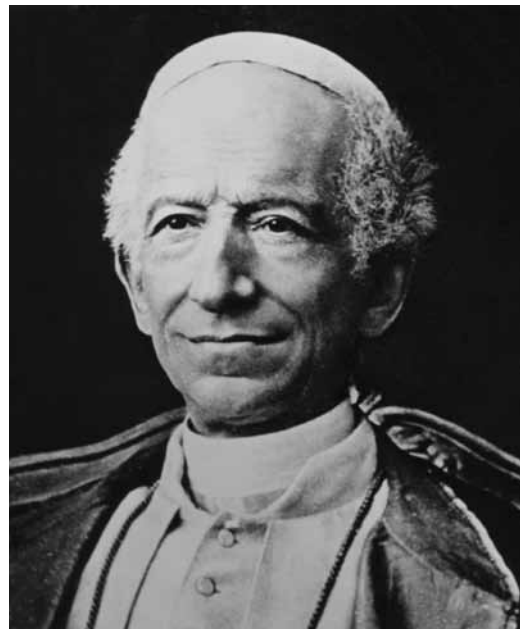
***The Party System*
– unsurprisingly,
given the well-
known bellicosity
of both its authors
– was a relentless,
scathing attack
on 'corruption'
in British politics
and the increas-
ingly meaning-
less nature of
Conservative/
Liberal party dis-
tinctions during
the period of Bal-
four's, Campbell-
Bannerman's, and
Asquith's early
governments.**

ideologically were often virtually indistinguishable. They constituted a 'class', drawn from the same families, schools, and professions (particularly the legal profession), and generally had more in common with one another than they did with the constituents or organisations that they theoretically represented. As a result of this state of affairs, members of the Commons needed 'independence' from this interconnected class – they needed to be accountable to constituents only and not to a party organisation. They also required a state-supplied 'non-party' salary.²⁴ Within parliament, and particularly the Commons, individual members needed to articulate an independent, non-party voice, so that discussions of both procedure and policy could be determined by someone other than the party leaders, whips, the Speaker, the chairmen of committees and the members of 'conference' committees (generally chosen by the other aforementioned individuals). This monopolistic concentration of undemocratic power was illustrated to the authors, for instance, in the informal agreement among front-benchers that resulted in the Lords thereafter (1911) being unable to oppose legislation agreed upon in advance by the leaders of the government and opposition.²⁵ The general collusion of the party establishments over subjects discussed in parliament, and the amount of time allotted for discussion of these subjects, particularly in the Commons, needed to be countered and left to the discretion of the Commons and Lords members generally, so as to insure both transparency and the timely discussion of truly important issues.²⁶ And, lastly, 'clean' government required elimination of secret party funds, and of the sale of titles in the annual Honours List, both of which were employed to 'buy' votes and influence, inside and outside parliament.²⁷

The authors are hardly sanguine about the likely amelioration of any of the difficulties noted above. They propose as possible reforms: shorter, fixed terms for the Commons (thereby limiting the power of party leaders to perpetuate themselves in power by calling potentially advantageous snap-elections); devolution of most parliamentary responsibility over crafting legislation, and forwarding it to the entire house, to specialised committees independent of party leaders; the adoption, at the national level, of the then-fashionable American Initiative and Referendum, successfully employed about this time in several American states; primary elections to choose constituency candidates, independent of the party establishments; establishment of a non-party press (a recurring effort of all three men); and extension of the suffrage to all women voters, thereby establishing a truly representative electorate.²⁸

Belloc's *The Servile State* (1912) was a modestly successful bestseller for a work of contemporary social policy. His earlier adherence to the 'Individualist' branch of British Liberalism becomes very evident in the content of this text.²⁹ Belloc's

Cecil Chesterton
(1879–1918)
Pope Leo XIII
(1810–1903)
Pope Pius XI
(1857–1939)



The Distributists and the Liberal Party

Belloc and Chesterton published their most mature summary statements of Distributist philosophy between the wars, after they had abandoned political Liberalism, i.e. Chesterton's *Outline of Sanity* (1926) and Belloc's *Essay on the Restoration of Property* (1936).

