

**Belloc, Hilaire. *An Essay on the Restoration of Property*. Norfolk, Virginia.: IHS Press, 2002. 102 pp. \$8.95 softcover.**

With this volume, IHS Press continues its important work of bringing back into print classics of Catholic social thought. In this book, the great English Catholic social critic, man of letters, and parliamentarian Hilaire Belloc provides us with one of the best descriptions of the economic order called distributism.

The central theme of distributism is probably the need for as many people as possible to become property owners, a position which of course echoes that of the papal social encyclicals. In this and his powerful book *The Servile State* (which is probably his best known work), Belloc makes clear that unless an economic order is shaped that provides for widespread property ownership, men's freedom is in peril. Their destinies will be controlled either by big business interests or government. He has no doubt that there is an alternative economic order to what we commonly called "capitalism" and socialism, a "third way."

People often think of distributism as a "back to nature" kind of movement. While many distributist writers have shown a yearning for something like a Jeffersonian yeomanry, Belloc makes clear that most fundamentally distributism does not involve that, but rather a kind of empowerment of individuals and families by property ownership. While it may be that the criticism of Belloc and other European Catholic writers of "capitalism" may be too sweeping (we must recall John Paul II's distinction between the two notions of capitalism in *Centesimus Annus*), the economic insecurity and lack of control over one's economic destiny is a deeply troubling feature of modern market economies. Belloc and other distributists could clearly see this in their time, and the problem probably has gotten only worse since then.

Belloc spends a chapter of the book explaining how these problems began and what their causes are. The collapse of the medieval guild structure, the economic changes occasioned by the Protestant Reformation (talked about at length in *The Servile State*), and the taking hold of what today we would call a flawed human anthropology (i.e., an extreme individualism, a failure to understand the social nature of man) are the core causes. Like other Catholic writers, he rejects the argument that the Industrial Revolution inevitably led to the dislocations and injustices of modern economic life. The Industrial Revolution could have been channeled differently had different views been prevalent. The outcome of all this was what might be called a fashioning of economic "rules of the game" that encouraged both large-scale enterprise and the creation of an "economic plutocracy."

Belloc provides many specific proposed solutions and makes clear that government has a very definite role—a coercive role—in restraining certain private economic behavior and protecting the “little guy.” Monopoly, except for so-called “natural monopolies,” should be stopped at all cost (he even thinks that we may be less stuck with the natural monopolies than we think). The tax system, he believes, is a particularly potent weapon in the war against bigness. He advocates a “differential tax,” which would fall heavily on larger enterprises or those inclining to bigness. It would have the effect of retarding their continued growth. He sees different ways that economic power could be concentrated and proposes ways to combat it, such as legal restrictions on large shareholder groups buying up more stock and consolidating their control over companies. He calls generally for a limit to the number of shares of stock that a single individual can own in a company, and calls for something like a concurrent majority system among stockholders of a company (i.e., it should take an extraordinary majority of stockholders to decide on actions, so that a relatively small percentage could hold a veto power). He even makes the disputable assertion, despite his antipathy for socialism, that state ownership over an enterprise may be preferable to control by a few extremely wealthy men. The arrangement he prefers, however, would be for the state to charter modern-type guilds to run enterprises—which, effectively, would socialize (but, not in the sense of “socialism”) the productive activity—or charter holding companies that would insure the widespread ownership of stock in firms.

Even where large-scale factories are needed, everything possible should still be done to encourage the small craftsman to be as much involved in the production of a good as possible. Where large factories are not truly needed, and where necessary efficiency would not suffer without them, then the tax system should be used to stop them from forming.

All this will help change the rules of the game and enable the restoration of an economy built basically on small-scale productive activity.

Belloc makes a number of other specific proposals geared to checking bigness and the concentration of wealth. While he never says that great wealth is an evil—as the Church does not—the effect of some of his proposals would certainly be to limit wealth accumulation and moderate the range of wealth disparity.

Belloc rightly understands—as so many of today’s liberals do not—that law and reform do not by themselves solve problems. He stresses the importance of attitudinal change. People have to break away

from the modern bias that prefers efficiency over freedom. (This has manifested itself in many ways in the post-1900 world, from the adulation of Italian fascism because under it the trains ran on time, to the condition of America and the West today, where people surrender more and more of their freedom for a false sense of security and the guarantee of an exaggerated conception of order.) People—including the poor, who are especially dispossessed by modern economic arrangements—have to come to appreciate the value of being property-owners and having a system that encourages this. They must be willing to reorient themselves to spending more for items made well by individual craftsmen than mass produced ones, not only because of the better quality, but because it is better for society. Belloc recognizes that such attitudinal changes will not be easy.

There is much to ponder in this short book, both as to the nature of the criticism made by Belloc of modern economic life and his proposed solutions. It would be good if we could somehow have a renewed debate in the Western world about these questions, and if writers and scholars similarly inclined as Belloc—and there are some—would reflect about how an analysis like his applies to our post-industrial age. This journal and the new economics and politics journal being founded at Ave Maria University would seem to provide particularly inviting forums for this. In any event, IHS Press is to be commended for one of their latest publishing achievements.

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