# On Property

**(Views and Comments)**

Dora Marsden

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On property. The mischief in all the debates which turn on property is that unconsciously the debaters are infected by the clerical habit of labelling as to quality. They are so put about to decide whether property is good or one or bad for one that they forget that their first concern is with what property is. The subject is by this means landed in the thorny region of attitudes, oughts, and duties where the controversy born of ungranted assumptions takes the place of the unrestrained tale readily told. Out of the great clamour which in modern times has raged about property two themes only can be picked out: one, that property is "bad" for a man, therefore must men be influenced to acquiesce in the placing of their property in Mortmain: in the Dead Hand which cannot be harmed by, or do harm to, it—the corporation, the commune, the state, the guild; and two, a fainter-sounding but more tenacious one that it is "good" and that therefore the "influence" must be exercised to find out ways and means whereby once got, property may remain attached to its possessors.

Now both these lines of theory become obviously futile if one starts from the point of what property *is*. Property, as its name sufficiently indicates, is what is one's own. What makes a thing into property is the fact that a person owns it. Apart from this power of the owner to work his will upon objects, "property" is not property: it is mere substance—part of the objective world, whatever we will to name it. The tight little problem with which a modern tendency of thinking is faced is, how at one and the same time to retain and abolish property, how to make commodities one's own and yet not one's own. When this has been solved, "collective" ownership will begin to show livelier signs of being acceptable to blunt sense, but until then, "collective" ownership will remain what it at present is, and always has been, the cover under which after winning a more or less grudging "consent," the few who are sufficiently powerful to mount to "control" will own the various properties which nominally are the possessions of the collective group. That is, the few will as long as they remain in power, work their will on the "organisation"—the Dead Hand, and aforetime property, after having been transmuted into "substance," will again become property: the properly of the controllers.

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Property is "one's own," and driven from one owner it finds another as inevitably as water seeks its level. And an owner is a master—one who does with what he possesses according to

his own nature, Accordingly when a group vests its "property" in a Dead Hand, the Dead Hand of necessity must elect living agents: the property finds its owners in the agents. It is inevitable. Should the official be one who cannot "own" on an extended scale he at once appears the "nithing," the "weak man" in the system. The "group" detest him in a sense and a degree very far different from that in which they fear a tyrant, for he reflects their folly back upon them, degree very far different from that in which they fear a tyrant, for he reflects their folly back upon them, The "group" appreciate even if they could not explain the difference between being governed by a Napoleon and a Praise-God Bare-bones: even between a Sir Edward Carson and a Labour M.P.

The reason is that what one can own, i.e. control, gives a measure of what one is: and the instinctive knowledge which the masses have, all phrases to the contrary notwithstanding, that the official in control is the owner is revealed by the fact that they reckon such a one, being elected to the position and not acting as owner merely proves himself to be incapable. They realise that they have not merely divested themselves of their own powers to own, but have perpetrated the foolishness in the interest of one too feeble to profit by it.

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The misunderstandings which are rife in relation to the holding of property are due to the fact that we endeavour to limit the area over which it extends. We own not only land and money (supposing we do): our "property" extends to the limits exactly of what we are: the nucleus of our property is what we are born with: instincts, family, grace, beauty, manner, brains, and the original dower of power which we have which puts them into evidence. These, are, in a more absolute sense than material possessions—our property. In relation to what these are, the toll we can levy of such material possessions as we desire will be. Human calculations are likeliest to work out aright if we regard our "property," that is, our "own," rather as a native endowment, than as something which can be post-natally conferred, as for instance, our kind of education; if we regard it as fundamental, a hazard of which the die is cast at birth: like our breathing apparatus rather than a muffler or artificial respirator. In fact, the analogy between the power to acquire property and the power to breathe might be usefully extended. Both are native endowments; both are necessary to continued existence; both are powers which can be adequately exercised only on one's own initiative; both require for their exercise access to a medium external to the body through which they exercise; both require their needs to be measured by their wants: both invalidate the entire person by any failure to work effectually, both have a minimum of specific requirements which they draw from the environment in which they are placed; and these failing in either case, only an advanced stage of inanition explains the failure of fight to the last degree of savagery in order to enable them to augment their powers to the necessary degree. That one acquires food and clothing for its first satisfaction while the other acquires fresh air makes no real sort of difference to the parallel. The ones are as essential as the other and their acquisition to be considered as much a matter of course.

