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A Test Point

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Last Sunday Senator WILLIAM ALFRED PEFFER delivered a lecture at Prohibition Park, Staten Island, in the course of which he stated:

“It would be unjust to take away any property from people who own it.”

Much turns upon the seemingly simple question here involved. It may be even considered a test point, that reveals the fibre of both mind and body, or the total absence thereof, in him who dares to approach the Social Question.

In the hands of two sorts of holders, and of no other, can property be found; either:

1. In the hands of those with just title; or
2. In the hands of those with none.

Taking the first, and leaving here aside all inquiry into what constitutes “just title,” but assuming that certain property is found in hands justly entitled thereto, the justice or injustice of taking it away is a practical one; no abstract theories need here be applied.

Men gather and organize themselves into social bodies for their wellbeing. A practical purpose, redounding to the ultimate wellbeing of all, lies at the bottom and is the aim of all “government” or social system. This principle is no longer open to discussion, in granite letters it is engraven in the words:

“Governments are instituted among men to secure life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; and whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundations on such

principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.”

Upon this practical principle, even before it was so strikingly worded, have men ever proceeded in their organization of society; and their conception of what was “just,” or “unjust” was ever controlled by that which their experience of facts pointed out. If, in their opinion, the doing of a certain thing would not redound to their happiness, it was left undone; if, in their opinion, it would redound to their happiness it was done. Facts, material conditions, experience, in short, has ever lighted the path of JUSTICE.

Whether property, held by good title, should or should not be taken away, in other words, whether the social system of ownership should or should not be changed, is, accordingly, to be determined solely by the experience gathered upon the happiness or the unhappiness that flows from its continuance in private hands. If its continuance brings on misery, it ceases to be just to leave it where it is; it becomes JUSTICE to take it away.

This undeniable principle firmly kept in sight, there can be no doubt that the system of private holdings of what is needed for production has become INJUSTICE, and that JUSTICE now demands the taking it away. This fact experience had pointed out as early as 1829, when the great New Yorker THOMAS SKIDMORE uttered the pregnant maxim:

“Inasmuch as great wealth is an instrument which is uniformly used to extort from others their property, it ought to be taken away from its possessor, on the same principle that a sword or a pistol may be wrested from a robber, who shall undertake to accomplish the same effect in a different manner.”

Thus stands the case even with regard to property held in private hands with just title. Can there be any question with regard to stolen property? None whatever. Now, then, the property found to-day in the private hands of the capitalist class is none other than stolen property.

Labor alone produces all wealth. The capitalist does no manner of useful work, directly or indirectly. He is a sponge on the body social. The original wealth that his class turned into a pistol, wherewith to increase its hoard by robbing others, was itself stolen, the child of some fraud or other—some fire, some failure, perchance some blacker crime. And from that starting point, the pistol used as capital has been enlarged, improved and perfected to do its criminal work on larger and larger scales. To take away the property of the capitalist class is to restore their own to the

workingclass, to the overwhelming majority, and thereby to re-organize society in such form as may promote the happiness of its members. This course has become unquestionable JUSTICE.

Neither do the abstract principles, that underlie the law of property, stand in the way of the Socialist claim that the property now held by the capitalist class, and needed to produce the necessities of life with, should be transferred from its present to other holders. On this subject the keen intellect of BENJAMIN FRANKLIN shed valuable light, nor did his robust manliness recoil before the truth. Boldly he said:

“Private property is a creature of society, and is subject to the calls of that society wherever its necessities shall require it, even to its last farthing.”

When the Populist Senator WILLIAM ALFRED PEFFER sweepingly pronounces unjust the taking of “any property from those who own it,” he reflects the mental and physical fibrelessness of both himself and of the movement of which he is so ridiculous a secretion.

[A De Leon editorial transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the Official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.](#)

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