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Ian Tregenza

INTRODUCTION

A prolific author, gifted orator, and controversialist, Hilaire Belloc (1870–1953) engaged large audiences through his writings and lectures across Britain, Europe, and the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century, challenging prevailing political and (Protestant) religious orthodoxies. One of Belloc’s phrases that proved particularly fertile was “the servile state,” the title of his 1912 book.¹ Appearing in the wake of the reforms brought in by the Liberal government of 1906–10, which Belloc unevenly supported as a member of Parliament, the book soon became part of the rhetorical armory for those resisting the collectivist trends of modern legislative programs.

Despite his frequent travels, Belloc never visited Australia. However, Belloc’s ideas, especially those associated with the servile state, attracted much interest in Australia—enthusiastically embraced by some, resisted or taken in new directions by others. Defenders of Australia’s social welfare

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¹ Hilaire Belloc, *The Servile State* (London and Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1912).

reforms of the first decade of the twentieth century, which in certain respects were more far-reaching than the British reforms of the same period, dismissed Belloc's prognostications; yet others saw them as a useful warning of the likely consequence of these reforms. In Catholic circles in the 1930s and 40s, Belloc's Distributist vision provided a set of guiding principles for the politically influential Catholic Action movement.² When plans were being laid in the 1940s for postwar reconstruction, the notion of the servile state was reworked in the political thought of the radical professor of philosophy John Anderson. After the war, the labor theorist and activist Lloyd Ross endeavored to reconcile Belloc's Distributism with the Australian Labor Party's (ALP) ambitious schemes for social reconstruction and the nationalization of industry.

The protean dimension to the reception of *The Servile State* in Australia can be partly attributed to the ambiguities of the text itself. Its unique mixture of radicalism and conservatism appealed to a diverse range of audiences and actors. In this general respect Belloc's influence in Australia was not necessarily different from, or indeed greater than, his reception in other parts of the Anglophone world. Jay P. Corrin, for instance, suggested that Belloc had an "enormous influence . . . on British and American Catholic political thought, a phenomenon relatively unnoticed by contemporary historians."³ But Belloc's ideas had a particular resonance in Australia, where forms of state action about which he had warned were extensively implemented. Tracing the reception of Belloc's *The Servile State* provides an interesting angle for reading Australian political thought in the first half of the twentieth century and, more generally, offers a useful illustration of the way political ideas are received and used within different contexts.

THE SERVILE STATE: CONTEXT AND ARGUMENT

By the time *The Servile State* appeared in 1912 Belloc was already a well-known author and public figure. While he was elected twice for the seat of South Salford, Manchester, his time as MP was not particularly successful. A radical liberal, Belloc became frustrated by the compromises of parliamentary processes, and the incapacity of the reformers in Parliament to

² Race Matthews, *Of Labour and Liberty: Distributism in Victoria, 1891–1966* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2017).

³ Jay P. Corrin, *Catholic Intellectuals and the Challenge of Democracy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 6.

challenge the system when the opportunities arose. Upon leaving Parliament he collaborated with Cecil Chesterton (G. K.'s brother) on the book *The Party System* (1911),⁴ which was a jeremiad directed toward what they saw as the corruptions of parliamentary government. Though *The Party System* concerns the political order and *The Servile State* the economic, they were of a piece. The party system, with its sham contest of political ideas, simply protected an economic arrangement benefitting the wealthy minority who owned the means of production at the expense of the property-less proletariat. Though he moved in the circles of the reformist, or “new,” liberals of the period, he was in fact the heir of the older mid-nineteenth century radical liberal tradition of John Bright and Richard Cobden, who promoted small scale property ownership and whose defense of the free market was in large part driven by a moral critique of the unearned privileges of the landed aristocracy.⁵ Belloc shared the new liberals’ concern with the plight of the poor and the working classes, but he came to the view that the new liberal measures designed to address the “social question” such as national insurance, minimum wage laws, and industrial arbitration were simply entrenching the servile status of the workers.

Belloc developed these ideas in the journal *Eye-Witness*, which he ran with Cecil Chesterton in 1911 and 1912, as well as in A. R. Orage’s literary and political journal *New Age*. This magazine promoted a curious mixture of modernist literature, radical politics, and Distributist economics. Despite the range of views canvassed, its general stance toward the ameliorative liberalism and scientific progressivism of the time was skeptical, if not oppositional. The “condition of England” was dire and the remedy required was drastic and wholesale. In identifying with the journal, Belloc himself wrote in an early issue that he agreed “unreservedly” with *New Age* that “the present condition of society, especially in modern England, is intolerable. . . . [and that it] must be transformed, and transformed quickly, if England is to survive.”⁶ Many writers for the journal, including Belloc, welcomed the increased industrial unrest and strikes that marked the period 1910–14, believing that it showed the working classes were confronting their political and economic masters and unsettling an unjust order. The stirrings of a revolutionary will could be discerned in these developments,

⁴ Hilaire Belloc and Cecil Chesterton, *The Party System* (London: Stephen Swift, 1911).

⁵ John P. McCarthy, *Hilaire Belloc: Edwardian Radical* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1978).

⁶ Hilaire Belloc, “Thoughts about Modern Thought,” *New Age* 2 (1907): 108.

which were a promising portent of things to come. Orage and others were attracted to anti-rationalist philosophers of the will such as Nietzsche and Georges Sorel, and with Sorel they saw the myth of the general strike as a harbinger of a new age.⁷

Sorel was also an important influence on the Syndicalist Tom Mann, who returned to England (via France) in 1910 after a period of union organizing in New Zealand and Australia.⁸ Mann's experience of the reformist policies in the Antipodes left him convinced of the necessity of direct action. For Mann, the widespread use of wages boards and arbitration acts in Australia resulted in working class acquiescence to the capitalist order. Such measures, he observed, represented "a most serious impediment to working-class solidarity; a powerful agency for hypnotising the workers into somnolence . . . that destroys their unions whilst pretending to recognise them; that gives the capitalist judiciary complete control of the men in the workshops, mines, mills, and factories; . . . and hands the workers over—handcuffed and ankle-chained—to the capitalist bosses, so that verily their last state is worse than the first."⁹ A similar critique of reformist liberalism and state socialism was made by the guild socialist S. G. Hobson. He criticized the Independent Labour Party's nationalization agenda, claiming it would do nothing to strike at the wage system, the root of capitalist injustice. Labour's position amounted to making the state "economically a better capitalist than the private employer" through humanizing the wages system, but ultimately "the object of their peculiar brand of Socialism was merely to transform the whole community into a completely regimented army of wage earners."¹⁰

