

ON PROPERTY

(Extract from the *Représentant du Peuple* of June 13 and 14, 1848)

We hear it said everywhere: *Property has been the basis of society; to infringe on property is to infringe on society.*

To determine the truth or error of this assertion, we must first determine the value of the word *property*.

Do we understand by this word the right to enjoy and dispose of the fruits of one's labor? — Then nothing will seem more reasonable than the consecration of this right, for property is not only the price of labor, but the consecration of labor. It is more than a principle, it is the consequence of reasoning or the expression of humanity.¹

But society was not constituted on property thus defined; on the contrary, society was founded on the principle of the appropriation, by some individuals, of the fruits of the labor of others; in short, on the principle of the exploitation of the labor of the majority by the privileged minority. Slavery organized on this principle is not entirely abolished in Europe, and even less so in other parts of the world, for many nations are still enslaved.

Under this system, the fruits of labor belonged not to the worker, but to the lords. Therefore, the true principle of property was not the foundation of society.

If by property we mean the privilege of possessing the land, then the problem changes, and the maxim that *property has been the basis of society* may have received practical sanction, but it cannot be accepted as correct.

Indeed, the appropriation of land by a small number of individuals was the dominant principle in Western nations, just as appropriation by the head of state was the dominant principle in Eastern nations. In the first case, the small number of possessors of the essential element of all production, namely the soil, — an element without which labor can do nothing, — could appropriate the *totality* or a *part* of the fruits of that labor. The first condition constituted *slavery*, the second *wage salariat*; but it must be noted that wages were granted to the worker as a means of subsistence, which, in the primitive condition, was owed to the slave.

Reflecting on property rights in this light, it becomes clear that these rights pertain to the minority who own the land, the majority of whom were dispossessed. Therefore, the maxim, *Property is the foundation of society*, can be translated as: *Society is based on the privilege of the minority and the exploitation of the majority.*

Now, we ask whether such a maxim is just. Should society continue to be founded on the same basis, which limits the right to property in the land to a minority? According to the rules of

¹ See our *Idées préliminaires à la Science sociale*, § 7-48-49, p. 15.

injustice, it would seem not, for society should not rest on a principle relative to a minority, but on an absolute principle representing the universality. Therefore, the principle must be established in the sense that we have given it: that which consecrates the fruits of labor as the property of the workers. Then the old basis of privilege, on which society is still founded, must be replaced by the new basis of equality, which grants to each and every person property in their works. Indeed, to be consistent with the social maxims that France has proclaimed, the current organization of land ownership cannot be maintained, for the right must belong to all. For this to be so, everyone must become proprietors of the fruits of their labor.

But, it might be said, that is what is happening today, since everyone has the right to enjoy and dispose of all the rights of their labor.

Is that true? we reply in turn. Can we say today that all the fruits of labor belong to the worker?

To those who answer us in the affirmative, we will ask: And what about rent, which absorbs half or a third of the product of agricultural labor? And what about land rents, interest, dividends and profits, which burden every kind of labor with a variable and onerous tax? Therefore, it is not accurate to say that today the worker becomes the proprietor of all the fruits of their labor, since they are obliged to give a portion to the proprietors, even though the other portion is insufficient for them to live on.

What, then, must be done so that the worker may own all the fruits of their labor, so that the *right* to property may become common to all and society may *truly* be constituted on property? What must be done so that humanity may move from the illusory system of property, — since it grants rights only to the exploiting minority, — to the system of real property, which will grant the fruits of its labors to the hitherto exploited majority? It is not necessary to destroy property — that would be absurd, since we want, on the contrary, to universalize property; it is necessary to abolish the old privilege, because this privilege makes the establishment of rational law impossible. And since the old privilege related not to the unshakeable principle of property, but to the social organization of property, which granted the land, inalienable by its very nature, to a small number of individuals, it will only be necessary to change the organization of property, which is variable in nature, as an expression of the social order, with regard to matter.²

We have just seen how, by means of reasoning, and without undermining the principle, but by knowing how to apply it in a just manner, so that it can become the basis of the social order; we have just seen, I say, how one manages to demonstrate the necessity of abolishing the old system, a system which, having served as the basis of the society constituted on exploitation, cannot serve as the basis for a society founded on the equity of right.

