
REDISCOVERING THE GUILD SYSTEM: THE NEW AGE CIRCLE AS A BRITISH LABORATORY OF CORPORATIST IDEAS (1906-1916)

A REDESCOBERTA DO SISTEMA DAS GUILDAS: O NEW AGE CIRCLE COMO UM LABORATÓRIO INGLÊS DAS IDEIAS CORPORATIVISTAS (1906-1916)

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the role of the New Age circle as a laboratory of corporatist ideas in pre-World War One Britain. The New Age circle was an intellectual informal network composed by radical, anti-liberal individuals coming from the entire political spectrum. Arguing that Corporatism was not just a socio-economic product of fascist, authoritarian and nationalist ideologies, the essay highlights the corporatist tendencies existed within the network in exam between 1907 and 1916. In so doing, we try to show how the United Kingdom participated to a global corporatist reflection started before the advent of Fascism also by non-fascist groups. Therefore the paper firstly presents an overview of the most important intellectual landmarks of the New Age circle, such as William Morris and John Ruskin's political and economic thought, Cardinal Manning's social ideas and the concept of group juridical personality of Frederic W. Maitland and John N. Figgis. Secondly, the several and different forms of corporatist thought were presented, such as Penty's medievalism, G.D.H. Cole's Guild Socialism, De Maeztu's right-wing, monarchic organicism and Belloc's social Catholicism.

KEYWORDS: Corporatism. The New Age. World War One. Guild Socialism. Social Catholicism.

RESUMO: Este artigo analisa o papel do New Age Circle como um laboratório das ideias corporativas na Inglaterra no período anterior à Primeira Guerra Mundial. O New Age Circle foi uma rede informal composta por intelectuais radicais e antiliberais provenientes de todo o espectro político. Defendendo que o corporativismo não foi somente um produto socioeconômico das ideologias fascistas, autoritárias e nacionalistas, o artigo pretende demonstrar que tendências corporativas foram uma característica também da rede analisada, entre 1906 e 1916. Dessa forma, deseja explicar como a Inglaterra participou de uma reflexão corporativa global, iniciada antes do advento do fascismo entre grupos políticos não fascistas. Primeiramente, o artigo realiza um panorama dos pontos de referência mais importantes do New Age Circle: o pensamento político e econômico de William Morris e John Ruskin; as ideias católicas-sociais do Cardinal Manning; e o conceito de personalidade jurídica dos corpos intermédios da sociedade teorizado por Frederic W. Maitland e John N. Figgis. A seguir, o artigo mostra as várias e diferentes formas do pensamento corporativo do New Age Circle, como, por exemplo, o medievalismo de Arthur J. Penty; o socialismo das guildas de G.D.H. Cole; o organicismo monárquico de Ramiro De Maeztu; e, enfim, o catolicismo social de Hilaire Belloc.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Corporativismo. New Age Circle. Primeira Guerra Mundial. Socialismo das Guildas. Catolicismo social.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in the study of Corporatism, both from the theoretical and legislative point of view (CASSESE, 2010; GAGLIARDI, 2010; STOLZI, 2007). In order to explain international transfers and connections, a trans-national perspective has been more and more privileged (PINTO, 2014; PINTO-KELLIS, 2014; PINTO-MARTINHO, 2016; DARD, 2011; MUSIEDLAK, 2010; PASSETI, 2006 and 2016).

Conventionally, the emergence, growth, and development of corporatist ideas have been seen as one of the major issues of the socio-economic and political approach of fascist, nationalist, and authoritarian parties and movements. This historiographical point of view clearly implies an unfortunate omission, since it excludes the possibility of connections and transfers between the corporatist thought and non-fascist groups. Assuming a rigid equivalence between Fascism and Corporatism fails to take account of several projects for the reorganisation of society along corporatist lines promoted by non-fascist political subjects before – and after – the rise of Fascism.

This paper tries to provide a new perspective on the problem, focusing on the pre-war British case. Since corporatist ideas were seen as the product of a reaction against liberal parliamentary policies, occurred throughout Europe between the 19th and 20th Centuries, the United Kingdom has seen largely immune to the anti-liberal corporatist theoretical elaboration. This essay challenges this historiographical interpretation by focusing on the New Age Circle, a group of writers, thinkers and intellectuals associated with «The New Age», a magazine about politics, literature and art edited from 1907 by Alfred R. Orage.

