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THE NATURAL LAW OF PROPERTY

THE institution of private property has been violently assailed and defined as "robbery" by schools who call themselves advanced. The idea springs from treating as identical the right of a man to what his labour produces and the legalised power conferred on others to confiscate what he produces. Since wealth should be distributed among individuals in proportion as each contributes to the sum of wealth, it follows that the share thus coming to each is his rightful property. In other words, what a man produces is his own provided he pays to the community the equivalent of any natural advantage of situation he enjoys in the course of production. That is, provided he pays economic rent to the community, every penny of what is left is his rightful property. This arrangement assures to all men an equal opportunity to produce and establishes the principle of "service for service" which is the fundamental basis of just distribution. A self evident proposition directly it is understood! The Natural Law of Property makes the product the rightful property of the producer, and also implies his right to what has been produced by others provided it is obtained from them in free exchange and in whatever part of the world it may be made. This law is the condemnation of Protective tariffs and the vindication of Free Trade. In every reasoned defence of property, it will be found to mean the guarantee to individuals of the fruits of their labour—and rightly so. The real vindication of private property and the real law of distribution is the law that gives the product to the producer.

Property in land and its rent is purely predatory and the very negation of true property rights. It is the power to command services without rendering service—to get something for nothing. And in violating the rule of service for service, which as we have seen, is the essential condition of a just distribution, it provides the most powerful disruptive force in society. Thus do extremes meet. The vested interests which defend private property in land and those "advanced thinkers" who, while denouncing it, would dole out equally the products of labour, are allies in an attack on true rights of property.

Communities are free to conform to this law or resist it. In this they can do as they please. But whichever be their choice the results are certain—wellbeing and goodwill, or alternatively, poverty and enmity. No more can we divert the blood from its natural flow and expect the heart to continue its beat, than we can divert the flow of wealth from its natural channels and expect social life to survive. Unhappily for us all, this is just what human laws attempt to-day. There exists to-day many a law that one would think was specially designed to deprive the producer of his rightful property. These man made laws are defended by the selfish interests who profit by them and supported by all the forces of the state. In strange company with these selfish interests we find men who, in the name of advanced thought, deny the right of a man to his own product and propose to share it out equally. "Not mine, not thine, but *ours*" is their cry. "From each according to his ability; to each according to his needs" say others. Well sounding and well intentioned as they both are, we deny the morality of either, for both conflict with nature's law that what a man makes is his own. The arbitrary State action here involved is supposed to be based on charity or benevolence. But it is forgotten that there is something greater even than these—Justice. Justice must come before even charity, and it may well be found that when men are assured of the full fruits of their labour, very little charity will be called for. "Equality of opportunity and reward according to service rendered" is the true maxim and squares with the natural law of distribution and of property. It also scores on the ground of practicability, for what human court is qualified to assess either the "ability" or the "needs" of each and every citizen? Not equality of wealth, nor yet wealth according to "needs," but "equality of opportunity and diversity of wealth according to service" is the condition which accords with economic Justice.

Not the laws of nature but the laws of man are at fault and need repeal. Not by denial of human rights and de-

nunciation of the natural order shall we ever learn "the art of living together," but in discovery of these rights and laws and giving them free play. Not the natural order, but our ignorance of and contempt for it is the source of our social troubles. On all sides this order is assailed to-day. The natural law of "equal freedom, equal rights and equal duties" is legally flouted wherever we turn. Our laws fail to recognise the elementary principle that what a man makes is his rightful property, and give his earnings to privileged classes.

Access to land is the equal birthright of all and the rent of land is communal property. By nature's decree the economic rent of land expresses with marvellous precision all the gains and advantages which man achieves as he progresses from barbarism to civilisation. The growth of economic rent is as inseparable from the advance of civilisation as the shadow from the substance. When allowed to return to the whole community which creates it, every member secures his rightful share in the benefits of advancing civilisation otherwise unattainable. Here we have true communism and the only kind of communism humanity stands in need of. The day which gives this communal value to the community will leave each individual citizen in enjoyment of the full product of his individual labour, that is, in possession of his rightful property. For the first time we shall reconcile communal rights with individual rights and learn that in every way they harmonise one with the other.

This coming of each into his own, this giving to the community what is the community's and leaving to the individual what is the individual's is no mere human device—no mere smart idea of man's invention as its enemies would have us believe, but the expression of nature's everlasting law. It is the first and greatest step we must take towards "the art of living together" and the essential condition of lasting peace. It is the putting into practice of "that order which God knows and wills," the order which in his upward progress it is surely man's destiny to attain.

W. R. LESTER.