In alluding to the ancient principle, we do not wish to condemn it, although we oppose it today; on the contrary, we recognize that it served to maintain order among humanity during the long period of past centuries; for then, and because of primitive ignorance, despotism was the only possible system of social organization. Despotism had to employ, — in order to maintain itself, —

² *Idées préliminaires*, § 51, p. 16.

intellectual and material exploitation, that is to say, the exploitation of all forces; therefore, the land, the source of all application of forces, and consequently the source of all labor, had to be alienated to the exploiting classes that dominated humanity. Thus, the organic system of landed property became naturally and necessarily inherent in the maintenance of despotic order; but from the moment one proposes to reconstitute society on *liberty*, the system of exploiting labor becomes incompatible with the new principle and, consequently, inevitably, the ancient basis of exploitation must collapse.

What, then, is the essential condition for the worker to reap all the fruits of their labor? — It is necessary to achieve an organization such that the worker pays neither rent nor interest on their labor. For this to happen, they must have both land and capital at their disposal; for it is then, and only then, that all the product of their labor will belong to them.

Before going any further, we feel it is useful to clarify our conclusions.

In the question of labor, there is only matter and intelligence. — Matter is the earth (including the atmosphere) and its products, on which and with which intelligence operates.

The action of intelligence on matter constitutes labor.

To this day, humanity has gone through two epochs: that of domination by proprietors, and that of domination by capital owners, who also dominated the land. — The first epoch constituted the feudal regime, the second constituted the bourgeois regime.

In both these periods, the domination of the possessors of the land and of capital constituted the domination of matter over labor, the domination of matter over intelligence; this has become incompatible with reason and justice. From now on, labor, which is intelligence translated into action, must dominate matter, which is land and capital. Therefore, the new social era must enshrine the supremacy of intelligence or labor.

Now we can move on to the second part of the question.

What must be done to ensure that labor dominates, that is, to ensure that land and capital — material resources, in short — are at the disposal of labor? Must it be taken immediately from the current possessors and distributed to all? This method would be absurd because it is unjust and ineffective, and we propose nothing unjust to achieve the restoration of order. A peaceful means must be found to place the community, which constitutes the State, in possession of the land and, at the same time, of a social capital that can serve it: 1. in order to undertake all possible and necessary improvements to the land, in order to sell agricultural, industrial, and commercial enterprises easily and profitably, as well as to preserve the fertility and health of the territory; 2. in order to provide workers, as indispensable auxiliaries to their physical and intellectual strength, with the tools of labor. Among these tools, we logically understand general and vocational education.

By these means, the land, the essential element of production, belonging to all, and all having at their disposal the means of production, they will be able to enjoy and dispose of all the fruits of their labor. By these means, the new property will not be based on a privilege, which is inequality, but on

a universal right, which is equality. This right is labor, the free exercise of which will procure real property, superior to any principle, for we have said that it is the expression of humanity itself.

It can be seen that the principle we have just deduced, as a logical consequence of irrefutable reasoning, is the only one that can satisfy the condition for radical reform set forth by M. Lamennais; namely: "That in order to ensure the life of each individual and at the same time their liberty, it is therefore not a question of abolishing property, but on the contrary of multiplying it, of making it accessible to all." (*Questions du travail*, articles in the *Peuple Constituent*, 2.)³

However, M. Lamennais had declared himself, a year ago, against socialist systems which tended to concentrate property in the hands of the State, putting an end to all individual property; — and in his journal, he ratifies the same conviction.