Although their thinking was neither monolithic nor coherent, the aim of this paper is to produce some insights into the general corporatist views that underpinned the New Age Circle's inner debates. In order to achieve this objective, the essay is organised into two main parts. In fact, although the official story of the New Age Circle begun, as mentioned before, in 1907, to start in that year would mean to miss too much. Therefore, the first section addresses the most important origins and intellectual landmarks that influenced the thinking of the New Age Circle's writers, while the second part focuses on the New Age Circle in the period between 1907 and 1916, underlining its features, characteristics and nuances.

2. ORIGINS AND INTELLECTUAL LANDMARKS

In order to explore what were the most important historical and intellectual landmarks for the New Age Circle's intellectuals, we have to refer to three strands of sources. Although acting with various and different intensity, all of the following cultural currents showed a massive impact on the thought of the intellectual circle in the decade before the First World War.

The first school of thought that has to be taken into consideration is represented by a long-lived cultural tradition that can be traced back to the thinking of English utopian social writers such as William Morris and John Ruskin. During the second half of the 19th Century, both of them developed a particular kind of Socialism based upon an organic and pre-revolutionary conception of social inter-relationships. Firmly opposed both to Liberalism and Capitalism, their anti-individualist fascination for a return to an idealised medieval rural England, marked the beginning of an intellectual tendency to refuse the industrial modernity in favour of a quieter, more harmonious and peaceful ancient society (THOMPSON, 1977).

Morris and Ruskin's echoes can be found in the work of one of the most influential friend and mentor of Alfred R. Orage, namely Arthur J. Penty. Born in York in 1875, he was an Architect and social thinker, close to Guild Socialism and Catholic Distributism during the 1910s and the 1920s. In 1906, Penty published an important volume entitled *The Restoration of the Gild System*, which served as a major source for all the New Age Circle's writers. Indeed Penty's work can be seen as one of the first efforts to re-evaluate and re-apply the concept of medieval guild to a modern, industrial environment (TAYLOR, 2004; MARTIN, 1967).

The second, important cultural landmark is represented by the elaboration of the concept of juridical group personality, elaborated in the United Kingdom at the beginning of the 20th Century by law historians and jurists Frederic W. Maitland and John N. Figgis. Their ideas were mainly rooted on the theories of German law historian Otto Von Gierke, whom work, *Das Deutsche Genossenschaftsrecht*, was indeed in part translated by Maitland in 1900, bearing the title of *Political Theories of the Middle Age*. The idea of group personality was

largely influent on the thought of G.D.H. Cole in the elaboration of his Guild Socialism during the First World War.

Finally, the third intellectual influence on the New Age Circle is represented by the Catholic social thinking, arisen in the second half of the 19th Century in Europe thanks to the work of personalities such as Emmanuel Von Ketteler, René de La Tour du Pin and Giuseppe Toniolo. This Catholic intellectual effervescence culminated in the famous social encyclical the *Rerum Novarum*, issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891. In the United Kingdom this kind of thinking was spread by Henry E. Manning, Archbishop of Westminster from 1865, and by his disciples and followers, such as, again, John N. Figgis and especially Hilaire Belloc and Gilbert K. Chesterton. Both of them joined, after 1907, the New Age Circle (CORRIN, 2002).

2.1 Between Medievalism and Socialism

As previously mentioned, Penty's volume *The Restoration of the Gild System* represented one of the main sources of the New Age Circle and of Alfred R. Orage himself. In fact, in the decade following its publication, several authors made explicit and implicit reference to his concept of restoring a guild system within the industrial society. For these reasons, Penty's work deserves here a careful analysis. More than the constructive side of his theory, which is actually poorly developed, Penty's criticisms both to Socialist Collectivism and Liberalism are worth particular consideration. Furthermore, the volume represented a landmark that helps us to better understand what ideas, cultures and authors had a major impact on Orage's intellectual network. Penty clearly outlined those influences since the preface of his book:

Readers of the following pages will probably be aware that the idea of restoring the Gild system as a solution of the problems presented by modern industrialism is to be found in the writings of John Ruskin, who put forward the proposition many years ago (PENTY, 1906, p. VII).

