

"What Is Property?": A Socialist's Answer

Pierre Joseph Proudhon
(1840)

If I were called upon to answer the following question: *What is slavery?* and I replied: *It is murder*, my meaning would be comprehended immediately. There would be no need for amplification to demonstrate that the power to deprive a man of his thought, will, and personality is the power of life and death and that to make a man a slave is to kill him. Why, therefore, may I not meet this other question: *What is property?* by replying: *It is theft*, without feeling certain I shall be misunderstood, although this second proposition is no more than a transformation of the first?

I am taking it upon myself to discuss property, the essential principle of our government and our institutions. I am within my rights. I may be deceived in the conclusion to which my researchers lead me. I am within my rights. It pleases me to state my conclusion at the outset. I am still within my rights.

Such and such an author preaches that property is a civil right, generated by labor and sanctioned by law. Another maintains that it is a natural right which derives its origin from work. Both these doctrines, contradictory though they may appear, are endorsed and promoted. It is my contention that neither labor, nor business, nor law can create property: that it is an effect without a cause. Should I be reproved for this?

Yet I hear murmurs arising!

--*Property is theft!* This is the slogan of '93! This is the rallying cry of revolution.

Reader, reassure yourself. I am not an instrument of discord, a seditious incendiary. I am anticipating history a little; I am revealing a truth the march of which we are attempting in vain to halt. I proclaim the preamble of our future constitution. If our prepossessions would permit us to consider it, the definition *Property is theft*, which you deem heretical, might prove a lightning rod to deflect the thunderbolt. But how many interests, how many prejudices stand in the way! Philosophy, alas, will not alter the progress of events. Destiny will fulfill itself regardless of prophecy. ...

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