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Articles

Studia Iuridica Lublinensia vol. 34, 2, 2025
DOI: 10.17951/sil.2025.34.2.35-52

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Universalism versus Particularisms in Economic Systems: A Doctrinal Analysis from the Perspective of Distributism

Uniwersalizm przeciwko partykularyzmom w systemach ekonomicznych. Analiza doktrynalna z perspektywy dystrybucjonizmu

ABSTRACT

The search for the optimal solution in the area of economic systems is a perpetual effort of humanity. Amongst endless disputes and conflicts between various parties, the quality of objectiveness and general effectiveness in addressing human needs could be defined as a universally desirable element. The author uses the outline of a Polish Dominican Thomist, Father Jacek Woroniecki's works, in the search for the best answer to the problem. This original method of analysis is applied to the three most common systems, as described by Catholic thinkers Hilaire Belloc and Gilbert Keith Chesterton. The study is conducted from the perspective of the role of property, state action and morality. The methods used involve a doctrinal, legal and philosophical examination. The results prove that distributism is the most holistic, universal solution, whereas capitalism and socialism are particularistic in their nature, thus limited and unsatisfactory. The paper's scientific outcome adds to the better understanding of the aforementioned systems, as well as to the pursuit of the best possible human economy.

Keywords: distributism; capitalism; socialism; universalism; particularisms; economic systems

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A man must narrow his mind in order
to lose the universal philosophy (…).
We have come out of the shallows
and the dry places to the one deep well;
and the Truth is at the bottom of it.[1]

G.K. Chesterton

INTRODUCTION

Father Jacek Woroniecki[2] centred a substantial part of his thought around the significance of a universal, holistic approach to reality. He juxtaposed the superiority of such a complete perspective with the deficiencies of partial and one-sided particularism. In his work *The Catholicity of Thomism* he stated: "In relation to all those particularistic doctrines which, having grasped a particle of truth, do not see its many other components and do not embrace its fullness, Thomism has precisely the character of a universalist doctrine, superior to all particularistic systems, but without excluding all that they contain in themselves of the positive, true and creative. Indeed, it willingly absorbs into itself, after having previously purified, all those particles of truth which are scattered throughout the innumerable philosophical systems (…); at the same time, it rejects their fractionality, their negations, and their narrow and one-sided exclusivism".[3]

When discussing ethics, he would often analyze two erroneous, particularistic systems first, and later proceed to embrace the correct, universal solution. The issue of the criterion of morality would be one example. He opposed heteronomy (based on objective reality, but external to each human being's self, resulting in a system of morality that has no stable justification other than the whim of the State, as in positivism, or even of God) and autonomy (taking into consideration the internal human conscience, but neglecting or ignoring the outside factors, ending up being flawed as subjective and unstable, as in radical individualism, utilitarianism, and egoism) to the standard of Christian ethics – a morality that was objective (considering in itself every given subject of human action, which guarantees its universalism and stability) and internal (rooted in the norm of one human nature,

[1] G.K. Chesterton, *The Well and the Shallows*, London 1935, pp. 71–72.

[2] A Polish Dominican priest, renowned Thomist, versatile in his interests and known in particular for his works on Catholic education. See M. Nowak, *Father Jacek Woroniecki (1878–1949) – Master and Mentor of Catholic and Christian Pedagogical Thought*, "Roczniki Pedagogiczne" 2021, vol. 13(49), pp. 95–117.

[3] J. Woroniecki, *Katolickość tomizmu*, Warszawa 1938, pp. 9–10 (first edition 1924). All quotes from Polish are translated by the author.

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common to every person).[4] The same method was applied by him to the everlasting dispute over economic systems. He elaborated upon the role of material goods and property in liberal (capitalistic) and socialist/communist states.[5] In the search for a concrete systemic solution, capable of providing the most universal and just participation in material goods of this world, he briefly described and suggested the validity of *distributism*.[6]

The economic system known under this term was the work of mainly two men, Hilaire Belloc and Gilbert Keith Chesterton. Those two close friends, bound by many of their beliefs (because of which a sobriquet was coined for their inseparable duo – Chesterbelloc),[7] acted as ardent proponents and defenders of private property, incessantly advocating for its wide distribution. Rooted firmly in the Catholic tradition, they used their intellectual capabilities to promote a Christian perspective on reality, eventually conceiving a vast intellectual heritage that inspires many to this very day. Their input into the development of economic systems has been no different. Some claimed that "there was hardly ever a more fierce, more romantic, more combative defender of private property in all history of Christianity than the Chesterbelloc".[8] The impact of their influence in this field can be measured by the fact that it left its tangible mark on prestigious scholars whose paradigm of work was not necessarily based on Christian thought. An example could be Friedrich August von Hayek, a representative of classical liberalism and a Nobel laureate in economics, who acknowledged Belloc by citing him in the famous work *The Road to Serfdom*.[9]