book includes a breathless social history of the European working class, from antiquity to the era of advanced capitalism. Belloc saw the status of this class progressing incrementally from the early medieval period through to the sixteenth century, largely as a result of limits imposed by the Church on the rapaciousness both of the medieval landed aristocracy and later the emerging class of international capitalists. During this period, the mass of humanity emerged from a condition of 'servility,' in which they had little independence, few rights, and almost no property, to a condition of modest autonomy and prosperity. If agricultural workers, they increasingly enjoyed prescribed rights and responsibilities, usually defined vis-à-vis the landed class through the influence of the Church, a certain level of self-government at the village or commune level, periods of rest on the increasingly numerous Church holidays, an income which allowed the modest accumulation of domestic property, and, if not actual land ownership, then at least security on the land as tenants, with compensation for improvements, and some control over what they produced. If city dwellers, they often had the protection of, and had gained a certain autonomy through, membership in the medieval craft guilds, which laid down guild standards, ran occupational training programmes, established 'quality control' over production in the various crafts, set realistic prices, and served as units from which local governments could choose their members. This elysian condition was shattered during the period of the Protestant Reformation, which Belloc links inextricably with the onset of advanced capitalism, when the economic and social 'regulatory' powers of the Church increasingly were appropriated to the state. Church lands were expropriated and used to establish a new landed (and capitalist) class dependent on, but eventually supplanting, the monarch; common lands were enclosed – eventually forcing many small proprietors off the land and into a proletariat without property; many church holidays were eliminated; the guild system was abandoned in favour of capitalist corporations; and land shifted from crops to grazing (throwing even more smallholders off the land).

The period since the Reformation had seen the virtual elimination of the autonomous propertied working class and the emergence of an increasingly impoverished, underemployed, urban proletariat, which, in the early twentieth century, had begun to demand, with increasing militancy, some improvement in their situation. In Belloc's view, the inadequate 'solutions' society offered in the early twentieth century to the problems of this class were either socialism or the 'Servile State'. Taking orthodox Marxists at their word, Belloc believed that socialism would entail the administration of virtually all property, including particularly the means of production and

distribution, by a government elite, on behalf of society. The Servile State, on the other hand, which Belloc saw as the 'collectivist' or 'New Liberal' solution, would essentially see the poor returned to their status in late antiquity, wherein they would labour (either for the state or corporations) in a slave-like condition, virtually without rights, independence, property, or autonomy, in exchange for the most minimal basics of life, provided through a welfare establishment.³⁰

Belloc's book primarily is a work of analysis, rather than the proposal of 'solutions,' but his identification of his ideal past as a 'Distributist' society makes it clear that a just, functional, future civilisation for him would include: personal autonomy and the political independence of adults; the ability for a husband and wife to form a family, including a proper home and enough property to support their family; control over one's work; organisation of work at the local level, perhaps in cooperatives; and a Christian sensibility governing social relations, as in the Middle Ages.³¹

G. K. Chesterton's short work, *The Utopia of the Usurers* (1917), like many of his books, is a collection of his (sometimes edited) recent columns from his journalistic work.³² Its focuses are the prostitution of artists and authors in a mega-capitalist economy, as creators are forced to debase their artistic work both in advertising and in publishing laudatory dishonest lives of prominent capitalists – a sometimes rather precious and overdone presentation for Chesterton;³³ the shoddiness of mass-produced 'department-store' products, over against those of craftspeople;³⁴ the degradation of working people through the reduction of their paid holidays, leisure periods that once were the province of the Church;³⁵ the evils of eugenics, a false solution to the problem of diseases that could be eliminated through a healthy upbringing in a proper modern home – a subject dealt with at length elsewhere;³⁶ and the reality that self-regulated work resulted either in better work or (implicitly) starvation – either of which is preferable to the degrading nearly military oversight of workers in factories.³⁷