Belloc's account of the servile state had much in common with these radical interpretations of the ameliorative liberalism and state socialism of the period. Yet unlike syndicalists such as Mann, or guild socialists such as Hobson and G. D. H. Cole, who were thoroughgoing modernists, the new age Belloc envisaged was not entirely new. Belloc, the Chesterton brothers, and others such as A. J. Penty and Maurice Reckitt appealed directly to an idealized medieval social order in which power and property were widely

⁷ Tom Villis, "Elitism and the Revolt of the Masses: Reactions to the "great labour unrest" in the *New Age* and *New Witness* circles," *History of European Ideas*, 31 (2005): 85–102.

⁸ McCarthy, *Hilaire Belloc*, 248–49; Corrin, *Catholic Intellectuals*, 128–30.

⁹ Tom Mann, "The Industrial and Social Outlook in Australia," *The Social-Democrat* 13 (1909): 337–43, at 342.

¹⁰ S. G. Hobson, *National Guilds: An Inquiry into the Wage System and the Way Out* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1919 [1914]), 8–9; cf. McCarthy, *Hilaire Belloc*, 301–5.

distributed across a range of institutions: religious orders, monasteries, church assemblies, conclaves, cities, towns, and professional and craft guilds.¹¹ There was a very English flavor in this appeal to guilds and an imagined medieval order as an attempt to overcome the consequences of industrialization. Looking back on the period immediately following the First World War, Reckitt wrote that the period was marked by a “quest for the autochthonous”—the attempt to recover native English solutions to a range of social problems that England had done much to create.¹² The effects of the industrial revolution might have been more far-reaching in England than elsewhere, but England also retained a pluralistic social order in the form of trades unions, professional associations, and a range of community and voluntary societies. It was from this pluralistic inheritance that the resistance to the state-centric industrial order could be found. For Reckitt among others, Belloc was a major inspiration for this renewal of the guild ideal. In his autobiography, Reckitt would write about *The Servile State*: “I cannot overestimate the impact of this book on my mind, and in this I was but symptomatic of thousands of others.”¹³

Though he retained a strong attachment to France, the land of his birth and his father, Belloc saw his writings as an attempt to reconcile his two great loves: “the soil of England and the Catholic Faith.”¹⁴ To do this he took on the Protestant establishment, intellectually fortified by a Whig history that read the story of post-Reformation England as one of steadily expanding liberty. Belloc’s role as a Catholic outsider and subverter of establishment orthodoxies is integral to his identity as a writer and public figure. An early influence was Cardinal Manning, who supported the workers in the London dock strike of 1889 and, in contrast to the older “establishment” English Catholics, encouraged Catholic engagement with the political sphere.¹⁵ Manning was also an important contributor to Pope Leo XIII’s ground-breaking encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of 1891, generally seen as the beginning of modern Catholic social teaching and signaling a

¹¹ Arthur J. Penty, *Old Worlds for New: A Study of the Post-Industrial Order* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1917); Maurice Reckitt and C. E. Bechhoffer, *The Meaning of the National Guilds* (London: Cecil Palmer & Hayward, 1918).

¹² Maurice B. Reckitt, *Maurice to Temple: A Century of the Social Movement in the Church of England* (London: Faber and Faber, 1946), 168.

¹³ Maurice B. Reckitt, *As It Happened: An Autobiography* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1941), 107–8.

¹⁴ Belloc, Letter to Katherine Asquith, 25 April 1930, cited in Victor Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill: Private Scholars, Public Culture, and the Crisis of British Liberalism, 1900–1939* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 18.

¹⁵ Corrin, *Catholic Intellectuals*, 43–58

turning point of the Papacy to engagement with the modern world. Drawing on principles going back to Aquinas such as the right to property, the dignity of labor, and the right to a living wage, this document pulls no punches in its assessment of the way the “unchecked competition” of modern industrial capitalism has led to a situation where “working men have been surrendered, isolated and helpless” and left at the mercy of “a small number of very rich men [who] have been able to lay a yoke little better than slavery itself.”¹⁶

Belloc’s disillusionment with politics compounded his earlier disappointment at missing out on academic positions at Oxford, putatively on account of his outspoken political and religious views.¹⁷ The personal and the political coalesced for Belloc, which goes some way to explaining the passionate and combative nature of his theorizing as well as his extensive body of historical work, both of which sought to overturn the established verities of the Protestant establishment. Reversing the Whig narrative is a key goal of *The Servile State*. It is a steadily encroaching servility rather than an expansion of liberty that characterizes post-Reformation England, according to Belloc.

The Servile State begins by asserting that slavery was endemic in the ancient Pagan world but largely disappeared over the course of the Christian Middle Ages. Capitalism laid the groundwork for the return of servility by overturning the later medieval order, in which property was widely distributed and the many enjoyed a degree of economic independence. This was set in train most abruptly in England at the time of the Reformation under Henry VIII when the monasteries were dissolved and the land passed into the hands of a few families. Servility did not come immediately, but in dividing society into the few who owned and the many who did not, modern capitalism was a step on the road to serfdom. As capitalism develops, or becomes “more perfect,” its tensions and contradictions become more apparent. It grows increasingly unstable as inequality is entrenched, contradicting the “moral base of our laws and traditions,” which “presupposes a state composed of free citizens.”¹⁸ For Belloc, genuine freedom only comes with economic independence, and even into relatively recent times this was maintained in the largely agricultural nature of much of English life. But through the forces of industrialization, mechanization, and the

¹⁶ *Rerum Novarum*, cited in Corrin, *Catholic Intellectuals*, 73.

¹⁷ Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill*, 18–22; Joseph Pearce, *Old Thunder: A Life of Hilaire Belloc* (Charlotte, NC: TAN books, 2002), 51–59.