The purpose of this paper is to expand on Father Woroniecki's initial remark on distributism and to further examine the nature of this economic system, using the aforementioned pattern outlined by the Polish Dominican. The aim is to present distributism's universal and comprehensive character, juxtaposing it with the particularistic and limited scope of the most popular alternatives: capitalism and socialism (communism). This shall be accomplished by analyzing the works of Belloc and Chesterton, as well as some other texts relevant to the topic of distributism. The search for political, legal, and philosophical sources and components of this system done in this fashion will prove to be of utmost importance, shedding new light on the topic and contributing significantly to the state of research on the

[4] Idem, *Katolicka etyka wychowawcza*, vol. 1, Lublin 2013, pp. 316–322 (first edition 1925, first complete edition 1986).

[5] Idem, *Katolicka etyka wychowawcza*, vol. 3, Lublin 2013, pp. 248–255 (first edition 1925, first complete edition 1986).

[6] *Ibidem*, pp. 377–378.

[7] See G.B. Shaw, *Belloc and Chesterton*, "The New Age" 1918, vol. 2(16), pp. 309–311.

[8] M. Novak, *Saving Distributism*, [in:] *The Collected Works of G.K. Chesterton*, vol. 5, San Francisco 1987, p. 16.

[9] F.A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, London–New York 2001, p. 91 (first edition 1944).

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subject. It should also be seen as a step forward in the unending pursuit of a better systemic solution in economics. To achieve that, the following will be divided into three parts, each focusing on a different aspect: the meaning of property, the role of the state and the position of morality.

PROPERTY

1. Limited effect of private property in capitalism

Belloc defines a capitalist State as a "society in which private property in land and capital, that is, the ownership and therefore the control of the means of production, is confined to some number of free citizens not large enough to determine the social mass of the State, while the rest have not such property and are therefore proletarian (…)".[10] Chesterton elaborates similarly, describing capitalism as that "economic condition in which there is a class of capitalists, roughly recognizable and relatively small, in whose possession so much of the capital is concentrated as to necessitate a very large majority of the citizens serving those capitalists for a wage".[11]

Therefore, it follows that in capitalism ownership is limited to a relatively small number of citizens, which is an immanent and essential trait of this system, not an accidental quality. Factors such as unchecked free competition gradually put wealth in the hands of few,[12] drastically restraining the scope of the positive effects private property could have on society. It has to be noted that not any kind of ownership is sufficient in this situation. Belloc identified the term "standard of subsistence", meaning a certain amount of wealth needed for people to live an acceptable life in any given civilization (a variable depending on factors such as local customs and existent era).[13] It follows that not any level of ownership is satisfactory, which will be seen even more clearly in the context of the distributive state. As a consequence, although capitalism exhibits some positive characteristics, such as the assumption of political freedom legally guaranteed to all citizens,[14] and the relative "effectiveness of human energy under this system, at least, in the first part of its development",[15] it proves to be intrinsically flawed by the way it arranges property. Placing ownership in the hands of a small group of people cancels most of the social merits that the institution of property should at default embody. Chesterton depicted it by writing

[10] H. Belloc, *The Servile State*, London–Edinburgh 1912, p. 15.
[11] G.K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity*, [in:] *The Collected Works…*, pp. 42–43.
[12] H. Belloc, *An Essay on the Restoration of Property*, Norfolk 2002, pp. 43–52 (first edition 1936).
[13] Idem, *Economics for Helen*, Norfolk 2004, pp. 48–51 (first edition 1924).
[14] Idem, *The Servile State…*, p. 13, 16.
[15] Idem, *Economics for Helen…*, p. 97. Italics removed.

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that it would be "the negation of property that the Duke of Sutherland should have all the farms in one estate; just as it would be the negation of marriage if he had all our wives in one harem".[16] Thus, private property in capitalism ends up as a mere shadow of its desirable, complete form.

2. Abolition of private property in socialism

The arrangement of wealth in socialism is founded on a different principle. Belloc outlines the economic scheme of this system, from which all socialist ideas flow, as follows: "Any wealth used for the making of future wealth, that is, Capital in any form, was to be handed over to the officers of the State; and all land and natural forces were to be owned forever by the State".[17] Chesterton proposes the definition: "Socialism is a system which makes the corporate unity of society responsible for all its economic processes, or all those affecting life and essential living".[18]