Belloc and Chesterton published their most mature summary statements of Distributist philosophy between the wars, after they had abandoned political Liberalism, i.e. *Chesterton's Outline of Sanity* (1926) and Belloc's *Essay on the Restoration of Property* (1936). The former amplifies points made in Chesterton's earlier monographs, and journalism. He notes that the Manchester School of laissez-faire or 'classical' liberalism, the guiding political philosophy of so many Liberals in the half-century before the First World War, ultimately had led to monopoly and plutocracy rather than healthy competition and economic diversity. It treated members of the largely powerless and property-less working class as expendable tools, to be used and discarded as profit dictated. Its political alternative, socialism, simply wished

to transform the monopolies created by high capitalism into state enterprises, supposedly to be administered in a non-exploitative fashion on behalf of society by enlightened elites. These elites, given human nature, seemed to Chesterton, in the cases both of social democracy and communism, simply to recreate the self-perpetuating oligarchies of high capitalism and to treat the mass of the population in nearly the same 'capitalist' manner, as economic slaves, to be minimally sustained, at a level just above penury (lest they revolt), by the all-wise all-powerful 'Servile State', in the expectation of a theoretical golden future that could and would never arrive.³⁸ As an alternative to both, Chesterton's Distributism advocated the recreation and nurturance of a true 'middle class' of autonomous, self-sustaining, propertied small holders, whether these be 'peasants' on the land, independent high-street proprietors, autonomous professionals, or workers in cooperative-owned factories. Without emphasising it in a significantly 'evangelical' sense (since both Chesterton and Belloc always addressed their works to the general public), Chesterton quietly insisted that a moral recovery, based in Christianity, and particularly Catholic Christianity, was an essential precondition to economic sanity.³⁹

Belloc's work offered many (he hoped) practical propositions to move Britain toward a Distributist future and away from plutocratic capitalism and socialism. He differed from Chesterton mainly in his emphasis on the role that government would need to play in the process of creating a healthy economic order. This government intervention would involve a temporary 'artificiality' to economic life that many laissez-faire capitalists (and some consumers) probably would find unpalatable.⁴⁰ It would include rigorous application of anti-monopoly laws, and expansion of these laws to include taxes on, or even prohibitions of, amalgamations in a given industry; taxes on new chain stores; taxes on the proliferation of what we now days might call 'warehouse' stores; taxes on non-agricultural capital (rather than a graduated income tax); limiting income taxes to a flat tax of 10 per cent with other indirect taxation on certain unspecified 'luxuries'; separate, much lower tax rates for smaller than larger units of agricultural land and related capital investments; encouragement of agricultural land sales from large-owners to small-owners, with tax breaks for the former as part of these sales; corporate tax breaks for small-business owners and those attempting to start small businesses; possible nationalisation of those industries, like railroads and banks, the control of which gives undue advantage to certain businesses or industries; and legal encouragement of agricultural cooperatives and craft guilds, so as to protect smaller from larger producers.

One can perhaps discern from the brief exposition of Distributive texts above both how Distributists might have made good Liberals before the First World War and how they might have found it difficult to remain Liberals thereafter.

Like pre-war Liberals generally, of whatever faction, the Distributists supported local control of education (although they generally did not share the Nonconformist trepidation about potential Anglican domination thereof), franchise reform, a nuanced imperialism that emphasised development and self-determination, land reform in Britain like that already achieved in Ireland after Wyndham's Land Purchase Act of 1903, and a general abhorrence of 'socialism'. Like the 'Individualist' (what we might now call 'classical' or 'libertarian') Liberals, they emphasised self-help rather than social legislation (opposing the growth of the 'Servile State') and devolution of government control to local authorities when practicable. Like the New Liberals, they were, however, willing to accept the selective intervention of the central government in domestic affairs, although they limited this generally to innovative taxation and matters related to the reestablishment of a peasant class on the land.

Of the issues that purportedly led to British Liberalism's 'strange death', Belloc and the Chestertons stood with the party concerning the People's Budget and curbing the Lords, and opposed it over Ireland, when it refused to call the Army's bluff and equivocated over home rule. They in turn equivocated over women's suffrage, generally (but not always) opposing it before the war. Regarding the 'Worker's Rebellion', they opposed socialism but generally supported the unions, which would place them with many other contemporary Liberals. All three of the chief Distributists supported the government when war was declared, with Cecil eventually dying of illness while on duty in 1918. G. K. supported the war because of his general abhorrence of authoritarian 'Prussianism', his contempt for what he saw as naked German imperialism, and in support of Belgium and other 'small nations' (like his earlier championing of Irish home rule). Belloc, half-French, and a French army veteran, was a natural supporter of the Entente. Together, their response to these issues, while perhaps comparatively 'rigid' in regard to Ireland, was similar to that of many British Liberals.

