

CHAPTER VI
THE MEANING OF PROPERTY
USE OF PROPERTY

What is property? It is wealth produced by labor, with the assistance of capital, from land. In an attempt to understand what property really is, it is unnecessary to follow the rather intricate by-paths laid down by Socialists and Communists which lead to the uses to which property is put. For instance, the purpose for which the property is used does not alter the character of property. Wealth is food, fuel, clothing and shelter. If an individual have more of these necessities than he can consume, he has saved some property, and he might give his surplus away, or loan it, to others who wish to save the time of producing it for themselves, for which he will take a payment which we call interest. Then there will come a day in the life of this individual when he will consider it desirable to call in his legal counsellor, and draw up a will making provision for his heirs. He determines they shall inherit his savings of property which now may be in many different forms. If he be so minded, it is necessary for us to ask, if what he would will, were his own to bequeath. In this case, all that is property is his. But let us say that with his surplus he has bought land on which to erect his house and that he has also bought a farm, as a country home of recreation, in addition to the utility of the place. Now we have reached the point when we have to consider

something which he will bequeath that is not property. The land on which his house is built was not produced by him. The land on which the farm is made was not produced by him. Therefore, these tracts of bare land cannot be property, for they are not wealth, and were not produced by labor. The farm is property, for the farm is the improvements upon the land: houses, barns, hedges, fences, ditches, various drains, plantings and so on—these are all improvements. So also with his house. The house, the pipes, the drains, indeed everything in it that has been produced by labor is property, but the land is not, for it was not produced by labor.

MISCONCEPTIONS

So property is wealth: primarily, food, fuel, clothing and shelter, and all the labor-products which are accessories in the production and use of these things. This simple problem has confounded the wit of more intelligent beings since the middle of the last century than any other which has perplexed the mind of man. Why? Because these people have been less intelligent than those who readily understood the nature of property? Not at all, for many brilliant men who have gained the world's ear have fallen victims to this extraordinary misconception. They have never considered what property is, but rather the use to which it is put by certain sections of the community. I daresay it is possible to compile a long volume of definitions of property by brilliant men who have never considered its nature. As an example of the general confusion in connection with the meaning of this term, I may take Professor Hobhouse's statement in a work called *Property, Its Duties and Rights*, comprising a number of essays by well-known men in the church, in universities, in law and industry,

whom the late Bishop of Oxford, the famous Canon Gore, invited to contribute to it. Professor Hobhouse says:

“While modern economic conditions have virtually abolished the property *for use*, apart from furniture, clothing, etc.; that is, property in the means of production, for the great majority of the people—they have brought about the accumulation of vast masses of property *for power* in the hands of a relatively narrow class.”
(Italics in the essay)

Thus, having in their own minds abolished property *for use*, they are obliged to find a purpose for it, and decide that it is *for power*. No one asks even if one concede the second finding, that is *for power*, how it can be used for power, without being of service, that is use to the consumer. Let us say the property which is in a great furniture factory (buildings, machinery, raw material of timber, varnish, cane and metal, etc.) is for power, the power presumably being exerted over the employees. What then? What do the employees produce in the factory? Furniture. For what purpose? To be used. So when it is in the factory, together with the machines (human and artificial) that made it, it represents power. But when it leaves the factory, and a chair or a bedroom set goes into the hands of the working man, it is again for use, and consequently, has to be abolished again so that power may not be endangered.

No one stops to think that very often the furniture factory is running along on reduced power, and when the steam in the boiler of property gives out, the employees have to take a holiday and the factory a rest. What is the factory then? It is still property. But where is its power?

EARLY MAN AND PRODUCTION

How simple this problem was to early man! He never passed any sleepless night thinking about the use of property. Day in and day out, he consumed it as he produced it, sometimes he saved a little for seed, sometimes he bred another pig or another dog for food, for pelt and for leather, and he was satisfied. When he had devised an implement to lighten his exertion as a producer, he realized the dual nature of property, but he could never have been so stupid as to think, because he did not eat the tool, that its nature fundamentally differed from the grain he produced or the pig that he bred. Both were the products of his own labor and care. It is only modern man who is not brought face to face with these achievements, who has any trouble about understanding their character. Modern man, a man living in a city, usually knows no more about the production of the necessaries of his existence than that which he sees in the grocery store, the butcher shop, the ironmonger's, the clothier's, and the dry goods emporia. There is for the city man one other pantehnicon, and that is the drug store, where now marketing is simplified, and he can buy anything from a tooth brush to a cone of ice cream. He is so far removed from the scenes of primary production that he has not the faintest idea of what the processes are, which are repeated every season, of producing food, fuel, clothing and shelter for him. He has no more idea of the growth of things upon which he feeds than an animal, perhaps not as much. Someone said that the city-bred man might notice the growth of his baby (meaning its development from stage to stage), but as for knowing anything about the germination of seed, he was a veritable ignoramus. But

is the ordinary town-dweller in this respect in any different position from any other man that is city-bred and a city-dweller? I doubt it. The generality I meet, no matter what their book knowledge may be, have little or no practical experience of these things and, what is worse, they do not show the slightest desire to acquire any first-hand knowledge.