The difference in comparison to capitalism is clear. Whereas in that system the core idea of private property was maintained (or perhaps it should be said – tolerated), in socialism it is completely discarded. The aim here is to place all material goods in the hands of the State. Seemingly, it would appear to be an effective remedy for problems of capitalism, such as lack of economic security, sufficiency and order.[19] Unfortunately, this kind of outcome is not feasible with exclusively collective, State arranged ownership. Belloc maintains that it is impossible to maintain economic freedom in such a situation,[20] because "the innumerable acts of choice and expression which make up human life can never work through a system of delegation".[21] In other words, a man cannot "express himself through the use of a thing which is not his own, but shared in common with a mass of other men".[22] At the same time, advocates of the aforementioned concept assume that a socialist state would be governed by exceptionally virtuous, just people, who would suppress their personal needs in a selfless pursuit of the common good – which is unrealistic, as politicians who are ruthless enough to come into power tend to abuse their position.[23] On the contrary, if the attempt to institute socialism takes place, further negative consequences are inevitable. Consistent socialism aims to make

[16] G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World*, London–New York–Toronto–Melbourne 1910, p. 48.

[17] H. Belloc, *Economics for Helen…*, p. 107. Italics removed.

[18] G.K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity…*, p. 44.

[19] See H. Belloc, *Socialism and the Servile State*, "The Catholic World" 1917, vol. 105(625), pp. 26–28.

[20] Idem, *An Essay…*, pp. 30–31.

[21] *Ibidem*, p. 31.

[22] *Ibidem*.

[23] Idem, *Economics for Helen…*, p. 109.

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the state the absolute master of dispossessed citizens' lives.[24] Such an order is in stark contrast to nature and every basic human instinct, making it impossible to be applied in any other way but through violent coercion.[25] Ultimately, the system designed to act as the remedy to deficiencies of capitalism ends up being worse than the former.[26] In an attempt to abandon one of the fundamental social institutions (previously deformed in capitalism), supposedly aiming to reach a higher level of social development, it ends up imposing an ownership arrangement "repulsive to the spirit of man".[27]

3. Widespread presence of private property and economic freedom in distributism

Belloc defines the distributive state 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 human agents of production (that is, the people who by their human energy produce wealth with those means of production)".[28] It is evident that the arrangement of the ownership of wealth is the key differentiating factor yet again. Nevertheless, distributism neither limits access to private property nor tries to abolish it. As Chesterton put it, distributism is the only system that truly asserts this institution.[29] Therefore, before a decision is made to endorse this "somewhat clumsy"[30] named idea, one has to answer the essential question: Is private property good or bad for man and society?[31]

Belloc replies in the affirmative with confidence. According to his analysis, the main meaning behind the concept of property (understood as "lawful control over a piece of wealth"[32]) is the "economic freedom which it bestows upon the individual or family possessing it"[33]. This economic freedom is an indisputable good because it fulfils some need in human nature. Namely, it is a *sine qua non* of the effective use of free will, without which neither human dignity nor even genuine humanity in itself can stand.[34] Here it becomes clear that the political freedom present in capitalism is inadequate on its own – Belloc strongly remarks that "to fend for

[24] Idem, *The Way Out*, Connecticut 2006, p. 84 (first published as a series of articles in 1938).
[25] *Ibidem*, pp. 89–90.
[26] *Ibidem*, pp. 91–92.
[27] *Ibidem*, p. 90.
[28] Idem, *Economics for Helen…*, p. 102.
[29] G.K. Chesterton, *Introduction*, [in:] *GK's: A Miscellany of the First 500 Issues of GK's Weekly*, comp. E.J.M., London 1934, p. 16.
[30] *Ibidem*, p. 12.
[31] *Ibidem*, p. 15.
[32] H. Belloc, *Economics for Helen…*, p. 83.
[33] Idem, *The Way Out…*, p. 99.
[34] Idem, *An Essay…*, p. 30.

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yourself when you have nothing is to starve".[35] Men deprived of an appropriate level of ownership inevitably become forced into some kind of subjection. Consequently, true freedom subsists only in the presence of the economic component. This conclusion is conveyed by Chesterton in an expressive statement. "Property", he asserts, "is a point of honour. The true contrary of the word 'property' is the word 'prostitution'".[36]

These observations have significant political and legal consequences. The ultimate systemic goal of the community becomes a wide distribution of property, "in at least a sufficient amount to secure freedom of action to the average man".[37] The distributist reformer does not aim to create a perfect society, in which every individual or family possesses sufficient wealth – a noble, yet unrealistic ideal.[38] The practical target is a *proprietary* state "wherein so many of the citizens are economically free that they give their tone to the whole community".[39] This sets up a pragmatic approach, inspired by solutions already tested to be fruitful in the past, especially in the European Middle Ages.[40] It could be said that the described perspective proves to be "down-to-earth" both in the figurative and literal sense due to the importance distributism attaches to the property of land.[41] Here Chesterton praises the autonomous farmer, presenting him as the exemplary citizen who knows "the end and the beginning and the rounding of (…) life",[42] perhaps the primordial expression of economic freedom. For the motto of distributism, he chooses none other than the commonplace "three acres and a cow",[43] to further proceed with enthusiasm and assume the role of the shameless harbinger of the revival of "Peasant Proprietorship".[44]

