

Property [Freedom Journal]

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Another comrade contributes the following remarks, treating the same subject.

Communist Anarchism implies a change in the mental attitude of men towards things as well as towards one another, a change which will necessarily bring with it a change of outward conditions. It implies the disappearance of the idea of ownership.

Property as it exists at present is a claim to the absolute ownership of things put forward by an individual of an association and acknowledged by society. Lately we have seen this claim disputed with regard to land. When Lady Matheson says of her estate in the Highlands shall I not do what I will with mine own? there is a general and growing feeling that the claim of any individual to hold land in such a fashion is outrageous. This woman is not using the land. She only demands that we shall all help her to prevent any one else from using it, a claim contrary to common sense, when people are starving for want of what she does not need.

But suppose she were using it? Suppose she were speaking not of an estate but of a potato field, which she and her family were cultivating, suppose her neighbors wanted her potato field to grow cattle fodder, and she in return said, "Shall I not do what I will with my own?" and demanded that we should all stand by her in her claim to this property. Should we?

If we did, if we acknowledged her absolute ownership of that potato field as long, and only as long, as she was actually using it, we should have modified the idea of property. We should have made some attempt to limit the claims of ownership according to the merits and the needs of the proprietor, instead of leaving each to acquire all he can get without illegal violence or fraud. But we should still be individualists advocating rights of property, just as much as the lawyers who contend to-day for a kind lord's absolute right to his estate. We should be advocates of peasant proprietorship of Land, of occupying ownership of houses, and so on.

By so doing we should leave the root of the evil untouched. The hard dividing line of mine and thine would remain. The ownership of things would still stand as a bar between man and man, crushing individuality, alienating social feeling.

"Things are in the saddle,
And ride mankind,"

said Emerson; things and the idea of the individual possession of them, of getting and keeping one's own particular tattle pile of goods. Things sought and held in this spirit get as it were on our backs and weigh us down like an Old Man of the Sea. They ride our energies and affections, our aspirations and hopes. They put a bit in our mouths and a spur in our side and guide our lives,

and the more we get the closer the bondage; until the very rich are almost as much shackled and oppressed by their wealth as the very poor by their poverty. Have we not lately heard that the younger Vanderbilt has gone nearly crazy beneath the burden of his riches? yet the fever of accumulation grows unchecked as long as it is fed by the temptations of private property, and the poor are ground into yet lower depths of misery that the rich may be more and more miserable. But this slavery of men to things is not confined to owners of great possessions. In varying shapes it burdens the life of the peasant proprietor striving and grinding early and late to add to his plot of land, or the thrifty artisan always ready to take bread out of his fellow's mouth by working overtime, so that he may add a few shillings to the little hoard in the savings bank. The subjection of man to the work of his hands is the curse which clings to property, and we look to the destruction of the idea of property, to Communism, for its removal.

Communism is not an arrangement for giving to each person property in what he is using or equal property to all, it is the abolition of the idea of property, of ownership, altogether. Does it seem strange to think of things as ownerless, of the claim of individuals to their use being settled by no abstract rules explained by a lawyer? When you feel inclined to laugh at the idea of masterless things, recollect that not so many hundred years ago, our ancestors would have laughed at the idea of a masterless man. Readers of William Morris's 'John Ball' will remember that one of the first questions the poet hears in dreamland is "Whose man art thou?" And when he indignantly replies "No one's man," the peasant at once says, "Nay, that's not the custom of England," and supposes that he must have come "from heaven down." That is a perfectly true picture of English feeling four or five centuries back, and yet today the idea that every one must necessarily belong some one else, who is personally responsible for him, seems ridiculous.

One day it will seem as ridiculous with regard to things. Why must a potato field be some one's property? Is there no other and more reasonable way of settling who is to work on it?

The daily experience of Russian peasants or Scotch crofters, settles the question with regard to land. Where no abstract rights of property are known or enforced, land is cultivated according to an amicable agreement between those whose needs are concerned. But how about other things, how is the use of them to be apportioned fairly unless we admit ownership? Is my neighbor entitled rudely to interfere between me and the things with which I have some personal relation and which are supplying my needs? Is he entitled without any consideration for my feelings to ride the horse I tend, to take possession of the sewing-machine I am about to use, to retain my favorite pencil in his pocket, to carry off the tea-pot given me by my grandmother, or insist on employing my comb and brush, to say nothing of intruding himself into my room when I prefer solitude?

If there were no way of securing respect from others for one's relations towards things but an acknowledgment of the rights of property, it would be tattle use to talk of abolishing those rights, for such respect is an essential part of human happiness. It is the vague idea that this respect for personal relations with things depends on property, that is the real objection to Communism in the eyes of many people. A very real objection if property and a true human relation to things were one and the same. But are they? To be sure of it we must consider, first, if the acknowledgment of abstract rights of property does secure the true human relation of men to things, and secondly, if it could be secured on no better grounds.

