

A NEO-DISTRIBUTIST PROPOSAL

A little-known movement from a century ago may provide a political platform for the promotion of convivial and autonomous local livelihoods, argues CHRIS SMAJE.

There's a saying that if you want a new idea, you should read an old book. It certainly feels as though some new ideas are needed to overcome the ecological, political and socioeconomic troubles of present times. There is a way to address these troubles, not so much through an old book as through an old political movement, namely distributism.

Simon Fairlie wrote a stimulating short history of the original distributist movement in a previous issue of *The Land*.¹ This detailed how the movement rose after World War I under the influence of G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, before being eclipsed after World War II, as postwar growth and the US-Soviet superpower rivalry re-centred twentieth century politics around the clash between corporate capitalism and Marx-inflected socialism.

Distributism's decline was linked to its rightward drift, and the undeniable rapprochement that Fairlie traces between some (but not all) of its prominent members and aspects of prewar fascism and anti-Semitism. Rightly, this did it no favours in the cold postwar light, although many other prewar thinkers across the political spectrum share in this dishonour.

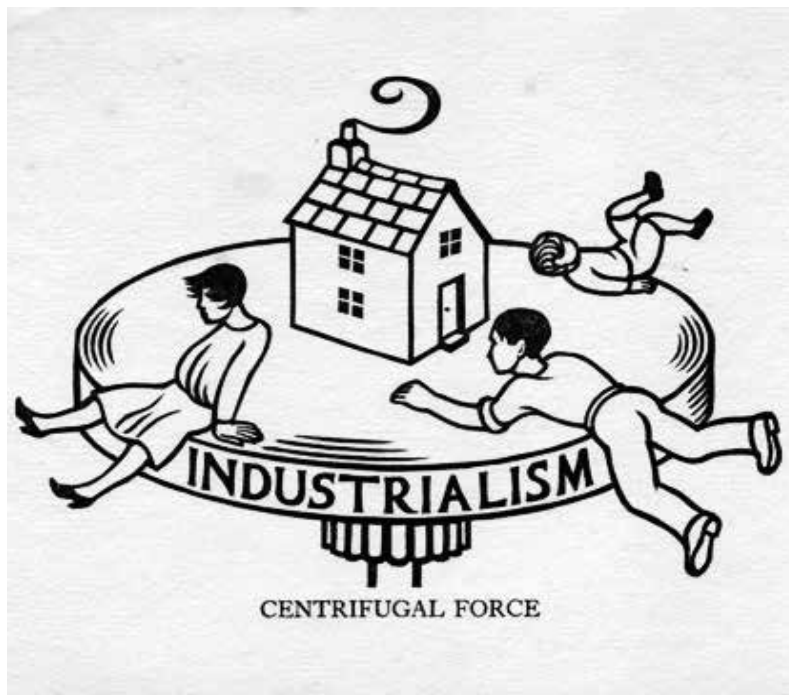
If there is a case for reviving distributism today, plainly this does not apply to all its original manifestations. Yet as the neo-distributist writer David Boyle puts it, "every intellectual movement and political tradition carries at least the possibility of tyranny within it".²

Part of the appeal of neo-distributism today rests on the need to overcome the tyrannies, and the ecocides, associated with the capitalist and state socialist doctrines which supplanted the original distributist movement, as part of a broader displacement of approaches to human flourishing which did not centre productivism or economic growth.

Romantic Anti-Capitalism

The distributists were one current in a wider stream of romantic anti-capitalism, that has been highly influential on contemporary ecological and decentralist thought. In England, this began with such figures as William Blake and William Cobbett, and continued with Victorian thinkers like John Ruskin and William Morris, before influencing disparate critics of 20th century politics including Mohandas Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Fritz Schumacher, Ivan Illich and Wendell Berry.

Romanticism remains a dirty word for many, but – in the words of one historian – this romantic lineage "has proved more resilient and humane than Marxism, "progressivism"



Wood engraver Philip Hagreen lived with other distributists at Ditchling in Sussex, and championed the land reform theories of the movement in his work.

and social democracy". Rather than seeking to resurrect or retreat into the past, at its best romanticism has "looked to the past for a critical perspective on the present that was more penetrating and promising than the future held out by the disenchanted heirs of the Enlightenment".³

This article will highlight four principal commitments of a revised distributism, and explain why they hold more future promise than existing mainstream political positions grounded in that disenchanted legacy.

Autonomy and Subsidiarity

The first of these is that ordinary people should have the autonomy to make a decent personal livelihood that's as enduring and renewable as possible, given the vagaries of climate, ecology and economy. In practice, for many people this will likely involve access to small areas of land. It will also require skills in gardening, farming, construction, and associated crafts that enable them to produce the food, fibre and other materials needed to furnish the basic necessities of life for themselves and/or for their local community.