Anyway, we may very well imagine that early man, being brought face to face with the essential problems that confound the imagination of the modern, never wasted any time on such questions as to whether his tool, when added to by more tools, had lost its use, and had become a thing for power.

LEGISLATORS AND LAWS

Is there now any limit to the action of government? Is there a line to be drawn beyond which self-respecting legislators will hesitate to trespass? Seemingly there is none, for all the old restraints and limits have been abolished. At one time statesmen were cautious and disliked anything in the nature of new class legislation. There always seemed to be some respect paid to minorities, and very often a tender regard was shown for all those interests from which most of the direct taxes were produced. All this is changed, and it is said that one of the reasons for it is that the "moneyed interests" of this country have been let off too lightly in the past. The modern legislator here seems to think two wrongs always make a right, and that there is no better way of reforming abuses than by government adopting the abuses that it frowns upon, if they be practiced by what now goes by the term "predatory interests." Legislators forget that there have always been laws on the statute books of this country sufficiently strong to cover any

of the delinquencies of which they complain. That the laws have been inoperative is no reason for making other laws, because lawyers are always lawyers, and those who succeed are very often the men who have sufficient skill to advise their clients to avoid the core of the law and be sure that their misdemeanors take place at its periphery. There may be some truth in this, but that is no excuse for Congress adopting their methods and legalizing them. If the methods are wrong as practiced by the "moneyed interests," the methods are wrong, no matter who practices them, and whether they are legalized or not.

There is, however, another side to this question that is worth considering, and it is the position of Congress in the matter. Its members are very highly paid as legislators; they are not only paid a salary but their travelling expenses are covered by the taxpayer and, in addition, money is allotted to them for various other purposes. Indeed, it may be said that a Federal legislator makes a very comfortable income. There is, in addition, the major question of dispensing patronage. Nepotism is general. It would be very difficult to compute the actual value of what a job is worth to a member of Congress. And these are the people who are at war against the "moneyed interests" of the country! These are the people who are accepted as the reformers of abuses! How many of them would be there to carry on the war if they were paid, let us say, on the European basis? No one could say. If they had to pay all their travelling expenses, pay for their secretaries and typists, find no employment for their relatives and friends with the government and, if they were treated, so far as taxation is concerned, as if they were ordinary wage-earners, there would be an entirely different morale and

personnel at Washington. Everybody knows that. But there is no public agitation for such a reform; nobody cares enough to protest publicly, although everybody who has anything to conserve seems to groan under the imposition.

JUSTICE AND TAXATION

There may be an opportunity very soon to re-write a constitution of the country with terms precisely defined. It may be that the day is coming when we shall know what the world liberty really means, and it is possible that if we do get a clear definition of the term liberty, we shall have it clearly understood what is property and what is not property. If the time should come when the term property is clearly defined and understood, it may be possible (depending largely on the character and wisdom of the men who are engaged in the matter) to decide what government should tax in the name of justice, and what it should not tax in the name of justice. Justice is at the bottom of the whole business. Someone else's property is the magnet which seems to attract the personnel of this administration and its cohorts. Suppose it were discovered, when the next great change in the basic laws of government is made, that property is wealth and only wealth—not paper—and that it is stupid to tax what all the people require, even for the purpose of "redistributing" wealth in the interest of the governing party. Suppose then another source of revenue which is not property were discovered, and the value of that source were taken for the expenses of government. The land on which one hundred and thirty millions of people exist must have sufficient value to yield all that is required in taxation for the purposes of a sane government and, so long as that source is there, and is scarcely taxed at all, the land

being grossly undervalued everywhere, it is iniquitous to tax wealth.

At any rate, no matter what happens, this matter of property, what it is and what it is not, is fundamental. It lies like a canker at the basis of all the trouble in the upper world and also in the underworld, and there never will be peace until the problem is solved. Lawlessness, legalized or not, will continue so long as the question is shirked by government. It was the curse of every civilization that has gone; it is the curse of our civilization, and is one of the causes of our decline.