

To the Anti-Collectivists

aka The Legitimacy of the Socialization of Property

César de Paepe

1868

The Report presented by de Paepe to the Congress of Brussels and of Basel on collective property, that we have published in our last number raised some objections of Proudhonian inspiration that saw the light in Victor Arnould's *Liberté*. De Paepe responded triumphantly in *l'Internationale*. We give here the two most characteristic replies of the collectivist writer. "Aux anti-collectivistes" and "Réponse d'un collectiviste à un mutuelliste," appeared in *l'Internationale* of October 10 and November 14, 1869.

Thanks to a dialectics put in the service of a method more often metaphysical than scientific (which it is necessary to avoid confusing with the historical and objective method of Karl Marx), Proudhon has discovered in the social world some laws that observation confirms more from day to day; it is, however, incontestable that hypothesis still plays an infinitely more considerable role in the works of that thinker and that often he has concluded *a priori* or from insufficient observations: witness the conclusions of his last works relative to the social role of strikes and trades-unions, and those relative to the tendencies of modern production towards association and thus towards the collective appropriation of land and the large instruments of labor, two phenomena of which Proudhon has misunderstood the immense scope from the point of view of the organization of the future, and that he condemned even in the name of reason and logic, while Marx, already well before 1848, in the name of observation and history, considers them the two principal elements of the solution of the social problem. The majority of the writers of *Liberté* have made the defects of Proudhon their own by sacrificing, so to speak absolutely, his scientific side.

The article of *Liberté* of September 26, titled *Conclusion*, is a striking example of these "conclusions [that are] *a priori* or based on insufficient observations." *Liberté* has been informed, by us, as well as by *l'Egalité* of Geneva, that the account of the Congress of Basel that it published from the *Réveil*, contained many errors, and that in particular the arguments of the collectivists were presented in a more or less false light; its observation of what is called the "Basel Congress" can thus only be insufficient, since it ignores in large part the reasons which have pushed the majority of the Congress to vote in favor of collective property. Well, despite that insufficiency of

observations, *Liberté* nonetheless presents its “conclusion” which thus can only be a conclusion *a priori*. That “conclusion” is a work of high fantasy, where shines a disdain for the observation of reality, which is equaled only by the puerile pretention of imposing on humanity purely subjective laws, such as the antinomic laws of Capital and Property, born in the brain of their author and destined to never extend their real existence outside of that small, fantastic and imaginary world.

All the reasoning of the anti-collectivists has for point of departure a hypothesis! The very social necessities which have formerly demanded the constitution of individual property, still demand and will doubtless always demand the support of individual property. That support is fatal; the force of things demands it; divisions or successions parcel out the soil, it is true; but the drawbacks of parceling will not lead to association, to the putting-in-common of the parcels, etc.; that is to say: the soil tends to be divided more and more, and we conclude from it that there may be a natural limit to this division. Why do you conclude that? By what right, on what basis, do you claim that individual property in land is alone practical? Do you know another means of remedying the division, to the parceling out of the soil, but the reunification of the parcels, whether that reunification is made for the profit of a single proprietor who makes the other proprietors of parcels his waged workers (a system that we all recognize as contrary to the aspirations of our era), or for the profit of several by means of co-proprietorship, that is a sort of collective property, however large or narrow this co-property may be? Is there in agriculture itself, that is to say, independent of the effects produced in France and in some adjacent countries by the sale of national properties and the law regarding successions,—two political, extra-economic facts.—Is there in agricultural industry the least tendency to purely individual labor? Is that this industry like the others, does not demand the application of the collective force, the division of functions, the use of machines, production on a grand scale and with unity? Are not the harvest, haymaking, and grape-picking the types *par excellence* of collective labor?

You want the contrary, and that is why, taking your wish for a positive tendency of society, you misread the facts, and believe that the *natural evolution* is diametrically opposed to what it is in reality; and that idea well-fixed in your brain, that the natural evolution conforms to your desires, you go so far as to reject *revolution* which is the thoughtful and intelligent intervention of men to hasten the dénouement of a natural evolution, even, if need be, putting force in the service of the new ideas and not, as you describe it, the violent intervention of a higher and foreign will in society.