The superiority of the ownership arrangement in distributism thus becomes clear. It takes the idea of freedom partially present in capitalism and refines it, effectively adding the economic component through widespread private property. It also addresses the need for economic security[45] without resorting to revolutionary means of socialism, avoiding its detrimental social consequences. Whereas in the two particularistic systems private property "becomes a privilege"[46] and conse-

[35] Idem, *The Servile State…*, p. 88.
[36] G.K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity…*, p. 52.
[37] H. Belloc, *Neither Capitalism nor Socialism*, "The American Mercury" July 1937, vol. 41(163), p. 312.
[38] *Ibidem*, p. 310.
[39] *Ibidem*.
[40] Idem, *The Middle Ages*, "The Catholic World" 1911, vol. 93, pp. 627–628.
[41] Idem, *An Essay…*, pp. 76–84.
[42] G.K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity…*, p. 140.
[43] *Ibidem*, p. 77.
[44] Idem, *The Chance of the Peasant*, "Everyman" 1912, vol. 1(1), p. 4.
[45] H. Belloc, *Economics for Helen…*, p. 103.
[46] G.K. Chesterton, *Introduction…*, p. 16.

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quently loses its essential character, distributism brings this institution into full achievable efficiency. Although not without flaws,[47] only this system enables the common citizen to enjoy proper ownership in the company of genuine freedom, making it a truly *universal* solution.

STATE

1. Corruption of the state in capitalism

Belloc in his works describes contemporary England as an "almost purely capitalist society"[48] and derives most of the data about capitalism from the analysis of his motherland's history. He concludes that the English nation (like many other societies during the Middle Ages) once existed as a distributive state,[49] which was then transformed into a capitalist one due to many intertwining occurrences, mainly the reformation and the subsequent confiscation of wealth by the British Crown.[50] Eventually, the few citizens controlling the means of production (capitalists) were able to impose their will on the government and succeeded in corrupting the political system so that it could serve their particularistic interests. Belloc reiterates: "The great landlords destroyed deliberately and of set purpose and to their own advantage the common rights over common land. The small plutocracy with which they were knit up, and with whose mercantile elements they were now fused, directed everything to its own ends. That strong central government which should protect the community against the rapacity of a few had gone generations before. Capitalism triumphant wielded all the mechanism of legislation and of information too".[51]

Chesterton implies it has become commonly accepted that the modern government has lost its power (or perhaps will) to make a very wealthy citizen obey the law.[52] He goes as far as to conclude that in fact there is no proper *state*, only a *plutocratic state* that "will always intervene on the plutocratic side".[53] He believes it is especially sagacious to say that the motto of the Manchester School is "Peace and Plenty, amid a starving people",[54] underlining how the "unreasonable neglect of government"[55] can lead to a state that serves the few.

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[47] H. Belloc, *Economics for Helen…*, pp. 103–105.
[48] *Ibidem*, p. 96.
[49] Idem, *The Servile State…*, pp. 41–54.
[50] *Ibidem*, pp. 57–77.
[51] *Ibidem*, p. 76.
[52] G.K. Chesterton, *Utopia of Usurers and Other Essays*, New York 1917, pp. 110–111.
[53] Idem, *The Collapse of Socialism*, "Everyman" 1912, vol. 1(6), p. 168.
[54] Idem, *A Short History of England*, London 1917, p. 234.
[55] Idem, *What's Wrong with the World…*, p. 169.

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The particularism is obvious. Laissez-faire capitalism, supposed to be absolutely necessary as the only effective way of producing wealth,[56] ends up corrupting the constitution of the state. It leaves competition unchecked, inevitably putting control of the means of production in the hands of a small group.[57] It can impose high taxation indiscriminately,[58] which is "incompatible with a wide and equitable distribution of ownership".[59] In summary, the government in capitalism generally surrenders when it comes to spreading and guarding private property, and when it does take action, it does so only to favour the owning few.