To put some flesh on the bones of this first commitment, it may help to move onto the second – the principle of subsidiarity. Politically, subsidiarity means making decisions at the smallest and most local level compatible with satisfactory resolution of the issue. Economically, it means producing necessary goods at the smallest level of human aggregation compatible with satisfactory production of the good.



When it comes to producing food and fibre, creating viable post-modern and post-industrial societies will require learning from the remarkably recurrent historic pattern of economic subsidiarity found among premodern and preindustrial societies worldwide.

Of course details vary greatly from place to place, but the basic pattern has been that intensive day-to-day garden or arable production is undertaken by individuals or small household/family groups, while more extensive land uses such as grazing, woodland management and watershed management are organised at the wider level of the local community.

Common and Private

A simpler way of framing this is to say that distributism involves private ownership where it's appropriate, and commons where it isn't.

There is a mythologised historical view of Britain (and elsewhere) that supposes all land was held in common, until it was enclosed and privatised in modern times with the emergence of capitalism. In fact, commons generally go together with something approximating private property, and there is arguably evidence going as far back as Iron Age Britain (possibly the Neolithic), of private landholdings where a family or household had an exclusive right to derive a livelihood, set within wider communal landholding.³

Suspensions of private property on the political left are well-founded. Alliances between states and private corporations have created opportunities for monopolistic accumulation of vast fortunes, at the expense of ordinary people. The distributist approach is – as the name implies – opposed to such accumulation. Instead it sees private property as a vehicle for spreading opportunities to generate modest practical livelihoods. On this view 'private property' just means that a community recognises an owner's right to derive a personal benefit or appropriate a product from a possession. It doesn't necessarily mean they can do whatever they like with that possession, regardless of its impact on other people.

But for this to happen, access to land and other kinds of livelihood-generating property must remain distributed. On this point, Fairlie detects a contradiction in distributism where the

"idealisation of property militates against the supposed objective of wider smallholder ownership of land, since that project necessarily involves land reform which in turn requires an abrogation of existing landowners' property rights ... The Distributists shy away from anything so radical".⁵

This isn't entirely true. Chesterton, for example, wrote that the English upper class:

"must 'shell out,' as the phrase goes, to a vastly greater extent than any Radical politician has yet dared to suggest; they must endure burdens much heavier than the Budget and strokes much deadlier than the death duties; for the thing to be done is nothing more nor less than the distribution of the great fortunes and the great estates."⁶

Neither this passage, nor the broader distributist case for an economic subsidiarity with a strong emphasis on smallholder property, looks out of place in the pages of *The Land*. There is no contradiction between making a case for smallholder property rights, commons and public ownership where they are respectively appropriate, and making a case against the concentration of private property.

The main problem faced both by the original distributists and by land reform activists in England today is that neither has been able to build large-scale political movements that ensure land and property stay distributed among the mass of ordinary people. All that's required to embrace a new distributism, in the first instance, is to agree on the need for such a movement.

While some might argue that the optimum way of keeping land available for public use is state ownership, as promoted by traditional socialist politics, what distinguishes the distributist approach is its emphasis on autonomy-within-community, where the autonomy part is just as important as the community part. Economic subsidiarity matters.



Does this count as toil? Maybe it depends how much community spirit is present.

Not Saving Labour

The third commitment is to honest and sustainable work in creating material livelihood as a human value, an end in itself. This means that ‘labour saving’ innovations are not regarded as inherently beneficial, in the way they are in mainstream economics – whether as a means for lowering costs, or for increasing total production.

Some such innovations might be favoured in a neo-distributist ecological society, but the main emphasis would be on creating more rather than less work for people in low-carbon, locally beneficial sectors such as farming, crafts, education, health and care work. When a decision was taken to ‘save’ labour, its redeployment would not be left to market mechanisms of supply and demand, nor to bureaucratic job-creation schemes. A distributist economy would instead create the conditions for people to generate autonomous livelihoods, not least – as already mentioned – through access to land.

It’s tempting to say that in a distributist society there would be a spiritual dimension to work, because decisions about work involve taking a position on what human life is about. But this is true in every society. The crux is that distributism sets itself against modern societies’ secular spirituality around work and the economy, that paradoxically seeks to minimise human labour as a ‘bad’ and maximise financial returns as a ‘good’. This has resulted in the concentration of money and status into a few hands, and the offloading of poorly rewarded and unpleasant work onto many others.

