

PROPERTY:
ITS ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT.

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LONDON:

WALTER SCOTT, LTD.,
24, WARWICK LANE, PATERNOSTER ROW.

1892.

PREFACE.



MY inspiration for this book, as for earlier volumes, has been drawn from that fruitful method which alone, I believe, can throw light upon sociological origins: I speak of the ethnographic method, which consists in looking upon existing inferior races as living representatives of our primitive ancestors. I am not here concerned to justify this method of treatment. It is the very basis of evolutionary sociology, since it allows us to study *de visu* the series of social stages swallowed up in the gulf of the past. By its help the most distant ages rise again in flesh and blood; by the most scientific of incantations the past becomes the present, and the observer can simultaneously criticise the successive phases through which civilised peoples have taken chronological cycles to pass. Whatever fresh sociological question may be approached, it thus becomes possible to study all its historic and prehistoric links, to embrace, at a glance, the slow strivings of humanity, and call up a spectacle of striking interest.

The evolution of the right of property, the subject of the present work, can, thanks to the ethnographic method, be followed step by step, and the lessons to

be derived from that examination are extremely important. The right of property is the great social mainspring; it is the giant whom primitive races imagined as crouching beneath volcanoes, and causing earthquakes by every movement. No great political revolution but is correlated with some modification of the right of property; no metamorphosis of this right which does not bring with it a political transformation.

In truth, we are here in presence of a powerful instinct, one springing from the very bowels of humanity. I have endeavoured to show that the desire to appropriate is simply one of the manifestations of the instinct of self-preservation, a thing imperious and tyrannical, as are all primordial impulses. But it would be a mistake to conclude from this that the instinct of property cannot be ennobled and idealised. From the point of view of perfectibility, it may be compared with the sentiment of love, capable of inspiring the sublimest devotion, and yet with no other physiological basis than animal rut. The instinct of property, like that of sex, becomes poetic as it is tinged with altruism.

But, as will be seen in the following pages, there seems to be a sort of moral contradiction between the forward march of civilisations and the gradual metamorphosis of the right of property, since this right begins in collectivism and tends towards individualism. Yet primitive man is far from being endowed with refined feeling. He is, however, weak, very poorly armed to carry on his struggle for existence in isolation, and that he may victoriously resist the hostile and injurious influences that assail him from

every quarter, he must unite himself closely with others in little groups : union is strength. Thanks to this needful and salutary solidarity, the ape-like man of the earlier ages was able to increase in numbers, intelligence, and morality. But when, after thousands of years of incessant effort, the battle was gained against the greater part of the dangers that had threatened his cradle, his ancient, ill-tamed, lower sentiments awoke, and a struggle took place between liberated egoism and the irksome solidarity of the first societies. Common property, with its thousand restraints, no longer sufficed an individual aspiring to possess property of his own, entirely to himself, which he had, according to the ancient formula, "the right to use and to abuse."

Such has indeed been the latest form of the right of property in all societies which have sufficiently evolved to reach it. Must we therefore conclude that this form is final and incapable of development? When they have finished this book, my readers will, I hope, be persuaded of the contrary. In fact, in all civilised societies which have preceded our own, the absolute supremacy of the unrestrained and selfish right of private property has been the forerunner of decadence, the main cause of ruin. A more enlightened humanity, having at last succeeded in creating sociological science, may, we would believe, avoid the rock whereon Athens and Rome were shipwrecked. It will understand that the war of each against all and all against each cannot be a sufficiently solid social foundation ; it will perceive that, for the sake of the common safety, it is urgent to idealise the right of property ; not, of course, by slavishly copying institutions which

their own imperfections have destroyed, but by replacing the licence of the selfish right of property by an organisation which, whilst it is altruistic, is also reasonable, scientific, upholding without annihilating the individual, leaving his freedom and his initiative unfettered.

The debate, or rather conflict, has already begun ; the new world is striving against the old. What will be the issue of the conflict? I am amongst those who have faith in the future.

CH. LETOURNEAU.

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I. The Instinct of Property.

Before entering upon the study of the various forms and transformations of property in animal and human societies, it will not be useless to go back to the actual origin of the instinct of property itself. An instinct it certainly is, an innate and ruling propensity. Amongst mankind it has been the great factor in history; before it religion has bent submissive; around it societies have been organised; by it the greater part of codes has been dictated; by it empires have been built up and destroyed. Finally, animals themselves, at least intelligent animals, whatever their zoological type, obey it exactly as do men.

Now when a propensity assumes so universal a character, we may be very sure that it has its root in actual biological necessities, in the depths of organic existence. Indeed, the instinct of property is but one of the manifestations of the most primordial of needs, the need of self-preservation, of existing, and securing existence to offspring. The banquet of nature is very irregular and sometimes very niggardly; the guests are numerous, hungry, and often brutal. Yet, under pain of death, a place must be gained there, defended, and, as far as possible, retained, for continually recurring needs must constantly be satisfied. The severity of the struggle for existence may be greater or less, but it goes on without a truce; therefore the more intelligent the organised being, whether man or animal, the more he takes thought for the future, the more he tries, by securing some sort of property, to reduce the element of chance in his life. In developed nervous centres, whether of a man or of a bee, the incidents of life leave a lasting imprint; a battle fought, a danger encountered, a painful effort made to obtain food or shelter, are written upon the memory and survive there. If an individual has one day succeeded, with great difficulty, in gaining provisions or a covert, he naturally desires more extensive appropriation, sustenance exempt from risk, a sure and permanent lodging. Upon this his mind perpetually dwells, and, according to the measure of his capacities, he procures these precious possessions, this security against misfortune; he becomes a proprietor. But this may