2. Omnipotence of the state in socialism

Chesterton believes socialism to be the "very reverse of anarchy" representing "an extreme enthusiasm for authority".[60] Consequently, the socialist government provides everything for its citizens and stands no real opposition.[61] In this reality, "everything is staked on the State's justice", which is summed up by him as "putting all the eggs in one basket".[62] But why is this arrangement so precarious? Belloc argues that even if we use the words "the state", in reality, it means nothing other than the people acting as officials, with all their varying qualities.[63] That entails, to use Chesterton's metaphor, that many eggs in the basket will inevitably turn out to be rotten.[64] As was already stated, this general susceptibility of human nature to flaws would have catastrophic consequences for the maintenance of common economic freedom in conditions of exclusive state ownership.[65] The type of personality represented by those who are usually attracted to ideals of socialism can also be seen as a detrimental factor. Belloc specifies the main types of such people.[66] One of them is the reformer who loves the collectivist (socialist) ideal in itself. It appeals to him because: "It is orderly in the extreme. All that human and organic complexity which is the colour of any vital society offends him by its infinite differentiation. He is disturbed by multitudinous things; and the prospect of a vast bureaucracy wherein the whole of life shall be scheduled and appointed to certain

[56] *Ibidem*, p. 77.
[57] H. Belloc, *An Essay…*, pp. 43–52.
[58] *Ibidem*, pp. 85–92.
[59] *Ibidem*, p. 87.
[60] G.K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity…*, p. 44.
[61] *Ibidem*.
[62] *Ibidem*, p. 45.
[63] H. Belloc, *Economics for Helen…*, p. 109.
[64] G.K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity…*, p. 45.
[65] H. Belloc, *An Essay…*, pp. 30–31.
[66] Idem, *The Servile State…*, pp. 121–130.

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simple schemes deriving from the coordinate work of public clerks and marshalled by powerful heads of departments gives his small stomach a final satisfaction".[67]

Following Belloc's train of thought, at least some officials governing the potential socialist state would display the aforementioned traits and desires. The intrinsic defect of this arrangement is evident. Whereas capitalism downplays the importance of government, socialism proves to be a systemic temple set up to worship the state. This distinctive type of idolatry has its own *dogma* (the denial of private property)[68] as well as *clergy* (public officials) who preserve the *faithful* (citizens) from "the consequences of their vice, ignorance and folly".[69] And even though the power of the state has no boundaries, it not only fails to properly address the needs of the community,[70] but has to resort to terror in its attempt to install the prophesied "promised land".[71] The particularism of the emerging order manifests itself in its fullness with the adverse reaction of the subject community,[72] rendering the whole systemic endeavour stillborn.

3. Subsidiarity of the state in distributism

Belloc highlights the necessity of state action. According to him, it is groundless to deem it hostile in every circumstance, and even more unjustifiable to consider it completely unnecessary: "The state *must* have power".[73] But what should be the limits of this power? The answer lies in one of the governing principles of distributism: subsidiarity. Its essence was presented by pope Pius XI in his encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*: "Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them".[74]

According to this "weighty principle", in many areas of life, the state should abstain from actively stepping in, so that when it actually *is obliged* to intervene it can "more freely, powerfully, and effectively do all those things that belong to it alone because it alone can do them: directing, watching, urging, restraining, as

[67] *Ibidem*, pp. 127–128.
[68] Idem, *Catholic Social Reform Versus Socialism*, London 1922, p. 2.
[69] Idem, *The Servile State…*, p. 122.
[70] G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World…*, p. 169.
[71] H. Belloc, *The Way Out…*, pp. 89–90.
[72] *Ibidem*, pp. 97–98.
[73] *Ibidem*, p. 150.
[74] Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* [issued on 15 May 1931], [in:] *The Papal Encyclicals: 1903–1939*, ed. C. Carlen, Raleigh 1981, p. 428.

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occasion requires and necessity demands".[75] Chesterton adheres to this rule in his distributist vision. He affirms that "there is nothing in our social philosophy that forbids the use of the State power where it can be used".[76] He further elaborates on this issue by displaying the desired relationship between the family and the state. The institution of family is antecedent to the state and, in its essence, should be able to exist independently, free of any outside interference.[77] Nevertheless, it does not mean that the state has no power whatsoever over families: "State authority is invoked and ought to be invoked in many abnormal cases".[78] Therefore, the state can and should act only when such action is justified by being deemed directly necessary[79] and likely to be effective.

Once again, the universal character of distributism reveals itself. It avoids idolizing the state, asserting that "the tendency of officials to take over our lives must be jealously watched".[80] At the same time, it does not refrain from using the power of the government when valid systemic goals require it. Having established the value of private ownership and economic freedom, the logical conclusion of the distributist reformer becomes obvious: "We invoke the power of the state in order to prevent, not to encourage, enslavement to the state: we invoke the power of the state in order to re-establish well-divided property".[81]

From this declaration stems the legal system that establishes and rightfully develops all of the institutions crucial for the maintenance of universal economic freedom, including the differential tax,[82] the guild system[83] and the management of unavoidable monopolies.[84] Every such measure that entails a restriction of liberty should be proven necessary before its adoption;[85] the level of desired state interference depends also greatly on the qualities of the government itself.[86] To strive for a constitution that can effectively "safeguard the freedom of the small man against the tyranny of the great"[87] would be a practical guideline for the legislator in most cases. Notwithstanding, even in the most ideal conditions, distributism does not promise an automatic, self-regulating economy. It deliberately chooses the politic