¹⁸ Belloc, *Servile State*, 83.

growth of factories, the alienation of workers from the means of production had become almost complete. The wage-system became entrenched and the property-less majority forced into contractual relations to sell their labor in order to survive. This situation of instability, insecurity, and insufficiency demanded a remedy. It is this remedy, in the form of ameliorative legislation, that marks the transition from capitalism to the servile state. Such legislation, even as it grants the worker a degree of “sufficiency and security” denied to him in a situation of unrestricted capitalism, makes official his inferior or servile status. The cost of his material sustenance is his freedom. Thus, Belloc defines the servile state as “that arrangement of society in which so considerable a number of the families and individuals are constrained by positive law to labour for the advantage of other families and individuals as to stamp the whole community with the mark of such labour.”¹⁹

In the last chapter of the book, “The Servile State has Begun,” Belloc identifies the existing and emerging forms of legislation, centered in particular on the status and regulation of labor, that point to the consolidation of the servile state. Belloc’s argument is that through a series of reforms, beginning with employer’s liability laws, new forms of status distinction were coming into existence, demarcating employers from employees. Although these distinctions were ostensibly designed to improve the material security of workers, in fact they confirmed workers’ inferior status. In short, employer’s liability creates such a distinction by specifying differential rights and obligations attached to employers and employees, rather than treating them as citizens who are equal under the law and free to enter contracts. But employer’s liability is just the beginning. Schemes such as national insurance, the minimum wage, and compulsory arbitration were entrenching this new status.

Belloc even contended that the principle of the minimum wage “involves as its converse the principle of compulsory labour”: Those who are covered by an agreement are forced to work for the amount laid out in that contract, and this is backed up by sanctions from the court. If such an agreement is ephemeral, then it is a stretch to describe it as enforcing labor; yet if it is extended over a long period of time, such that it becomes the normal expectation of employment, then “the method is necessarily transformed into a system of compulsory labour.”²⁰ The system would, potentially, extend from wages boards in particular industries, where bargaining

¹⁹ Belloc, *Servile State*, 16.

²⁰ Belloc, *Servile State*, 172, 174.

is voluntary but habitual, to compulsory arbitration. But Belloc thinks that even in these servile times, this is still a bridge too far for societies that have inherited a European tradition of freedom: “Lastly, there is the obvious bludgeon of ‘compulsory arbitration’: a bludgeon so obvious that it is revolting even to our proletariat. Indeed, I know of no civilised European state which has succumbed to so gross a suggestion. For it is a frank admission of servitude at one step.”²¹

Those outside this system of wage capitalism—the unemployed—will “be made to work.” Though it was yet to happen, the logic of the system would be to force such unfortunate creatures—a class of “surplus” workers—into labor colonies, where they would be taught “to produce those economic values, which are regarded as the minimum of sufficiency.”²²

In the years leading up to the First World War, terms such as slavery, servility, and servitude were often deployed in the critique of industrial capitalism, as well as in response to the state socialist and new liberal moves to extend state power. Belloc’s *Servile State* tapped into this prevailing discourse and in so doing provided a rhetorically powerful, if idiosyncratic and partial, analysis of the direction of political reform. Over subsequent decades, the work would often be described as prophetic; its appeal ranged widely across the political spectrum, even for some who did not necessarily share Belloc’s interpretation of history, his economic analysis, or his radical Distributist solution.

THE AUSTRALIAN RECEPTION: WORKERS’ WELFARE STATE OR SERVILLE STATE?

Belloc’s argument found considerable appeal in England, especially in the ranks of those, such as the Distributists and guild socialists, who were critical of the legislative programs promoted and enacted by new liberals, Fabians, and state socialists. But the analysis seemed to have had special significance in the Australian situation, where experiments in state socialism were taken further than elsewhere and where a reliance on the state for economic and social development prevailed. With an eye particularly on the reform period of the turn of the twentieth century, the historian Keith Hancock observed in 1930 that “Australian democracy has come to look on the state as a vast public utility whose duty it is to provide the greatest

²¹ Belloc, *Servile State*, 176.

²² Belloc, *Servile State*, 178.

happiness for the greatest number.”²³ Subsequently, the political scientist Alan Davies suggested that “Australians have a characteristic talent for bureaucracy,” and while “bureaucracy pervades most modern societies” this is especially the case in Australia, where “demands for security and equality have been unusually strong.”²⁴

Arguably the high point of state building occurred in the years immediately after the federation of the colonies in 1901, with the establishment of a series of new national institutions. One of them was the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration (founded in 1904), which institutionalized compulsory industrial arbitration. A landmark judgment of the court came early when its President, Justice Henry Bournes Higgins (1851–1929), in the “Harvester” case of 1907, established the principle of the living or family wage. Whereas Britain and Europe resisted compulsory arbitration and relied rather on policies such as national insurance to establish conditions of “sufficiency and security” for workers, Australia and New Zealand made industrial arbitration a cornerstone of welfare reform. It has been argued that the Australasian model can be described as a “wage-earners’ welfare state,” which historically linked a living wage to industry protection.²⁵

When the court was established, its new liberal architects such as Prime Minister Alfred Deakin (1856–1919) hailed it as “the beginning of a new phase of civilization” that promised to bring in the reign of law, rather than conflict in industrial affairs.²⁶ The leading judge of the court in its early years, H. B. Higgins, described the rule of such courts with an oblique reference to the nineteenth century legal positivist John Austin, as “A New Province for Law and Order.”²⁷ Earlier the English Fabians Sidney and Beatrice Webb visited Australia and welcomed its experiments in social reform, especially around labor legislation.²⁸ Australia seemed to be a proving

²³ Keith Hancock, *Australia* (London: Ernest and Benn, 1930), 61.

²⁴ A. F. Davies, *Australian Democracy: An Introduction to the Political System* (1958; London: Longmans, 1964), 4–5.

²⁵ Francis G. Castles, *The Working Class and Welfare: Reflections on the Political Development of the Welfare State in Australia and New Zealand, 1890–1980* (Wellington and Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1985).

