



## **Review of Alexander William Salter's *The Political Economy of Distributism: Property, Liberty, and the Common Good*, Catholic University of America Press 2023, 228 pp.**

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This helpful book argues that distributism, with its strong Catholic Social Thought foundations, has resources to contribute significantly to a common good capitalism and discussions of political economy. If this book doesn't draw people to distributism, thereby helping distributism gain the fair hearing it deserves and jumpstarting a discussion about its role in contemporary discussions about political economy, I do not know what will. Here Salter brings the distributist thinking of G. K. Chesterton and H. Belloc into comparison with economist Wilhelm Ropke in order to contribute to the discussion of common good capitalism. Salter compares the thought of Chesterton and Belloc to the mid-century German economist Ropke, and provides key passages and insights to provide a clear understanding of distributist thought. Being an economist, he helps bring an economist's perspective to Chesterton and Belloc, specifically by showing how Ropke's economically informed thought aligns with their thinking. In so doing, Salter also shows how Chesterton and Belloc speak to contemporary political economy discussions. Although he is Orthodox, not Catholic, Salter does excellent work showing the way the principles of Catholic Social Thought—not only the common good, but dignity, subsidiarity, solidarity, justice, and other concerns—inform the thought of Chesterton, Belloc, and Ropke (who also was not Catholic, but a serious Protestant). Salter aims to explain and promote distributist ideals for economic discussion—and this he does well.

The book has ten chapters. These I will describe below in greater detail. First, however, I provide a quick overview. To help introduce distributism, the first chapter places it in the context of common good capitalism, and second chapter in light of its roots in Catholic Social Thought. Chapters 3 and 4 explore Belloc's distributism; chapters 5 and 6 explore it in Chesterton. Chapter 7 then places distributism in the context of contemporary discussions of political economy. Chapters 8 and 9 are on two of Ropke's works, highlighting the distributist strains found in them. Chapter 10 closes, providing concrete suggestions for implementing distributism today. The order and logic of these chapters work well, in a tightly knit fashion.

Chapter 1 highlights the foundational distributist view that ownership of property is an essential condition for true human freedom (and dignity), which means that property—

and especially the means of production—should be as widely distributed as possible. Chesterton once said that “the problem with Capitalism is not too many capitalists, but not enough capitalists” (1920, 41)—and what he meant was that when the means of production become consolidated into the hands of a very few, then we have the same problem which socialism poses: that people are without property, and so, without political power. In this sense, capitalism and socialism are not always opposites; in fact, when Capitalism slides into oligarchical ownership of the means of production, it is quite like socialism—a proletarian society of wage-earners without property of their own.

Chapter 2 provides an excellent overview of key concepts in Catholic Social Thought which comprise the Catholic view on politics and economics. Again, Salter points out that the church “condemns both the coerced collectivism of socialism and the unbridled individualism of industrial capitalism.” Society is not merely an aggregate of individuals, and “man is social by nature.” There is authority and order—the state plays a role to promote the common good, but must respect the dignity of individuals, and the proper roles of each person and each aspect of society (family, church, state, and so forth). Salter explains and shows the relationship between solidarity, dignity, subsidiarity, social justice, and the common good, and emphasizes how the church is absolutely for private property, but also points out that “One cannot love the poor while immoderately partaking of wealth in one’s personal life” (25). This correctly explains the balance/tension in church teaching about private property and using what is ours for the common good.

Chapter 3 on Belloc’s *Servile State* highlights the essential connection between ownership of property and individual freedom. Quoting Belloc, “The control of the production of wealth is the control of human life itself” (30). Salter helpfully highlights the general thrust of Belloc’s book—explaining how the loss of private property by the government in the sixteenth century, and from there capitalism, has slid further into an oligarchical control of the means of production. For Belloc, the options are a) slavery, where all property is owned by a few who the rest of us work for, b) socialism, or c) widespread property ownership. While Salter points out some problems with Belloc’s views, he maintains that they deserve our consideration.

Belloc’s *Essay on the Restoration of Property*, which is the focus of chapter 4, provides clarifications and some concrete proposals (mostly taxes to help promote redistribution of property). An important point brought up here is that distributists are not seeking an equal distribution of wealth and purchasing power; rather, they want every person to have some means of production to generate wealth other than wages (typically, private property). Belloc suggests graduated taxes, which would help advantage individual proprietors against large companies. Belloc clearly knows that the current system may produce things cheaper and more efficiently than what he proposes, “but the price you have to pay in the loss of freedom is a great deal too high” (59). Ultimately, Salter thinks that “the most profitable reading of Belloc is as a social philosopher whose concern is freedom and human flourishing” (68).

Family and the home are the focus of chapter 5, which explains Chesterton's *What's Wrong with the World*. Here we see why property and family are complementary institutions—propertied families are necessary for a good society. The family, for Chesterton, is prior to politics and the state, and the family home is the ultimate location of freedom. Salter explores the many topics of Chesterton's book, including the role of the state, the role of education, the organization of the family household, and especially the importance of property for the stability and self-sustaining abilities of families.