It became increasingly clear to Distributists, however, after the war, that while they often occupied a political 'middle ground' between Conservatism and socialism, they did not occupy the same 'centre' as did most 'New Liberals', increasingly the dominant element in the party, who Distributists saw as having shifted Liberalism to the left, toward a 'welfare-state' Liberalism that often was indistinguishable from social democracy.⁴¹ Distributists rejected some key Liberal policies before and after the war: unqualified free-trade, the abandonment of an impartial

It became increasingly clear to Distributists, however, after the war, that while they often occupied a political 'middle ground' between Conservatism and socialism, they did not occupy the same 'centre' as did most 'New Liberals', increasingly the dominant element in the party, who Distributists saw as having shifted Liberalism to the left, toward a 'welfare-state' Liberalism that often was indistinguishable from social democracy.

The Distributists and the Liberal Party

'Gladstonian' Christianity as the moral basis of the party programme, and home rule that did not include the entirety of Ireland.⁴²

Distributists also came to advocate new programmes that neither Tories, Labour, nor most Liberals embraced, including: the promotion of cooperatives and guilds; electoral reform, including primaries for choosing constituency candidates and the national initiative and referendum; (mostly unspecified) expanded legal protection for, and promotion of, the nuclear family as the basis of British society; expanded paid holidays for the working class; a middle ground regarding pub licensing, between deregulation and prohibition; unrelenting opposition to monopolies and any combinations that hindered small proprietors; radical parliamentary reform, so as to make individual members truly constituency representatives rather than mere party functionaries; tax reform in favour of small proprietors; and 'transparency' regarding party secret funds and manipulation of the Honours List.

The general 'tone' of Distributist journalism both before and after the war was closer to Labour than to that of either of the traditional parties, emphasising the corruption of, and collusion between, the major parties; a general anti-establishment stance, suspicious both of big business and big government; and a bemoaning of the lack of a 'free' press, meaning the dearth of non-party periodicals and newspapers – like G. K.'s *Weekly* – that were independent of the established parties.

If one glances at the first two modern papal social encyclicals – Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) – one can see what attracted the Distributists to Catholicism. These documents articulate a 'third-way' social philosophy similar to that developed by the Distributists.⁴³ In them, the popes note the following essential elements in a Christian response both to laissez-faire capitalism and socialism in its various guises: (1) a return to a Christian worldview, expressed socially as in every other part of life;⁴⁴ (2) personal autonomy in making one's way economically in the world, in a prudent and thrifty manner, whenever possible, without the interposition of the state – but with provision that the state *could and should* intervene in social life during periods of extreme economic distress;⁴⁵ (3) the duty of the state to provide social services for the poor if they are not available from any other source;⁴⁶ (4) the importance of the nuclear family as the basic 'building-block' of civil society;⁴⁷ (5) the need, in Christian charity, to reconcile social classes rather than drive them apart;⁴⁸ (6) the necessity for employers to pay workers a just wage, one that would allow the accumulation of capital, which would allow workers the development of social autonomy and independence;⁴⁹ (7) that employers provide safe and healthy work environments for their employees, including work hours limited by the requirements of health and safety;⁵⁰ (8) that the wealthy

recognise that their property, beyond that necessary to support their families, is held in trust for society as a whole and should, when necessary, be used for the benefit of others;⁵¹ (9) that it is the Church's duty, as it was before the onset of global capitalism, to protect and promote the interests of the poor and to reconcile social classes;⁵² (10) that the state should honour Sundays and the holidays identified by the Church as necessary for rest and recreation;⁵³ (11) that the accumulation by families of adequate private property to insure their independence and autonomy should be promoted by the state;⁵⁴ (12) that taxes should be limited so that families can support themselves from their non-taxed income;⁵⁵ and (13) that non-socialist labour unions, worker's cooperatives, mutual-aid societies, and other constructive combinations by members of the working class should be encouraged by the state and society and should be immune from state and employer interference.⁵⁶

~

One sees in all this that while the Distributists shared much in common with the reforms advocated by many within the early-twentieth-century Liberal Party, they were looking for something else besides. This was an ideological coherence, an overarching philosophy, which Liberalism lacked. The Distributists eventually found, or created, this philosophy in a confluence of certain elements of Liberal reform and of Christianity, a combination once significantly present in Liberalism's Gladstonian heyday. The Distributists eventually found their social vision articulated best in the Catholic social teaching of the day. Belloc's linking of Catholicism and social progress, which the Chestertons absorbed from him, the Chestertons' evolving High-Churchmanship, which eventually became Rome-focused, and the peculiarity of their own particular proposals for social reform, found a natural, if perhaps partially coincidental, affinity in the social Catholicism of the two contemporary popes who also were interested in political economy. Whether (for the Chestertons, at least) the 'chicken' of social reform or the 'egg' of Catholicism came first is not entirely clear. What is obvious is that the confluence of a coherent timeless Christian theology and non-socialist reform that the Distributists found in social Catholicism was for them an irresistible combination.

