

“Land, Labor, and Property”

Jean-Guillaume-César-Alexandre-Hippolyte de Colins

by Jean de Colins (from *Du Pacte Sociale, et de la Liberté Politique considérée comme complément moral de l’Homme*, vol. 2, 1835, pp. 134-61) in *The Origins of Left Libertarianism: An Anthology of Historical Writing*, edited by Peter Vallentyne and Hillel Steiner (Palgrave Publishing Ltd., 2000).

*Jean-Guillaume-César-Alexandre-Hippolyte de Colins (1783-1859), a Belgian baron who lived mainly in Paris, sought to develop a position—rational socialism—intermediate between the extremes of full capitalism (with only private property) and full communism (with only collective property). All persons fully own themselves and the artifactual wealth that they produce, and they are entitled to an equal share of the natural resources and of the assets inherited from previous generations. Gifts and bequests are to be subject to heavy taxation (although at less than 100% of their value, for efficiency reasons). Natural resources are subject to a rent-tax.*

*A warning about the following reading: Colins writes in many places as if he held that an unrestricted right to make gifts and bequests is both necessary for efficient social functioning and required by justice. His ultimate view, however, is that efficient social functioning requires only some kind of weak (partially restricted) right to make gifts and bequest, and that justice does not require any such right. More specifically, he holds that justice requires that gifts and bequests be taxed as much as compatible with efficient social functioning.*

[To appear at the bottom of the first page] Reprint of extracts from pp. 136-55 of Volume II of [Jean-Guillaume-César-Alexandre-Hippolyte Colins,] *Du Pacte Social et de la Liberté Politique*

*Considerée comme Complément Moral de l'Homme*, 2 vols, Paris, Moutardier, 1835. Translated by Guido Erreygers, Marylène Pastides, and Peter Vallentyne. Translation copyright © 2001 by Guido Erreygers, Marylène Pastides, and Peter Vallentyne.

We have just proved the general right of humankind to the common property of the land, and the particular right of each nation for as long as the productive capacities of the planet are sufficient for the needs of its inhabitants.

We will now prove that: (1) “This national community of landed property cannot be established instantaneously without causing an infinite number of individual injustices, and consequently without bringing about anarchy.” (2) “In the future, however, landed property, belonging to everyone, can be realized in each nation.”<sup>1</sup>

We believe that the first claim needs no proof. Indeed, to try to convince people by means of reasoning to voluntarily relinquish their assets is the most ridiculous utopianism.

How then can the community of landed property be established in the future? There are only two remaining means: The first, an insurrection of those who have nothing against those who have. The second, a social state that would enable the nation to gradually take possession of that which belongs to it, without harming any individual.

(...)

This whole book will demonstrate the possibility and the ease of becoming free by the second means, that is by the possibility given to the nation to gradually acquire the property that belongs to it without harming any individual. Here we will abstract from the future application of the right of each nation to landed property. We want only to prove that, even with our so-called laws that emerged from despotism, territorial property could become and remain communal without causing any harm at all to individual rights, to production or to liberty. Thus, this would

be even more plausible in a country where there were true laws based on justice.

Let us suppose that in a municipality a rich man, to whom the current laws allow unrestricted disposition of his fortune, thinks that justice requires that landed property belong to society, and that to satisfy his conscience he names the municipality as the inheritor of his assets. The municipality, somewhat emancipated, administers the revenues of these assets, and uses them to meet the needs of the region.

The belief of this man propagates, his example spreads, and after about a century all municipalities own about three fourths of the landed property in their districts. Society, so enriched, might want to coordinate its territorial property, and expropriate the remaining quarter for the public good with prior compensation for the owners. Our current laws would present no obstacle.

Thus all land would be in the hands of the nation, without the smallest injustice and without any restriction of liberty. Our remaining task is to prove that this common property of assets would not harm production, and that indeed it would increase it.

Landed property, now being in the public domain, would be divided and rented to the highest bidder for a specified period of time, subject to a security deposit of movable goods.  
(...)

