

Individual or Common Property [Apr, 1890] : A Discussion, from a Communist Correspondent

Freedom Press (London)

April, 1890

"N'importe qui" says "Common property is advocated only by those who believe the present evil condition of society is due to individual property." But what does he think the present evil conditions of society are due to if not to individual property? To monopoly? Then will he please distinguish between individual property and monopoly? In other words will he point out exactly where individual property ends and monopoly begins? "It is much easier to be inexact than exact." Let us be exact on this point.

Now, what is Communism? To begin with, I doubt if "N'importe qui's" interpretation of Malato's definition is correct. "That the products shall not be taken from those who produce them," I take to mean simply there will be an end of exploitation. At any rate there can scarcely be two opinions as to the meaning of the word "Communism." It means producing and sharing in common; therefore, to my mind, there is a spirit of perversity in the following sentences of "N'importe qui's." "But what does Communism propose? Evidently that the mine dishonest system should be maintained, but in another form, that the idlers should live upon the workers precisely as at present, but that it should be a different idler." The unanimous laughter of all Communists will greet this statement; and "N'importe qui" may safely assure himself that his definition is "incorrect."

There are many things in "N'importe qui's" article (contradictions included) which I cannot deal with now, though I hope I may have an opportunity of returning to them later. I must, however, just have my say in regard to the question of the right of the producer to his product. There are two things to be considered in the production of to-day. Most important of either of course is the labor force of the individual- A free man has the choice of producing in cooperation with his fellows, or singly and on his own account. The advantages, even to the most assiduous workman, are on the side of cooperation. I think this will go undisputed. If he is an ordinary sociable man, sensitive and lovable, something far dearer to him than his product is assured by living and sharing in the Commune-the charm of free social intercourse. Think, now, for a moment. Could this be attained in a society where "the owl-winged faculty of calculation" reigned supreme; a society

of weights and measures-the Individualist ideal? I assert that for nine-tenths of human kind it could not. There would be no lightheartedness, no spontaneous laughter in a social gathering to-day where your share, where each ones right to a share in the refreshment had been arrived at by an algebraic equation. Human nature revolts from this quibbling about "rights" when its best instincts are aroused.

But take the Individualist in relation to his product and see if he is quite just. As I have said we have first to consider the labor-force of the individual; but scarcely less vital is the second element in production, namely the tools, the means he uses to a given end. But the wealth of to-day, the tools and instruments of production are our common inheritance. Now your product is not the result of your labor alone; it is also partly the result of the labor of past generations. Your appropriation of it, therefore, would be an injustice to us all. Not that we deny your right to live as you like, or even to commit suicide; but as we want neither capitalist exploitation nor your charity we will be Communists, as free as you, as to the development of our own natures, but not destroying human self-respect by reminding the weak "that there is something of the nature of charity" in supplying their wants.

From another Communist Correspondent.

I cannot agree with the distinction drawn, in the letter you published last month from "N'importe qui" between private property and monopoly. It seems to me that property is the domination of an individual (a coalition of individuals) over things; it is not the claim of any person or persons to the use of things; this is usufruct, a very different matter. Private property means the monopoly of wealth, if we take the ordinary dictionary meaning of the word monopolize, which is "to engross the whole of." Roman law defined private property as the right "to use and abuse." The secondary meaning of monopoly is "the sole power of dealing in anything," as where the sovereign in old times used to grant to a certain merchant letters patent entitling him to deal in a certain commodity and to prevent any one else from dealing in it. It seems to me, therefore, that to draw a line between private property and the monopoly of things is to make a distinction without a difference. I think private property may fairly be taken to mean the monopoly of wealth, the assumed right to prevent others from using it, whether the monopolizer is using it or needs it, or not. Usufruct, on the contrary, only implies a claim to the use of such wealth as supplies the user's needs. And it is this claim to use which we Communists advocate as against the Individualist "rights of property."

The only claims, as it seems to us, which any member of a community can fairly put forward to a share of the social wealth are, first, that he requires it to develop and maintain all his faculties and powers in efficiency; second, that he has done his best to contribute towards the production of the general wealth; third (in special cases and in reference to certain special articles) that he has put so much individual thought and labor into some particular thing that he is particularly attached to it and cannot keep it about him or give it to some particular friend. In the latter case the creator's special feeling towards his creation, which is, as it were, a part of himself, would be respected in any social community, just as his feeling for his children would be respected, without recognizing any "right of property" in the matter.