The Liberal Party's significant, diverse Christian membership, and the motivations of this element for eclectic reform, combined with Belloc's increasingly influential advocacy of Catholic-inspired non-socialist social reform, together probably provided the impetus for the Distributist impulse. The Chestertons, before they became Catholics, were linked to the Anglo-Catholic movement, which had a long-standing connection to social reform, articulated by individuals

What neither Liberalism nor Anglicanism could offer the Distributists, and particularly the Chestertons, was ideological and doctrinal coherence and permanence. Social Catholicism offered both.

like Fr. Frederick Denison Maurice (1805–1872 – the contemporary of the Liberal High-Church PM William Ewart Gladstone, 1809–1898), and other influential Anglican social-theology luminaries such as Bishop Charles Gore (1853–1932) and Archbishop William Temple (1881–1944).

What neither Liberalism nor Anglicanism could offer the Distributists, and particularly the Chestertons, was ideological and doctrinal coherence and permanence. Social Catholicism offered both.⁵⁷

Dr John B. Davenport is Professor of History in the College of Social and Behavior Sciences at North Central University in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He has published a number of scholarly articles, most often focusing on the English writer G. K. Chesterton.

1 The increasingly-less-ideologically-distinct Conservative, Liberal (various factions), and Labour parties supported ‘national’ governments, 1916–22 and 1931–45.

The ideological difficulties which the Liberal Party of the United Kingdom faced in the post-Gladstonian world – the attempt to re-establish a ‘centre’ in British politics – were mirrored in other European liberal parties of the period. See: Dieter Langewiesche, *Liberalism in Germany* (Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 128–198, 257–270. Like the British Liberals, those in Germany divided into ‘classical’ and ‘social’ liberal factions, which (unlike Britain) actually resulted in the creation of separate parties, both before and after the First World War.

The same process in Britain is described variously and well by many. I have relied mostly on two older texts: Alan Sykes’ *The Rise and Fall of British Liberalism, 1776–1988* (Longman, 1997) and H. V. Emy’s *Liberals, Radicals, and Social Politics, 1892–1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1973).

2 Other individuals associated with the initial, influential, British, and increasingly Roman Catholic, Distributist movement included the craftsmen Eric Gill (1882–1940) and Hilary Pepler (1878–1951), and the theologian and social theorist Fr. Vincent McNabb (1863–1943). The Guild Socialist Arthur Penty (1875–1937) sometimes is added to this list.

3 The Distributists have never been a significant political force, although they continue to influence individual social thinkers and politicians (see, for instance, John C. Medaille’s *Toward a Truly Free Market* (ISI Books, 2010)). A London-based ‘Distributist League’ was founded in 1926.

4 Please see, in this regard: Hilaire Belloc, ‘The Liberal Tradition’ in J. S. P[hillimore] and

F. W. H[irst] (eds.), *Essays in Liberalism* (Cassell, 1897), pp. 1–30; G. K. Chesterton, ‘Liberty, Liberalism, and Libertarians’, *Illustrated London News*, 3 Mar. 1928, to be found in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, vol. xxxiv (Ignatius Press, 1991), pp. 481–485; and Cecil Chesterton, *Gladstonian Ghosts* (Lantern Press, 1905), pp. 18, 27, 45, 47, and 49.

5 Belloc also acknowledged a debt to Henry Cardinal Manning, whose championing of the workers in the London dockers’ strike of 1889 remained embedded in his memory. See: Joseph Pearce, *Old Thunder: A Life of Hilaire Belloc* (Ignatius Press, 2002), pp. 28 and 82.

6 Ian Ker, *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 22–23. Joseph Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G. K. Chesterton* (Ignatius Press, 2004), p. 10.

