Age-old `distributism' gains new traction

by David Gibson
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NEW YORK (RNS) Can an Anglican theologian from Britain revive an 80-year-old Catholic social justice theory and provide a solution to America's economic woes and political polarization?

Philosopher and political thinker Phillip Blond thinks so, and he's giving it everything he's got.

Blond, who has been a counselor to British Prime Minister David Cameron, just wrapped up a two-week U.S. tour to pitch his retooled version of "distributism," a theory that argues that both capitalism and government are out of control.

In that sense, the thinking goes, both Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party are right.

"What we are creating in our society is a new model of serfdom," Blond declared Friday (Oct. 14) in a lecture at New York University. "The rhetoric of free markets has not produced free markets; it has produced closed markets," and the nation's "social capital" is declining, leaving behind isolated individuals and fractured families who must depend on Washington for support.

With a flurry of charts, Blond graphically demonstrated the

breakdown of both social norms and the family unit -- and the growth of government to address those ills -- as well as the dominance of corporations and the rich in the current economy.

It's a result of an "oscillation between extreme collectivism and extreme individualism," Blond argued. Both are manifestations of the same impulse: a concentration of power first in the state and then in the markets. And both those liberal and conservative "orthodoxies" have led to the same society-destroying outcome.

Or, as he put it more bluntly, libertarianism on both the left and the right "produced an economy where people thought you could screw each other and everybody would get rich."

"Occupy Wall Street and the Tea Party are essentially different expressions of the same phenomenon," Blond said. Both are angry at the concentration of power, but both are on rocky ground when they demand salvation from either the gods of the market or government.

Distributism, Blond argues, calls for going smaller and more local in search of solutions (music to the ears of classic conservatives) while leaving the central government to build the infrastructure and guarantee basics like education and health care (ideas that would warm any bleeding heart).

Little wonder that Blond has adopted the moniker of a "Red Tory," or what Americans might call the "Red Right," or perhaps "Tea Party Socialism."

Indeed, distributism has always been something of an oddity.

The idea originated in England in the 1920s with the deeply Catholic writers G.K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc, who founded the Catholic Distributist League to advance theories inspired by Pope Leo XIII's landmark 1891 social justice encyclical, Rerum Novarum, which challenged the emerging problems of the industrial age.

The concern that both capitalism and communism were huge, dehumanizing forces gained some currency in the Great Depression. Its supporters, however, were often regarded as quirky or outright cranks, and were criticized as gentry who "drove down in their motorcars to discuss the abolition of machinery."

Chesterton and Belloc were certainly more convincing as authors than as economists, and while their calls for patronizing small shops rather than big chain stores sounded nice, they didn't have much to offer in terms of real solutions.

With the emergence of a booming post-World War II economy dominated by superpowers and then by globalized financial markets, distributism became at best a footnote and at worst the intellectual equivalent of flat-earthers -- neo-medievalists who pined for an economy that ran like J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth.

Even a few years ago the theory would not have gained much of a hearing.

But now, distributism has arguably become the most intriguing idea to emerge out of the ruins of the early 21st-century economic collapse, in no small part because it has the greatest potential for bridging the current ideological chasms in the United States.

Blond has been hailed by The New York Times' conservative columnist David Brooks and by the liberal media mogul Arianna Huffington, and met with politicians from both parties on his U.S. tour. He was invited to speak at Catholic University of America in Washington by Stephen F. Schneck, a political scientist and Obama supporter, and in New York he was hosted at an invitation-only confab by Philip K. Howard, the apostle of a "common good" public policy and onetime adviser to Al Gore.

But can distributism find an audience for radical change if it appeals to the grievances of both extremes but rejects their remedies?

Blond is unabashedly small-c conservative. His theories are inspired by religious ideals, but he speaks openly about the centrality of moral renewal to restoring society. That makes him suspect to many on the left. But there is vigorous opposition on the right to Blond's critiques of free market dogmas, not to mention his openness to a key role for government in many sectors.

Blond says, for example, that he was stunned by the "shockingly poor" urban and transportation infrastructure he found riding the train from Washington to New York.

America's cultural and political infrastructure is no better, Blond said. If Americans do not call a truce in the culture wars and end the "endemic political paralysis" caused by a system of checks and balances and no shared norms, then progress will be hard to achieve.

Americans, he said, have to sit down and figure out who they want to be as a nation -- and that's a long-term answer that may be hard to achieve in this short-term crisis.

"It's very difficult to see what Americans can group around," he told Religion News Service. "You need a new culture, or a new commonality around which you can associate and create."

"And the problem is you don't have that because you have culture wars. And once you have culture wars you have a society that fragments ... which means you become a society that can't solve problems. Which is very worrying."