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“ONE BIG THING”: DISTRIBUTISM REVISITED

A Review of:

Michael Hickey, Catholic Social Teaching and Distributism: Toward a New Economy. Lanham, MD: Hamilton Books, 2018. 152pp.

Race Matthews, Of Labour and Liberty: Distributism in Victoria, 1891-1966. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017. 375pp.

Thomas Storck, An Economics of Justice & Charity: Catholic Social Teaching. Its Development and Contemporary Relevance. Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2017. 161pp.

In the words of historian Race Matthews, channeling the late Isaiah Berlin, Distributism is like the proverbial hedgehog. It “knows one big thing”; namely, that true social justice can only be gained through a wide distribution of productive property among a people. By productive property, Distributists mean a homestead, land sufficient for a vegetable garden and simple animal husbandry, and the tools needed for such a venture. They want a “society of owners,” with “property for the people” gained where necessary through state guided redistribution of housing opportunities and land. In place of capitalist enterprises, which sever ownership and labor, Distributists favor cooperatives of all sorts—credit unions, purchasing and marketing coops, insurance societies—and worker participation in the ownership and control of necessarily large factories.

While there were antecedents, Distributism emerged as a direct consequence of the 1891 Papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*—The New Age—authored by Pope Leo XIII. While this document was “modern” in its readiness to engage—rather than simply denounce—the emerging urban-industrial order, it was traditional, or agrarian, in its insistence that all wealth derived from the land. As Leo wrote, “it may truly be said that all human subsistence is derived either from labor on one’s own land, or from some toil, some calling, which is paid for either in the produce of the land itself, or on that which is exchanged for what the land brings forth.”

The Pope also linked the physicality of home, goods, and land to the “natural and original right of marriage” and to its “principle purpose,” namely to “Increase and Multiply.” Only through the ownership of private property might the family find its full expression and autonomy. In consequence, “the law...should favor ownership, and its policy should be to induce as many as possible of the people to become owners.”

This bond between property ownership, family autonomy, and social health became the principle theme of the British authors Hilaire Belloc and G.K. Chesterton, who refined Leo’s principles into a fairly complete Distributist theory and program of action. As the former explained in his volume *The Restoration of Property*, the goal was to create “a society in which property is well distributed and so large a proportion of the families in the state... own and therefore control the means of production as to determine the general tone of society.” He would use differential taxation to discourage chain stores, large industrial plants, and the accumulation of farm land beyond the needs of one family. Chesterton added that “as each...family finds again the real experience of private property, it will become a centre of influence, a mission.” Three new books describe the origins and course of Catholic social teaching and its relationship to Distributism. Two are cast as introductions to these subjects. The better of these is Thomas Storck’s *An Economics of Justice and Charity: Catholic Social Teaching. Its Development and Contemporary Relevance*. Storck is a most able writer, and he properly emphasizes the centrality of family health and liberty to the Catholic economic project. While he gives too little attention to the agrarian foundations of *Rerum Novarum*—which is curious since he once edited the fine Catholic agrarian journal *Caelum et Terra*—he succeeds in showing the continuity of Catholic social teaching on economic questions from Leo XIII up to and including the current Pontiff, Francis.

Storck is particularly impressive in his discussion of *Quadragesimo Anno*, the encyclical issued by Pope Pius XI on the fortieth anniversary [1931] of *Rerum Novarum*. This document was “[s]o ambitious,” he reports, that “the Catholic world has not yet assimilated, let alone implemented, its teaching.” Where the earlier encyclical was largely content to lay out general principles, Pius’ is far more detailed and politically engaged. As its subtitle boldly proclaims, it is *On Reconstructing the Social Order and Perfecting It Conformably to the Precepts of the Gospel*. Storck makes the important point that this document appeared within a few months of another famed encyclical, *Casti Connubi*, which strongly reaffirmed Roman Catholic teachings condemning artificial birth control and abortion while defending Christian marriage. In both, Pius highlights the imperative that public officials focus their efforts on “the needs of married people and their families.”

How should Catholics reconstruct the social order? Pius praises the creation of Christian labor unions to advance “the rights and legitimate demands of Catholic laborers” and “to assert the saving principle on which Christian society is based.” Governments must make “clearer the social duties of property owners.” All “ownership” is actually provisional, related to just ends. The Pope urges that clear limits be set on the accumulation of land and capital, so that the “immense power and despotic economic domination” found in advanced capitalist societies could be contained. He insists that a “family wage” be paid to husbands and fathers as a fundamental “right in communitative justice.” Unfettered or “free” competition resting on the theoretical “errors of the ‘individualistic’ school” must be tempered by the claims of social justice and social charity, to be achieved through appropriate forms of taxation and regulation.

Storck also includes a solid appendix on the encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, issued by Pope John Paul II in 1991. A number of neo-conservative Catholic writers have argued that this document “has brought economic liberty into Catholic social teaching” (Michael Novak) and marks the end of the Catholic “quest for a ‘Third Way’ between or beyond capitalism and socialism” (George Weigel). Storck persuasively argues that the overwhelming message of *Centesimus Annus* still sets “the logic of the free market” over against “the logic of the [Catholic] Magisterium.” For example, it insists on the necessity of a family wage for fathers, says that markets must be “appropriately controlled,” and calls for new limits on what might be bought and sold.