²⁶ *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 30 July 1903, vol. 15, 2862.

²⁷ Higgins, *A New Province for Law and Order* (London: Constable, 1922). Cf. John Austin, *The Province of Jurisprudence Determined* (London: John Murray, 1832).

²⁸ Beatrice Webb, *The Webb’s Australian Diary 1898*, ed. A. G. Austin (Melbourne: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, 1965). References to Australia and New Zealand as social laboratories were common in the early twentieth century. See, for instance, William Pember Reeves, *State Experiments in Australia & New Zealand* (London: Grant Richards, 1902). For an overview of the literature see Francis G. Castles, “Social Laboratory,” in *The Oxford*

ground for the ideals of labor reform cherished by new liberals and Fabians; or was it simply further on the path to the servile state?

In Australia, as elsewhere, *The Servile State* established Belloc's reputation as a penetrating controversialist and social critic. The work received widespread press coverage when it appeared; some interpreted it as providing a timely warning for Australia, given the trend of Australian social reform. The Sydney newspaper *The Sun*, for instance, noted that if the trend toward the servile state can be discerned in Britain, "it is all the more true of Australia, where the tendencies noted by Mr. Belloc are much stronger." After outlining Belloc's argument as to why the collectivist solution is illusory, *The Sun* asked rhetorically, "Is Mr. W. M. Hughes [the federal Attorney-General] listening to that?"²⁹ W. M. "Billy" Hughes (1862–1952), a noted union leader and future Prime Minister, was then serving as Attorney General in the Federal Labor Government and was endeavoring to greatly expand the powers of the Commonwealth government over areas such as industrial relations and commerce—moves which were defeated at referendums in 1911 and 1913.

During the war years the servile state idea was invoked by unionists in the context of divisive conscription campaigns led by Prime Minister Hughes, as well as the "Great Strike" of 1917. This strike, which lasted a month and drew one hundred thousand participants across New South Wales and Victoria, was sparked by the introduction of time cards on the railways as one of many measures in the cause of national efficiency. In a publication of the Amalgamated Railway and Tramway Service Union it was noted that Belloc's book was particularly pertinent in Australia, given "that the foundations of that state of society that Belloc fears is impending are more securely laid here than anywhere else." The article drew particular attention to Belloc's warnings concerning the move toward compulsory arbitration and the outlawing of strikes, which would see governments in the service of the capitalist class use the unemployed to break unions and be put to work in the national cause. The whole system of industrial relations, starting with wages boards and culminating in compulsory arbitration, amounted to precisely the kind of labor colony that Belloc prophesied: "It is . . . another case of the bartering of an heritage of freedom for a mess of potage."³⁰

Companion to Australian History, ed. Graeme Davison, John Hirst, and Stuart Macintyre (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 592–93.

²⁹ "Coming Slavery. Capitalism Triumphant. Servile Status for Workmen. What an Author Foresees. New Book by Hilaire Belloc," *The Sun* [Sydney], 13 December 1912, 12.

³⁰ J. C. Andrew, "The Coming Slavery. The Servile State," *All Grades Advocate* [Sydney], 20 September 1917, 4.

Though some sympathized with Belloc's analysis and saw it as pertinent in the Australian context, others were critical. The counter-reaction, unsurprisingly, was led by some of the main proponents of the new labor laws. An early critic was William Jethro Brown (1868–1930), law professor and one time president of the South Australian Court of Industrial Arbitration. His work *The Underlying Principles of Modern Legislation* (1912) drew on evolutionary theory, idealist liberalism, and the theories of group personality as developed by his teacher at Cambridge, the legal historian F. W. Maitland. In subsequent editions of this work Brown devoted several pages to Belloc's *The Servile State*, which he acknowledged as a direct challenge to the progressivist liberalism of his own analysis.³¹ Brown conceded that there is much "food for reflection" in *The Servile State*, judging it to be "a stimulating and arresting statement of the great problem of securing the subordination of the power of capitalism to the freedom of the citizen."³² However, for Brown the work was marred by some serious deficiencies. Even assuming great inequalities in the possession of property and compulsory labor for the many, Brown stated that he "cannot concede . . . that a man's status is necessarily servile either because he does not receive his fair share of the national dividend, or because the law ensures him a living wage, or even because he is compelled by law to labour. Compulsion to labour is the normal lot of men." For Brown, the vital questions are not whether the vast bulk of the population will have to work, but "What are the conditions of labour? Are those conditions such as to make free self-development impossible? Has the labourer at his disposal the means to remedy real grievance?"³³

Brown also observed that Belloc failed to take into account the increasingly democratic nature of the modern state, which had led to a series of interventions that had tamed capitalism and improved the lot of the majority of the workers. Just because freedom of property and of contract had been important sources of freedom in the past, they do not therefore exhaust the meaning of the idea. As mentioned above, Brown's philosophical conception of the modern state drew partly on the idealist, Hegelian derived, liberalism of T. H. Green and Bernard Bosanquet, with their theories of freedom as participation in the rational will. The growth of the state, and with it the extension of law into industrial affairs, represented

³¹ William Jethro Brown, *Underlying Principles of Modern Legislation* (London: John Murray, 1915), 63ff.

³² Brown, *Underlying Principles*, 67.

³³ Brown, *Underlying Principles*, 64.

not the coming of the servile state but the enabling conditions for the realization of true freedom.³⁴

A similar conception of freedom as self-realization can be found in the writings and legal judgments of H. B. Higgins, who, as previously noted, institutionalized the principle of the living wage in Australia. A very important source for Higgins's thinking on the living wage was Catholic social thought as embodied in *Rerum Novarum*. Higgins devoted a lengthy passage of an 1896 article contextualizing the social reforms of the period to Pope Leo XIII's teaching on the labor question, suggesting that "there is nothing in recent history so striking or significant as the Pope's encyclical of 1891." Where we might have expected a "lofty silence" from the Pope on the labor question, Higgins suggested, we have in fact been delivered an emphatic call to respect the dignity of labor and the means by which it can be protected, including the vital principle that the wage earner be supported in "reasonable and frugal comfort."³⁵ This phrase came directly from *Rerum Novarum* and was subsequently incorporated into the 1907 Harvester judgment.³⁶

