
Private Property, Primitive Accumulation, and Idolatry

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ABSTRACT

This article suggest that belief in absolute private property rights is a type of dispossession of what rightfully belongs to God and, by extension, the people of God. The first section of this essay address a question so often ignored in discussions of private property rights: how did some people come to be owners of property in the first place, while others own nothing but their own bodies and its labor? Then the article look into the history of dispossession. The second section address how that history is explained away through various types of theodicy. There is an exam about some such theodicies and the author suggest that our prevailing regime of privatization and absolute property rights is a kind of idolatry, the worship of a false god of dispossession.

Keywords: Property; Rights; Dispossession; Theodicy; Idolatry

Propiedad privada, acumulación primitiva e idolatría

RESUMEN

El artículo sugiere que la creencia en los derechos absolutos de la propiedad privada es un tipo de despojo que legítimamente pertenece a Dios y, por extensión, al pueblo de Dios. La primera sección aborda la cuestión, a menudo ignorada en las discusiones sobre los derechos de la propiedad privada: ¿cómo algunos se convirtieron en propietarios mientras otros no poseen nada excepto sus cuerpos y su trabajo? Luego se examina la historia de la desposesión o enajenación. La segunda sección aborda cómo esta historia es explicada a través de varios tipos

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de teodiceas. Se presenta un estudio de dichas teodiceas y el autor sugiere que nuestro predominante régimen de privatización y de los derechos absolutos de la propiedad son una suerte de idolatría, de un culto al falso Dios del despojo.

Palabras clave: Propiedad; Derechos; Enajenación; Teodicea; Idolatría

When I lived and worked in a poor *población* of Santiago de Chile in the final years of the Pinochet dictatorship, there were billboards erected in the neighborhood that read *La libre empresa crea; crea en la libre empresa*. The power of free enterprise to create was indeed something that had to be *believed in*, because tangible evidence of such a miracle was hard to see in the poor neighborhoods of Santiago. There was in Chile a class of businesspeople making plenty of money, unimpeded by government or communal oversight. The people at the bottom of Chilean society were constantly urged to believe that the wealth would eventually trickle down to them. This hopeful eschatology received a boost when Pinochet left power in 1990. Thirty years later, a season of protests in Chile has revealed a large underclass of people who have grown tired of waiting and have ceased to believe.

The regime of absolute private property rights is best understood as underwritten by a kind of belief, a theology that in many ways contradicts Catholic theology. In this brief article, I will suggest that belief in absolute private property rights is a type of dispossession of what rightfully belongs to God and, by extension, the people of God. In the first section of this essay, I address a question so often ignored in discussions of private property rights: how did some people come to be owners of property in the first place, while others own nothing but their own bodies and its labor? After suggesting we look into the history of dispossession, in the second section I address how that history is explained away through various types of theodicy. I briefly examine some such theodicies, and suggest that our prevailing regime of privatization and absolute property rights is a kind of idolatry, the worship of a false god of dispossession.

I. Taking possession

The famous contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal in I Kings 18 is linked to the question of property rights through the story of Naboth's vineyard in I Kings 21. The rival gods YHWH and Baal represent two rival systems of rule and rival systems of property. It is significant to note that the name "Baal" means "owner". The Baalist kings had absolute power, and property was an alienable commodity under Canaanite law. For the Israelites, by contrast, the king was subject to the monarchy of God, and property was inalienable. Each family had their *nachalah*, their share of property.¹ King Ahab violates this arrangement. He wants Naboth's vineyard to extend his palace garden, but Naboth refuses to sell, which would be a violation of Israelite law: «The Lord forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance (I Kings 21:3)». Property rightly belongs to God (cf. Ps. 24:1); its use is for the flourishing of God's people. They do not have sole discretion to do whatever they deem fit with their property. Jezebel, the chief promoter of the cult of Baal, is indignant that some yokel is standing in the way of the king. She has Naboth killed, and presents his vineyard to Ahab. The LORD is displeased, and sends Elijah to Ahab: «Thus says the Lord: Have you killed, and also taken possession? (I Kings 21:19)». Elijah pronounces judgment and doom on the house of Ahab, for «Indeed, there was no one like Ahab, who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the Lord, urged on by his wife Jezebel. He acted most abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the Lord drove out before the Israelites (I Kings 21:25-6)».

The contest between the LORD and Baal is not simply about what we would call "religious belief", but is also about what we would call "economics" and "politics". In the biblical text, there are no such distinctions. The text is simply about the God of life versus the gods that kill and take possession, which is the hallmark of idola-

¹ Timothy Gorringe, «Idolatry and Redemption: Economics in Biblical Perspective», *Political Theology* 11, no. 3 (2010): 369-73.

try. The text needs to be read in light of tensions in the ninth century B.C. between a traditional peasant tribal culture and an urbanized elite influenced by Baalism. Such an historical reading helps us to avoid the anachronism of seeing the issue of idolatry as limited to “religious belief”, but it is more than an exercise in getting the history right. As Timothy Gorringer notes, the issue of idolatry is the key to assessing our current economic system, because the fundamental justification of ownership rights in any society is a theological question. There is always a “god” in this sense, whether or not people express explicit belief in the existence of such a being.² «Every generation will be confronted with its own Ba’als, their own strange gods, who grab power over them and seek to devour them».³

