

Property is Government

Louisa Sarah Bevington

May 1895

Can it be said too often: "Property is Government"? It is the modern measure and means of domination, and it is nothing else at all. It ceases to exist directly the human will decrees its annihilation; the moment a private individual is sick of it in his own case, he is rid of it. The moment collective opinion shall be averse to it, it will vanish from the planet. The word "property" slips glibly enough from many a pen; yet I declare that it fits nothing real within the range of my intelligence, and nothing desirable in the range of my emotions. Objects may be partly made by me, or handed to me; they may, next, be welcome (because useful) to me; or they may be in my way, because useless to me. In the latter case, the wisest thing to do is to send them or carry them across the street to the neighbour whose requirement they exactly fit. The objects may, by the custom or the law prevailing around me, be called my "property", in which case the neighbour, unless he be a "thief", will take no direct steps towards removing them from my custody, but will, if I choose, meekly permit me to fine him of time, trouble, or goods (as represented by money), before considering himself their fit custodian. Yet the things are still only the things; and have no natural point of attachment with either my neighbour or me, until one of us puts them to their appropriate use.

Popular concession, fixed with force-law, may never have been questioned by citizens born under the law; but no amount of human concession, or human force, can make real a relation which is naturally non-existent; or will avail to keep up the solemn pretence of it when the general discomfort and distress arising from such pretence, causes the force-law to be chafed against, and thus annuls the ancient concession on which law originally took its stand.

At the present hour, the bulk of humanity has not begun to recognise the property idea as in itself debateable. All the talk is of a change of title in property-owning; and this even among many who dream of abolishing Government. And all the while Property and Government are as inseparable as Substance and Shadow; and as long as you keep either one of them, you will have to put up with the vagaries of the other.

Meanwhile of those whose minds are active concerning the Property "question", one set regards it as a necessary element of orderly progress that may safely be left to evolve through future phases as a dominant institution; while another set regards it as the chief, and constant, and necessary foe of order and progress; the bulwark and the *raison-d'être* of force-law; the promoter of militarism; the cause of human antagonisms, great and small; the root of all evil, and of all the frightful waste involved in the arming and defending of man against man.

The question then arises: Which of these two sets of thinkers is in advance of the other? Which see the deepest into the springs of human action? Which displays most intellectual perspicacity and moral (that is, healthily social) momentum? Which most accurately interprets Nature and History? And which, if at once able (by help of revolution) to put theory into practice throughout a whole community, would do most to dissipate existing evil tendencies in surrounding citizens, and to invigorate and foster in them useful and beneficent tendencies?

The thing to bear firmly in mind is that property, however acquired, must maintain itself by governmental force. And this is in itself a tell-tale fact. We do not need to force upon one another that which Nature has instituted as useful to all.

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