

The Source of Rights

by Frank Chodorov

The basic axiom of socialism, in all its forms, is that might is right. And that means that power is all there is to morality. If I am bigger and stronger than you and you have no way of defending yourself, then it is right if I thrash you; the fact that I did thrash you is proof that I had the right to do so. On the other hand, if you can intimidate me with a gun, then right returns to your side. All of which comes to mere nonsense. And a social order based on the socialistic axiom—which makes the government the final judge of all morality—is a nonsensical society. It is a society in which the highest value is the acquisition of power—as exemplified in a Hitler or a Stalin—and the fate of those who cannot acquire it is subservience as a condition of existence.

The senselessness of the socialistic axiom is shown by the fact that there would be no society, and therefore no government, if there were no individuals. The human being is the unit of all social institutions; without a man there cannot be a crowd. Hence, we are compelled to look to the individual to find an axiom on which to build a nonsocialistic moral code. What does he tell us about himself?

The late Frank Chodorov edited The Freeman for a time, was associate editor of Human Events, and the author of several books, including The Income Tax (New York: Devin Adair, 1954), from which this selection has been reprinted by permission.

This essay shows why a socialistic society must decline because it fails to respect private property.

Desire to Live

In the first place, he tells us that above all things he wants to live. He tells us this even when he first comes into the world and lets out a yell. Because of that primordial desire, he maintains, he has a right to live. Certainly, nobody else can establish a valid claim to his life, and for that reason he traces his own title to an authority that transcends all men, to God. That title makes sense.

When the individual says he has a valid title to life, he means that all that is he, is his own: his body, his mind, his faculties. Maybe there is something else in life, such as a soul, but without going into that realm, he is willing to settle on what he knows about himself—his consciousness. All that is “I” is “mine.” That implies, of course, that all that is “you” is “yours”—for, every “you” is an “I.” Rights work both ways.

But, while just wanting to live gives the individual a title to life, it is an empty title unless he can acquire the things that make life liveable, beginning with food, raiment, and shelter. These things do not come to you because you want them; they come as the result of putting labor to raw materials. You have to give something of yourself—your brawn or your brain—to make the necessary things available. Even wild berries have to be picked before they can be eaten. But the energy you put out to make the necessary things is part of you; it is you. Therefore, when you cause these things to exist, your title to

yourself, your labor, is extended to the things. You have a right to them simply because you have a right to life.

Source of Government

That is the moral basis of the right of property. "I own it because I made it" is a title that proves itself. The recognition of that title is implied in the statement that "I *make* so many dollars a week." That is literally true.

But what do you mean when you say you own the thing you produced? Say it is a bushel of wheat. You produced it to satisfy your desire for bread. You can grind the wheat into flour, bake the loaf of bread, eat it, or share it with your family or a friend. Or you can give part of the wheat to the miller in payment for his labor; the part you give him, in the form of wages, is his because he gave you labor in exchange. Or you sell half the bushel of wheat for money, which you exchange for butter to go with the bread. Or you put the money in the bank so that you can have something else later on, when you want it.

In other words, your ownership entitles you to use your judgment as to what you will do with the product of your labor—consume it, give it away, sell it, save it. Freedom of disposition is the substance of property rights.

Freedom of Disposition

Interference with this freedom of disposition is, in the final analysis, interference with your right to life. At least, that is your reaction to such interference, for you describe such interference with a word that expresses a deep emotion: You call it "robbery." What's more, if you find that this robbery persists, if you are regularly deprived of the fruits of your labor, you lose interest in laboring. The only reason you work is to satisfy your desires; and if experience shows that despite your efforts your desires go unsatisfied, you become stingy about laboring. You become a "poor" producer.

Suppose the freedom of disposition is taken away from you entirely. That is, you become a slave; you have no right of property. Whatever you produce is taken by somebody else;

and though a good part of it is returned to you, in the way of sustenance, medical care, housing, you cannot under the law dispose of your output; if you try to, you become the legal "robber." Your concern in production wanes and you develop an attitude toward laboring that is called a "slave" psychology. Your interest in yourself also drops because you sense that without the right of property you are not much different from the other living things in the barn. The clergyman may tell you you are a man, with a soul; but you sense that without the right of property you are somewhat less of a man than the one who can dispose of your production as he wills. If you are a human, how human are you?

