

Pëtr Kropotkin

Expropriation

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I

It is told of Rothschild that, seeing his fortune threatened by the revolution of 1849, he hit upon the following stratagem: — “I am quite willing to admit,” said he, “that my fortune has been accumulated at the expense of others, but if it were divided among the millions of Europe to-morrow the share of each would only amount to five schillings if he asks me for it.”

Having given due publicity to his promise, our millionaire proceeded as usual to stroll quietly through the streets of Frankfort. Three or four passers-by asked for their five schillings, which he disbursed with a sardonic smile. His stratagem succeeded and the family of the millionaire is still in possession of its wealth.

It is in much the same fashion that the shrewd heads among the middle classes reason when they say “Ah, expropriation, I know what that means. You take all of the top coats and lay them in a heap, and every one is free to help himself and fight for the best.”

But such jests are irrelevant as well as flippant. What we want is not a re-distribution of top-coats. Besides it is likely that in such a general scramble the shivering folk would come off any better? Nor do we want to divide up the wealth of the Rothchilds. What we do want is so to arrange things that every human being born into the world shall be ensured the opportunity in the first instance of learning some useful occupation, and of becoming skilled in it; next, that he shall be free to work at his trade without asking leave of master or owner, and without handing over to landlord or capitalists the lion’s share of what he produces. As to the wealth held by the Rothchilds or the Vanderbilts, it will serve us to organize our system of communal production.

The day when the laborer may till the ground without paying away half of what he produces, the day when the machines necessary to prepare the soil for rich harvests are at the free disposal of the cultivators, the day when the worker in the factory produces for the community and not for the monopolist — that day will see the workers clothed and fed; and there will be no more Rothchilds or other exploiters. No one will then have to sell his working power for a wage that only represents a fraction of what he produces.

“So far good,” say our critics, “but you will have Rothchilds coming in from outside. How are you to prevent a person from amassing millions in China and then settling amongst you? How are you going to prevent such an one from surrounding himself with lackeys and wageslaves — from exploiting them and enriching himself at their expense?”

“You cannot bring about a revolution all over the world at the same time. Well then. Are you going to establish Custom Houses on your frontiers, to search

all who enter your country, and confiscate the money they bring with them? — Anarchist policemen firing on travelers would be a fine spectacle!”

But at the root of this argument there is a great error. Those who propound it have never paused to inquire whence come the fortunes of the rich. A little thought would suffice to show them that these fortunes have their beginning in the poverty of the poor. When there are no longer any destitute there will no longer be any rich to exploit them.

Let us glance for a moment at the middle ages, when great fortunes began to spring up.

A feudal baron seizes on a fertile valley. But as long as the fertile valley is empty of folk our baron is not rich. His land brings him in nothing, he might as well possess a property in the moon. Now what does our baron do to enrich himself? He looks out for peasants!

But if every peasant-farmer had a piece of land, free from rent and taxes, if he had in addition the tools and stock necessary for farm labor, who would plough the lands of the baron? Each would look after his own. But there are whole tribes of destitute persons ruined by wars, or drought, or pestilence. They have neither horse nor plough. (Iron was costly in the middle ages, and a draught-horse still more so.)

All these destitute creatures are trying to better their condition. One day they see on the road at the confines of our baron's estate a notice-board indicating by certain signs adapted to their comprehension that the laborer who is willing to settle on this estate will receive the tools and materials to build his cottage and sow his fields, and a portion of land rent free for a certain number of years. The number of years is represented by so many crosses on the sign board, and the peasant understands the meaning of these crosses.

So the poor wretches swarm over the baron's lands, making roads, draining marshes, building villages. In nine years he begins to tax them. Five years later he levies rent. Then he doubles it. The peasant accepts these new conditions because he cannot find better ones elsewhere; and little by little, by the aid of laws made by the oppressors, the poverty of the peasants becomes the source of the landlord's wealth. And it is not only the Lord of the Manor who preys upon him. A whole host of usurers swoop down upon the villages, increasing as the wretchedness of the peasants increases. That is how things went in the Middle Ages; and today is still not the same thing? If there were free lands which the peasant could cultivate if he pleased, would he pay 50 to some "Shabble of a Duke" for condescending to sell him a scrap? Would he burden himself with a lease which absorbed a third of the produce? Would he — on the metayer system — consent to give the half of his harvest to the landowner?

But he has nothing. So he will accept any conditions, if only he can keep body and soul together, while he tills the soil and enriches the landlord.

So in the nineteenth century, just as in the Middle Ages, the poverty of the peasant is a source of wealth to the landed proprietor.

II

The landlord owes his riches to the poverty of the peasants, and the wealth of the capitalists comes from the same source.