As Ruskin and Morris before him, Penty, although considered himself a Socialist, strongly attacked Collectivism, judging it an impure and misleading version of social thinking: «may I be allowed – he affirmed in December 1907 – to explain that the criticism contained therein was not directed against the aims of Socialism, but against the particular scheme of bringing such ideals about as embodied in Collectivism» (PENTY, 1907, p. 127).

While rejecting the label of anti-socialism, – «at any rate – he affirmed – I am accustomed to call myself a Socialist, and shall continue to do so» (PENTY, 1907, p. 127) – Penty criticised Collectivism in order to find another way to accomplish socialist goals. In his opinion, the fundamental mistake of all collectivist theorists was to identify the hidden cause of societal collapse in the capitalist economic competition, which, in Penty's mind, was not bad in itself but only in the socially disintegrating version of Capitalism. In fact, a properly regulated competitive economic system, such as, for instance, the medieval one, could be a positive instrument of socio-economic, cultural and spiritual growth.

It is true that competition, as it manifests itself in modern society, is a force of disintegration. But this is not because it is necessarily an evil thing; but because the conditions under which it is to-day pursued are intrinsically bad. [...] Competition as it existed under the Gild System, when hours and conditions of labour, prices, etc., were fixed, was necessarily a matter of quality; for when no producer was allowed to compete on the lower plane of cheapness, competition took the form of a rivalry in respect to the greater usefulness or beauty of the thing produced (PENTY, 1906, p. 2-3).

Saving economic competition and thus private property, Penty started to formulate an idea of Socialism as a form of social machinery, a way to better organise the industrial forces of the nation.

However, it has to be underlined that his actual reform proposal was all but precisely developed. In fact, Penty only produced some vague insights, mainly envisaging an utopian happy society formed by rural owners and local closed markets, managed by sector-based industrial guilds that «being social, religious, and political as well as industrial institutions, [...] postulated in their organization the essential unity of life» (PENTY, 1906, p. 3).

Nevertheless, two aspects stand out for their importance. Firstly, Penty's thinking was clearly based upon the figure of the producers, which were all the individuals involved in the production process. In this way, he started to replace the working class as a key concept for the social revolution, substituting it with the concept of organic nation, taken from Ruskin's ideas.

Secondly, Penty accused the idea of mechanical and scientific-based progress – typical of Capitalism – to be the main cause of the decline of society:

It may be said that the solution of our problems is to be found in a further development towards mechanical perfection, and this contention would be perfectly reasonable if the object of man's existence were to make cotton and buttons as cheaply as possible; but considering that man has a soul which craves some satisfaction, and that the progress of mechanical invention degrades and stultifies it by making man more and more the slave of the machine, we feel justified in asserting that real progress lies along other lines (PENTY, 1906, p. 18).

In Penty's mind, a true and profound human renewal lied in a moral and spiritual progress to which the mechanical improvement had to be subdued.

Machinery being a means to an end, we may test its social utility by considering its desirability or otherwise of the ends it is to serve (PENTY, 1906, p. 19).

Overall, Penty's book represents the first attempt to re-evaluate the medieval guild system, updated to the modern economy of the industrial society. It was, as we affirmed, a vague and scarcely precise effort; nevertheless *The Restoration of the Guild system* represented a major source of influence for several thinkers of the New Age Circle.

2.2 Group Juridical Personality and Corporate Bodies

Almost in the same years, a different theorisation of the concept of juridical personality, opposed to the Liberal doctrine, was spreading throughout Europe. The two most influent intellectuals that contributed to diffuse the concept of group personality in Britain, and the attached idea of a different kind of sovereignty and socio-economic and political organisation, were the jurist and historian Frederic W. Maitland and the catholic thinker John N. Figgis (NICHOLLS, 1994).