7 G. K. Chesterton describes the process of his conversion in various works, most notably *The Catholic Church and Conversion*, *Why I am a Catholic*, and *The Thing: Why I am a Catholic*. See: G. K. Chesterton: *Collected Works*, vol. iii (Ignatius Press, 1990), pp. 59–335.

8 One of my students once remarked that ‘The Distributists usually knew what they were against and sometimes understood what they were for.’ This epigram was provided by Mr Josiah W. Baker, my research assistant during spring term, 2016. I am much indebted to him both for his readings of various Distributist texts and his work in helping compile the bibliography from which this article was written.

9 This list includes internally described Distributist texts and the writings most often identified as essential to the movement. I have tried to identify either the first British or American edition as follows: (1) Hilaire Belloc, ‘The Liberal Tradition’, in *Essays in Liberalism*, by Six Oxford Men, edited by John Swinnerton Phillimore and Francis Wrigley Hirst (London: Cassell, 1897); (2) G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World* (New York: Dodd, 1910); (3) Hilaire Belloc and Cecil Chesterton, *The Party System* (London: S. Swift, 1911); (4) Hilaire Belloc, *The Servile State* (London & Edinburgh: T.N. Foulis, 1912); (5) G. K. Chesterton, *The Utopia of the Usurers* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1917); (6) G. K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity* (New York: Dodd, 1927); and (7) Hilaire Belloc, *An Essay on the Restoration of Property* (London: The Distributist League, 1936). Citations from modern editions often will be noted herein below. The Papal encyclicals *Rerum Novarum* (1891) and *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) obviously were not written as ‘Distributist’ texts per se, but eventually were treated as such by Belloc, G. K. Chesterton, and their followers, since the ideas of the Distributist ‘founders’ and the two popes in question were essentially congruent.

10 Cecil Chesterton’s *Gladstonian Ghosts* (1906)

generally is not included in the list of primordial Distributist texts, since Cecil’s ideology, while containing elements of what became the Distributist consensus, was much less focused even than the diverse Distributist movement. This text did anticipate some of what followed in his and Belloc’s *The Party System* (1911), which usually is identified as a ‘Distributist’ text.

11 Belloc, ‘The Liberal Tradition’, pp. 6–7, 29–30

12 A sensibility that could be shared by the Christian elements uneasily held together by the strap of the historic Liberal Party, i.e. Anglicans of various stripes, particularly High Churchmen; Roman Catholics (particularly Irish Roman Catholics); and Non-conformists. Archibald Philip Primrose, 5th Earl of Rosebery (1847–1929), the Liberal PM 1894–1895 and leader of the opposition, 1895–1896, propounded a vague theory of government labeled ‘Efficiency’, an entirely secular version of the earlier Liberal ‘Retrenchment and Reform’. See: G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World* (Ignatius Press, 1994), pp. 19–20. Chesterton wanted this Christian sensibility, which he felt was missing after Gladstone’s departure, reemphasised; see p. 27.

13 Ibid, pp. 33–34, 56.

14 Ibid, p. 37.

15 Ibid, p. 41.

16 Ibid, pp. 52–53.

17 Ibid, pp. 58–61.

18 Ibid, p. 67.

19 Ibid, p. 73–74. Chesterton’s brother Cecil expands on this point in *Gladstonian Ghosts*, ‘Our British Moslems’, pp. 142–158. ‘Beer drinking ... is a national habit which no wise ruler would try to suppress’ (p. 153).

20 Ibid, pp. 79–80.

21 Ibid, pp. 83–125, passim.

22 Ibid, pp. 129–175, passim.

23 Hilaire Belloc and Cecil Chesterton. *The Party System* (IHS Press, 2007), pp. 30–31, 36–42. G. K. Chesterton makes the same point repeatedly in the *Illustrated London News*, 1910–1913. Please see his columns: ‘Objections to the Party System’ (17 Dec. 1910), ‘The Conserving and Reforming Parties’ (4 Feb. 2011), ‘The Party System’ (4 Mar. 1911), ‘Is Parliament Corrupt?’ (27 May 1911), ‘The Political Parties and Bureaucracy’ (2 Mar. 1912), ‘The Collapse of Party Labels’ (6 Jul. 1912), ‘Abuses of the Party System’ (1 Feb. 1913), and ‘New Titles for Our Parties’ (24 May 1913). G. K. Chesterton: *Collected Works*, vol. xxxviii, *The Illustrated London News, 1908–1910* (Ignatius Press, 1987), pp. 647–651; and G. K. Chesterton: *Collected Works*, vol. xxix, *The Illustrated London News, 1911–1913* (Ignatius Press, 1988), pp. 32–35, 47–51, 91–95, 250–253, 320–324, 433–436, and 497–500.