Take the case of a citizen of the middle class who, somehow or other, finds himself in possession of 20,000. He could, of course, spend his money at rate of 2,000 a year, a mere bagatelle in these days of fantastic, senseless luxury. But then he would have nothing left at the end of ten years. So, being a “practical person,” he prefers to keep his fortune intact, and win for himself a snug little annual income as well.

That is very easy in our society, for the good reason that the towns and villages swarm with workers who have not the wherewithal to live for a month, or even a fortnight. So our worthy citizen starts a factory: the banks hasten to lend him another 20,000, especially if he has a reputation for “business ability”; and with this round sum he can command the labor of five hundred hands.

If all the men and women in the country side had their daily bread sure and their daily needs already satisfied, who would work for our capitalists, or be willing to manufacture for him, at a wage of half-a-crown a day, commodities selling in the market for a crown or even more?

Unhappily — we know it all too well — the poor quarters of our towns and the neighboring villages are full of needy wretches, whose children clamour for bread. So, before the factory is well finished, the workers hasten to offer themselves. Where a hundred required a thousand besiege the doors, and from the time his mill started the owner, if he is not more than commonly stupid, will clear 40 a year out of each mill hand he employs.

He is thus able to lay by a snug little fortune, and if he chooses a lucrative trade, and if he has “business talents,” he will increase his income by doubling the number of the men he exploits.

So he becomes a personage of importance. He can afford to give dinners to other personages, to the local magnates, the civic, legal, and political dignitaries. With his money he can “marry money,” by-and-by he may pick and choose places for his children, and later on perhaps get something good from the government — a contract for the army or for the police. His gold breeds gold; till at last a war, or

even a rumor of war, or a speculation on the Stock Exchange, gives him his great opportunity.

Nine-tenths of the huge fortunes made in the United States are (as Henry George has shown in his "Social Problems") the result of knavery on a large scale, assisted by the state. In Europe nine-tenths of the fortunes made in our monarchies and republics have the same origin. There are not two ways of becoming a millionaire.

This is the secret of wealth ; find the starving and destitute, pay them half a crown, and make them produce ten schillings worth in the day, amass a fortune by the means, and then increase it by some lucky hit, made with help of the State.

Need we go on to speak of small fortunes attributed by the economists to forethought and frugality, when we know that mere saving in itself brings in nothing, so long as the pence saved are not used to exploit the famishing?

Take a shoemaker, for instance. Grant that his work is well paid, that he has plenty of custom, and that by dint of strict frugality he contrives to lay by from eighteen pence to 2 schillings a day, perhaps a month.

Grant that our shoemaker is never ill, that he does not half starve himself, in spite of his passion for economy; that he does not marry or that he has no children; that he does not die of consumption; suppose anything and everything you please!

Well, at the age of fifty he will not have scraped together 800; and he will not have enough to live on during his old age, when he is past work. Assuredly this is not how great fortunes are made. But suppose our shoemaker, as soon as he laid by a few pence, thriftily conveys them to the savings-bank, and that the savings bank lends them to capitalists who is just about to "employ labor" — i.e., to exploit the poor. Then our shoemaker takes an apprentice, the child of some poor wretch who will think himself lucky if in five years time his son has learned the trade and is able to earn a living.

Meanwhile our shoemaker does not lose by him; and if trade is brisk he soon takes a second, and then a third apprentice. By-and-by he will take two or three journeymen-poor wretches, thankful to receive a half-a-crown a day for work that is worth five schillings, and if our shoemaker is "in luck," that is to say, if he is keen enough and mean enough, his journeymen and apprentices will bring him in nearly 1 a day, over and above the product of his own toil. He can then enlarge his business. He will gradually become rich, and no longer have any need to stint himself in the necessaries of life. He will leave a snug little fortune to his son.

That is what people call "being economical and having frugal, temperate habits." At bottom it is nothing more nor less than grinding the face of the poor.

Commerce seems an exception to this rule. "Such a man," we are told, "buys tea in China, brings it to France and realizes a profit of thirty per cent. On his original outlay. He has exploited nobody.

Nevertheless, the case is analogous. If our merchant had carried his bales on his back, well and good! In early medieval times, that was exactly how foreign trade was conducted, and so no one reached such giddy heights of fortune as in our days. Very few, and very hardly earned, were the gold coins which the medieval merchant gained from a long and dangerous voyage. It was less the love of money than the thirst of travel and adventure that inspired his undertakings.

Now-a-days the method is simpler. A merchant who has some capital need not stir from his desk to become wealthy. He telegraphs to an agent telling him to buy a hundred tons of tea, he freights a ship, the vessel brings him his cargo. He does not even take the risks of the voyage, for his tea and his vessel are insured, and if he has expended four thousand pounds he will receive more than five thousand: that is to say, if he has not attempted to speculate in some novel commodities, in which case he runs a chance of either doubling his fortune or losing it altogether.