And you call yourself revolutionaries! Alas! Your maxims and your method are borrowed from the code of the bourgeois economists, who have also not wanted the intervention of men in the blind play of economic laws, and laugh at the spontaneous and collective efforts of the workers to hasten the period of necessary modifications; *laissez faire, laissez passer*.

You think that Society has the right to maintain individual property of the soil and to oppose itself to its return to collective property.

In the name of what society do you speak? And if it has the right to do it, does it have the power? If at a given moment it can intervene in a revolutionary manner to regulate its own affairs and make all at once a great step forward towards its natural destinies, can it overturn the natural order of things? Society has only one right, which is to conform to its own laws, to the laws of its historic development; to hasten or slow the natural tendencies that follow the facts, by modifying in one sense or another certain institutions, such is the power of the body of individuals who make up society at a given moment, a power in which each participates to

a certain degree according to their greater or lesser influence on their contemporaries. When the anti-collectivist Proudhonians have proved to us that their individual property without rent either to the profit of individuals, or to the profit of society as a whole, that their leveling of the land-rent, is an observable phenomenon; when they have studied and classified the relations of that force that we have thus far encountered among the proprietary phenomena; when they have classified and generalized these relations in order to draw some laws from them, we will bow before these laws, unless we can neutralize them by contrary laws; until then we are right to say that the rent is a natural fact resulting from the unequal fertility of the soil, an inequality that one can, certainly, diminish by means of certain agronomical procedures, irrigation, rotations, enrichments, etc., but that one can never *level* because they result from forces placed beyond the power of man, such as the exposure of a plot of land to the south or north, the vicinity of mountains, waters, forests, etc.; until then we will be right to say that their system is only an abstraction and that they are themselves only abstractors of quintessence.

It is otherwise with collective property, that is an observable phenomenon. Mr. Bakunin has cited the example of the Russian commune, and Mr. Cowel-Stepney a tribe of Indians. Certainly, the Russian commune is not observable in France, Belgium, Italy or England; nor are we Indians, and we do not live in the United States. But what does that prove? If collective property is not an observable fact among us today, does that demonstrate that it does not conform to the most imperious social necessities, those most generally felt, and that consequently it will not be observable tomorrow. — In England, is there the least tendency towards our system of small farmer-proprietors; is there not actually, in fact, a tendency to the greatest concentration of property in land between an always more restricted number of landlords; and doesn't that very present tendency already produce today a contrary tendency in minds that demand the return of the soil to collective property, a demand which tomorrow some minds will transform into deeds, because it alone conforms to the social necessities that, on the one hand, want large-scale agricultural production and, on the other, demand equality between men. It is certain that the English people, on the day when they have worn out the system of large individual property, can only choose between collective property with large-scale agricultural production, or small-scale property with small-scale production, and that this last alternative is hardly probable in a country where they are accustomed to all the advantages of large-scale agriculture. And if in Belgium and France, the division still continues in many places, don't we already see certain facts that indicate that the period of division nears its end and that those of association and collectivism will commence? These facts are, on one hand, cooperative association, the pooling of the parcels recognized as useful by the élite among our cultivators, and on the other the application of the public company to agricultural industry. For the first case, let us cite this passage from the January 17, 1869 issue of the *Journal de la Société agricole du Brabant* the editors of which are certainly not complicit with the laborers of the Basel Congress!

“The possible situation of the agricultural populations has awakened the concern of the governments and the economists in recent years. But the remedies that they have proposed, if they tend to attenuate the evils, cannot always make them disappear entirely. It is in freely formed association that must be found the most effective means of combating the drawbacks that we have highlighted. The association would aim to *pool capital as well as land*, which by their situation are particularly suitable to make up a single operation. Then it could carry out a division of labors that would be set out again between the different chiefs of the operation, in conformity with the special aptitudes of each of them.

