

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



Report of the Commission on the Question of Inheritance

Adopted by the General Assembly of the Geneva
Sections

Mikhail Bakunin

August 28, 1869

Mikhail Bakunin

Report of the Commission on the Question of Inheritance
Adopted by the General Assembly of the Geneva Sections
August 28, 1869

Retrieved on 25th April 2021 from

www.libertarian-labyrinth.org

L'Egalité, August 28, 1869, Geneva. Working translation by
Shawn P. Wilbur.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

Citizens,

This question which will be discussed at the Congress de Basle is divided into two part, the first consisting of the *principle*, the second the practical application of the *principle*.

The question of the principle itself must be considered from two points of view: that of utility and that of justice.

From the point of view of the emancipation of labor, is it useful, is it necessary for the right of inheritance to be abolished?

To pose that question, is, we believe, to resolve it. Can the emancipation of labor signify anything but its deliverance from the yoke of property and capital? But how to prevent both from dominating and exploiting labor, as long as they are separated from labor, they will be monopolized in the hands of a class which, by the fact of exclusive enjoyment, exempt from the necessity of working to live, will continue to exist and crush labor, by taking from them rent for the land and interest on capital, and who, supported by this position, still take hold,

as they do everywhere today, of all the profits of the industrial and commercial enterprises, leaving to the workers, crushed by the competition that they are forced to make among themselves, only that which is strictly necessary to preserve them from hunger.

No political and juridical law, however strict it may be, could not prevent that domination and exploitation, no law could prevail against the force of things, none will be able to prevent a given position from producing all its natural results; from which it clearly results that as long as property and capital on one side and labor on the other, the one constituting the bourgeois class, and the other the proletariat, the worker will be the slave, and the bourgeois the master.

But what is it that separates property and capital from labor? What constitutes, economically and politically, the difference of the classes, what destroys equality and perpetuates inequality, the privilege of the minority and the slavery of the majority? It is the right of inheritance.

Must we show how the right of inheritance creates all economic, political and social privileges? It is obvious that the difference in classes is only maintained by it. Through the right of inheritance, natural as well as temporary differences in fortune or happiness that can exist between individuals and should disappear as the individuals themselves disappear, are perpetuated, petrified as it were, and becoming traditional, create privileges of birth, found classes and become a permanent source of the exploitation of millions of workers by thousands of men born fortunate.

As long as the right of inheritance functioned, we could not have economic, social and political equality in the world, and as long as the inequality exists, there will be oppression and exploitation.

Then, in principle, from the point of view of the integral emancipation of labor and the laborers, we should desire the abolition of the right of inheritance.

It is understood that we do not pretend to abolish physiological heredity or the natural transmission of the bodily and mental faculties, or to express ourselves more accurately, of the muscular and nervous faculties of parents to their children; often this transmission is an unfortunate fact, because it passes physical and moral maladies from past generations to the present generations. But the fatal effects of this transmission can only be combated by the application of science to social hygiene, both individual and collective, and by the rational and egalitarian organization of society.

What we want, what we should abolish, is the right of inheritance created by jurisprudence and constituting the very basis of the legal family and the State.

It is also understood that we do not intend to abolish sentimental inheritance. We mean by this the inheritance that passes into the hands of children or friends objects of slight value that belonged to their friends or their deceased parents, which by dint of having long served have preserved, as it were, a personal imprint. The serious legacy is one that provides the heirs, either completely or in part, the possibility of living without work, drawing on the collective work, whether the rent of the land or interest on capital. We mean that capital as well as the land, in short all the instruments and all the raw materials for labor, ceasing to be transmissible by the right of inheritance, become forever the collective ownership of all productive associations .

The equality and consequently also the emancipation of labor and the laborers are only at this price.

There are few workers who do not understand that in the future the abolition of the right of inheritance is the supreme condition of equality. But there are some who fear that if we are going to abolish it presently, before a social organization has assured the fate of all children, whatever the conditions in which they are born, they children will find themselves in distress after their deaths.

“What!” they say, “I have amassed by the sweat of my brow, and by condemning myself to the cruelest privations, 200, 300 or 400 francs, and my children are to be deprived of it!”

Yes, they will be deprived of it, but on the other hand they will receive from society, without any prejudice to the natural right of the mother and father, a maintenance, education and instruction that you would not be able to assure them of with 30 or 40 thousand francs. For it is obvious that as soon as the right of inheritance is abolished, society must take charge of all the costs of the physical, moral and intellectual development of all the children of both sexes who are born within it. It must thus become their ultimate guardian.

We have stopped at this point, because it brings in the question of integral instruction about which another commission must make its report to you.

But there is another point that we should clarify.

Many claim that by abolishing the right of inheritance, we will destroy the greatest stimulus that drives men to labor. Those who think thus continue to consider work as a necessary evil, or to speak theologically, as the effect of the curse that Jehovah in his wrath launched against the unfortunate human race, and in which by a singular whim, he understood his whole creation.

Without entering into this serious theological discussion, taking as a basis the simple study of human nature, we will respond to these accusers of labor, the work being far from an evil or a hard necessity, is, for any man who is in possession of his faculties, a need. In order to make sure everyone can make an experiment on himself, let them be condemned for just a few days to absolute inaction, or else to sterile, stupid, unproductive labor, and see if in the end they do not consider themselves the unhappiest and most debased of people! Man is forced by his very nature to work, as he is forced to eat, drink, think, and speak.