[75] *Ibidem*.
[76] G.K. Chesterton, *The Outline of Sanity…*, p. 132.
[77] Idem, *What's Wrong with the World…*, p. 50.
[78] *Ibidem*.
[79] H. Belloc, *State Arbitration Peril*, [in:] *The Limits of State Industrial Control*, ed. H. Carter, Toronto 1919, pp. 169–170.
[80] Idem, *The Way Out…*, p. 148.
[81] *Ibidem*, p. 146.
[82] Idem, *The Crisis of Our Civilization*, London–Toronto–Melbourne–Sydney 1937, pp. 196–202.
[83] Idem, *The Way Out…*, pp. 123–128.
[84] *Ibidem*, pp. 147–148.
[85] *Ibidem*, p. 148.
[86] Idem, *State Arbitration Peril…*, p. 170.
[87] Idem, *An Essay…*, p. 57.

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of constant human effort instead, incessantly adapting to maintain a government that is "the moderator and preserver of freedom".[88] This intentional character is what sets it apart from its systemic alternatives, which blindly rely on the belief in either the self-regulation of the free market on the one hand or the omnipotence of the officials on the other.

MORALITY

1. Materialism of capitalism and socialism

Chesterton believes that the thinkers of his age are bound by a specific dogma, namely that of material monism.[89] This conclusion is the one that acts as the indisputable basis for all reasoning. Even if tangible facts seem to contradict the above assumption, modern man is "forbidden by Materialism to accept scientific evidence".[90] Effectively, rational debate is outlawed, and the general perspective ends up being substantially limited.

According to Belloc, the issue originates from the Protestant Reformation, and is embedded in its immediate material fruit, the "Industrial Capitalistic Society".[91] The biggest influence Belloc traces back to the thought of the French theologian, John Calvin. He was the one who designed a "well expounded and fully argued philosophical system" acting as the foundation of the newly erected counter-Church.[92] The most influential part of his thought was the diminution (or even denial) of free will enjoyed by humans, in contrast with the overemphasized role of predestination. In other words, the conclusion that "good deeds proceeding from no free will were of no effect towards the salvation of man's soul".[93] Owing to this proposition Calvin became the spiritual father of the "'modern gospel of wealth', the idea that a man's value, even his spiritual value, is connected with his power to accumulate money".[94] Even if contrary to his intentions and internal beliefs, he severed the connection between free human action and the destiny of one's soul, making men pursue the only certain and tangible goal – material wealth.[95] As a result, the zeal for the glory of God became superficial; any practical virtue appeared to be obsolete. This "false philosophy" bred the system of social injustice, which put the means of

[88] *Ibidem*.
[89] G.K. Chesterton, *The Thing*, London 1946, p. 212 (first published in 1929).
[90] *Ibidem*, p. 213.
[91] H. Belloc, *The Results of the Reformation*, "The Catholic World" 1911/1912, vol. 94, p. 516.
[92] Idem, *The Crisis of Our Civilization…*, p. 116.
[93] *Ibidem*.
[94] *Ibidem*, p. 117.
[95] *Ibidem*, p. 118.

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production in hands of the chosen few.[96] This materialistic reasoning deliberately broke down all safeguards guaranteeing well-distributed property,[97] paving the way for Capitalism, an "abominable state of affairs"[98] due to its disordered arrangement of ownership.

In the area of morality, the essence of Socialism turns out to be no different from Capitalism. When addressing Russian Communism, Chesterton claims that the worst parts of its ideology were copied from the materialism known in Western Europe long before Bolshevism took its visible form.[99] The spiritual essence of the errors is in his eyes exactly the same, which he proves with a comparison: "Moscow has the same stupid belief in mechanical action and dead matter supporting its extreme Communism which our fathers had supporting their extreme Individualism".[100] Consequently, he concludes: "Just as their machinery is borrowed machinery, so their materialism is borrowed materialism".[101]

This materialism is not sufficient to satisfy the complex needs of mankind. Its erroneous, one-dimensional comprehension of humanity leads to inadequate solutions. It was already pointed out that on the systemic level, its fruits fail to properly guarantee economic freedom, essential for human dignity and overall happiness. In capitalism, it leads directly to unbridled competition, usury, and other forms of exploitation imposed on the proletariat by the capitalist class.[102] In socialism, it brings despair to societies, by enforcing itself in the form of sheer violence and terror.[103] But even in the theoretical, utopian form, Socialism is not genuinely appealing to the spirit of man. Chesterton rejects this ideal on the ground of the basic human desire to give to others, as with any act of genuine generosity. He proves that the institution of private property is an indispensable condition of this social dynamic, and it cannot be replaced by common sharing through collective ownership. Something crucial to the very essence of a healthy, wholesome human society would be missing without it.[104] This incomplete nature of the collective utopia Chesterton summarizes by saying: "I have read some tons or square miles of Socialist eloquence in my time, but it is literally true that I have never seen any serious allusion to or clear consciousness of this creative altruism of personal giving. For instance, in the many Utopian pictures of comrades feasting together, I do not remember one that had the note of hospitality, of the difference between host and