The other introductory volume, Michael Hickey’s *Catholic Social Teaching and Distributism: Toward a New Economy*, covers much of the same ground, but with a curious twist. Simply put, he seems to have problem with orthodox Catholic understandings of marriage and family. Where the modern popes, including Francis, have placed the traditional family as the central object of economic concern, Hickey tries to avoid the subject. Early on, he makes the odd statement that in the modern world, the “family is a term constituted with meaning because the meaning has experienced profound and rapid change over time.” He then seems to equate single-parent families and “any set of parents” [does he mean “same-sex parents”?] with the conventional variety. When he turns to Belloc and Chesterton, he has to acknowledge the importance to Distributism of “home and family” again, but largely dodges the question of marriage.

In place of such references, he prefers the vague term “community” as lying at the core of Catholic social teaching and Distributism. He also likes the more recent term, “preferential option for the poor.” While both phrases are, in a way, implicit in the social encyclicals of the modern popes, they become unwieldy and confusing when severed from a grounding in the defense and promotion of the natural family.

Race Matthews’ *Of Labour and Liberty: Distributism in Victoria, 1891-1966*, is a richly detailed scholarly analysis of attempts to implement a Distributist economic program in the Australian state of Victoria. I commend the University of Notre Dame Press for producing a U.S. edition of this work. Americans—even educated ones—often treat Australia as an obscure backwater, with little to teach the rest of the world. In fact, Australia has been an important laboratory for attempts to reconcile family life with modern economic developments.

The author gives a detailed account of the origin of Distributist ideas among 19th Century European Catholics. He also gives valuable attention to the ways in which these concepts animated the Catholic Action movement, emerging in the early- and mid-decades of the 20th Century as a mechanism for advancing Catholic social teaching culturally and politically. Particularly useful is his focus on the origin of the Young Catholic Workers campaign, inspired by the Belgian priest Joseph Cardign.

Matthews carefully describes how the spirit of *Rerum Novarum* initially entered the Australian Catholic Church through leading clerics such as Cardinal Patrick Moran of Sydney and Archbishop Daniel Mannix of Melbourne. The narrative gains power as he describes how lay movements, inspired by Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo Anno*, emerged with an infectious enthusiasm. Particularly important was the *Campion Society*, founded in 1931, an intellectual “salon,” of sorts, which had “unparalleled” influence for the balance of the decade. Consequences included the creation by the Catholic hierarchy of the Australian National Secretariat for Catholic Action in 1938.

Among the future leaders that *Campion* nurtured was “a miniature tornado of ideas and energy” named B.A. Santamaria. A significant share of the volume focuses on his early career. As a protégé of Archbishop Mannix, Santamaria set out to rid the Australian labor movement of Communist influence. In 1940, this Party—heavily Stalinist in orientation—controlled unions with 275,000 members and was “significantly influential” in others totaling 480,000 members; this represented 58 percent of all unionized workers in the land. Communist influence carried over into the Australian Labour Party (ALP), the political wing of “Labor.” Starting in 1941, Santamaria launched “the Movement,” with financial backing from the Church. Mimicking Communist tactics, and operating in secret, Santamaria’s Christian cadres infiltrated local unions; by the early

1950's, they had-- quite amazingly-- driven open Communists completely out of union leadership. In line with the hopes of Pius XI, many unions had instead become "Christian."

Matthews accepts this as good, but with little enthusiasm. For he becomes harshly critical of Santamaria's next step: a plan to use similar tactics to gain control of the Australian Labour Party itself and then—as he wrote in a private letter to Manix-- "implement a Christian social programme [of Distributism] in both the State and Federal spheres" and so accomplish something unseen "in the Anglo-Saxon world since the advent of Protestantism." Matthews is probably correct in seeing this as hubristic "mission creep"; the Catholic population at the time was only about 20 percent of the national total. Yet he goes too far, I believe, in then suggesting that Santamaria had visions here of establishing a Christian fascist regime along the lines of Generalissimo Franco in Spain. This is simply unfair. [Full disclosure: in the 1990s I became a friend of "Bob" Santamaria through his work in the Australian Family Association, which he had also later founded.]

In any case, Santamaria's effort here led in 1955 to a split in the ALP; his faction became the Democratic Labour Party, which controlled the balance of power at Australia's Federal level until 1972. Matthews blames this split for preventing a political alliance between Catholic Distributists and non-Marxist socialists in the ALP, and for allowing the political victory of a series of conservative governments pursuing "reactionary" free-market policies.

Matthews' volume also includes detailed reports on the successes and failures of Distributist-inspired cooperatives in Australia in the two decades after World War II. He adds descriptions of more successful and enduring Distributist efforts in Nova Scotia during the 1930s and '40's (the Antigonish Movement) and the vast Mondragon cooperative in Spain, which is still very much in operation.

In all these ways, his *Of Labour and Liberty* is a splendid answer to the frequent charges that Distributism has never been tried and has not succeeded. Indeed, this approach to human economic relationships, nurtured within the Catholic Church, remains as a real model for the elusive "Third Way," independent of the excesses of both Capitalism and Socialism.