First, then, what constitutes a man's real relation to things? Either he has created them, put his own qualities, his own thought into them, shaped them so that they repeat his personality, or he tends, fosters, develops them so that to him they represent a certain portion of his own

care, affection and energy. And in either case he loves them with some of the same instinctive love which he feels for himself. Thus the author has a sense of personal relation with his book, the mason with the house he helps to build and decorate, the housewife with the clothing she devises and sews, the gardener with the plot of ground he cultivates, the carter or shepherd with the animals he tends.

Again, we each of us have a sense of instinctive attachment to the things which supply our needs in proportion as they satisfy our individual tastes and requirements—as they suit our fancy. In this way we get attached to special tools, special workshops, special houses, special furniture, special clothes, special sorts of food, even special knives and pencils. By using these congenial things we can produce better work with less effort and in general enjoy a fuller satisfaction in our life.

Here, then, are two very real sorts of relation between men and things. Are they of the nature that can be assured and confirmed by any code of rules as to abstract rights of property? We continually see on the contrary that the rights of property interfere between men and the things with which they are most intimately and actually connected. Human beings are being separated every day from their own handiwork, and from the things that can best supply their needs, from land, and machinery, houses, food, and clothes, in the name of rights of property. Does the farmer consider his carter's claim to the horses, or the capitalist the workman's claim to the tools or machinery, or the landlord the peasant's claim to the land or the woman's claim to the house or room or furniture? No, abstract rights of mine and thine ride rough-shod over human feeling and human need and violently divorce men and women from things which are to them a part of themselves, thereby causing a frightful amount of suffering, mental and physical.

Is this necessary? If there were no fixed hard and fast rules of mine and thine to settle the claims of men to the use of things, would this suffering be increased or lessened?

If society acknowledged no such rules, if it were Communistic, the relation of men to things would be determined as relations between persons are in most cases settled already, i. e., each case by free choice and on its own merits. There is, there can be no law to prevent another man from coming between me and my brother, my friend or my sweetheart.* If personal relations clash, we must arrange them according to the circumstances, feelings and needs of the people involved. There are no fixed rules, but on the whole we preserve an attitude of respect for one another's claims. If we did not, society would be impossible and no acknowledgment of abstract legal rights could mend matters.

Now suppose abstract legal rights with regard to things done away with, do not much the same reasons as prevent me from interfering between my neighbor and his friends restrain me also from carrying away his tools, turning him out of his house, driving him from his land, insisting on riding his favorite horse, playing on his violin, using his brush and comb, wearing his coat, or running away with the silver tea pot given him by his grandmother? I do not acknowledge his property in these things, but if I see that he has an actual relationship with any of them, social feeling will instinctively restrain me from violating it. If I am so unsocial a person as to be indifferent to his pain, still I shall remember that I too have no abstract rights of property. As I do unto others so will they probably do unto me and if I forget this, my neighbors will remind me and resent unfair conflict which is a danger to all of them, and a pain to the social feeling of most.

On the other hand, if I unfairly wish to monopolize things, coats, horses, tools, or what not, when other people are going short, and there are no fixed rules behind which I can by ingenious

reasoning shelter myself from the general human obligation to share the fruits of the >common labor, this sort of selfishness will not be easy. If I am imitating the unsocial behavior of the Marchioness instanced by Comrade Kropotkin and keeping a big house all to myself when other people are unhealthily over-crowded, I shall have no argument to meet the claims of the over-crowded people and the protests of my neighbors against my inhumanity. The house is not mine, and other people have an equal claim with myself to be housed when there is house-room. If my necessities, convenience, associations, or taste lead me to prefer certain rooms, decidedly my neighbors would be unsocial to attempt to oust me, but if I try to keep more rooms than I really need, I shall have "rights" on which to take my stand as any excuse. I and my needy neighbors must meet as equals with equal claims and settle the matter by mutual agreement or fight. In our century most of us prefer agreement, in cases where we have no imaginary "rights" to back up our obstinacy. Those who have lived in American communities say that it is curious how quickly the idea of property fades from the mind when it is not kept up by a social convention. How soon one begins instinctively to look on wealth as something to be shared according to needs instead of contended for as an individual right.

This is the changed attitude towards things which is dawning as a desirable possibility upon the consciousness of our age, a change which is at once the motive force of the idea of expropriation and a security against the lasting revival of economic slavery after the expropriation is accomplished.

RICHES.

Since all the riches of this world
May be gifts from the devil and earthly kings,
I should suspect that I worshiped the devil
If I thanked my God for worldly things.
The countless gold of a merry heart,
The rubies and pearls of a loving eye
The idle man never can bring to the malt
Nor the cunning hoard up in his treasury.

WILLIAM BLAKE.

* During the ages of authority continuous efforts were of course made to secure legal rights of property in wives, with such ill success that the attempt has been to a great extent abandoned. This sort of property was always specially insecure inasmuch as it was liable to steal itself.

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