“Let us arrange ourselves; and since it is impossible to make a suitable division of the lands that we use, the good lands being found on your side, the poor ones on mine, let us work them all in common. In this way we will avoid competition, we could distribute the rotation in a manner to gather in a single bloc all the homogenous crops. It would be possible for us to employ those machines of recent invention nouvelle that function with so much speed and economy; the transportation of fertilized and return of the harvest would be must easier; and we would no longer be forced to race constantly from one parcel to another, from one under of the commune to the opposite extremity.”

For the second case, we will content ourselves with citing the public companies of the vineyards in France, and notably the one that spent 12 million on small properties in the Gironde and transformed them into one great rural operation (see the *Rive Gauche* for June 3, 1866).

Just as in manufacturing industry we see the small boss or artisan who labors alone and directly for their clientele, give way to cooperative associations of laborers or associations of capitalists, public or joint-stock companies, we can expect to see the small farming boss and the small proprietor, cultivating their own land, give way to the cooperative association of the rural laborers of to the public agricultural company. That is to say that here again, although by other means that in England, the new tendencies that we can already see here and there push towards a system of collective property and agriculture, rather than the system of the individual *possessing proprietor*, dreamed of by *Liberté*. Certainly, these forms of collectives property are not those of the collectivism of the Basel Congress, — the earth belonging to the whole of humanity — but they can be an movement towards the collective appropriation of the soil by society, while certainly they are not an movement towards individual property. All this only proves that, although everywhere the earth must be the collective property of society, the solution does not seem as simple to the collectivists as one might say, and that the means of transition between that collective property and present property seem to them to differ necessarily according to the particular constitution of property in land in the different regions.

Whatever the case, a little earlier or a little later, depending on the country, the phenomena of agricultural industry and property in land unfold before our eyes according to the same law as those of manufacturing industry and capital, and form with those two series of analogous, if not completely identical facts. That analogy is one of extreme importance, and *Liberté* has not even glimpsed it; if it had done so, perhaps it would not have so light, with the stroke of a pen, *abolished an economic phenomenon*.

First series of phenomena. The profits collected by capital in the form of dividends, interest, profits, bribes, etc. increase more and more; labor’s portion decreases, for if the nominal wage has increase for certain workers, the real wage has diminished. Capital tends to centralize, manufacturing work to become collective.

Second series of phenomena. The revenue of the agricultural proprietor increases; the wage of the agricultural workers decreases, although their nominal wage has generally increased. Agricultural property, which tends to centralize in certain countries, also tends to parcel out in others; but even in these latter countries a new tendency begins to show itself beside the other: agricultural property, in order to meet new needs, will centralize, and agricultural labor, by the use of machines, the division of functions, the application of the theory of crop rotation, tends to become collective in all its parts, labor, sowing, reaping, hoeing, clearing, etc., as it has always been, more or less, in some of its essential parts, harvest, haymaking, etc.

Thus, we are in presence of two orders of facts which may seem contradictory at first, but which, after a little deeper analysis, appear to follow the same course.

We do not claim to have resolved here, in a few lines, the problem of the collectivity of the soil; we have simply shown:

1. That the observation of actual facts, of present tendencies, as well as the observation of social necessities that these facts create, alone can lead to solutions.
2. That contrary to the opinions of *Liberté*, agricultural property, like all capital (machines, workshops, factories, mines, teamsters, etc.) tends to become collective.
3. That a rational comparison of laws, contradictory in appearance, but analogous at base, such as the laws of agricultural property and capital, is often enough to lead to the solution of social problems.
4. That not only is the system of individual property without rent, by the equalization of land, an impossible solution, but that, if it was possible, it would not be not a plausible solution.

The inequality of the land-rent of the individuals brought to the same level by the attribution of all the rent to the social collectivity, the application of scientific processes to agriculture, the transformation of the landlord and tenant, agricultural employers, cowhands, and all the small proprietors—the transformation of everyone into co-proprietors of the soil and into co-workers accomplished, the mutualists can reassure themselves, man will no longer be exploited by man, no more by the individual than by the human collectivity, given that society will deduct nothing from the labor of the farmers, but will be content to use the soil in conformity with the general interests and to allocate the rent, which is not the fruit of the individual labor of the cultivators, but rather the combined result of the forces of nature and of society.

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