Now, how could he find men willing to cross the sea, to travel to China and back, to endure hardship and slavish toil and to risk their lives for a miserable pittance? How could he find dock laborers willing to load and unload his ships for "starvation wages?" How? Because they are needy and starving. Go to the sea — ports, visit — the cook shops and taverns on the quays, and look at these men who have come to hire themselves crowding round the dock gates, which they besiege from early dawn, hoping to be allowed to work on the vessels. Look at these sailors, happy to be hired for a long voyage, after weeks and months of waiting. All their lives long they have gone down to the sea in ships, and they sail in others still, until the day when they perish in the waves.

Enter the cabins, look at their wives and children in rags, living one knows not how till the fathers return, and you will have the answer to that question. Multiply examples, choose them where you will consider the origin of all fortunes, large or small, whether rising out of commerce, finance, manufacturers, or the land. Everywhere you will find that the health of the wealthy springs from the poverty of the poor. An Anarchist society need not fear the advent of an unknown Rothschild who would seek to settle in its midst. If every member of the community knows that after a few hours of productive toil he will have a right to all the pleasures that civilization procures, and to those deeper sources of enjoyment which art science offer to all who seek them, he will not sell his strength for a starvation wage. No one will volunteer to work for the enrichment of your Rothschild. His golden guineas will be only so many pieces of metal — useful for various purposes, but incapable of breeding more.

In answering the above objection we have at the sometime indicated the scope of Expropriation. It must extend to all that permits any one, no matter whom financier, mill-owner, or landlord, to appropriate the product of others' toil. Our formula is simple and comprehensive.

We do not want to rob any one of his coat, but we wish to give to the workers all those things that lack of which makes them fall an easy prey to the exploiter, and we will do our utmost that none shall lack aught, that not a single man shall be forced to sell the strength of his right arm to obtain a bare subsistence for himself and his babes. That is what we mean when we talk of expropriation; that will be our duty during the revolution, for whose coming we look, not two hundred years hence, but soon, very soon.

III

The ideas of Anarchism in general and of Expropriation in particular find much more sympathy than when we apt to imagine among men of independent character, and those for whom idleness is not the supreme ideal. "Still," our friends often warn us, "take care you do not go too far! Humanity can not be changed in a day, so do not be too great a hurry with your schemes of Expropriation on too small a scale to be lasting. We found not have the revolutionary impulse arrested in mid-career, to exhaust itself in half measures, which would content no-one, and which while producing a tremendous upheaval of society, and stopping its customary activities, would have no power of life in themselves, and would merely spread general discontent and inevitably prepare the way for triumph of reaction.

There are, in fact, in a modern state established relations which it is practically impossible to modify if one attacks them only in detail. There are wheels within wheels in our economic organization — the machinery is so complex and interdependent that no one part can be modified without disturbing the whole. This will become clear as soon as an attempt is made to expropriate anything.

Let us suppose that in a certain country a limited form of Expropriation is effected; for example, that, as recently suggested by Henry George, only the property of the great landlords is confiscated, whilst the factories are left untouched; or that, in a certain city, house property is taken over by the commune, but merchandise is left in private ownership; or that, in some manufacturing centre, the factories are communalized, but the land is not interfered with.

The same result would follow in each case — a terrible shattering of the industrial system, without the means of reorganizing it on new lines. Industry and commerce would be at a dead-lock, yet a return, to the first principles of

justice would not have been achieved, and society would find itself powerless to construct a harmonious whole.

If agriculture could free itself from great landowners, while industry still remained the bond slave of the capitalists, the merchant and the banker, nothing would be accomplished. The farmer suffers to-day not only in having to pay rent to the landlord; he is oppressed on all hands by existing conditions. He is exploited by the tradesman, who makes him pay half-a-crown for a spade which, measured by labor spent on it, is not worth more than sixpence. He is taxed by the state, which cannot do without its formidable hierarchy of officials, and finds it necessary to maintain an expensive army, because the traders of all nations are perpetually fighting for markets, and any day a little quarrel arising from the exploitation of some part of Asia or Africa may result in war.

Then again farmer and laborer suffer from the depopulation of country places: the young people are attracted to the large factory towns by the bait of high wages paid temporarily by the manufactures of articles of luxury, or by the attractions of a more stirring life. The artificial protection of industry, the industrial exploitation of foreign countries, the prevalence of stock-jobbing, the difficulty of improving the soil and the machinery of production — all these are causes which work together against agriculture, which indeed is burdened not only by rent, but by the whole complexity of conditions developed in a society based on exploitation. Thus, even if the expropriation of land were accomplished, and without paying rent, agriculture, even though it should enjoy — which can by no means be taken for granted — a momentary prosperity, would soon fall back into the slough in which it finds itself to-day. The whole thing would have to begun over and over again, with increased difficulties.