As already mentioned, both of them largely derived their ideas from the thought of the German historian Otto Von Gierke, with particular reference to his main work entitled *Das Deutsche Genossenschaftsrecht*, originally published in Berlin in four volumes between 1868 and 1913. This intellectual legacy was recognised by Figgis himself in 1913: «I cannot overestimate my debt to that great monument, both of erudition and profound thought, the *Das Deutsche Genossenschaftsrecht* of Dr. Otto Gierke. A very small portion, by no means the most valuable, was translated by Maitland, and his introduction forms an almost indispensable preliminary to this study» (FIGGIS, 1913, p. 55).

Frederic W. Maitland certainly represented the key figure. He was born in London in 1850 and educated at the Trinity College in Cambridge, where he graduated in moral sciences and international law. Maitland was one of the first legal historians in Britain interested in comparative law, studying the influence of the Roman law on the British common law. Indeed, his interest for the European juridical culture culminated in the translation of the third part of Von Gierke's work, published in English in 1900 and bearing the title of *The Political Theories of the Middle Age* (VON GIERKE, 1900). The influence of Maitland's translation on all the pluralist thinkers of the early 20th Century was paramount, especially for the theorisation of the concept of the group juridical personality. Younger than Maitland, John N. Figgis was born in Brighton in 1866 and from 1885 he attended St. Catherine's College in Cambridge, where he first met Maitland. He was a brilliant scholar of history, theology and political sciences.

The idea of group juridical personality was bound up with the anti-individualist reaction of idealist British philosophers, such as Thomas H. Green and Bernard Bosanquet, that started, at the end of 19th century, to discredit individualism as a leading socio-economic and political theory (DEN OTTER, 1996; NICHOLSON, 1990). In the same vein, both Maitland and Figgis argued that the single individual was not the real fact of the society. In their opinion, the real juridical person upon which a community was built were the groups. In fact, as they often affirmed, we do not live as isolated individuals, but we find our fullest development in a vast number of associations and groups. Significantly, in 1913, Figgis affirmed:

The notion of isolated individuality is the shadow of a dream. [...] In the real world, the isolated individual does not exist; he begins always as a member of something, and, as I said earlier, his personality can develop only in society (FIGGIS, 1913, p. 55).

Before him, in a conference held in 1903 at the Newham College of Cambridge, Maitland stated that legal theory had to recognise the existence of another kind of juridical person other than the individual:

Besides men or 'natural persons', law knows persons of another kind. In particular it knows the corporation, and for a multitude of purposes it treats the corporation very much it treats the man. Like the man, the corporation is [...] a right-and-duty-bearing unit (MAITLAND, 1911, p. 306-307).

In order to strengthen this idea, in the introduction to the Gierke's translation,

Maitland wrote that «a corporation [...] is a real thoroughly person with a real will» (MAITLAND, 1900, p. XL), entailing that a group or an association naturally acquires its rights and duties without any government intermediations or legal justification.

Reshaping the very source of the sovereignty – which had to be the group, and not the individual – allowed those thinkers to establish the theoretical foundations for the genesis of a new kind of society. Within this new order, groups, associations and corporations would have played an essential role in the political, social and economic life of the nation. In fact, in Maitland and Figgis' thinking the group would have been more suitable to understand and manage the community, eventually replacing the central State in the role of government.

2.3 Social Catholicism in Britain

The final fundamental intellectual landmark was the Catholic social thinking arisen in Europe at the end of the 19th century, especially for the catholic members of the New Age Circle.

In order to outline the most important features of the Catholic social movement in Great Britain, it is necessary to briefly recall the figure of Henry Edward Manning. Archbishop of Westminster from 1865, Manning was one of the first important catholic spokespersons that showed a singular devotion for social action, condemning what he defined the plutocratic, money-hungry clique of capitalist power. For instance, his particular social inclination can be exemplified by his intervention during the London dock strike of 1889. In fact, Manning's role was essential in order to achieve a peaceful resolution of the struggle. Interestingly, after that event, London workers carried Manning's portrait beside that of Karl Marx during the May Day commemoration of 1890 (CORRIN, 2002, pp. 52-53).