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It will of course be maintained that the power to acquire property and the actual coming by it are two very different things; it is because they are regarded as so different that those debaters who uphold the "theme" that property is "good" are so concerned with the ways and means of

keeping property "stable"; ready to go to any length towards the creation of an authority which will guarantee that men shall remain secure in their property. Yet after all their efforts the nature of property defeats them: it remains fluid. It gathers as a refulgence about the individual powers, grows dense and dissipates exactly according to the force of the individual will about which it settles. The authority which was to keep it fluid, itself becomes the property of those who choose to exploit it. All properties are as fluid to the acquiring as air is: they know only one authority: the will which can command them; and the means which *can* command them can be as readily sought and found in the individual will, as can the force which primarily conceives them as desirable. There are no firm and fixed methods: there are merely convenient ones. Whatever method serves best to the getting and holding is best. The line of least resistance to actual possession is the line for successful competition. Phrases—"morality," "legality"—from the point of vision of the person on the make are negligible quantities: they come into the reckoning only as possible factors with resisters one might encounter on the way. They belong to the kind of forces which, while not respected, are recognised: they enter into the calculation in the account of resistance to be met, but not in the account of the force which is to meet it. Moral and legal forces are part of the machinery whereby those who think property "good" try to make us "respect" our neighbour's property: whereas the fit and feasible thing is for each of us to respect our own. The respect due to our neighbour's property is the affair of our neighbour. Minding each other's business—and property—is a dull laborious and irritating affair. Minding our own is our native interest; the proper affair of a swagger person. For the possession of property is nothing more than the expression of our personality and will, the material with which we are able to do as we please. The seeking to acquire it is the endeavour to get a free scope for the exercising of our own power: it is the avenue to self-expression and self-satisfaction. Those who do not force open such an avenue to some extent, are those who have nothing to express. A deterring "respect" that the avenue is other people's property is a smug excuse provided for those who cannot attend to their own proper concerns. It does not hold with stronger powers, nor does human admiration go out to it. It goes to the "strong" men: whether it is the exploiter who sets out to buy human stuff—body and soul—to express his will upon—like Mr. Ford; or any "tyrant" who will sacrifice his fellows life and limb—to please himself. They like it. When men gather up all their scattered conceptions of what is admirable and create God, they create him in their image and give him the world to play with. The world is his: we and all that therein is. He makes his will through the world and us: anything less would be a derogation of his dignity and power. It is not an accident that men have conceived "god" under such an image: he is the embodiment of the strong will which they fundamentally admire. That the image entails their being hustled somewhat is matter for grim satisfaction. There is a real pride in being treated sans cérémonie.

If it is felt occasionally that God goes too far, he does not lack apologists. "May not God do what He likes with His own?" Of course God has the advantage over earthly strong men of being very remote and is thus saved from administering those aggravating personal pushes for which well-beloved earthly tyrants usually pay with their necks: though even a Job ultimately cursed him, in spite of his good opinion of him. In short he ceased to respect him though he continued to like him: and that is precisely what happens with the strong-willed here: the great of the earth—those who work their own will in the world—are admired and liked but, of necessity, tripped up, kept as much as possible on a leash; as for the small, the feeble-willed who respect their neighbour's possessions—they are neither liked nor respected; they are trodden upon: then actively disliked because they appear so messy and disfigured.

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If then the person who respects only his own property, placing on his neighbour the onus of respecting his, is the one who instinctively is appreciated as the worthier person, it remains to consider why the apparent practical forcing into effect of such instinctive impulses is spoken of with disfavour: why, in short, the seizing of property is regarded with abhorrence. It is mainly accountable to the uncalculated effects of the efforts of those who seek to make property stable, by guaranteeing a man's "security" in his possessions. What actually happens is that property follows its natural trend in the wake of the strong will. The net which the invoked "authority" lays manages only to ensnare those too feeble to break through it. It is like a spider's net which will catch flies but through which a man': boot rips without recognising its presence. In effect the pains and penalties which the state attaches to attacks on property turn out to be handicaps attached to the slowest runners. Prison is the potential home of the poor: the crust and ha'penny stealers. The big thieves regard prison as outworks of their various enterprises: the houses of correction which a kindly state for some unaccountable reason supplies them with gratuitously. It is not strange that the strong and rich believe in the state and the penalties it imposes: because these things suit them; there is no need for them to be hypocritical: they believe with all their heart and soul that the poor should not steal: it would be quite awkward if they began to: like two people both trying to get through a stile at the same time. So to encourage them they will, unless it happens to be seriously inconvenient at the moment, observe the demeanour of one who does not commit petty thefts: in fact they would honestly be ashamed to. Let Justice be done and preserve the Law-Courts!