Territorial property having become public, *the net revenue*—that is, the rent—is used by society for the happiness of all. We urge the reader to pay attention to what we call net revenue, because we will use this expression frequently and a very precise idea must be associated with it. The net revenue is what the tenant who works [the land] pays to the idle landlord, including the tax burden. The use of this revenue for the happiness of all constitutes the only community that can be established without harming production.

Thus we have just proved that: (1) In the future landed property can become common

property (in the whole of this book we indicate the means to accomplish this). (2) It would be just and useful to future generations for it to become so.

We can thus already establish that hereditary territorial property is a political injustice, that is to say A PRIVILEGE. But a privilege can be necessary to the existence of society, either absolutely or relatively. Now, since freedom requires justice, in order to balance one necessary privilege society is forced to establish another privilege in favor of those who are wronged by the first. Indeed, as soon as a certain amount is added to one side of an equation, one must increase the other side by an equal amount in order for the equation to still hold.

We shall consider elsewhere this second privilege (i.e., the second amount to be added to the political equation). Here we show only the existence of the first and the demonstrated necessity to establish the second.

We continue: “Movable property cannot be assigned to a political individual, that is to say, it cannot exist in common. It must therefore be assigned to the natural family, and consequently be transmitted by inheritance.”

In discussing *Districts* we said: (1) “Natural families have united to insure, reciprocally and by *hereditary* transmission, the *ownership* of the objects acquired for the maintenance or the well-being of their lives.” (2) “These objects cannot have been but the result of the labor of each [family] applied to natural resources; and no family would have worked for the future if it hadn’t had the hope that the product of its labors couldn’t be violently pillaged by those who had been idle.”

The existence of any society is thus based on the existence of the natural family considered as social unit. Thus, the desire to destroy the natural family as social unit is an attack against the bonds of conjugal love, of paternal love, and of filial love, as well as against sociability, which is the essence of humanity.

The political essence of the natural family is the hereditary transmission of the product of its labor. Now, at the beginning of the natural family, that is, before the beginning of political society, movable wealth could not be common property, since such wealth did not exist. And when political society began, it was only to prevent this community [of movable wealth].

All we need to know, therefore, is only whether it is possible (putting aside whether it is useful) to make this wealth, once it reaches a certain amount, common property. The community of movable wealth is always a utopia, because it is always against nature. Indeed, once movable wealth becomes common property, production stops. Laziness, as a passion, is natural for humans; necessity alone makes them work. What would be the point of working? What kind of family bonds would there be? ... But we forget that there would be no families!

No families! We blush for having had the weakness to have tried to respond to such craziness. A universal family with everything in common! Women, children, tools, and products of labor!! Who is the inhabitant of Bedlam<sup>2</sup> who ever had such a dream?

The discussions of pure Saint-Simonism—that is, of the possibility of establishing a community of movable property—that for some time have managed to take place seriously in France, would make us believe that our country is more than a century away from the time when the establishment of political liberty will be merely possible (let alone probable).

We conclude: The natural family can exist politically only by means of inheritance. Society is necessarily composed of natural families. Thus: INHERITANCE IS NECESSARY FOR SOCIAL EXISTENCE.

(...)

But if in practice movable property cannot be common, according to true justice it belongs nonetheless to all to the extent that it comes from past generations. It is the misdirected instinctive understanding of this truth that has led to the utterance of so much nonsense.

Let us develop this proposition, one of the most essential propositions for the establishment of political liberty. The product of labor belongs to the producer. The essence of property is the power to dispose of the thing owned. At the death of the producer, his intentions with respect to the transmission of his property must be executed by society in its protective role. And when these intentions have not been declared or remain obscure, it is for social justice to interpret them.

People work for themselves and for their natural families—with no distinction among generations. To deny this proposition is to deny the obvious: for fathers generally prefer their grandchildren to their own children.