[96] Idem, *The Results of the Reformation…*, p. 799.
[97] Idem, *An Essay…*, p. 41.
[98] Idem, *The Results of the Reformation…*, p. 800.
[99] G.K. Chesterton, *Avowals and Denials: A Book of Essays*, New York 1935, p. 30.
[100] *Ibidem*.
[101] *Ibidem*.
[102] H. Belloc, *The Way Out…*, pp. 9–68.
[103] *Ibidem*, pp. 87–92.
[104] G.K. Chesterton, *Objections to Socialism*, "The Forum" 1909, vol. 41, p. 130.

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guest and the difference between one house and another. No one brings up the port that his father laid down; no one is proud of the pears grown in his own garden".[105]

Therefore, due to their shared false materialistic premise, both Capitalism and Socialism are unable to support social harmony. Although they focus solely on the realm of tangible entities, they can neither satisfy the earthly nor the spiritual needs of men. Arguably, they are inefficient in filling the stomach of an average citizen, but they are even less capable when it comes to fulfilling the moral thirst for freedom, or even sentimental desires of the human heart. The apparent outcome is common discord, both amongst citizens and between the various longings of individuals.

2. Material goods as an instrument of virtue in Distributism

St. Thomas Aquinas' analysis of the proper form of government gave birth to an important assertion: "For an individual man to lead a good life two things are required. The first and most important is to act in a virtuous manner (for virtue is that by which one lives well); the other, which is secondary and instrumental, is a sufficiency of those bodily goods whose use is necessary for virtuous life".[106]

Distributists are faithful disciples of the *Universal*[107] Doctor of the Church. They realize that material goods are essential to a good life. But they also know that they are not the only, nor the ultimate goal of human existence. They are rather an instrument, a means that enables men to use free will, thus making it possible to effectively exercise virtue. Only through lawful and harmonious use of wealth (for the vast majority of people enabled through the institution of private property) they can arrange the symbolic "garden of life" properly, shaping both tangible and intangible entities in their own image, just as they are shaped in the image of Heaven.[108]

This holistic perspective also leads to humbling conclusions. As man is not God but only his image, his use of wealth must deal with limits.[109] Many objective elements of commutative and distributive justice[110] can be addressed by the legal intervention of the state. But Catholic Social Teaching is clear that many actions are

[105] *Ibidem*, pp. 130–131.

[106] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship* [*De regno ad regem Cypri*], [in:] *Opuscula I: Treatises*, Wisconsin 2018, p. 393, Book II, Chapter 4.

[107] "We so heartily approve the magnificent tribute of praise bestowed upon this most divine genius that We consider that Thomas should be called not only the Angelic, but also the *Common* or Universal Doctor of the Church" (Pius XI, *Studiorum Ducem* [issued on 29 June 1923], [in:] *The Papal Encyclicals: 1903–1939*, ed. C. Carlen, Raleigh 1981, p. 252).

[108] G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World…*, p. 47.

[109] *Ibidem*, pp. 47–48.

[110] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica, Part II (Second Part)*, London 1929, pp. 157–159, ST II-II, Q. 61, Article 1.

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"a duty, not of justice (save in extreme cases), but of Christian charity".[111] In reality, on the general level of the whole society, only widespread property can foster such higher virtues. Only with the empowerment of property comes the opportunity to be responsible for one's actions and consciously answer to the moral obligation put forth by Jesus Christ. Would it be truly possible for the common man to deny oneself without the possibility to own goods? Would it be earned then to hear from the highest authority: "Come, ye blessed of my Father, possess you the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me to drink; I was a stranger, and you took me in: Naked, and you covered me: sick, and you visited me: I was in prison, and you came to me" (Matthew 25:34–36).[112]

Belloc firmly believes that it was thanks to the moral influence of the Catholic Church that the "society of owners", Distributism was once born in the Middle Ages.[113] This kind of ethics enabled Europe to flourish both through the right legal institutions and the personal virtues of citizens.[114] Above all it fostered "an intense and living appetite for truth, a perception of reality", which "invigorated these generations".[115] This pursuit of objectiveness is what characterizes Distributism as an economic system. While acknowledging the importance of material wealth, it escapes the narrow, limited perspective of strict materialism. By defining property as an instrument used to achieve a good life, it develops a universal approach that nourishes both body and soul.