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The really queer and odd factor concerned in the morals clustered about "theft" is that the propertyless take so readily to them. The praiseworthy efforts of the rich in maintaining the "tale as it is told," are based on common sense and are comprehensible, but the acquiescence of the "poor" is only explained by failure in intelligence. Not only do their instincts fail to prompt them to the adequate assertion of their will to acquire: they are not strong enough to resist the laying-on of such an interpretation of their situation as makes a bad case hopeless. They permit themselves to be bamboozled into the belief that the piping voice of the magistrate saying to the poor, "He that takes what isn't his'n, When he's cotched'll go to pris'n," is the thundering voice of the Lord saying from everlasting to everlasting "Thou shalt not steal." What really means nothing more than "Mind your manners," gets mixed up with odd queer things like Universal Law, Religion, Space and Everlasting Time, into which mixture the figure of the policeman and hangman appear as the agents of an Eternal Justice which deflects them—mere specks—into time.

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Not all the "poor" however are thus pathetically and bemusedly silly. They are not all putty made for the moulder's hand, ready to be shaped by the "statesmanship" of the perfect statesman. Quite a goodly proportion would be able to appreciate Mr. Winston Churchill's remarks anent Sir Ed. Carson: appreciate them perhaps a shade more caustically than they doubtless appeared to their author.

"The great democracy is watching. So often we urge these millions to be patient with their bare necessities of life—the audience in India—in Egypt—all are watching, noting—native soldiers, native officers—the devastating doctrines of Mr. Bonar Law … I thank God that I have not to play for the stakes to which you are committed. 'We are Tories,' you say, 'no laws apply to us. Laws are made for working people—to keep them in. their proper places. We are the dominant class and it will be time enough for us to talk about law and order when we get back to office.'" Yes, indeed!

— "Daily News," Wed., April 29th.

What the intelligent "poor" in their present perilous position are set to solve is the "calculation as to consequences." The boomerang effect of any aggressive expression of the will returns on them in the shape of consequences—a bill to pay. The antagonisms, the rage of frustrated schemes are roused in just those persons who are empowered to get their own back with interest.

An accepted "value" which more than any other to-day stands in need of overhauling is that of a guaranteed security: more particularly that of security from physical violence. In the civilised world this supposed "good" has long outweighed every consideration which might have seemed to vie with it. It has become the sacredest of the sacred. It has had a long run—a fact which has the merit of leaving its effects too defined for doubt, and its present sublimation in modern democracies and modern industrial civilisations calls out for judgment to be passed on its worth. Three main charges can be brought against it. It destroys the stamina of the people, whose young men fritter away their strength in talk. They are as garrulous as old women, far more sentimental and far less shrewd. Their battles are fought—in talk. It encourages the peoples' most dangerous vices: they become self-deceptive: at once cocksure and timorous, swaggering yet having to seek a vicarious vindication; vain of their "freedom" which is yet merely "freedom" to obey and submit. It provides a system which offering a common protection for all alike defeats the ends of contests in which men might become apprised of their true level. They are all "equal" because "security" at once makes unnecessary and forbids the putting of their full powers to the proof. But more than these: the promised benefits which were the considerations which led to this apotheosis of Guaranteed Security turn out to be a complete hoax. Against whom do the "people" seek to "secure" themselves? Not against each other, but against the top dogs: which they do by doffing off responsibility for their own defence, and leaving themselves bare and weaponless with their defence left in the charge of—whom? Just these top dogs. The workings of the machinery inside the heads of these democratic peoples is extraordinary and funny. They are like men working in a pit filled with poisonous gases supplied with the necessary fresh air by men at the surface whose only concern is to keep them toiling down there for their benefit. At any moment they can switch off the supply, and the workings of the cage which would bring the toilers to the surface they are placing in their employers' hands also. And they imagine that making great to-do banding together in the depths of the pit will have an effect, not realising that they must approach more nearly to equal terms before their organising together can do much for them. To abandon a straining simile: the re-assumption of responsibility for self-defence, the self-provisioning of weapons of offence and defence which will compare with those of their present masters is the first concern of the propertyless who now depend upon "employment" by others as a means of livelihood.

A correspondent, Mr. Henry Meulen, asks how far the advice given to starving strikers to seize food would go with persons in less desperate straits. No distance at all we should say, since for unarmed men to take to courses of violence is to court the possibility of desperate reprisals, and common sense justifies such action only on the understanding that it is an alternative to an otherwise still more desperate situation. Moreover, it stands some chance of success because of its suddenness, its obvious need, and from a wholesome fear which sees in it a lesser evil than a more ferocious which might come later. But it remains an affair of wild impulse, and impulse cannot be adopted as a policy in a dangerous situation. Our view is that all men and women should equip themselves with weapons of offence and defence as deadly as the deadliest of which they can hear tell: that only by this means can the people be in a position to make terms with those who can call in such to support them: that under such conditions the "property" question would cease to be the festering class problem which it now is, but would unravel itself on the lines of natural ability, human self-respect and kindliness. The present paralysed condition of an unarmed "protected" mob in the power of a handful of armed "protectors" supplied by the state, and called a condition of law and order, peace and security, is the real problem: not a "property" problem but a "power" problem.

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