In an ecological neo-distributist society, work – in its toils, in its rewards and in its social, ecological and economic consequences – would be distributed more fairly, more evenly and more responsibly. Part of this would involve a reassessment of what counts as ‘toil’. For example, distributists would view secure and self-directed physical work on a farm or smallholding as less toilsome than insecure and other-directed

deskwork in an office. This is already an open secret widely shared in contemporary society, particularly among younger people. It tugs at the increasingly barefaced modernist lie that nobody wants to farm any more.

Households

The final distributist commitment is to households as the key unit of production and consumption, though not the only one. Making households economically key, through the distribution of land, through subsidiarity and through emphasising the value of their work, introduces a self-limiting element that mitigates against over-financialisation and the drive to increase surplus production. It also ensures that the focus of livelihood-making remains fundamentally local, which helps to support local commons, communities, wildlife and wild landscapes.

Households might comprise an adult couple of the same or different genders with or without children, a larger family group, a group or intentional community of friends with or without a common economic purpose, a religious community, or any number of other possibilities. But family and kinship relations are likely to be one important dimension of household organisation in the future, just as they are in the present and were in the past, and I’d argue this is no worse a way to constitute households than other possibilities.⁷

Four Commitments

In a nutshell then, these are the four commitments mentioned above as the essence of a neo-distributist movement. First, the autonomy-in-community of local livelihood-making, grounded in distributed access to private land and commons. Second, political and economic subsidiarity. Third, an emphasis on work as a spiritual value in creating a decent local livelihood; and fourth, an emphasis on the household as a unit of joint production and consumption.

Distributism differs from mainstream modern political movements by not being committed to the notion that the humdrum routines of daily life and livelihood-making must be transcended for the better, by some singular dynamic of 'progress' such as market forces, class struggle or communal identity (as espoused respectively by market liberals, Marxists and nationalists).

It's not that these forces have no relevance. They've been responsible for numerous murderous conflicts, and taken us to the brink of environmental catastrophe. Between them they represent the main legacy from the 'disenchanted' (i.e. secular) logic of the 18th century Enlightenment period in European thought mentioned above, which basically replaced religious beliefs in redemption in the afterlife with secular beliefs in the here-and-now redemption of everyday life on Earth.

Building Coalitions

Distributism doesn't deny the existence or sometimes the usefulness of these forces, but it does deny their world-redeeming power. So, for example, there's a place for markets in a neo-distributist society – locations where people can exchange things – but not for 'the market' as an abstract force driving the global economy. Likewise, there's a place for people to articulate collective economic and/or cultural identities politically. But there's no assumption that a bureaucratic centralised state, communist or nationalist, organised through those identities, represents a path to the general betterment of society.

The large and initially successful communist revolutions that reverberated across the twentieth century were generally raised on the back of peasant communisms that were more-or-less distributist in character. These were first co-opted by Leninist power grabs of the centralised state apparatus, channelling that disenchanted Enlightenment idealisation of 'progress', then ultimately undermined by capitalist forces operating with more powerful versions of the same idealisation.

For distributists, the path to betterment is more local, more specific and probably closer in character to those earlier peasant communisms. It's about how individuals, households and communities can continue to create good local livelihoods for themselves in the face of various natural and human forces pulling against that.

There are certainly some powerful counterforces at large – most importantly, the self-destructive fire of financialised global capitalism, and the literal fires, floods and famines its activities are causing. But some forms of anti-capitalist politics also run counter to local convivial livelihoods. This is especially true of forms of socialism, populism and nationalism which



Clare Leighton 1933 - August: Harvesting

are committed to a centralised and inevitably bureaucratic state as a purifying political force.

Defining local, ecological, neo-distributist alternatives poses knotty problems, like how to build a broad-based, mass movement to supersede modern state politics, that's opposed in its essence to mass movements and state politics. One place to start is by creating coalitions, and a mutually supportive political umbrella for people working in diverse ways on distributed, convivial, ecological, local livelihood-making. There are already an enormous number of people, organisations and movements dedicated to this work. Worldwide, many regions, cultures, political frameworks and religious traditions are broadly distributist in the senses outlined above, but lack the common structures and vocabularies to join forces and gain strength from one another.

To that end, I've been discussing with an international group of colleagues the idea of a Distributist Congress – potentially as both a recurrent meeting and an ongoing political vehicle. I invite readers of *The Land* to contact me to express their interest, support or ideas for such a Congress, as individuals or on behalf of relevant organisations they represent.

Email: distributism@proton.me

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7. See Chris Smaje. 2021. 'Commons and households in a small farm future'. *The Land* 29, pp.42-9.