Drawing on both new liberalism and Catholic social thought, Higgins sought to bring about greater balance in the bargaining arrangements between capital and labor. But for Higgins—like other new liberals such as Brown, and unlike Belloc—the state was an important means for facilitating this goal. Higgins particularly took issue with Belloc's claim that there is a necessary link between a minimum wage and compulsory labor. The position that Higgins defends, he urges, "is very far from justifying the fears of those who look on provisions for minimum rates as tending to the establishment of a 'servile state.' Mr Belloc's dogma . . . that 'the principle of a minimum wage involves as its converse the principle of compulsory labour,' is not confirmed by such experience as I have had."³⁷

According to Higgins, were the wage system to be abolished through revolution, and the workers to take control of the means of production, the need for regulation of working conditions would not be dissolved: "Those who favour new systems as the result of some cataclysm or catastrophe or revolution, and treat with scorn industrial tribunals as mere alleviations, or

³⁴ See Michael Roe, *Nine Australian Progressives: Vitalism in Bourgeois Social Thought, 1890–1960* (Saint Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984), ch.1.

³⁵ Higgins, *Another Isthmus in History* (Creswick: Martin and Grose, 1896), 16–17.

³⁶ On the Catholic influence on living wage judgments in Australia, see Kevin Blackburn, "The Living Wage in Australia: A Secularization of Catholic Ethics on Wages, 1891–1907," *Journal of Religious History* 20 (1996): 93–113.

³⁷ Higgins, *New Province*, 45.

as mere devices to bolster up the existing system, had surely better reconsider their opposition. Let not the better be always the enemy of the good.”³⁸

In the 1920s the Court of Conciliation and Arbitration retreated from the living wage standards as laid down in earlier judgments on the grounds of the market’s capacity to pay. But there was to be no rescinding of the principles of centralized wage fixing and compulsory arbitration of industrial disputes. So central were such principles to the Australian political and economic order that they have been depicted as part of what is widely referred to as the “Australian settlement,” which was only unwound through the economic liberalization of the 1980s.³⁹ From a “Bellocian” perspective, Australia’s institutionalizing of the wage relationship through compulsory arbitration, along with the centralizing of decisions regarding economic “sufficiency and security,” arguably represented the high-water mark of the servile state. There were, however, forms of resistance to emerge in the 1930s and 40s, some of which caught the attention of Belloc himself.

CATHOLIC ACTION, DISTRIBUTISM, AND THE SERVILE STATE

Belloc’s influence in Australia reached a high point in the 1930s and 40s and was connected with a minor renaissance of Catholic social thought. This was a response to the great depression and was augmented by the papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), which was an expansion of the Church’s teachings on the labor question and the economic order contained in *Rerum Novarum*. Guiding principles of *Quadragesimo Anno* concerned the distribution of property and the idea of subsidiarity, involving the devolution of authority to local communities and organizations. The organization most responsible for disseminating these ideas was the *Campion Society*, established in Melbourne in 1931, with smaller branches in other Australian capital cities.⁴⁰ Its leading figures included Denys Jackson, Kevin Kelly, Frank Maher, and the young B. A. Santamaria (1915–98), who would go on to play a leading role in the anti-communist struggle of the 1940s and 50s that resulted in a major split in the ALP in 1955.⁴¹

³⁸ Higgins, *New Province*, 77.

³⁹ Paul Kelly, *The End of Certainty: The Story of the 1980s* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992).

⁴⁰ Colin H. Jory, *The Campion Society and Catholic Social Militancy in Australia, 1929–1939* (Sydney: Harpham, 1986).

⁴¹ Bruce Duncan, *Crusade or Conspiracy? Catholics and the Anti-Communist Struggle in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2001); Ross Fitzgerald, *The Pope’s Battalions: Santamaria*,

The Campions represented a new generation of university-educated Catholics who had become less wedded to the Irish roots of Australian Catholicism and were receptive to European currents of thought. Though the papal teaching was important for the Campion society, they were also influenced by the French theorist Jacques Maritain and English Catholic writers such as G. K. Chesterton, Christopher Dawson, and most especially Belloc. The second meeting of the Campion society (February 11, 1931) was devoted to a discussion of Belloc's *Survivals and New Arrivals*.⁴² According to one historian, "the Bellocian viewpoint set the dominant framework for most of the early Campions."⁴³ An early observer closely associated with the movement wrote of the interaction of papal teaching and Belloc's thought among the Campions in the following terms: "In interpreting and applying the principles of *Quadragesimo Anno* to Australian conditions, the members, societies and activities fathered by the movement used the Bellocian dialectic in their analysis of the crisis in Christendom, in their criticism of Australian society and in their programmes for social reconstruction."⁴⁴

Also important for the Campions was the American Catholic Worker movement led by Dorothy Day, and in 1936 they launched the journal the *Catholic Worker*, inspired by its American counterpart. Much of the copy of the first two years was written by Santamaria. It was a feisty, highly polemical tract that promoted the program of Catholic Action, including calling for the radical redistribution of property, workers' control of industry through the revival of the guild idea, the rejuvenation of agriculture, and the defense of the traditional family. With a circulation that averaged fifty thousand per issue it was a journal of some consequence that attracted wide interest, including from Belloc, who wrote a congratulatory note on its inception in 1936. In the following year in response to the journal's campaign against a national unemployment insurance scheme then being promoted (unsuccessfully) by the federal government, Belloc praised the journal for its stance. According to the journal, such a scheme is a mere palliative that accepts the inevitability of unemployment and effectively entrenches the worker's subordinate status: "National insurance means that a system of national slavery is at last installed and given legal recognition as part of the law of the land. . . . In the name of charity, the ruling

Catholicism and the Labor Split (Saint Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2003).

⁴² Gerard Henderson, *Santamaria: A Most Unusual Man* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2015), 35.

⁴³ Duncan, *Crusade or Conspiracy?*, 11.

