

# Proudhon Was Wrong - Property Is Not Theft

Mr. W. J. Cadman's reply to the motion "Proudhon was right—property is theft" at the Enfield Debating Society last month

IF, AS PROUDHON asserts, "all property is robbery," if no one can in justice become the possessor of any article, it follows that no man can have any right to the food he eats. If the food is not his *before* he eats it, it cannot be his *after* he has eaten it. From this it would seem that a man has no right to his own body; indeed, we must conclude that a man has as much right to his neighbour's body as to his own.

To deny the right of individual private property, therefore, inevitably lands one in absurdity!

The only sensible way to ascertain what are the rights of property is to look first at the essential facts of our life on this planet. We come into this world possessed of no property whatever and on arrival here we find that one thing only is given to us which is both free and ready-made. This one thing is fresh air.

To get the food, clothing and shelter which are essential if we are to survive, nature bids us work. Now nature is fair. Apart from fresh air nature provides nothing ready made, but she does provide a storehouse of raw material upon which we can work; she provides us with land. Man, therefore, labours upon the land, and is thus able to bring into existence all those tangible material things which we term wealth.

There are now two points which need to be stressed. First, nature is inexhaustible. So that, provided we all have access to natural resources, whatever wealth a man makes by his exertions should not prevent another from making whatever wealth he requires so long as he is prepared to work. Secondly, the wealth we make, and retain as our property, is really of temporary possession only, for from the moment of making any wealth, it begins to change back into original matter. Some forms of wealth will last for but a few hours—fresh milk is one example, others will last for various longer periods. There are very few forms of wealth which will last long enough to pass on to the next generation. The truth is that mankind lives from hand to mouth.

The right to possess private property springs from the fact that the individual has, by his labour, produced it. It is, so to speak, an extension of his personality. As a man belongs to himself, his labour when put into concrete form, belongs to him also.

It has been shown what is the rightful basis of private property. How is it, then, that Proudhon had this idea that property is theft? Probably because in his day as in our own, through long-established custom, were tolerated forms of ownership based upon force and fraud which can only be described as immoral private property. Chattel

slavery at once springs to mind as an outstanding form of immoral property. Slavery is, fortunately, now a thing of the past in most parts of the world. But shortly before the American civil war, when slavery was being hotly attacked, one argument in its defence went something like this:

"Here is a widow. All her husband has been able to leave her, after a lifetime of toil, is a half-dozen slaves, all of which he bought with honestly earned money. Would you now free those slaves, and thus put this woman in a condition of penury?"

Arising out of this kind of argument is a vital principle which we should note. It is this:

If you possess some property which has both legal and moral sanction and you exchange it for property which has only legal sanction, you cannot claim that the moral sanction attaching to the property you have disposed of now attaches to the new property you have acquired.

Though chattel slavery is no more, there remain other forms of immoral property in our midst. The chief of these is private property in land, an institution which in its most extreme forms is even worse than chattel slavery.

Land is not wealth. The truth of this is apparent if we consider that if one man, the only inhabitant, owned the whole Earth he would quickly starve to death unless he constantly exerted himself in productive work. A landowner *regarded solely as a landowner*, contributes nothing to production, but takes wealth from others. We are indebted to Ruskin for reminding us that, from an economic point of view, there are only three classes, namely working men, beggars and thieves. One can only acquire wealth by work, by gift, or by theft!

Throughout history many famous men have condemned the robbery which private landownership entails. One can go back as far as Moses, who legislated against land being permanently alienated from its original possessors. Because the Mosaic law on the subject was not kept, we find Isaiah thundering against those who joined field to field. In ancient Rome, Tiberius Gracchus fought to the death to revive the Licinian Laws limiting landholding. Coming nearer to our own times, Thomas Spence delivered a lecture to the Newcastle Philosophical Society, in 1775, in which he proposed that the land in each parish should be vested in the parish authorities and rented out to individuals. Thomas Carlyle in his history of the French Revolution condemned the robbery which landownership entailed. In the mid-19th century, Herbert Spencer brilliantly attacked landownership in his *Social Statics*, and compared it with murder.