CONCLUSIONS

The inherently confined character of Capitalism and Socialism leads to many negative consequences. The former ends up extremely unstable, due to the internal dissonance between political freedom and the unbearable economic dependency of the proletariat.[116] The latter fails to become the common economic language of the whole world,[117] effectively paving the way to the return of the Servile State[118] known from the Pagan Europe of the past – a system with its own advantages, but overall repulsive to the spirit of man, which naturally rejects the idea of state-level

[111] Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* [issued on 15 May 1891], [in:] *The Papal Encyclicals: 1878–1903*, ed. C. Carlen, Raleigh 1981, p. 247.
[112] *The New Testament*, [in:] *The Holy Bible: Translated from the Latin Vulgate*, Baltimore 1914.
[113] H. Belloc, *The Servile State…*, pp. 37–38.
[114] Idem, *Europe and the Faith*, New York 1920, pp. 201–202.
[115] *Ibidem*, p. 202.
[116] Idem, *The Servile State…*, pp. 81–96.
[117] G.K. Chesterton, *Utopia…*, p. 176.
[118] H. Belloc, *The Servile State…*, pp. 121–154.

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legalized slavery.[119] Those outcomes are clearly unsatisfactory, thus proving that the vision seen through the lenses of the aforementioned philosophies is at least partially false, in other words – *particularistic*.

On the contrary, Distributism as a system makes the effort to address reality as a whole, with visible positive results. It does not hesitate to adopt what is good in other solutions, at the same time rectifying errors. In the case of ownership, it realizes the need for private property as an institution; but it is also adamant about widespread access to capital, thus answering valid concerns of proponents of exclusive collectivism. When addressing the role of the state, it realizes the necessity of the active role of the government in a healthy society; simultaneously it applies reasonable boundaries, according to the rule of subsidiarity, making sure that the state's action is intentional and justified even with the smallest construction.[120] In the area of morality, it accepts the important role of material wealth in the world; at the same time, it avoids strict materialism by asserting the supremacy of ethics and virtue over tangible goods, which play an instrumental role in exercising the former. Ultimately, it addresses all levels of existence, making it truly realistic – *universal*.

This conclusion can also be expressed in another statement: Distributism is truly *catholic*. Not only "Catholic" in the specific sense, owing to the heritage of the Catholic Church, but "catholic" according to the more general meaning of the word, as in "all-embracing" and "comprehensive". Father Woroniecki in his writings aimed to prove a similar interpretation of Thomism[121] and Christian ethics in general – in his eyes striking in the fullness and depth with which it embraced all the factors of the moral life.[122] This quality may indeed be the true soul of Christendom, which, as Chesterton stated, is its common sense, able to bear fruits that are not only good but also everlasting.[123]

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[119] Idem, *Economics for Helen…*, pp. 92–95.

[120] Chesterton reprimands the modern reformer that even the smallest fence or gate should neither be built nor taken down without a rational reason. See. G.K. Chesterton, *The Thing…*, p. 29.

[121] J. Woroniecki, *Katolickość…*, pp. 99–109.

[122] Idem, *Katolicka etyka…*, vol. 1, p. 117.

[123] G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*, New York 1925, p. 340.

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ABSTRAKT

Poszukiwanie optymalnego rozwiązania w obszarze ustrojów gospodarczych jest odwiecznym wysiłkiem ludzkości. Wśród niekończących się sporów i konfliktów między różnymi stronnictwami obiektywność i ogólna skuteczność w zaspokajaniu ludzkich potrzeb może być określona jako element powszechnie pożądany. Autor wykorzystuje zarys prac polskiego tomisty o. Jacka Woroniec-

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kiego OP w poszukiwaniu najlepszej odpowiedzi na ten problem. Oryginalna metoda analizy jest zastosowana do trzech najbardziej powszechnych systemów, opisanych przez katolickich myślicieli – Hilaire'a Belloca i Gilberta Keitha Chestertona. Badanie prowadzone jest z perspektywy roli własności, aktywności państwa i moralności. Zastosowane metody obejmują badania doktrynalne, prawne i filozoficzne. Wyniki dowodzą, że dystrybucjonizm jest najbardziej holistycznym i uniwersalnym rozwiązaniem, podczas gdy kapitalizm i socjalizm są partykularne w swojej naturze, a zatem ograniczone i niezadowalające. Wyniki naukowe artykułu przyczyniają się do lepszego zrozumienia wyżej wymienionych systemów, a także poszerzają sferę wiedzy pomocnej w dążeniu do możliwie najlepszego systemu ekonomicznego.

Słowa kluczowe: dystrybucjonizm; kapitalizm; socjalizm; uniwersalizm; partykularyzmy; ustroje ekonomiczne

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