⁴⁴ James G. Murtagh, *Australia: The Catholic Chapter* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1955), 174.

class is attempting to deprive us of justice. They have made us slaves. Now they attempt to erect our slavery into a permanent institution.”⁴⁵

Belloc’s letter, published in the October 2 issue of that year, expressed the hope that though the English situation was a lost cause the servile state might yet be thwarted in Australia:

Dear Sir, - I cannot tell you what a delight it was to me to get your copy of July 3. . . . I . . . want to thank you, in company with thousands of others, for having rallied to and stated plain principle in the most important of all temporal causes at the moment.

Every one of these insurance ramps and pension ramps and the rest of them are merely capitalist tricks for making certain of regimented labour provided by force through the State for the advantage of the owners. In a wholly Catholic society such falsehood would be discovered and destroyed—or rather, could never have been begun. But though we are not strong enough in this country to be of much effect against the advance of the servile State, I believe that you in Australia, with your much larger Catholic body, can resist successfully. I pray to God that you do.

. . . If what they desire, as they hypocritically pretend, is the wealth of the poorer citizen, then let them work for the restoration of property. . . . Those who fail to act towards that end are making directly for the re-establishment of slavery . . .

Very faithfully yours,
H. Belloc.⁴⁶

The influence of Belloc’s diagnosis of the ills of modern industrial capitalism, framed in terms of an encroaching slavery, is evident in the early years of the *Catholic Worker*. A collection of writings from the journal was published in 1944 to mark its eighth year, and the volume was dedicated to Belloc.⁴⁷ The chapter in which Belloc’s letter is republished is titled “The Fight against Slavery.”

⁴⁵ *Catholic Worker*, July 1937, reprinted in *25 Men, Design for Democrats* (Melbourne: Catholic Worker, 1944), 93–95.

⁴⁶ Reprinted in *Design for Democrats*, 95–96.

⁴⁷ *Design for Democrats* (1944).

The *Catholic Worker* was just one of a range of publications produced by those promoting the Catholic Action agenda that bore a Bellocian impress. For instance, Santamaria's 1940 pamphlet "What the Church Has Done for the Worker" can almost be read as a precis of Belloc's history, charting the shifts from ancient slavery through medieval serfdom to the modern worker, along with the threat posed by the new servility. According to Santamaria, the Church played a major role in overthrowing slavery and raising the status of workers: "there is no institution which can boast a finer achievement than that accomplished by the Church in raising the status of all workers throughout the Roman Empire." The only hope of preserving the workers' status, he continued, is a return to the concept of guilds, in which producers are in control of their crafts and labor can once again take precedence over capital.⁴⁸

One of the bodies set up under the broad umbrella of Catholic Action was the National Catholic Rural Movement, which was devoted to stemming the tide of industrialization through the promotion of small-scale family farming and parish community life. Santamaria was a driving figure in the movement, and in a 1942 pamphlet he set out its aims in terms that closely paralleled Belloc's argument in *The Servile State* and *The Distribution of Property* (1936). "There is a unique Catholic tradition of the land," Santamaria wrote, "and it is fitting that it should be so. For the land is linked peculiarly with the ideas and institutions which are inseparable from the Christian way of life. . . . The moral freedom of the individual person has no counterpart in the regimentation and servility which are the handmaids of industrial civilisations. It lives only if a man is his own master and is free from the threat of economic pressure and insecurity."⁴⁹ Such sentiments were widely disseminated in Australian Catholic Action circles in the early 1940s and were part of a larger national, and international, debate about the shape of the economic and political order that was to be established once international hostilities ceased. And Belloc's ideas would provide a catalyst for thinking through the moral foundations of this new order beyond Catholic circles.

⁴⁸ B.A. Santamaria, *What the Church has done for the Worker* (Melbourne: Advocate Press, 1940). Available at: <https://www.ecatholic2000.com/cts/untitled-700.shtml>; cf. D. G. M. Jackson, "From Social Service to Servile State," *Advocate*, 25 May 1939, 19, 24.

⁴⁹ B.A. Santamaria, *The Fight for the Land: The Program and Objectives of the National Catholic Rural Movement* (n.d. ca. 1941–42). This Catholic agrarian vision was developed further by Santamaria in his work *The Earth Our Mother* (Melbourne: Araluen Publishing, 1945).

CONFLICT, CONSENSUS, AND THE SERVILE STATE: THE CASE OF JOHN ANDERSON

For many the state in war offered a model of cooperation that if replicated in times of peace offered the opportunity for great collective achievements. The fully rational, planned society, free from fear and want, appeared attainable. Free market advocates such as Friedrich von Hayek famously depicted this as building the road to serfdom, citing with approval Belloc's prognostications.⁵⁰ However, as we have seen, Belloc, unlike Hayek, did not criticize social legislation in order to defend the free market, but precisely because such legislation was buttressing the rule of capital.

A closer reader of Belloc than Hayek, but with similar concerns about the servility entailed in the collectivist planning of the period, was the Marxist-turned-libertarian professor of philosophy at the University of Sydney, John Anderson (1893–1962). Anderson emigrated from Scotland in 1927 where he studied under the Welsh idealist Henry Jones. Rejecting the idealist philosophy of his teachers at Glasgow, Anderson became a major inspiration for what came to be known as Australian realism,⁵¹ and his libertarian outlook left a lasting legacy on the intellectual life of Sydney, including the movement known as the “Sydney Push,” which included among its circle leading cultural and literary figures such as feminist Germaine Greer, critic and poet Clive James, and the art historian Robert Hughes.⁵²

One of Anderson's key writings was an essay titled “The Servile State” published in 1943, which contained a critical engagement with Belloc's work. According to his biographer, Anderson was influenced by Belloc while a student in Glasgow, and three decades after the publication of Belloc's *The Servile State*, in the midst of the national debate about postwar reconstruction, Anderson deemed it worthy of a reconsideration.⁵³

Anderson rejected much of Belloc's diagnosis of modern society, his “partisan” Catholic reading of economic history, and his Distributism, but he shared a concern that the conditions of modern life, especially “the desire for security and sufficiency,” were leading to the construction of a servile

⁵⁰ Friedrich von Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (1944; London: ARK, 1976) 10n and 66.