Furthermore, during his life, Manning fulfilled an important role within the discussion of the arising Catholic social thinking, carrying on a regular correspondence with Von Ketteler, Giuseppe Toniolo and the Pope Leo XIII. In 1890, he was also invited to the International Social Work Congress of Liege. Although too old to make the journey, his ideas obtained a great success as his letter was read before the audience. Overall, it can be stated that Manning played an important role in the process that led to the social and corporatist-oriented encyclical of Leo XIII, issued in 1891.

In 1906 – the same year of the publication of Penty's book – Manning established in London the Christian Socialist League, in order to spread the new social attitude of the Catholic world in Britain. The main objective of the League was indeed to develop an intellectual synthesis between Socialist and Catholic values. Furthermore, it is interesting to notice that among the members of the League there were John N. Figgis and Gilbert and Cecil Chesterton. All of them became important contributors of the New Age Circle and were also closely connected with the early Guild Socialism. Moreover, Manning represented a moral guide for Hilaire Belloc, another friend of the Chesterton brothers and an early associate of the New Age Circle, who published in 1911 an important book entitled *The Party System* (BELLOC, CHESTERTON, 1911), which contains a strong attack to parliamentary policies, further developed in a 1912 volume wrote by Belloc and entitled *The Servile State* (BELLOC, 1912).

This rapid overview of the cultural sources of the New Age Circle highlighted the great variety of influences and landmarks. Those influences, as we will see in the next pages, were mirrored in the great multiplicity of theoretical outcomes in the years between 1907 and the Great War.

3. THE NEW AGE CIRCLE: THE IRRESISTIBLE CHARM OF THE GUILDS

The leading figure of the New Age Circle was certainly the editor Alfred R. Orage. He was born in Yorkshire in 1873 and in 1894 he became a schoolteacher in an elementary school in Leeds, where he attended a study group on Plato (MAIRET, 1936; MARTIN, 1967; TAYLOR, 2004). The year 1900 marked the beginning of his association with the journalist and writer Holbrook Jackson, and especially with the architect and later social theorist Arthur J. Penty. Interested in the study of English social thinkers, such as John Ruskin and William Morris, as well as in the continental philosophy of Nietzsche, they founded the Leeds Art Club, one of the most advanced centres for modernist thinking in the pre-war Britain (MATTHEWS, 1979: 147-166). Their interests encompassed themes such as socialist and anarchist policies, Nietzsche's philosophy, spiritualism, psychoanalysis, modernist poetry and abstract expressionist art (Steele, 1990).

Although officially associated with the Fabian Society, Orage, Penty and Holbrook were particularly concerned with the cultural and philosophical foundations of Socialism, rather than with the scientific superstructure of the Socialist State of Collectivism. In 1906,

while Penty was revising his draft of *The Restoration of the Gild System*, Orage moved to London with Holbrook in order to find a way to disseminate the ideas arisen in Leeds. Their first step was establishing a discussion forum within the Fabian Society, founding in June 1906 the Gilds Restoration League and then, in January 1907, the Fabian Arts Group, whose chairman was Bernard Shaw.

However, in open contrast with the official ideas of the Fabian Society, the Group was soon dismissed. At that point, Shaw, with the help of banker and theosophist Lewis Wallace, decided to buy a liberal declining magazine, «The New Age», offering the editorship both to Orage and Holbrook, who soon left the office.

The first issue of the review under the new editorship appeared in May 1907, showing a new, significant subtitle: “An Independent Socialist Review of Politics, Literature and Art”. Orage did not advocate any specific formula of economic or political ideas. Indeed, he desired to set up an open space for debating social issues in order to realise the necessary social revolution to save the British society from collapse. His rationale was from the very beginning trans-political and open to contributors coming from the whole political spectrum, with no veto or restrictions. As he wrote in April 1908, in fact, «friend and enemy of Socialism alike will find the need more and more insistent of some neutral ground where intelligences may meet on equal terms» (ORAGE, 1908, p. 503).

