

## WHAT IS PROPERTY?



W. R. LESTER, M.A.

Mr Lester's latest *brochure*\* under the above title is in his best style and in every way worthy the importance of the subject with which it deals. To those whose deepest desire is to establish a political system on the solid basis of righteousness, there can be no more searching question than that which asks for a definition of "property." It is sharper than a two-edged sword, piercing the joints and marrow of the body politic. It is the crucial question the answer to

which, when once given in clearness of head and soundness of heart, will determine a man's conception of his place in the world and the part he must play therein. It is not surprising that men have hesitated to pursue the inquiry to its final conclusion. The lurking suspicion that if the truth were discovered many of our doings would come under condemnation and that much of what constitutes the furniture of our communal life would have to undergo a process of re-distribution or re-allocation according to a hitherto untried principle:—this subconscious fear or suspicion has probably deterred many from inquiring too closely as to the moral or rightful basis of property. Moreover, it must be admitted that as the complexity of social relationships has increased through mass production, sub-division of labour and automatic machinery in industry, the difficulty has become greater in discriminating between "mine," "thine," and "ours": and we cannot wonder greatly that busy men of the world have abandoned the attempt to moralize on the matter.

But the pressure of the ethical sense and the distinctively human desire to "look into" things, is as constant and persistent as the pressure of the enveloping atmosphere. Truth always stands at the door and knocks. When the stroke of action has ceased and the moment of reflection has come, such questions as this will obtrude themselves in spite of all our pre-occupations and affected indifferences. "Is this thing mine? How did I come by it? Is it really 'proper' to me, and in the last resort what *is* property?" If the man who is worried by such questions is an easily-tired thinker he may have to find a temporary resting-place in the conclusion that "property is anything that is capable of being owned": but sooner or later to the growing soul these questions will reassert themselves and the urge becomes irresistible to find if possible a *moral* relationship between himself and his property.

It is at such a crisis in a man's thinking that Mr Lester's argument will appeal. Production, he assures us, is the only true and ethical ground of proprietorship. What a man makes with his own hands from the raw material provided by nature, is his indefeasibly as against the world. What he obtains by exchanging his services for the product of another man's labour is equally his property, and no one, not even a government, has a moral right to confiscate any part or fraction of it.

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Through mere co-operation in effort and the temporary subordination of the individual to the work of the team, an increment of product—a steadily increasing increment—comes into existence, which is not the result of any one person's labours, but is entirely due to the convergence of effort in one direction. If we can clearly distinguish between this increment in the total product and the reward that would naturally have attended each man's solitary labour,



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surely we may affirm with confidence that this increment belongs by right to the team collectively, and that no individual among them can lay a valid moral claim to any part of it?

Thus, as Mr Lester points out, we have two forms of property coming into existence at the same time, and the problem before us is as to how we shall separate them equitably and be able to say "This belongs to individual men," and "That belongs to Society collectively." The real trouble is that these two forms of property, which we may describe as private and public, have become so inextricably intermingled that the task of disentangling them baffles the skill of even the expert in Accountancy. But what human artifice cannot do, the natural ordering of things will sometimes accomplish for us if we will only follow Nature's leading. It so happens that Nature has an automatic, self-checking and infallibly-accurate method of registering the value of the "increment" in product that is due to co-operation and mutual helpfulness and not to the labour of any individual. Her method is this. Human industry must be carried on upon land, and the particular parts of the Earth's surface where team-work is being done *or might be done*, acquire a selling value that accurately reflects the contribution to the total results that should be credited to the fact of combination or co-operation. If that reflected value (*i.e.*, the price that workers are willing to pay for the advantage accruing to certain sites) is recognized as public property, then all the value that remains may be left to individuals as their private property to be apportioned among them according to the market price of ability.

Mr Lester's question has been ignored by the schools whose teaching has become obscure and inconclusive in consequence. It is not without significance here that it is to a layman we are indebted for having grappled boldly with the problem, and for having given us the only answer that will conform to truth and justice.

ALEX. MACKENDRICK.

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