⁵¹ A. J. Baker, *Australian Realism: The Systematic Philosophy of John Anderson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

⁵² Anne Coombs, *Sex and Anarchy: The Life and Death of the Sydney Push* (Ringwood, Victoria: Viking, 1996).

⁵³ Kennedy, *A Passion to Oppose: John Anderson, Philosopher* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1995), 156.

state. A major weakness of Belloc's analysis, according to Anderson, was the focus on property and legality, a defect shared with Marx. Each assumed, incorrectly, that if a radical redistribution of property took place, then this would solve the demand for "security and sufficiency." It is precisely this desire—which is a moral rather than strictly economic question—that is the mark of servility. Belloc's mistake is to obscure this prior moral question in the name of the economic solution: "the attitude of 'putting the economic first' leads straight to that servility whose growth Belloc undoubtedly deplures."⁵⁴

Anderson drew on a distinction he found in Sorel (*Reflections on Violence*) between the ethic of the consumer and the ethic of the producer; the former emphasizes "ends, things to be secured" and the latter emphasizes "activities, a way of life, a morality." The consumer's viewpoint is essentially utilitarian, seeking a final condition or substantive outcome. Like Sorel, Anderson thought that the valuable part of Marxism was not the end—the classless or socialist society—but the movement. "The doctrine of history as struggle is at once the liberal and scientific part of Marxism; the doctrine of Socialism as something to be established ("classless society") is its servile part."⁵⁵

All social reforms which aim at stability do "away with the conditions under which free activities are possible, and the well intentioned reformer always produces results which he did not anticipate." This is as true of the progressive liberal reformer as it is of those promoting the Distributist solution to the problem of capitalist instability. Whenever the workers replace the ethic of the producer with that of the consumer they are on the road to the servile state, since they can be bought off and ultimately enticed into conformity. Moreover, all forms of political consensus, according to Anderson, reflect particular configurations of power, and seemingly laudable ideas such as "service" and "the development of personality" are in fact closely linked to the "protective state" and tend to mask a servile mentality. Far from civilization being threatened by social conflict, for Anderson "a high level of culture depends on the existence of a plurality of movements, which take their chance in the social struggle." Ultimately it is conflict, contestation, and struggle—rather than the reorganization of

⁵⁴ Anderson, "The Servile State," *The Australasian Journal of Psychology and Philosophy* 21 (1943): 2–3, 115–32, at 119.

⁵⁵ Anderson, "Servile State," 120, 131. On Anderson's debt to Sorel see Creagh McLean Cole, "The Ethic of the Producers: Sorel, Anderson and Macintyre," *History of Political Thought* 31 (2010): 155–76.

property relations—that are the best bulwark against servility: “For the measure of freedom in any community is the extent of opposition to the ruling order, of criticism of the ruling ideas. . . . The servile State is the unopposed State.”⁵⁶ This agonistic “ethic” of perpetual opposition would leave its mark on the libertarian Sydney Push into the 1970s.⁵⁷

RECONCILING PLANNING AND DISTRIBUTIVISM: LLOYD ROSS AND POSTWAR LABOR

An important contributor to postwar planning in Australia was Lloyd Ross (1901–87), son of Bob Ross, who was a close associate of Tom Mann⁵⁸ and had helped draft the socialization objective of the ALP in 1921, which included the principle of workers’ control of industry. Lloyd Ross was an influential official with the Australian Railways Union and leading labor theoretician in the 1940s and 50s. He joined the Communist Party of Australia (CPA) in 1935 but by 1940 had become disillusioned with the party, believing “that the CPA was an enemy of freedom and that the totalitarian menace was real.”⁵⁹ Though not Catholic himself, he came to sympathize with the views of the Catholic Social Studies Movement (generally known simply as “The Movement”) led by Santamaria; much of Ross’s writing in the 1940s and 50s, some of which was published in the Catholic journal *Twentieth Century*, attempted to reconcile the competing principles contained within Distributism and guild socialism on the one hand, with the collectivist strands of the broader Australian labor movement on the other.

Ross’s most direct engagement with Belloc’s thought appeared in his 1947 essay “Socialism and Distributivism,”⁶⁰ which was a response to an essay written by Santamaria under the alias John Williams.⁶¹ In his essay Santamaria had bemoaned the absence in Australian society of a “strong tradition of independent proprietorship,” which had led to an acceptance

⁵⁶ Anderson, “Servile State,” 121–32.

⁵⁷ Coombs, *Sex and Anarchy*.

⁵⁸ Neville Kirk, *Transnational Radicalism and the Connected Lives of Tom Mann and Robert Samuel Ross* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

⁵⁹ Michael Eason, “Ross, Lloyd Robert Maxwell (1901–1987),” *Australian Dictionary of Biography* 18 (2012), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/ross-lloyd-robert-maxwell-15927>. Cf. Stephen Holt, *A Veritable Dynamo: Lloyd Ross and Australian Labour 1901–1987* (Saint Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1996).

⁶⁰ Lloyd Ross, “Socialism and Distributivism,” *Twentieth Century* 1 (1947): 32–47.

⁶¹ John Williams (B.A. Santamaria), “Problems of the Federal Government,” *Twentieth Century* 1 (1946): 3–20.

of the proletarian status of much of the workforce, bought off by a minimum wage and the palliative of social services. Both major parties had come to accept the concentration of industry, and while Labor's nationalization objective might bring industry under social control it would do nothing to raise the status of workers or reverse the "growing menace of proletarianism." The answer, for Santamaria, was to move beyond the faux alternatives of liberalism and socialism, to the Distributist ideal, "even if it involves legislative measures with the tang of revolution about them."⁶²

Ross welcomed Santamaria's contribution for having raised important questions for the Australian labor movement given that, according to Ross, "Australian Labour is so tragically lacking in theoretical discussions of Labour's aims and methods."⁶³ For Ross the question was how to balance the labor movement's long-standing demands for both security and freedom, along with "status" and "emancipation," in a world where central planning and the concentration of industry had become inevitable. In order to answer this, and to address Santamaria's concerns, Ross revisited Belloc's argument in *The Servile State*, endeavoring to show "how easily his [Belloc's] views could be harmonized with the liberty tradition in socialist teachings. . . . the key . . . to a possible reconciliation between socialism and distributivism [*sic*] . . . [and] the major missing idea from contemporary thinking and action by Labour."⁶⁴

Ross traced the "liberty tradition" within socialism (and anarchism), suggesting that from the late eighteenth century socialists had resisted the "loss of access to the land" and regarded "the growth of large-scale industry as 'abnormal, unnatural and dangerous.'" Moreover, for both the early socialists and the Distributists, "liberty was lost, when men lost their opportunity to produce for themselves."⁶⁵ Worker's control of industry, which was promoted by the guild socialists of the early twentieth century and incorporated into the federal ALP's socialization objective, was an attempt to recover the workers' lost liberty as well as to raise their status—in other words, to counter the "proletarianism" that Distributists such as Belloc and Santamaria lamented.