Both Tolstoy and Cardinal Manning had some biting things

to say on the subject, and in the early 1900s Winston Churchill attacked land monopoly in brilliant speeches which have seldom been equalled, speeches which read as true today as when they were delivered.

Let us, though, forget this cloud of witnesses for the moment, and look simply at the facts for ourselves. Suppose a man takes a fish from the English Channel and calls it his property. There is surely nothing wrong with that. But now suppose a man claims the English Channel itself as his property, and forbids all other people from fishing therein. Would not that be grossly unjust?

But the same arguments must apply to dry land. If a man plants a field with seed and in due time reaps the harvest, that harvest is undoubtedly his private property, for his labour has produced it. But does the act of sowing the seed give him the right to claim that field is his property, for ever?

Every man needs sufficient space on which to build his house. But does the natural right to enough space justify a man in claiming ownership of thousands of acres principally in order to charge his fellow men for the right to live?

Private landownership disinherits the mass of the people from any share in what the Creator has provided for the sustenance of all. Did the Creator intend that men should have to *buy* space on this Earth, from some of their fellow men? Without doubt this is the supreme wrong in our civilisation. We rightly permit private property in the products of labour; this is, in fact, the first step in civilisation, but we wrongly permit private property in the Earth itself.

Proudhon was almost certainly right in thinking that the French aristocrats of his day had not acquired their wealth honestly, but he did not discover how the theft was taking place. Had he lived for another fourteen years he might have stumbled on the truth. For in 1879 was published Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*, a book which made plain the reasons for poverty keeping pace with progress, and the reason why the bulk of the world's wealth finds its way into the hands of comparatively few.

Two kinds of value arise in society. The first is that of tangible, material wealth that is the result of man's conscious efforts. This wealth is rightly private property. The second is what is produced by the efforts of the community as a whole; a value that one can say is *unconsciously* produced, and which is not the result of any one man's work. This second kind of value attaches itself to land and is expressed as the rental value of land; being the result of communal activity it should belong to the community as a whole.

By patient study of the natural physical laws and by working in harmony with them men have invented and perfected the motor-car, the aeroplane, and numerous other marvels of our modern civilisation. It is no less true that there are unchanging moral laws which if we obey them, we prosper. If we disobey them, we suffer.

We must conclude, therefore, that tangible, material wealth, produced by labour from land, is rightly private property and should not be subject to taxation while the rental value of land remains uncollected for communal purposes.

## NO-DEPOSIT HOUSE MORTGAGES

THE second stage of the Government's plan to make it easier for people of modest means to buy a house began in April. People who choose to buy a house with an option mortgage will be able to seek an advance of up to 100 per cent of valuation. This is called the Option Mortgage Guarantee Scheme. Many building societies will join in the scheme provided funds are available.

The Option Mortgage Scheme benefits people who get little or no income tax relief on their mortgage interest payments. The scheme covers houses with a valuation not exceeding £5,000.

The scheme is obviously intended to help those in the lower income groups. But what effect, if the scheme works, will it have on the housing market? The increased demand for houses will increase the price. Not the building element, for competition will look after that, but the land element, the supply of which cannot increase with the increased demand.

This is the way of all subsidies to house buyers whatever means are adopted—as has been amply demonstrated in the past.

### From the introduction to Enquiry into Prices and Incomes

THE first wage freeze was enacted by Parliament over six hundred years ago, shortly after the Black Death.

The first of the great plagues swept through England in 1349, and within a few months the centuries-old system was fundamentally changed and the full rigour of feudal serfdom disappeared. Wages doubled or trebled overnight, but with the population reduced by one-third by the end of the century there was no corresponding rise in the price of food and other necessities.

First by Royal Proclamation, then by Statute, the government reacted swiftly in a determined bid to end the peasants' bonanza. It was decreed that wages would be fixed at pre-plague levels, and that any previous agreements for increased wages would be void.

Successive Parliaments re-enacted the Statute of Labourers with ever-increasing penalties for disobedience, and a whole system of Justices and Quarter Sessions was established in order to fix and enforce wage rates, but all to little or no avail. The Prices and Incomes Board is heir to a long tradition.