Following Orage’s editorial tolerance, the review soon became an open discussion forum for those intellectuals interested in socio-economic renewal issues. In the weekly meetings, held at the magazine’s offices or at the Kardomah Cafè in Fleet Street, a curious mixture of personalities coming from the whole political spectrum gathered together. Besides Orage and Penty, the group was formed by guild socialist theorists, such as G.D.H. Cole and S.G. Hobson; Catholic thinkers, such as Cecil and Gilbert J. Chesterton, Hillaire Belloc and Maurice Reckitt; the Anglo-Spanish right-wing monarchic intellectual Ramiro De Maezty, who then became an advocate of Francisco Franco during the Spanish Civil War; finally, Thomas E. Hulme, philosopher, scholar and translator of Nietzsche, Bergson and Sorel, who died in the trenches during the First World War.

Between 1907 and 1916, a different conception of society rapidly arose. Discussing freely on the pages of «The New Age», those writers formulated several different proposals and blueprints, crossing the traditional political divisions between left and right, progressive and reactionary, conservative and revolutionary, protestant and catholic. Nevertheless, they

all shared an anti-positivist, anti-liberal and anti-parliamentary tendency, absorbing and reflecting a way of thinking elaborated elsewhere in Europe. This new cultural, political and socio-economic tendency was mirrored by a growing interest for the pre-revolutionary world: the society of *ancient regime* was seen as a harmonious community, where every social group had precise rights and duties. Therefore, the medieval and modern era economic organisation system was positively evaluated, leading to a rediscovery of the guild system as the most efficient and equal form of industrial organisation.

3.1 Reforming Socialism: a Nationalist Framework for a Moral Renewal

As well as in other European countries, during the pre-war period the New Age Circle Socialism was drifting away from its positivist roots, falling into an ambiguous cultural dimension, which could rest in several different political movements.

But what was the core of this new socialism? As shown by the British historian Tom Villis, Orage's socialist tendency was part of a common European attempt to dissociate Socialism from its democratic and parliamentary overtones, freeing it from materialist and collectivist bias (VILLIS, 2006). The father of the anti-materialist European socialism was with no doubt the French philosopher Georges Sorel, but it had a large diffusion throughout Europe, especially in Italy, where it influenced also Fascist corporatist ideology. The moral issue within the so-called social question represented the main interest within the new social attitude of several European intellectual not convinced by the collectivist formula. As stated before, the New Age Circle represented the British part of this European reaction against materialism and classic Marxist socialism, refusing its scientific background and substituting it with a strong ethical, non-classist and organicist attitude. Significantly, in 1910, Orage affirmed that «we are in for a revolution, political, economic, and, we would add, moral» (ORAGE, 1907, p. 41), where the third term clearly stands out for its importance and originality.

Therefore, Orage's main goal, as he put in 1912, was «reconstructing both the theory and practice of Socialism» (ORAGE, 1912, p. 27). Focusing firstly on the moral question, Orage started to replace the original Marxist analysis of the society, based on class relations and social conflict, with a strong nationalist framework. Since the renewal had to be principally moral, and solely as a consequence social and economic, the classic revolutionary

subject, namely the working class, lost its centrality. Therefore, while rejecting the idea of class struggle, Orage started to look at the idea of nation, rather than the class, as the new benchmark for his new theory of Socialism. One of his articles of September 1909 clearly revealed this new attitude:

No class has been able by itself either to achieve power or to maintain power; and if King, Barons and the Middle Classes have successively failed in this, we cannot see that the working classes can hope to succeed. [...] Now, Socialism knows no such distinction. A Socialist Party is not the party of a class but of the nation; and exactly as the Labour Party finds itself committed to the policy of exclusion will it find itself opposed to Socialism, and therefore to its own interests (ORAGE, 1909, p. 373-374).

Therefore, in Orage's mind, a true socialist party should have been the party «of the whole community, representative of all the national interests, without distinction of class, sect, sex, or creed» (ORAGE, 1907, p. 141). In the same vein, a true democratic and popular government should have been the result of the pacific cooperation between all the classes, which means all the economic and social interests that composed a national community. It is interesting to notice that Orage labelled as oligarchy any political system where the power is monopolised by a single social class, which more and more became a synonym of economic interest group:

We intend to convey by the word Oligarchy a system of government in which power is confined practically to a single class. That class may be the class of the nobility, as it was yesterday, or it may be the class of the wealthy, as it is today; or, again, it may be the class of the hand labouring proletariat, as Mr. Keir Hardie, for example, says it will be to-morrow. But whatever class it is, If power belongs exclusively to it, the resulting form of government is an Oligarchy, that is, government by class (ORAGE, 1907, p. 141).