Ross agreed that much of the industrial unrest of the period could not be solved simply through higher wages, more social services or the nationalization of industry, but must also respond to "working-class psychologi-

⁶² Williams, "Problems of the Federal Government," 5–6.

⁶³ Ross, "Socialism and Distributivism," 38.

⁶⁴ Ross, 33.

⁶⁵ Ross, 34.

cal needs, and the granting of opportunities for self-expression and democratic satisfaction.”⁶⁶ Planning, state intervention, and the nationalization of key industries are all necessary features of the postwar political order; the question was how to pursue the ideals of liberty, status, and workers’ control—ideals common to socialists and Distributists—in this new order. Ross framed his answer in terms of general principles rather than specific proposals. It included modest forms of workers’ participation in industrial decision making and, where possible, the decentralization of industry. The wholesale return to small land holding was no longer feasible, and whether this new regime of state intervention and planning would “lead to a ‘servile state’ or to socialism or to a confused mixture of the two” would depend on how well democratic methods could be applied to these new realities.⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

Belloc’s death in July 1953 received widespread coverage in the Catholic press, including several obituaries reflecting on his achievements and noting his influence in Australia.⁶⁸ A requiem service was held at Melbourne’s St. Patrick’s Cathedral attended by 1800 mourners. By this time much of the political energy of Catholic Action was focused on the anti-communist crusade within the union movement and, by virtue of its institutional affiliation, the ALP. In 1952 Archbishop Daniel Mannix invited the Jesuits to establish an adult education center in the Melbourne suburb of Kew, to be located in the newly named Belloc House. This would become something of a hub for the activities of the Movement, which was reaching “the height of its powers within the ALP and was ready for combustion.”⁶⁹ Santamaria’s clandestine operation to purge the ALP of communists, replace them with Movement-affiliated delegates, and ultimately take control of the party, was exposed by the leader of the ALP, H. V. Evatt in October 1954. This culminated in the acrimonious split within the party in 1955 and the

⁶⁶ Ross, 38.

⁶⁷ Ross, 46–47.

⁶⁸ James McInerney, “Australia’s Enduring Debt to Hilaire Belloc,” *The Advocate*, August 20, 1953, 8; John Dawes, “Belloc and Australia: The Thunder and Challenge of his Writings Roused Many Disciples in New Battles Here,” *The Catholic Weekly*, July 30, 1953, 20.

⁶⁹ Brenda Niall, *The Riddle of Father Hackett: A Life in Ireland and Australia* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2009), 252.

creation of the Catholic-dominated Democratic Labor Party (DLP), the long term effects of which included keeping the federal ALP out of power until the early 1970s and ultimately the loosening of the Catholic identification with the Labor Party.

Notwithstanding the work of interlocutors such as John Anderson, Belloc's mid-twentieth-century influence in Australia was largely tied to the fortunes of Catholic Action and the Santamaria circle. The split in the Labor Party was a traumatic event which many Laborites—Catholic and non-Catholic—would blame on Santamaria's authoritarian methods, consciously borrowed from the communists.⁷⁰ There were also important cleavages among Catholics concerning the legitimacy of Santamaria's movement, centered on whether it should be a lay organization or have official Church backing. This was finally settled in 1957 when the Vatican ruled it a lay organization. The estrangement of Catholic social thought from the mainstream Australian labor movement paralleled similar developments in Britain, Europe, and North America, in which many inter-war Catholic intellectuals, foremost among them Belloc, moved in increasingly authoritarian, reactionary directions.⁷¹

While some interest in Distributism lingered into the 1960s and was important in the cooperative and credit union movements,⁷² it was moving to the margins of political debate as the postwar boom, along with the Keynesian consensus of managed capitalism, seemed to promise a new age of "security and sufficiency." The turmoil of the early twentieth century, which saw the international industrial order lurch from crisis to crisis, and which made radical solutions such as Belloc's attractive to so many, came to be seen as a failure of management that could be avoided with the right mixture of fiscal regulation and sufficient social welfare. As the later decades of the twentieth century revealed, such a view proved to be overly optimistic and crisis has returned as a seemingly endemic feature of the international economic order. Unsurprisingly, the Distributist alternative has recently made something of a comeback and attracted interest across the political spectrum.⁷³ It also features in a reassessment of the history

⁷⁰ Mark Aarons, *The Show: Another Side of Santamaria's Movement* (Melbourne and London: Scribe, 2017).

⁷¹ Corrin, *Catholic Intellectuals*; cf. Tom Villis, *British Catholics and Fascism: Religious Identity and Political Extremism between the Wars* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).

⁷² Matthews, *Of Labour and Liberty*, ch.14.

⁷³ Richard Wolffe, "Yes, there is an alternative to capitalism: Mondragon shows the way," *The Guardian*, 25 June 2012; Gene Callaghan, "Distributism is the Future," *The American Conservative*, 11 April 2016.

and philosophy of the Australian Labor Party by the post-liberal political philosopher Adrian Pabst.⁷⁴ This era of ideological realignment and economic disruption might also prove to be an opportune time to recover the lessons and legacies of Belloc's *The Servile State*, a minor classic from an earlier "post-liberal" moment.⁷⁵

Macquarie University.

⁷⁴ Adrian Pabst, *The Story of Our Country: Labor's Vision for Australia* (Redland Bay: Connor Court, 2019).

⁷⁵ Cf. George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (1935; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).