

Chapter 27

The Enslavement of Labor

AS CHATTEL SLAVERY, the owning of people, is unjust—so private ownership of land is unjust. Ownership of land always gives ownership of people. To what degree, is measured by the need for land. When starvation is the only alternative, the ownership of people involved in the ownership of land becomes absolute. This is simply the law of rent in different form.

Place one hundred people on an island from which there is no escape. Make one of them the absolute owner of the others—or the absolute owner of the soil. It will make no difference—either to owner or to the others—which one you choose. Either way, one individual will be the absolute master of the other ninety-nine. Denying permission to them to live on the island would force them into the sea.

The same cause must operate, in the same way and to the same end, even on a larger scale and through more complex relations. When people are compelled to live on—and from—land treated as the exclusive property of others, the ultimate result is the enslavement of workers. Though less direct and less obvious, relations will tend to the same state as on our hypothetical island. As population increases and productivity improves, we move toward the same absolute mastery of landlords and the same abject helplessness of

labor. Rent will advance; wages will fall. Landowners continually increase their share of the total production, while labor's share constantly declines.

To the extent that moving to cheaper land becomes difficult or impossible, workers will be reduced to a bare living—no matter what they produce. Where land is monopolized, they will live as virtual slaves. Despite enormous increase in productive power, wages in the lower and wider layers of industry tend—everywhere—to the wages of slavery (i.e., just enough to maintain them in working condition).

There is nothing strange in this fact. Owning the land on which—and from which—people must live is virtually the same as owning the people themselves. In accepting the right of some individuals to the exclusive use and enjoyment of the earth, we condemn others to slavery. We do this as fully and as completely as though we had formally made them chattel slaves.

In simple societies, production is largely the direct application of labor to the soil. There, slavery is the obvious result of a few having an exclusive right to the soil from which all must live. This is plainly seen in various forms of serfdom. Chattel slavery originated in the capture of prisoners in war. Though it has existed to some extent in every part of the globe, its effects have been trivial compared to the slavery that originates in the appropriation of land.

Wherever society has reached a certain point of development, we see the general subjection of the many by the few—the result of the appropriation of land as individual property. Ownership of land gives absolute power over people who cannot live except by using it. Those

who possess the land are masters of the people who dwell upon it.

The idea of individual ownership naturally and justly attaches to things of human production. But when it is extended to land, the rest is just a matter of time. The strong and cunning easily acquire a superior share in this species of property. For it is to be had, not by production, but by appropriation. In becoming lords of the land, they necessarily become lords of other people.

Ownership of land is the basis of aristocracy. It was not nobility that gave land, but the possession of land that gave nobility. All the enormous privileges of the nobility of medieval Europe flowed from their position as the owners of the soil. This simple principle of ownership produced the lord on one side, and the vassal on the other. One having all the rights, the other none.

The same cause has enslaved the masses of workers in every age. It is still acting in the civilized world today. We may say that personal liberty—freedom to move about—is universally acknowledged. In the United States and most civilized countries, political and legal inequality have been abolished. Yet the greatest cause of inequality remains—revealing itself in the unequal distribution of wealth.

The essence of slavery is that everything workers produce is taken from them, except enough to support a bare existence. Under existing conditions, the lowest wages of free labor invariably tend toward this same state. No matter how much productivity increases, rent steadily swallows up the whole gain (or even more). Thus, the condition of the masses in every civilized country is tending toward virtual slavery—under the forms of freedom.

Of all kinds of slavery, this is probably the most cruel

and relentless. Laborers are robbed of their production and forced to toil for mere subsistence. But their taskmasters assume the form of inescapable demands. It does not seem to be one human being who drives another, but "the inevitable laws of supply and demand." And for this, no one in particular is responsible. Even the selfish interest that prompted the master to look after the well-being of his slaves is lost.

Labor has become a commodity, and the worker a machine. There are no masters and slaves, no owners and owned—only buyers and sellers.

When Southern slaveholders saw the condition of the free poor in civilized countries, it is no wonder they easily persuaded themselves to accept slavery. There can be no doubt that Southern field hands were (as a class) better fed, better lodged, and better clothed than agricultural laborers in England. In the South during slavery, it would have been scandalous for masters to force their slaves to live and work under conditions that large classes of free white men and women did in Northern cities. If public opinion had not restrained them, their own selfish interest in maintaining the health and strength of their slaves would have.

Is it any wonder that demands to abolish slavery seemed hypocritical to slaveholders? And now that slavery has been abolished, the planters find they have sustained no loss. Ownership of the land—on which the freed slaves must live—gives them almost as much control of labor as before. Yet they are relieved of some very expensive responsibilities.

As population increases and land becomes more valuable, the planters will get a greater share (proportionately)

of the earnings of their laborers than they did under slavery. Of course, labor will get a smaller share. At least slaves got enough to keep them in good physical health. But in countries such as England, there are large classes of laborers who do not get even that.

These modifying influences are lost in the complicated processes of modern production, where serfdom assumes a less obvious form. Those whose labor is appropriated and those who appropriate it are widely separated through many intermediate gradations. This makes relations between members of the two classes indirect and general, while before they were direct and particular.

That such conditions are not more common here is due to the great extent of fertile land available on this continent. This has not only provided an escape valve for the older sections of the Union, it has greatly relieved the pressure in Europe. But this avenue of relief cannot last forever. It is already closing up fast. As it closes, the pressure must become greater.

The working class is being driven into this helpless, hopeless poverty by a force like a resistless and unpitying machine. It drives people to acts barbarians would refuse. The Boston collar manufacturer who pays his workers two cents an hour may sympathize with their condition. But, like them, he is governed by the law of competition. His business cannot survive if he pays more. And so it goes, through all the intermediate gradations. It seems to be the inexorable laws of supply and demand that forces the lower classes into the slavery of poverty. And an individual can no more dispute this power than the winds and tides.

But in reality, it is the same cause that always has, and always must, result in slavery:

The monopolization by some of what nature meant for all.

As long as we recognize private property in land, our boasted freedom will inevitably involve slavery. Until it is abolished, Declarations of Independence and Acts of Emancipation are in vain. So long as one person can claim exclusive ownership of land—from which other people must live—slavery will exist. Indeed, as material progress grows, it must grow and deepen.