For Orage, a true socialist, democratic and equal government should have emerged from the harmonic cooperation of all the social classes, each one according to its capabilities and competences:

Such a government only deserves to be called a popular government and a democratic government in the true sense of the word, since It represents not, as of old, merely the noble class, nor, as now, merely the wealthy class, nor, again, as may be in the future, the class of the

day-labourer, but all classes, each according to its political capacity and merits (ORAGE, 1910, p. 50).

3.2 Towards a Functional Society

During the 1910s, an organicist conception of the society underpinned Orage's thinking as well as the ideas of his growing intellectual network. According to the organicist doctrine, the nation was a metaphysical entity, superior to the individuals that formed it. Therefore, the economic and social divergences existing within the society should have been removed, replacing them by a pacific cooperation, intrinsically impossible in a liberal parliamentary system. Consequentially, all the intellectuals closed to the New Age Circle prompted up criticisms towards the democratic parliamentary system, proposing a different kind of ordered, pacific, coordinate society based on associations and corporate bodies, in order to reach what Samuel G. Hobson in 1912 called «a unity of economic interests» (HOBSON, 1914, p. 121).

Thus, liberal parliamentary democracy was under attack in its philosophical and conceptual foundations. An atomistic society, based on individual constituency and representation, was seen incapable of managing a modern industrial society. Ramiro De Maeztu – an Anglo-Spanish contributor of «The New Age», later an advocate of the regime of Primo de Rivera and founder, in 1931, of the right-wing, monarchist organisation Acción Española – affirmed that a national community was not formed by isolated individuals, but rather society arises only when common ends lead individuals to associate with each other, forming a real community based on communal socio-economic interests. In fact, in his book entitled *Authority, Liberty and Function in the Light of the War*, published in London in 1916, De Maeztu stated:

Rights only arise when man enters into relation with the good, either to preserve the existing goods or to create new ones. In function of the goods, in the relation between men and goods, rights arise. Every right is functional (DE MAEZTU, 1916, p. 253).

Therefore, the individual acquired his rights, even the right of freedom, only if he entered in association with other men in order to achieve a superior communal objective: «men – wrote De Maeztu in 1915 on «The New Age» – are associated for a common object and that the fulfilment of this common object is considered superior to the individual aims of its members» (DE MAEZTU, 1915, p. 424). Without this functional prerequisite, freedom was basically a detrimental principle, because every man would have used it in order to reach

his egotistic ends with no concern for common good. Significantly, in 1918 Maurice B. Reckitt – a catholic member of the New Age Circle – stated that «the principle of individual liberty [...] is radically and irremediably opposed to all organisations» (DE MAEZTU, 1915, p. 424).

Although variously developed, all the writers of the New Age Circle shared a same interest for a decentralised system where a significant amount of political and economic power was demanded to sectorial industrial organisms, since sovereignty only arises from groups that fulfilled a precise function within the national community. In order to overcome both the liberal parliamentary democracy and the social collectivist State theory, the New Age Circle's intellectuals developed an idea of socio-economic and political machinery shaped on the example of the medieval guild system, based on a range of coordinated, functional, industrial organisms.

Since sovereignty did lie neither in the central State nor in the individuals, but rather it emerged from groups, also the representation system had to be based on associations that fulfilled a precise role in the community and represented precise socio-economic interests. Therefore, as stated by Samuel G. Hobson – who first coined the term Guild Socialism on «The New Age» in 1912 – industrial guilds would have really unified the nation through «the regimentation into a single fellowship of all those who are employed in any given industry» (HOBSON, 1914, p. 132). He continued stating that «every type and grade of worker, mental or manual, must be a member of the Guild» (HOBSON, 1914, p. 136). Decentralising economic and political powers in several specific, functional, industrial associations would realise what G.D.H. Cole defined in 1913 «associations [...] of independent producers» (COLE, 1913, p. 364). In its extreme theorisation, the geographically elected central government totally disappeared, becoming a simple association itself with the aim to perform the function to represent the consumer perspective.