As to claim two, it simply amounts to saying that a comrade who shares the efforts ought to share in the resulting enjoyment of any group he belongs to. It seems to be quite clear that the efforts will be both slighter and more pleasant when they are made in common and that the fruits of them will be decidedly larger than if the same number of persons, with the same materials and tools, worked each separately and apart. Your readers no doubt remember the chapter in

Karl Marx's "Capital," where attention is drawn to the increase of produce due to collective effort and he is by no means the only economist who has noted it. In most cases it is impossible to say what portion of the produce is due to the common character of the work and what would have resulted if all those who created it had worked separately. What is possible is for each of the workmen to feel it his business, his highest interest to do his best, and that by doing so, be he weak or strong, he is adding something to the common stock, something which would not be there without him. A man who feels this and acts upon it, seems to us to have a special moral claim on the community to have his needs supplied. If he does not feel it and does not attempt to act upon it, he is in the -position of any other imperfectly developed human being-an object of pity; one to be helped by the genuine and outspoken opinion of his fellows as to his conduct, like a liar or a person who gives way to violent fits of temper.

The first claim is a part of that larger claim that each individual has upon the social feeling of the community of which he is a member; the claim that he shall-as far as the means of the community will admit-have space and Opportunity for the fullest development of which his nature is capable. Not only is such opportunity pleaded for by the social feelings of such of us as believe the highest development to lead to the highest happiness, but it is urged by the self-interest of the community for the best developed members of a community are certainly the most useful to it as a whole and the most inclined to work hard. By AN ENGLISH ANARCHIST.

From an Individualist Correspondent.

THERE are a few points in Tom Pearson's criticism of my article that call for a reply. It would be as well, I think if my critic would define the meaning of the word "right" in the sense in which he uses it. I should say that a man has a right to anything he has got and can keep or anything upon which he has got an effective claim.

Thus at present Earl Dudley has a "right" to certain possessions, or rather, what is more important to his lordship, to an enormous tax on the industry of the people in the Black Country. He has a right to this as long as he can get it, but if the people who labor upon his estate and who are naturally more powerful than he, declined to pay him any more, and he had no means of enforcing the payment, he would cease to have a right to it.

If I have a L5 note in my pocket, and the Bank is in a sound condition I have a "right" to the sum of L% in the possession of the Bank; but if the Bank has failed and can't pay its creditors, I no longer possess that right.

My critic also seems to forget that the institution of private property as it exists now (I refer rather to the exaggerated and unnatural forms of ownership perpetuated by law) rests, not so much upon the selfishness of the few as upon the unselfishness of the many. It is well for Communists also to bear in mind that the institution of private property in the soil has arisen out of that of common property. It was the communistic arrangements of early tribes that to a large degree gave rise to government. The sovereign was selected to look after the "common welfare," and naturally, being a man, he generally managed to make this synonymous with his own welfare, just as politicians do to-day. The land therefore gradually passed from the hands of the people into those of the king. Then the king waged war with other kings-for the "common welfare" of his subjects, of course. Any therefore who fought bravely for their sovereign were rewarded with portions of the common land. Hence grew up our present landed system, simply because the people were forced by circumstances to delegate the protection of their interests to others.

Yes, I evidently differ from Pearson on some important points, or I am not in favor of recommending the worker to 'seize the accumulated wealth and use it for the common benefit!' If any worker did seize any of the accumulated wealth I think he would most likely use it for his own benefit-at least I should advise him to do so. I think, however, that I may say that the chief point of difference between the Communistic and Individualistic schools is in this: that whilst the Communists would convert the workers into thieves, the Individualists would convert the thieves into workers.

Pearson asks me further if the wealth is to be distributed according to the natural abilities and merits of each, who is to decide what these abilities and merits are I may say in reply that I try to decide the natural merits and abilities of those I come in contact with and reward them accordingly. Thus I employ the bootmaker who makes me the best boots for the least money. I have to find out by experience, aided by recommendation, who are the best workmen to go to for this or that service, and I expect most other people do the same; and I claim that in the absence of monopolies protected by the State, free competition and free contract would necessarily distribute the wealth according to the merits and abilities of each.

But why do not the Communist Anarchists illustrate their principles by a practical example? Surely as Anarchists they are not waiting for the majority to accept their ideas, and if they do not make a start, how can they ever expect Communist Anarchism to be established? Nor are their ideas likely to make much headway among intelligent and practical reformers unless they can show by their own example that the principles they advocate are sound.

By ALBERT TARN.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Freedom Press (London)
Individual or Common Property [Apr, 1890] : A Discussion, from a Communist Correspondent
April, 1890

Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Socialism, Vol. 4, No. 41, online source RevoltLib.com,
retrieved on April 12, 2020.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net