Parenthetically, the link between late-nineteenth-century British Liberalism and

- modern Classical Liberalism can be seen in the modern edition of *The Party System*, wherein the Foreword was composed by Ronald Ernest ('Ron') Paul, Congressman from Texas, 1979–1985, 1997–2013, Presidential candidate for the Libertarian Party in 1988, and a past-leader of the Liberty Caucus of classical liberals in the American House of Representatives.
- 24 Belloc and Cecil Chesterton, *The Party System*, p. 26. The Parliament Act of 1911 provided the first 'independent' salaries for members of the Commons – £400 per annum. The discussion of individual-member 'independence' is amplified in ch. 5, 'Control of Elections', pp. 86–98.
- 25 Ibid, pp. 48–52.
- 26 Ibid, pp. 54–75, passim.
- 27 Ibid pp. 76–85.
- 28 Ibid, p. 127.
- 29 The lingering influence of the Distributists on Liberalism can be found among those who draw upon Christian ethics in the articulation of their political vision, e.g. George Elliot Dodds (1889–1977) or Joseph ('Jo') Grimond, Baron Grimond (1913–1993). Dodds became the chairman of the Liberal 'Unservile State Group' in 1953 and wrote a chapter in George Watson's book *The Unservile State: Essays in Liberty and Welfare* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957).
- 30 Belloc's analysis of society is summarised by Victor Feske in ch. 1, 'Hilaire Belloc: The Path Not Taken', in *From Belloc to Churchill: Private Scholars, Public Culture, and the Crisis of British Liberalism, 1900–1939* (University of North Carolina Press, 1996) pp. 15–60. See particularly pp. 33–37.
- 31 Belloc comes closest to offering a 'solution' to the problems of contemporary society in Sections Three ('How the Servile Institution was for a Time Dissolved', pp. 71–84), Four ('How the Distributive State Failed', pp. 85–106), and Six ('The Stable Solutions of this Instability', pp. 121–126). See: Hilaire Belloc, *The Servile State* (Liberty Classics, 1977).
- 32 The actual title of Chesterton's book is *The Utopia of the Usurers and Other Essays*; the 'Other Essays' constitute about two-thirds of the volume.
- 33 G. K. Chesterton, *The Utopia of the Usurers and Other Essays*, in G. K. Chesterton: *Collected Works*, vol. v (Ignatius Press, 1987), pp. 405–409, 412–413.
- 34 Ibid, pp. 415–416
- 35 Ibid, pp. 417–420
- 36 Ibid, pp. 423–425; see also Chesterton's *Eugenics and Other Evils* (Dodd, 1922).
- 37 Ibid pp. 430–434.
- 38 G. K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity* (IHS Press, 2001), passim, but particularly pp. 26, 42–43, 51, 55–56, 67, 70, 79, 85, 93, 98, 107, 111, 147, and 179–181.
- 39 Ibid, pp. 160–163.
- 40 Hilaire Belloc, *An Essay on the Restoration of Property* (IHS Press, 2002), passim but particularly pp. 56–58, 67–71, 78–83, 86–87, and 94–95.
- 41 The Distributists probably would have agreed with George Dangerfield that 'When Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman died in 1908, it was like the passing of true Liberalism. Sir Henry had believed in Peace, Retrenchment, and Reform, those amiable deities who presided so complacently over large portions of the Victorian era, inspiring their worshippers with so many generous sentiments.' See: George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 27.
- 42 Please see in this regard: John Davenport, 'G. K. Chesterton: Nationalist Ireland's English Apologist', in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, v. 103, no. 410 (Summer, 2014), pp. 178–192.
- 43 The following editions were consulted: Pope Leo XIII (Vincenzo Giocchino Pecci, 1810–1903, pope 1878–1903), *Encyclical Letter of His Holiness Pope Leo XIII on the Condition of the Working Classes: Rerum Novarum* (Pauline Books & Media, 2000; promulgated, 1891); and Pope Pius XI (Achille Ambrogio Damiano Ratti, 1857–1939, pope 1922–1939), *Encyclical Letter On Social Reconstruction [Quadragesimo Anno]* (St. Paul editions, 1939?).