It is silly, then, to prate of human rights being superior to property rights, because the right of ownership is traceable to the right to life, which is certainly inherent in the human being. Property rights are in fact human rights.

A society built around the denial of this fact is, or must become, a slave society—although the socialists describe it differently. It is a society in which some produce and others dispose of their output. The laborer is not stimulated by the prospect of satisfying his desires but by fear of punishment. When his ownership is not interfered with, when he works for himself, he is inclined to develop his faculties of production because he has unlimited desires. He works for food, as a matter of necessity; but when he has a sufficiency of food, he begins to think of fancy dishes, a tablecloth, and music with his meals. There is no end of desires the human being can conjure up, and will work for, provided he feels reasonably sure that his labor will not be in vain. Contrariwise, when the law deprives him of the incentive of enjoyment, he will work only as necessity compels him. What use is there in putting out more effort?

Therefore, the general production of a socialistic society must decline to the point of mere subsistence.

Decline of Society

The economic decline of a society without property rights is followed by the loss of

other values. It is only when we have a sufficiency of necessities that we give thought to nonmaterial things, to what is called culture. On the other hand, we find we can do without books, or even moving pictures, when existence is at stake. Even more than that, we who have no right to own certainly have no right to give, and charity becomes an empty word; in a socialistic order, no one need give thought to an unfortunate neighbor because it is the duty of the government, the only property owner, to take care of him; it might even become a crime to give a "bum" a dime. When the denial of the right of the individual is negated through the denial of ownership,

the sense of personal pride, which distinguishes man from beast, must decay from disuse. . . .

Whatever else socialism is, or is claimed to be, its first tenet is the denial of private property. All brands of socialism, and there are many, are agreed that property rights must be vested in the political establishment. None of the schemes identified with this ideology, such as the nationalization of industry, or socialized medicine, or the abolition of free choice, or the planned economy, can become operative if the individual's claim to his property is recognized by the government. □

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Confession of a Compliant Taxpayer

by Dwight R. Lee

I'm afraid of the IRS, so I always pay at least as much, and probably more, than I owe in federal taxes. I confess this with apologies to my fellow taxpayers, particularly those who don't do as I do.

You have all heard, and most of you believe, that honest taxpayers are victimized by tax evaders. In an April 1995 *Money* magazine article, for example, Teresa Tritch tells us, "All told, individuals and corporations are expected to shortchange their fellow taxpayers by an estimated \$150 billion this filing season. That adds \$1,932 to the average tax bill of every honest taxpaying U.S. household." This sounds plausible enough at first glance, but it is based on two naive assumptions about how government operates: first, that the government needs some fixed amount of money and so if it receives less from one taxpayer it compensates by taking more from another; second, that we are better off when the government spends more of our money. Neither assumption is supported by our experience with government, or by the logic of the political process.

If the government required only a fixed amount of money each year, we could hope to reduce the federal deficit by increasing tax revenues. Unfortunately, the federal government spends more than a dollar for every

dollar it gets. The budget deficit fluctuates from year to year, but over recent decades it has tended to increase as federal revenues increase. So if some of my fellow taxpayers pay more taxes than required, my taxes are not reduced. Quite the opposite. The government would respond to the additional money by committing to new spending that will grow faster than anticipated, with yet more money and larger deficits being required, and I end up with a larger tax burden. Conversely, if some taxpayers underpay, my taxes will be lower, not higher, than they otherwise would be. And government spending will also be less.

But if I benefit from additional government spending, I might be worse off even if my taxes are lower because others underpay. What I gain in lower taxes might be more than offset in lost government benefits. But do I, or does anyone else, benefit from additional government spending?

This may seem like a silly question. Someone always benefits from a transfer, a subsidy, or a service when the government spends more money. But those benefits always have to be paid for by someone. So the important question is, are the benefits from additional government spending worth the costs? When the government spends more money, are the additional benefits I receive from expansions in my favorite programs worth as much as I have to pay for expansions in the programs

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