

THE  
EVOLUTION OF PROPERTY  
FROM  
SAVAGERY TO CIVILIZATION.

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EVOLUTION OF PROPERTY  
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BY PAUL LAFARGUE

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“The economic structure of society is the real basis on which the juridical and political superstructure is raised, and to which definite social forms of thought correspond: in short the mode of production determines the character of the social, political, and intellectual life generally.”

KARL MARX, *Capital*.

“A critical knowledge of the evolution of the idea of property would embody, in some respects, the most remarkable portion of the mental history of mankind.”

LEWIS H. MORGAN, *Ancient Society*.

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## PUBLISHERS' PREFACE.

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THE work of Paul Lafargue on the Evolution of Property was originally published as a series of articles, under the *nom de plume* of "Fergus," in the *Nouvelle Revue* of Paris, edited by Madame Adam. The originality of the theory advanced, and the mass of facts quoted, were noted not only in France but in England. The *Daily News* and the *Daily Telegraph*, notably, called attention to the chapter on Primitive Communism—a chapter written in answer to Professor Huxley's attack on Rousseau and Human Equality.

The *Socialdemokratische Bibliothek*, Hottingen, Zurich (a series of volumes issued by the German Socialist Party), has already published a translation of the work, and as soon as the more complete English edition is out it will be used as the basis of Italian and Polish translations.

The *Fascio Operaio*, the official organ of the Italian Working Class Party, in its issue of July 27th, 1890, says:—"Lafargue's work is an attempt to work out the history of property along the lines of the materialistic

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conception of history. Lafargue, by his great talent and his wide reading, is undoubtedly equal to the task he has set himself."

The *Sozial Demokrat*, the official organ of the German Socialist Party as long as the persecution of Bismarck lasted, in its issue of July 5th, 1890, says:—"Lafargue's general reading, and his special study of pre-historic times and anthropology, qualify him for the writing of a History of Property. . . . We can confidently recommend his work as one eminently instructive, suggestive, and readable."

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# THE EVOLUTION OF PROPERTY.



## CHAPTER I.

### FORMS OF CONTEMPORANEOUS PROPERTY.

**P**OLITICAL economists have laid it down as an axiom that Capital, the form of property at present predominant, is eternal; they have tasked their brains to show that capital is coeval with the world, and that as it has had no beginning, so it can have no end.<sup>1</sup> In proof of which astounding assertion

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<sup>1</sup> By capital is meant anything which produces interest : a sum of money lent, which at the end of months, or years, yields a profit ; land that is cultivated, or any instrument of labour that is set in action not by its proprietor, but by salaried workmen ; but the land which is cultivated by the peasant and his family, the gun of the poacher ; the plane or hammer of the carpenter, albeit property, is not capit-

all the manuals of political economy repeat with much complacency the story of the savage who, having in his possession a couple of bows, lends one of them to a brother savage, for a share in the produce of his chase.

So great were the zeal, and ardour which economists brought to bear on their search for capitalistic property in prehistoric times, that they succeeded, in the course of their investigations, in discovering the existence of property outside the human species, to wit, among the invertebrates: for the ant, in her foresight, is a hoarder of provisions. It is a pity that they should not have gone a step farther, and affirmed that, if the ant lays up stores, she does so with a view to sell the same and realise a profit by the circulation of her capital.

But there is a gap in the economists' theory of the eternity of capital. They have omitted to show that the term capital likewise exists from all time. In a ship every rope has its appropriate name, with the exception of the bell rope. It is inadmissible that in the domain of political economy the terminology should have been so inadequate as not to furnish a name for so useful and all-important a thing as capital ;

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alistic property, because the owner utilises it himself instead of using it to extract surplus value from others. The notion of profit without labour sticks like a Nessus-shirt to the term capital.

yet it is a matter of fact that the term capital, in the modern sense, dates no farther back than the 18th century. This is the case also with the word philanthropy (the humanitarian hypocrisy proper to the capitalistic régime). And it was in the 18th century that capitalist property began to assert itself, and to acquire a preponderating influence in society. This social predominance of capital led to the French Revolution, which, although one of the most considerable events of modern history, was, after all, but a bourgeois revolution accomplished with those catchwords of liberty, fraternity, equality, justice and patriotism which the bourgeois were, later on, to employ in puffing their political and financial enterprises. At the time of the Revolution the capitalists were cattle so newly raised by society that in his "*Dictionnaire de Mots Nouveaux*," published in 1802, Sébastien Mercier thought it necessary to insert the word *capitaliste*, and to append the following curious definition:—" *Capitaliste*: this word is well nigh unknown out of Paris. It designates a monster of wealth, a man who has a heart of iron, and no affections save metallic ones. Talk to him of the land tax—and he laughs at you; he does not own an inch of land, how should you tax him? Like the Arabs of the desert who have plundered a caravan, and who bury their gold out of fear of other brigands, the capitalists have hidden away our money."