- The latter document essentially repeats the teachings of the former, celebrates progress made over the past forty years, and issues new warnings both about socialism (pp. 53–55, 57–59), given the excesses of the Communist state in Russia since 1917, and about any return to the (from the papal perspective) heartless competition of Manchester-School Liberalism (see particularly pp. 29, 44) which eventually had led only to monopoly (pp. 50–52).
- Pius herein is ambivalent about the fascist 'Corporate State', which some Catholics saw an attempt to embody elements of Catholic social teaching in a 'third-way' system, neither capitalist nor socialist (see pp. 45–48). While both Belloc and G. K. Chesterton routinely condemned Hitler and the Nazis, they too initially were uncertain about the Italian, Austrian, and Spanish fascist regimes. Chesterton, of course, died in 1936, before the Spanish Civil War had run its course. He certainly was supportive of Dollfuss, but this was more as the leader of a 'small nation' against the imperialism of a greater one than anything. Please see in this regard his column of 8 July 1933, 'Austria and the Nazis' in *The Illustrated London News* to be found in G. K. Chesterton: *Collected Works*, v. xxxvi, *The Illustrated London News, 1932–1934* (Ignatius Press, 2011), pp. 300–304. In general, Belloc was more sympathetic to Mussolini than was Chesterton (who criticised Mussolini
- for his misunderstanding pre-war Italian Liberalism); Belloc supported Franco during the Spanish Civil War and also Charles Maurras' *Action Française*. See: Ian Ker, G. K. Chesterton: *A Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 659–660, 712, 715; and Joseph Pearce, *Old Thunder: A Life of Hilaire Belloc* (Ignatius Press, 2002), pp. 195–196, 254, 260–261.
- The blanket charge of anti-Semitism sometimes leveled at Belloc and both Chestertons, seems often connected to scurrilous ethnic remarks appearing in Cecil Chesterton's journal *New Witness* during the Marconi Scandal, 1912–1913, related to the Jewish background of Sir Rufus Isaacs (1860–1935), the Attorney General at the time, his brother, Godfrey Isaacs (1867–1925), managing director of the Marconi Company, and the Postmaster General, Herbert Louis Samuel (1870–1963), who also was a Jew. Both Belloc and G. K. Chesterton were critical of the anti-Semitic tone that the journal sometimes exhibited during the scandal, often attributable to contributions by Hugh O'Donnell (1846–1916), but certainly the ultimate responsibility of Cecil Chesterton, the journal's sometimes cavalier editor. Please see Pearce, *Old Thunder*, p. 152–153.
- G. K. Chesterton seems not have thought much in his earlier Anglican years of Pope Leo and his teachings, noting in *The Catholic Church and Conversion* (1929) that: "nobody in our really well-informed world took much notice" of the teaching of "the poor old gentleman" who represented the dregs of a dead religion, essentially a superstition.' Quoted by Ian Ker in G. K. Chesterton: *A Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 565–566. Clearly Chesterton was influenced by *Rerum Novarum*, wherein the concept of 'distributive justice' is clearly articulated (Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, p. 30).
- 44 Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, pp. 5, 15, 52–53.
- 45 Ibid, pp. 9–10, 14, 16, 26, 51
- 46 Ibid, pp. 33–34.
- 47 Ibid, pp. 12–13.
- 48 Ibid, pp. 16–17.
- 49 Ibid, pp. 18–19, 39.
- 50 Ibid, p. 33.
- 51 Ibid, pp. 21–22, 27, 37.
- 52 Ibid, pp. 27–28.
- 53 Ibid, pp. 36, 38.
- 54 Ibid, pp. 40–41
- 55 Ibid, pp. 41–42.
- 56 Ibid, pp. 42–50.
- 57 This essay can be read as a complement to David Boyle's article 'Hilaire Belloc and the Liberal Revival' in the *Journal of Liberal History* (Spring 2003), accessed in electronic form, 1 Dec. 2015 (<http://www.david-boyle.co.uk/history/belloc.html>).