Chapter 6 is on Chesterton's *Outline of Sanity*, and here we really get to see his criticisms of Capitalism (as it has devolved) and socialism alike, and the importance he attached to distributed property. Chesterton is critical of the affects which often come with 'big business' and the undermining of small proprietorship. He provides his own solutions, which like Belloc include taxes, as well as government subsidies to help individuals buy property. His criticisms of the division of labor and mechanization are quite interesting, and Salter draws out the cleverness of Chesterton's criticisms, and their relevance to distributism and political economy.

The relevance of Belloc and Chesterton for contemporary discussions in political economy is the focus of chapter 7. First, Salter points out that distributists' view of the state promoting the common good by helping establish broader distribution of property (and so liberty to more people) is helpful in current discussions about state capacity. Second, in the political economy discussions about economic freedom, political freedom, and inequality, distributism obviously will have valuable insights about the relationship between property ownership and freedom—both economic and political. Third, with regard to normative economics, Salter points out the ethical claims of distributism, and compares them to Mary Hirschfeld's recent work. He maintains that both the distributists and Hirschfeld lack concrete prescriptions for concrete exchange activities, and he suggests Munger's "euvoluntary" criteria as a helpful tool for distributists. Ultimately, Salter believes that what the distributists need is a good economist to apply their thinking to the world—and Salter reckons that Wilhelm Ropke is just such an economist.

Chapters 8 and 9 on Ropke round out this book nicely, as Ropke is an often-overlooked philosopher who admired distributism in many ways and who provides a way of doing political economy, with a commitment to rigorous economics as well as a Christian-humanist moral philosophy. As Salter writes, "if I have written these chapters correctly, they should irritate those economists and social philosophers who believe they have nothing to learn from each other ... Ropke is ... the economist who plies his trade within the Western tradition's quest for the 'good society,' rather than independent of it or opposed to it" (153).

In chapter 8, which focuses more on his social philosophy, Ropke's distributist leanings are apparent, with his focus on proletarianization of society: neither socialism nor pure *laissez-faire* capitalism is the answer, and the problem with capitalism "is not due to some men owning capital, but rather to others not owning any, and thus being proletarians" (159). A strong (impartial and incorruptible) state government is good, to help set up the rules

of the game of business, but it should not be constantly tinkering or meddling in everything. Competition is essential, but it is not in itself a sole principle to sustain a society (160). Bigger more efficient businesses may produce goods cheaper, but like Belloc, Ropke is concerned as well with the sociological impact: large business “which permits the cheapest form of production on the basis of measurable costs, may in the end prove to be the most expensive for society as a whole” (cited at 161) insofar as it reduces the vast majority of society to a proletariat. A truly free market will lead to human freedom, but the free market must be protected by government rules, and social behaviors which value widely distributed means of production.

Chapter 9 demonstrates Ropke’s economic commitments to price theory, free markets, and division of labor (with some caveats). Simple *laissez-faire* is not able, on its own, to provide all that is necessary for a healthy market economy. There are four problems requiring attention. The free market does much better than centralized government to order the economy, which is the first of these problems. But some intervention is needed to solve the social problem, which is the uneven distribution of the means of production. The political problem requires that we create conditions where no one group can long prosper (and so, gain a monopoly on power). And the moral problem—considering what the moral and spiritual effects of the economic system are on humans—is not a question to be answered by *laissez-faire*. For Ropke, ultimately the widespread distribution of property is an essential element of a society of fully free human beings.

Rather than merely summarizing the book, chapter 10 provides a practical roadmap to bring a distributist way of thinking into practice. Salter points out that while theology can give us advice, it will not be able to actualize the ideals in the economy; for that, we need economists with an understanding of economics and implementation of policy. Political mobilization, needed to propel the ideas into reality, can be found in the platform and goals of the American Solidarity Party, which has a strongly distributist orientation. With regard to civil society, Salter recommends the work of Elinor Ostrom’s polycentricity as a useful tool aligned with subsidiarity and ‘sphere sovereignty’ of Reformed political thought (i.e., Abraham Kuyper). Finally, reiterating the essential connection between property ownership and liberty, Salter concludes by saying that we need to harmonize the science of economics with the art of political economy: “the conversation between distributism and price theory must continue” (220).

Of the many advocates of distributism over the years, few have been as able and as economically informed as Salter. His book gives us a fantastic introduction to the key works of three essential distributist thinkers, Chesterton, Belloc, and Ropke, highlighting for each the essential themes of political economy. In the many passages he brings to the fore (sometimes seeming to channel the spirit of Chesterton), Salter demonstrates not only his knowledge of distributism, but also his economic knowledge as he raises legitimate concerns. Throughout, he shows a generosity of spirit and writes with great clarity—both of which provide the reader an understanding of these three thinkers, of the central aim and hopes of

distributism, and of the ways it can contribute to contemporary political economy discussions and common good capitalism in particular. In writing this book, Salter has not only done a great service to economists and distributists; he has also done much for the common good.

## References

Chesterton, G. K. 1920. *The Superstition of Divorce*. London: Chatto & Windus.