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Book Review: The Hound of Distributism, by Roger Aleman (ed).

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This collection of essays provides an introductory overview of an alternative approach to economic and social arrangements in Distributism as presented by 17 authors, including editor Roger Aleman. One author in particular, GK Chesterton, is a classic writer in various literary fields while the remainder of the authors come from contemporary discourse. The contemporary writers include Dale Ahlquist, President of the American Chesterton Society, Joseph Pearce, Director of the Center of Faith and Culture at Aquinas College, and Dr. William Fahey, President of Thomas More College, among others. The works presented in "The Hound of Distributism" provide a basic primer on the theory of Distributism. Analysis of these essays reveals that the work of these Distributist theorists may provide valuable contributions to the discourse on sustainable development by linking theory to practice with implications for both public servants and everyday persons. While not explicitly published with sustainable development in mind, a read of "The Hound of Distributism" makes clear that there are obvious implications for this important area of public policy concern from this school of thought.

Sustainable development is a wicked public policy problem of almost incomparable complexity.¹ The contemporary debate in the mainstream sustainable development literature is between those that assume a capitalist economic system and those who argue in favor of a

¹ Hjorth, Peder, and Ali Bagheri,. "Navigating towards sustainable development: A system dynamics approach." *Futures*. 38, no. 1 (2006): 74-92.

Marxist approach.² The literature assumes some form of centralization will be necessary to address growing environmental concerns that stem from economic and human activity without exploring alternative economic and social theories. At its core, mainstream literature assumes some form of top-down command and control of resources with limited decentralization of decision-making authority despite evidence that centralization is destructive.³ Only in the radical literature is advocacy of decentralization presented in a manner that adds to the discourse.⁴

Roger Aleman and the contributing authors to “The Hound of Distributism” represent a “third way” alternative to dominant systems of social arrangement that, when engaged with, have profound implications for sustainable development that should not be overlooked. This approach, called Distributism, is a radical economic and social theory premised on decentralization of political and economic authority, the centrality of the family in political and social life, and the assumption that private property is a natural inviolable right.⁵ Whereas Capitalism and Socialism both separate work from ownership, Distributism seeks the reunification of work and ownership through the widespread ownership of private property (Aleman 2009). The early Distributist writer Hilaire Belloc defined Distributism as “a state of society in which the families composing it are, in a determining number, owners of the land and the means of production as well as themselves the agents of productions” (Belloc, quoted by Fahey 2015, pg 13).⁶ That is, the people who by their human energy produce wealth with the means of production.

The institution of alternative economic arrangements such as employee cooperatives is of central importance for economic decentralization and reconnection of labor and capital.⁷ This approach is deeply rooted in Catholic Christian values and in the writings of Pope Leo XIII, who wrote in the late 19th century in response to changing economic and social conditions that left many workers and families displaced. In recent years, questions related to the proper role and scope of government, size and impact of business, the nature of property rights and concerns for family life have sparked renewed interest in this economic system, leading to the forming of Distributist societies in the United States, Europe, and in the developing world as well.

“The Hound of Distributism” covers a range of topics from economics and totalitarianism, subsidiarity, guilds and unions, workers’ rights, permaculture, private property, and the restoration of a system of education that supports civic engagement. Distributism seeks first to develop a culture that values property, family, and community, while seeking to radically decentralize economic, political, and social power to the most competent local level possible. This thinking is in line with Elinor Ostrom’s Nobel Prize winning work “Governing the

² Carlos J. Castro, “Sustainable Development Mainstream and Critical Perspectives,” *Organization & Environment* 17, no. 2 (2004): 195–225.

³ Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolutions of Institutions for Collective Action*, Political Economy of Institutions and Decisions (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁴ Carlos J. Castro, “Sustainable development mainstream and critical perspectives.”

⁵ G.K. Chesterton, “On a Tired Word.” In *The Hound of Distributism* (2015).

⁶ H Fahey, “Towards a Description of Distributism.” In *The Hound of Distributism* (2015). Quoting Hilaire Belloc.

⁷ G.K. Chesterton, “What’s Wrong with the World.” Cassell & Company. (1910).

Commons,” which called for a similar decentralization of natural resource management.⁸ Distributist thought is centrally focused on liberty for individuals and families.

Topics covered in this work range from the theoretical to those of interest to both practitioners in political arenas and to families and individuals seeking a more sustainable means of self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency is the essence of the system proposed in “The Hound of Distributism”, offering an alternative to *laissez-faire* economic institutions that, as Distributist critics say, leave the employed in a state of servility. The authors challenge basic assumptions that govern modern life, including the acceptance of the separation of ownership and work as the sign of economic progress. The alternative of increased and widespread property ownership is rarely explored in contemporary discourse on sustainable development, marking an unspoken bias in the status quo.

Rarely do academic works offer insight into the intersection between the political, economic, the practical, as well as the impacts on everyday living, especially on the topic of sustainable development. One such example of this linkage is in the discussion of subsidiarity, which assumes that political and economic decisions should be made by the most competent local authority possible.⁹ This is one such implication that recognizes that reordering society to achieve sustainability requires addressing the ontology of property, individual autonomy, and formal education. This implication leads to further implications on the nature of governance, liberty, and the role of government. These are all essential questions in sustainable development, which the contributing writers to “The Hound of Distributism ” offer unique perspectives to addressing.

⁸ Elinor Ostrom “Governing the commons”

⁹ David Cooney. “Understanding Subsidiarity.” In *The Hound of Distributism* (2015).

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