In 1802 mankind had not as yet acquired the feeling

of profound respect which in our day is inspired by the capitalist.

The term capital, though of Latin origin, has no equivalent in the Greek and Latin tongues. The non-existence of the word in two such rich languages affords a proof that capitalist property did not exist in ancient times, at least as an economical and social phenomenon.

The form of property which corresponds to the term capital was developed and acquired social importance only after the establishment of commercial production, which crowned the economical and political movement agitating Europe after the 12th century. This commercial production was stimulated by the discovery of America and the route to India by the Cape of Good Hope, by the importation of precious metals from America, the taking of Constantinople, the invention of printing, the family alliances among the sovereigns of Europe, and the organisation of the great feudal states, with the relative and general pacification which resulted therefrom. All these and other collateral causes co-operated to create a rapid development of capital, the most perfect of all forms of private property, and, it may be averred, the last. The comparatively recent appearance of capital is the best proof adducible that property is not immutable and always the same, but that, on the contrary, it, like all material and intellectual phenomena, incessantly evolves and passes through a series of forms which differ, but are derived, from one another.

So far indeed is property from being always identical that in our own society it affects divers forms, capable of being reduced to two principal ones.

I. FORMS OF  
COMMON PROPERTY.

a. *Common property of ancient origin*, the type of which are the communal lands, exposed for centuries past to the encroachments of the nobility and *bourgeoisie*.

b. *Common property of modern origin*, administered by the State, comprised under the term Public Services, (the Mint, Post Office, Public Roads, National Libraries, Museums, etc.)

II. FORMS OF  
PRIVATE PROPERTY.

a. *Property of personal appropriation*.

b. *Property*. — *Instruments of labour*.

c. *Property*. — *Capital*.

(a). *Property of personal appropriation* begins with the food one eats, and extends to the articles of clothing and objects of luxury (rings, jewels, etc.), with which one covers and decks oneself. Time was when the house, too, was included in this branch of personal property; a man possessed his dwelling, a marble palace or a hut of straw, like the tortoise his shell. If by the application of machinery to industry, civilisation

has placed numberless objects of luxury within the reach of the poor which hitherto have been purchasable by the rich alone, it has on the other hand deprived the bulk of the nation of their dwelling-house. It constrains them to live in hired apartments and furnished lodgings ; and in the midst of unprecedented wealth it has reduced the producer to a strict minimum of property of personal appropriation.

Capitalist civilisation condemns the proletarian to vegetate in conditions of existence inferior to those of the savage. To waive the important fact that the savage does not labour for others, and to confine ourselves wholly to the question of food, it is indisputable that the barbarians who invaded and peopled Europe, and who, possessing as they did, herds of swine and other animals, and having within their reach all the resources of the chase in richly stocked forests, and of fishing in the seas and rivers—if ill-clad with the skins of wild beasts and coarsely-woven materials—partook of more animal food than do our proletarians, whose shoddy clothing, excellently woven by perfected machinery, is a very poor protection against the inclemencies of the weather. The condition of the proletarian is the harder in that his constitution is less robust and less inured to the rigour of the climate than was the body of the savage. The following fact affords an idea of the robustness of uncivilised man. In the prehistoric tombs of Europe skulls have

been discovered bearing traces of perforations suggestive of trepanning. Anthropologists at first took these skulls for amulets or ornaments, and concluded that they had been perforated after death, until Broca showed that the operation could not have been performed on corpses by producing a number of skulls in which a process of cicatrisation was observable, that could not have taken place unless the trepanned person had survived the operation. It was objected that it must have been impossible for ignorant savages, with their rude instruments of bronze and silex, to practice so delicate an operation, considered dangerous by modern doctors, despite their learning and the excellence of their surgical instruments. But all doubts have been now removed by the positive knowledge that this kind of operation is practised by savages with perfect success. Among the Berbers of the present day the operation is performed in the open air, and after the lapse of a few days, to the infinite astonishment of European witnesses, the trepanned man is on his legs again and resumes his occupations just as if a portion of his skull had not been scraped away, for the operation is performed by scraping. Skull wounds, which entail such grave complications in civilised persons, heal with extraordinary quickness and ease in primitive peoples. Notwithstanding the frantic enthusiasm with which civilisation inspires the philistine, the physical, and maybe the mental, inferiority of the