Thus everything that could convince the producer that the product of his labor will be used for the happiness of all the members of his posterity, without time itself disinheriting anyone, will enter into his considerations and consequently in the justice of the social interpretation [of his intentions].

In the current state of society, the intentions of producers, considered in this light, are continually violated. Indeed, a thousand things deprive the worker's children from the fruits of their father's labor: orphans and the weak are robbed of everything; war, resulting from social ignorance, reduces peoples to misery; a loan devours that which war has spared; a fire destroys movable property; a flood ravages territorial property. In each of these cases the intention of the producer is frustrated, and society, which has the duty to execute it, commits an injustice. The children of the inventors of the printing press and of the compass, and the children of Galileo, of Kepler, of Newton, and of Jenner, could they not be, and are they probably not, beggars in the middle of the wealth that nations owe to their fathers?

The only means that society can have of being just in the interpretation of the will of past generations, is to ensure that the existing generation—without distinction among families—owns

the products that the past generations destined for their posterity. Yet the labor of each person belongs to himself, and the product of his labor must pass, by inheritance, to his own children.

Social justice will thus consist of the reconciliation of the two principles: (1) Movable wealth transmitted by past generations belongs to all. (2) The product of individual labor must pass by inheritance to the children [of the producer].

This is not the place to reconcile these principles, which appear opposed: we will do this elsewhere. Here it suffices to establish that each is necessary.

Once reconciled, no one could find himself stripped of the portion of wealth that belongs to him from past generations. In this light, movable property will consequently be communal—without nonetheless stopping production, since each person will at the same time retain the assurance that the product of his labor will hereditarily pass to his own children.

To prove that movable property—to the extent that it comes from past generations—belongs to all, we have given a reason of justice based on the intentions of the producers. There is another reason based on the very essence of society considered as the keeper of wealth: because this wealth cannot be conserved without the cooperation of all, it belongs to all.

From this it follows that: “The general wealth, coming from nature and from the acquisitions of past generations, belongs BY RIGHT to the existing national generation, to make use of it as a usufructuary.”

We shall show now that this generation cannot “alienate this wealth as an absolute owner could”. We shall ask our question in the following manner: “May the general wealth—both natural and acquired by past generations—be squandered by the existing generation?”

Let the voice of sophism be silenced, let the public conscience freely deliver its judgement; and the general wisdom, interpreter of this conscience, will call out: (1) “You may not squander that which past generations have put in your care. Natural and acquired wealth

belong to humanity, to civilization, and to the nation at the very least. It is from this wealth that political liberty, the social messiah, must be born. And God, in the heart of humans, has declared this liberty inalienable.” (2) “If you squander the general wealth, the following generation has the right to recover this wealth from wherever it happens to be, BECAUSE IT IS ESSENTIAL FOR LIBERTY AND, LIKE THE LATTER, INALIENABLE.”

One generation, therefore, has the right to borrow only as much as it can earn and pay back. And the commitments that it has made to satisfy its pride or to favor despotism are in no way obligatory for the generation that follows it.

(...)

All we have wanted to prove here is that: “The existing generation is only the usufructuary of the general wealth.” As to whether “each hereditary owner must in fact be the absolute owner and be able to alienate his property”, this is so obvious that it needs no demonstration.

(...)

Let us pause here for an instant. According to justice, immovable wealth in general, and movable wealth to the extent that it comes from past generations, belongs to all. These two parts of the general wealth are *infinitely* greater than the part acquired by the existing generation. Moreover, the conservation of this last part is, like the rest, done by means of the cooperation of all. It follows that, if one considers the totality of the general wealth as belonging to all, the *injustice* that will be done to each person will be *infinitely* small, and can be compared to the difference between the true root and the approximate root of an irrational number.

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<sup>1</sup> Translators’s note: All quoted text is quoted in the original and is quoting earlier passages of this work. All numbering has been added by the translators for clarity.

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<sup>2</sup> Translators's note: Bedlam was an insane asylum in London.