It is impossible to determine more of the character of these reforms, since it would be necessary to adapt them to the particular situation in each country. But in all countries, the goal remains the same: the establishment of collective labor and property, and the liberty of each in the equality of all.

The method of revolution will naturally be shorter and more simple. Revolutions are never made by individual, nor by associations. They are brought about by the force of things. The International Association does not aim to make the revolution, but it must profit from it and organize on its behalf, as soon as it is made by the more and more obvious iniquity and ineptitude of the privileged classes.

It should be understood between us that on first day of the revolution, the right of inheritance will simply abolished, and with it the State and legal right, in order that on the ruins of all these iniquities will rise, across all political and national boundaries, the new international world, the world of labor, science, freedom and equality, organizing itself from the bottom up, by the free association of all the productive associations.

The Commission proposes to you the following resolutions:

Considering that the right of inheritance is one of the principal causes of the economic, social and political inequality which reigns in the world.

That apart from equality there can be neither liberty, nor justice, and there will always be oppression and exploitation; slavery and poverty for the proletariat, wealth and domination for the exploiters of the people's labor;

The Congress recognized the necessity for the full and complete abolition of the right of inheritance.

That abolition will be accomplished, as events dictate, either by means of reforms, or by revolution.

If labor is cursed today, it is because it is excessive, stultifying et forced; it is because it kills leisure and deprives men of the possibility of humanely enjoying life; it is because each, or almost every one is forced to apply his productive strength to the sort of work least suited to his natural dispositions. It is finally because in this society founded on theology and on jurisprudence, the possibility of living without working is considered as an honor and a privilege, and the necessity of laboring to live as a sign of degradation, as a punishment and a shame.

The day when labor—muscular and nervous labor, manual and intellectual, at the same time—will be considered the highest honor of men, as the sign of their virility and their humanity, society will be saved; but that day will not come as long as the reign of inequality endures, as long as the right of inheritance is not abolished.

Would that abolition be just?

But if it is in the interest of everyone, in the interest of the humanity of everyone, how could it be unjust?

We must distinguish between historical, political, and legal justice, and rational or just simply human justice. The first has governed the world to this hour, and has made of it a receptacle of bloody oppression and iniquity. The second must emancipate it.

So let us examine the right of inheritance from the point of view of human justice.

A man, we are told, has earned for his labor a few tens, a few hundred thousand francs, a million, and he would not have the right to leave them as an inheritance to his children! But that would be a violation of natural right, a sinful plundering!

First, it has been proven a thousand times that a lone worker cannot produce much beyond what they consume. We challenge a serious worker, that is to say a workman enjoying no privilege, to earn tens, hundreds of thousand francs, millions! That would be him simply impossible. So if there is in today's society some individuals who earn large sums, it is not by their

work, it is thanks to their privilege, through a juridically legalized injustice, that they earn it; and as everything that they do not take by their own labor is necessarily taken from the labor of others, we have the right to say that all these gains are thefts committed by privileged individuals against the collective labor, with the sanction and under the protection of the State.

Let us move on.

The thief protected by law dies. He leaves, by testament or intestate, his land or capital to his children or relations. This, it is said, is a necessary consequence of his liberty and his individual rights; his wishes must be respected.

But a dead man is dead; outside of the entirely moral and sentimental existence made in the pious memories of his children, relatives or friends, if he has earned it, or public recognition, if he had rendered some real service to the public, he no longer exists at all; so he can have neither liberty, nor rights, nor individual will. Ghosts must not govern and oppress the world, which only belongs to the living.

To continue to wish and to act after his death, there must then be a legal fiction or political lie, and as he is henceforth incapable of acting by himself, some power, the State, must be responsible for acting for him and in his name, the State must execute the will of a man who, being no more, can have no will.

And what is the power of the State, if it is not the power of everyone organized to the detriment of everyone and in favor of the privileged classes? It is above all the production and collective force of the laborers. So must the laboring masses guarantee to the privileged classes the transmission of inheritances, which is the principal source of their poverty and slavery? Must they forge with their own hands the irons that bind them?

We conclude. It is enough that the proletariat declares that it no longer wants to sustain the State that sanctions its slavery, in order for the right of inheritance, which is exclusively polit-

ical and legal, and as a consequence contrary to human rights, to fall on its own. To abolish the right of inheritance is enough to abolish the legal family and the State.

What is more, all social progress has proceeded by the successive abolitions of inheritance rights.

We first abolished the right of divine inheritance, the traditional privileges or chastisements that were long considered as the consequence of divine benediction or curse;

Then we abolished the right of political inheritance, the consequence of which was the recognition of the sovereignty of the people and the equality of citizens before the law;

Today we should abolish economic inheritance in order to emancipate the laborer, the man, and to establish the reign of justice on the ruins of all the political and theological iniquities of the present and past.

The last question that remains for us to resolve, is that of the practical measures to take in order to abolish the right of inheritance.

The abolition of the right of inheritance can be accomplished in two ways: either by means of successive reforms, or else by social revolution.

It could be accomplished by means of reform in those fortunate countries, very rare if not unknown, where the class of proprietors or capitalists, the bourgeois, being inspired by a spirit and wisdom that they lack today, and finally understanding the imminence of the social revolution, would come to terms, in a serious manner, with the world of the workers. In this case, but only in this case, the path of peaceful reforms would be possible; by a series of successive modifications, wisely combined and settled amiably between the laborers and the bourgeois, we could completely abolish the right of inheritance in twenty or thirty years, and replace the present mode of property, labor and instruction by collective labor and property, and by integral education or instruction.