

What is Property?

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Anarchists have a well-earned reputation when it comes to property. Acts of targeted vandalism and sabotage are often used by liberals, politicians and corporate media outfits to paint a picture of anarchism as nothing more than mindless hooliganism. But these small-scale acts of property destruction represent more than just surface-level outbursts of misdirected rage, or a ritualistic rivalry with Starbucks windows. They gesture towards a broader assault on the philosophical and legal underpinnings of the state and capitalism itself.

Early anarchist forebearer Pierre-Joseph Proudhon summed up this tension more than 175 years ago, when he penned the phrase ‘property is theft’. All power structures are rooted in ideology. A shared belief in this ideology is what keeps the structures of power in place. Under capitalism, the edifice of social control is built on the collective illusion of private property, and the sanctity of the so-called ‘free market’. Any moves taken to challenge this logic will therefore provoke pushback from the system’s indoctrinated cheerleaders, and will certainly catch the attention of the repressive and recuperative functions of the state. But as the saying goes... you can’t make an omelette without breaking a few eggs. And you definitely can’t overthrow capitalism without messing with people’s stuff.

So... what is property, anyway? And what do anarchists have against it? Property is a legal concept, used as a means of delineating ownership and control. It’s rules are so ingrained into the fabric of our daily lives that it’s easy to forget that they are fluid, changeable, and that they have assumed many different forms throughout human history. From the stateless Anishinaabe peoples of the Three Fires Confederacy, to the vast state-managed enterprises of the Soviet Union, differences in baseline conceptions of property have fundamentally shaped the specific character of social relationships, the development of culture and the operation of power and authority in their respective societies. In most parts of the world today, national and cultural distinctions exist mainly as localized variations of a single, global capitalist economy. The dominant ideology of this empire is a consumer-fuelled individualism – a worldview that sees a corporate-dominated system of private property as synonymous with freedom of choice... or even liberty itself.

Of course, things haven’t always been this way. Capitalism first emerged in Europe, where the growing wealth and power of rich landowners, merchants and financiers gradually began to unravel and displace the existing system of feudal social relations. Before this, much of the lands and natural resources needed for human survival were considered a commons, meaning that they weren’t actually owned by anyone. Even in the Christian agrarian societies where

capitalism first took root, it was widely understood that the earth and the entire bounty of nature belonged to God, and were merely administered by his representatives on earth, the Church and the monarchy.

The shift to capitalism was made possible through large scale commodification. This process, also known by Marxists as primitive accumulation, essentially amounts to state-sanctioned theft. In a cruel parlour trick, things without monetary value are legally transformed into commodities that can be owned and traded. Yellowknives Dene anti-colonial theorist, Glen Coulthard describes it as “the violent transformation of non-capitalist forms of life into capitalist ones.” The great enclosure began in earnest at the end of the 15th century, as acre upon acre of the British Commons was broken up and commodified into individual parcels of land. This was, incidentally, around the same time that Spanish and Portuguese merchants began their invasion and pillage of the new world. As part of their genocidal colonization of the so-called Americas, European settlers imposed this new system of private land ownership onto Indigenous nations with a very different conception of property – one in which people belonged to the land, not the other way around. The same colonial process of commodification was then applied to fellow human beings. Over the following centuries, European slave traders kidnapped millions of Africans, reduced them to the legal status of chattel property and sold them to the owners of massive agricultural plantations. The massive volume of wealth extracted from this stolen land and labour cemented the power of the emergent capitalist class, and was used as a springboard for subsequent wars of conquest. And with these new waves of Euro-American expansion came the enclosure of new lands, the creation of new markets, and the spread of capitalist social relations all across the globe.

Conceptions of property and ownership have evolved over the years. In its hardwired pursuit of constant growth, capitalism has been forced to constantly adapt, contort and reinvent itself. Technological advances have revolutionized the manufacture and transportation of commodities, while property relations have become muddled through the rise of publicly owned corporations, investment vehicles and financial debt instruments. And the logic of the commodity form has continued to colonize new frontiers, from intellectual property, to genetic blueprints, to information itself. This has resulted in a world where nearly everything imaginable has been transformed into property, and its ownership increasingly concentrated in the hands of a shrinking pool of unimaginably wealthy individuals. This hoarding of resources by a small minority finds its natural reflection in the explosive growth of abject poverty among the world’s majority. In the Global South, oil and mining companies hire paramilitary death squads to displace entire villages, swelling the populations of favelas, shantytowns and mega-slums well beyond their natural limits. Meanwhile, in the so-called ‘developed world’, millions of people are homeless, while ten times that number of homes sit vacant, silently accruing value for real estate speculators and investment trusts owned by the managers of public sector pension funds.

These levels of entrenched inequality are backed up by the massive application of state violence, and the internalized sense of collective helplessness that this violence has produced. But this fatalism has limits, and many see the regime of property for what it is – a social war – and act accordingly. Around the world, anarchists have been at the forefront of urban squatting movements, breaking into empty buildings and transforming them into social centres and collective housing projects. In more rural areas, communities of displaced peasants have occupied private or state-owned lands and defended one another against the threat of eviction, while Indigenous groups have taken up arms, halted development projects, and forced colonizers off their territory.

Anarchists have honed their forgery skills, creating counterfeit government IDs, state currency and travellers cheques for armed resistance movements around the world. While other anarchists, like the Greek comrades of Revolutionary Struggle, have carried out armed expropriations, robbing banks to fund their attacks on the state. Crews of anarchists have bloc'ed up and swarmed grocery stores, liberating enough food to feed their entire block, while others have broken into fenced off lots to build community gardens and autonomous parks. The struggle for anarchism is above all a struggle to replace the alienated and exploitative social relations of capitalism with new relationships based in solidarity and mutual aid. This means de-commodifying our lives, and all of the things that we need to live well. It means seizing back the commons... and everything that they've stolen from us.

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