Therefore, a functional, group-based representation had to replace a geographical, atomistic one, because recognising the existence of contrasting socio-economic interests was the only way to form a real government capable of harmonising them in order to reach a superior, national welfare. The national community had to be transformed, in 1913 Figgis' words, in «a society of societies» (FIGGIS, 1913, p. 49).

4. CONCLUSIONS

During and after the Great War, the New Age writers took very different paths. G.D.H. Cole, with the help of Samuel G. Hobson, established in 1916 the National Guild League and started to edit his own magazine, «The Guildsman». However, after several versions of his Guild Socialism, the last one formulated in 1921 and included in a book entitled *Guild Socialism Re-Stated*, in 1924 Cole's theoretical efforts eclipsed with the closure of his last magazine, «The New Standards». In the late '20 and in the '30, Cole reconciled himself with the Labour Party, trying to provide strong theoretical foundations and political outlines for a future Labour government.

Ramiro De Maeztu became an advocate of the Regime of Primo de Rivera, serving as Spanish ambassador in Argentina after 1928. After returning to Spain, he established in 1931 the right-wing monarchist movement *Acción Española*, heavily influenced by the French group *L'Action Française* led by Charles Maurras, advocating a return to pure *Hispanidad*. De Maeztu died on 29th of October 1936, during the Civil War, murdered by republican soldiers. Hilaire Belloc and Gilbert K. Chesterton established several catholic magazines – namely «The Eye-Witness», «The New Witness» and «The G.K.'s Review» – in order to develop, especially in the late 1920s and in the 1930s, the social-catholic theory called Distributism, inspired by the *Rerum Novarum*. Maurice Reckitt, after being a founder of the National Guild League, moved towards catholic position, establishing in 1931 a journal entitled «Christendom. A Journal of Christian Sociology».

Alfred Orage continued to be the editor of the New Age until 1922, becoming very close to the social credit theories formulated by British engineer Clifford H. Douglas. After leaving «The New Age» editorship, Orage travelled in France and in the United States, returning to England in 1930 where he started to edit a magazine called the «New English Weekly» before dying of a heart disease in November 1934.

Finally, Arthur J. Penty, after the Bolshevik Revolution, broke with Guild Socialism and became close to Distributism, agrarian revivalism and social Catholic thinking, launching in 1923 the Christian Socialist Crusader League and in 1926 the Rural Reconstruction Association. In the early 1930s he became an admirer of corporatist economic organisation of Mussolini's Italy, supporting the nationalists in the Spanish Civil War and, after 1932, the ideas of Oswald Mosley and the British Union of Fascists. He died of heart disease in January 1937.

Overall, the analysis of this British anti-liberal community allows us to grasp some general conclusions. First of all, focusing on the British case helps us to discover some historiographical distortions. In fact, in the United Kingdom fascist parties as well as declared corporatist proposals never achieved a great amount of public support. Nevertheless, the absence of a strong framing tool as the concept of Fascism, has led to an underestimation of the similarities that a part of the British thought had with the European cultural rebellion against Liberalism and parliamentary democracy. This rebellion did not lead necessarily to Fascism, and the United Kingdom represents an exemplary case that shows the various and different declinations taken within a similar cultural milieu.

Focusing exclusively on the New Age Circle, it has to be stated that it is almost impossible to provide a single, satisfying definition for the cultural and political space produced by the intellectuals studied. The terms socialism, nationalism or radical right are all equally distorting as they fail to take account of complicated, and often contradictory, attitudes towards themes such as revolution, labour, capital and nation. The least that can be said is that the New Age Circle's writers produced ideas and theories that contained several themes which have been seen as the distinctive characteristics of the pan-European revolt against positivism, parliamentary democracy and liberalism: a profound sense of cultural dislocation; a revolt against materialism and rationalism; a call for a new elite and for a moral renewal of the society; a strong anti-parliamentary, anti-liberal and anti-individualist feeling; and finally, the elaboration of proposals for a re-organisation of the society, deeply permeated by a corporatist atmosphere.

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