The same holds true of industry. Take the converse case; make over the factories to those who work in them, but leave the agricultural laborers slaves to farmer and landlord. Abolish the master-manufacturers, but leave the land owner his land, the banker his money, the merchant his Exchange, maintain still the warm idlers who live on the toil of the workmen, the thousand and one middlemen, the State with its numberless officials, and industry would come to a stand-still. Finding no purchasers in the mass of country people still as poor as ever, having no raw material, unable to export products, and embarrassed by the stoppage of trade, industry could only struggle on feebly, and thousands of workers would be thrown upon the streets. These starving crowds would be ready and willing to submit to the first schemer who came to exploit them, they would even consent to return to the old slavery, if only under promise would work.

Or, finally, suppose you oust the land-owners, and hand over the mills and factories to the worker, without interfering with the swarm of middlemen who drain off the produce of our manufacturers and speculate in corn and flour, meat

and groceries in our great centres of commerce. Well, when exchange is arrested and products cease to circulate, when London is without bread, and Yorkshire finds no buyers for her cloth, a terrible counter-revolution trampling upon heaps of slain, sweeping the towns and villages with shot and shell; there will be proscriptions, panic, flight, perhaps all the towers of wholesale judicial massacre of the Guillotine, as in France in 1815, 1848, and 1871.

All is interdependent in a civilized society; it is impossible to reform any one thing without altering the whole. On that day when we strike at private property, under any one of its forms, territorial or industrial, we shall be obliged to attack all its manifestations. The very success of the Revolution will demand it.

Besides we could not if we would confine ourselves to a partial expropriation. Once the principle of the "Divine Right of Property" is shaken, no amount of theorizing will prevent its overthrow, here by the slaves of the soil, there by the slaves of the machine.

If a great town, Paris for example, were to confine itself to taken possession of the houses or the factories, it would still be forced to deny the right of the bankers to levy upon the Commune a tax amounting to 2,000,000, in the form of interest for former loans. The great city would be obliged to put itself in touch with the rural districts, and its influence would inevitably urge the peasants to free themselves from the landowner. It would be necessary to communalise the railways that the citizens might get food and work, and lastly, to prevent the waste of supplies, and to guard against the chicanery of corn-speculators, like those to whom the commune of 1793 fell a prey; it would place in the hands of the citizens the work of their stocking their warehouses with their commodities, and apportioning the produce.

Nevertheless, some Socialists still seek to establish a distinction. "Of course," they say, "the soil, the mines, the mills and manufacturers must be expropriated; these are the instruments of production, and it is right we should consider them public property. But articles of consumption, food, clothes and dwellings, should remain private property."

Popular common-sense has got the better of this subtle distinction. We are not savages who can live in the woods, without other shelter than the branches. The civilized man needs a roof tree and a hearth, a bed-chamber and a bed. It is true that the bed, the room and the house of the non-producer are only part of the paraphernalia of idleness. But for the worker a room, properly heated and lighted, is as much an instrument of production as the tool or the machine. It is the place where the nerves and sinews gather strength for the work of the morrow. The rest of the workman is the daily repairing of the machine.

The same argument applies even more obviously to food. The so-called economists of whom we speak would hardly deny that the coal burnt in a machine could do no work, be excluded from the list of things indispensable to the producer? Such hair-splitting is worthy of the metaphysic of the schoolmen. The rich man's feast is indeed a matter of luxury, but the food of the worker is just as much a part of production as the fuel burnt by the steam engine.

The same with clothing: if the economists who draw this distinction between articles of production and of consumption dressed themselves in fashion of New Guinea we could understand their objection. But men who could not write a word without a shirt on their back are not in a position to draw such a hard and fast line between their shirt and their pen. And though the Dainty gowns of their dames must certainly rank as objects of luxury, there is nevertheless a certain quantity of linen, cotton and woolen stuff which is a necessity of life to the producer. The shirt and shoes in which he goes off to work, his cap and the jacket he slips on after the day's toil is over, these are as necessary to him as the hammer to the anvil.

Whether we like it or not, that is what the people mean by a revolution. As soon as they have made a clean sweep of the Government, they will seek first of all to insure to themselves descent dwellings and sufficient food and clothes — free of rent and taxes.

And the people will be right. The methods of the people will be much more in accordance with science than those of the economists who draw so many distinctions between instruments of production and articles of consumption. The people understand that this is just the point where the Revolution ought to begin; and they will lay the foundations of the only economic science worthy the name — a science which might be called: "The Study of the Needs of Humanity, and of the Economic Means to satisfy them."

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Footnotes are missing
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