There is no doubt that the principle, thus stated in such an absolute manner, can be victoriously opposed; for indeed, abolishing *all* individual property and establishing the State as the *sole* owner, sole regulator and sole remunerator of labor would lead society to the most dreadful form of servitude. — But the principle we have deduced from the arguments we share with M. Lamennais does not abolish *all* individual property, nor does it establish the State as the regulator and remunerator of labor. This principle consists in bringing the land back into the State's possession, land which until now has been alienated to individuals through a privilege disastrous for labor. This principle also consists in placing the land, the essential element of all production, at the disposal of the worker, in exchange for a premium levied on the produce to constitute a tax.⁴

Individuals, remaining free in the exercise of their labor, would then be socially guaranteed ownership of the fruits of their labor.

The proposed means is simply the recognition of universal rights against privilege; of the universal right of all to property against the privilege of property held by a few; of the rational right to property of the fruits of labor against the abusive right to property of the primary element of production, which, in absolute justice, is inalienable.

We communicated some of these ideas to the Central Agricultural Congress last March. They were very poorly received, perhaps believing that they infringed upon the right to individual property. Therefore, we limited ourselves to observing that landed property, constituting a part of wealth, and labor acting upon the soil, the basis of this property, meant that the problem of the organization of labor was directly dependent on the institution known as landed property. By separating the purely agricultural question from the fundamental social question, we restricted

³ We believe we find the expression of the same wish in the words that M. Lamartine has just spoken in the session of the 12th of this month: "We will fill, with laws of popular utility, with labor laws, with laws emancipating the proletariat, with laws of property multiplied and growing in the hands of all; we will fill with truths and benefits this abyss that certain utopias have filled, in the imagination, with fallacious promises, lies, and errors." (Very good, very good!)

⁴ This idea of the return of the soil to the State, as a material means of social organization, is developed in a manuscript work which was entrusted to us, and whose author wished to remain anonymous.

ourselves to observing, through a printed summary, that the solution to all the problems demanded by the progress of science was hampered by the conditions of the current organization of property, which grants possession of the land to a certain number of individuals. From this, we deduced the following conclusions:

1. The abolition of landed property must be proclaimed when its maintenance is incompatible with the social order that must be established for the happiness of humanity;
2. The destruction of the basis of the current order must be proclaimed, when the maintenance of this so-called order is incompatible with the true social order which the happiness of humanity demands;
3. The return of the land to the State, so that the social power can establish the divisions in the land suitable for agricultural exploitation, according to the state of science, the works of overall improvement, with a view to the good of all the inhabitants, and grant the right of exploitation to all individuals who want and are able to exercise their work on the land; these reforms, I say, are not communism; they are true social organization.

To preemptively address any objections that our communication might raise, we have included the following statements:

“But, it will be said again, the return of the land to the State implies the expropriation and ruin of families, an injustice; in a word, a revolution.

“I will answer again, beginning by declaring that a social reform ceases to be rational the moment it commits a single injustice. Now, I say:

“1. The return of the land to the State can be done peacefully, without disorder, without loss to any of the current families. Social science will provide the solution to this problem when the solution is socially recognized and proclaimed necessary and indispensable;

“2. Political and social revolutions, achieved through force, only ever occur as a result of irrational obstacles to the spread of rational principles made necessary to humanity by the progress of civilization.”

Now we believe we can add that the time seems ripe to deal with the examination and discussion of ways to achieve a solution to the problem of returning land to the community and creating social capital in favor of labor.

Having examined Citizen Proudhon's plan for the Bank of Exchange, and the developments he presented in his program published in issues 60, 61, and 65 of his newspaper, we believe that with certain modifications to the conditions for the repurchase of farms, after the repayment period has expired, the desired outcome for the material social organization could be achieved. From this perspective, we declare our support for Citizen Proudhon's program, but without prejudging the consequences of this project with regard to the more fundamental question of social order.

RAMON DE LA SAGRA.

Paris, June 6, 1848.

Working translation by Shawn P. Wilbur; last revised December 4, 2025.