

# Distributism

## *Beyond Capitalism and Socialism*

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Fritz Schumacher used to tell the story of the three professionals sitting around arguing about whose was the oldest profession. The doctor said that his was the oldest because God operated on Adam to remove his rib to make Eve. The architect, however, declared that even before that God built the world out of chaos. Yes, said the economist, but who do you think made that?

Yes, indeed, economists have made chaos, and they have done it on a worldwide, if not universal scale, and, for some reason, are richly rewarded for it. They have created a system, in both capitalist and socialist guises, that favors the using up of the world's resources at ever-faster rates, that encourages their processing in ways that produce pollution and waste, that puts wealth into ever-fewer hands in the countries of the favored few, that allows for great sickness, poverty, ignorance, and starvation across the world, and that celebrates every single one of what this culture knows as the Seven Deadly Sins. (For those of you who have forgotten the Church's teachings, those are pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. Yes, even sloth: for the couch-potato consumers.)

There must be a better way. And, of course, there is and has been for a very long time. It is a society based on small self-sufficient regions, empowered communities, vibrant neighborhoods, gainfully employed families, individual self-satisfactions, decentralized politics, local economies, sustainable organic agriculture, cooperative work, environmental humility, and careful nurturing of the earth. It is the way many people have lived, probably in most places and for most of the time, for the greatest part of the last eight thousand years, punctuated by some periods of empire and kingship, until the rise of capitalism five hundred years ago.

It was nearly a hundred years after the ravages of industrial capitalism had spread across the United Kingdom that a group of people in England began to talk about this sort of society, and they gave it the name of Distributism. It was a largely literary movement, with giants like Hillaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton, and it set out in careful and inspiring terms what the good society would look like, giving a framework and a name to what had long been seen as an ideal, or at least more reasonable, way of life. It did not have a great deal of success, on the ground as it were, because of all the centralizing, big-government twentieth-century forces stacked against it, but it suggested the ways people might organize their lives insofar as those forces permitted it and the kind of world to be working for.

It was called Distributism because it held that in the ideal society ownership and property would be distributed as widely as possible, to individuals, families, and co-ops, and not in the hands of governments and corporations of either capitalist or socialist bent. It sought to work out the principles of late-nineteenth-century Catholic "social justice" teachings, as outlined particularly by Leo XIII's *Rerum Naturum* of 1891, in which he attacked the "excesses of capitalism" overtly as being responsible for the "misery of the working classes." Its solution was not so much the abolition of capitalism, the sort of thing that socialists were on about at the turn of the century, as the abolition

of large institutions of capitalism and a return to an economy built on guild craftsmen, small family farmers, and village-level trading.

You may recognize in this many of the elements of agrarianism, a parallel movement largely in the United States, that similarly deplored the evils of industrialism and urged a return to a society based on small-scale agriculture. Its sense that farming and an interaction with nature are a moral good, foster family and village closeness and allow life on the human scale is carried over into most Distributist writing. Its classic statement, *I'll Take My Stand*, was published in 1930, around the time the Distributists were writing some of their most important books in England—for example, Chesterton's *The Outline of Sanity* (1927) and Arthur Penty's *The Elements of Domestic Design* (1930).

The Distributist philosophy is still alive today, though it is not always named Distributism, and so, surprisingly enough, are some of the actual elements of it, taking shape at the edges of the dominant society. To suggest but a few, there is the bioregional movement, deep ecology, farmers markets, community-supported agriculture, organic farming, homegrown gardens, local- and slow-food movements, alternative currencies, alternative medicine, alternative energy, intermediate technology (Schumacher was directly influenced by the English Distributists), Buy-Nothing Day, simple living, homeschooling, neo-Luddism, worker ownership, antiglobalization, anti-free trade, environmental interest groups, ecological restoration, eco-villages, land trusts, and land preservation. All of these would be welcomed by Distributists as living out their legacy.

What's more, if the predictions for the future prove to be accurate—peak oil and the end of long-haul transportation, global warming and the end of agribusiness—the world and its destructive capitalist/socialist economy will be forced to change radically and in the direction of Distributist principles. As James Kunstler puts it in *The Long Emergency*, when these crises hit, national and supranational economies will disintegrate, and the focus of society will have to return to the town or small city and its supporting agricultural hinterland. It will require us to downscale and rescale virtually everything we do and how we do it, from the kind of communities we physically inhabit to the way we grow our food to the way we work and trade the products of our work. Anything organized on the large scale, whether it is government or a corporate business enterprise such as Walmart, will wither as the cheap energy props that support bigness fall away.

And then, of necessity, the world will reconstruct itself on the lines of more human-scale, community-based, local-resource-dependent societies, something that the Distributists would recognize as what they'd been talking about all along.