The prophetic refusal of absolute property rights is carried forward in Christian history. From the advocacy of common ownership in Acts 2:44-45 and 4:32 through the work of Church fathers such as Athanasius, Basil, Ambrose, Jerome, and John Chrysostom, private property was considered a post-Fall usurpation of what was meant to be common to all. Aquinas grants that external things are under the power of human beings not by nature, but only according to their use, which has been granted to them by God, who «has sovereign dominion over all things».⁴ It is lawful for humans to procure and dispense property, for humans take better care of property when it is theirs; such an arrangement is more orderly and also cuts down on quarrels. With regard to its use, however, «man ought to possess external things, not as his own, but as common, so that, to wit, he is ready to communicate them to others in their need».⁵ This is the basis for the “social mortgage” on property that recent popes have identified.⁶ God is the true owner of all property; individuals

2 *Ibid.*, 371. Here Gorringer is drawing on Ton Veerkamp, *Die Vernichtung des Baal* (Stuttgart: Alektor, 1981).

3 Ton Veerkamp, *Die Vernichtung ...* 51, quoted in Gorringer, «Idolatry and Redemption: Economics in Biblical Perspective», 372.

4 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II.66.1ad1.

5 *Ibid.*, II-II.66.2.

6 See Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, §42 and Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §93.

may have care of particular pieces of property, but its use belongs to all as common.

The history of private property rights is the history of attacks on this notion of common property. Karl Marx labeled this movement “primitive accumulation”, the origin of capitalism in the seizing of common lands for private use. Marx tells the history of “enclosure” from the sixteenth to nineteenth century in England and Scotland, when common lands that subsistence farmers depended on for their livelihoods were appropriated for private use. Often, peasants were simply driven out by nobles, and any resistance was met by force. When care was taken to dispossess people by legal channels, a bill of enclosure from the House of Lords would divide up common lands among those who already owned land, in proportion to the amount of land they already possessed. Small landowners were often forced to sell, unable to afford legal fees and fencing, and unable to make a living without access to common lands. Game laws harshly punished attempts to find food on property to which one did not have title; laws against vagrancy forced the newly landless into indentured servitude. The result was a class of people, “liberated” from the land, who had nothing to sell but their labor. The enclosure movement worked hand in hand with the industrial revolution, moving subsistence farmers into factories and opening the divide between those capitalists who owned the means of production -land, machines, etc.- and those laborers who owned nothing but their own bodies.⁷ Masses of people were forced to exchange a dignified subsistence for 12 hours a day in the factory, subject to beatings, fines, accidents, poor health conditions, and pay of less than 1 penny per hour.

⁷ Marx’s account of primitive accumulation is found in Karl Marx, *Capital*, volume 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 873-904 [chapters 26-28]. An excellent history of the process can be found in Michael Perelman, *The Invention of Capitalism: Classical Political Economy and the Secret History of Primitive Accumulation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).

The process of primitive accumulation is, as Michael Perelman writes, «an uninterrupted story of coercion».⁸ That story is not limited to England and Scotland, but played out similarly on the European Continent and especially wherever colonization took place including the *encomienda* system in Latin America, the theft of Indian land in North America, and the use of African slaves. The rise of capitalism depended on massive projects of dispossession and privatization. Though Marx presented primitive accumulation as a one-time stage in world history, it is in fact ongoing, a phenomenon that characterizes not only the early modern period but our own. Fred Pearce's book *The Land Grabbers* documents what he calls the «final enclosure of the planet's wild places, a last roundup on the global commons».⁹ The process of enclosure is ongoing and has lately intensified, as corporations, governments, and wealthy individuals take control of huge swaths of land in the global South, often removing its current inhabitants by force.

The Guinea Savannah Zone in Africa, covering one and a half million square miles, is one of the largest places currently subject to enclosure. The World Bank calls this zone «the world's last large reserves of underused land» and indeed most development schemes rely on this view of the land as insufficiently exploited and notionally "empty". The Guinea Savannah Zone, however, is not empty; it is home to 600 million people, mostly farmers and herders who make use of every inch of it. Most are poor and have real needs that are not being met. Large-scale industrial farming for markets is being proposed as the solution, promising abundant food and jobs. But as even one agribusiness executive admitted in 2011, «exclusively industrial-scale farming displaces and alienates peoples, creates few jobs and causes social disruption».¹⁰

8 Perelman, *Invention of Capitalism* ... 15.

9 Fred Pearce, *The Land Grabbers: The New Fight Over Who Owns the Earth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), p. x.

10 James Siggs, quoted in *ibid.*, ix.

The most commonly proposed solution to food insecurity is propagated from above, that is, by governments and corporations that are at a significant remove from people who actually know their land. In the Gambella region of Ethiopia, for example, the government in the 2010s moved peasant farmers into state-designated villages and handed their fields and forests over to foreign agribusinesses. Most of the rural population of Gambella was relocated. Under the terms of the government's contract with the Indian agribusiness giant Karuturi, the land must be provided with "vacant possession" and the government must provide security against riots. The government used massacres, intimidation, the closing of schools, and other tactics to force people from their homes.¹¹ This scenario is being played out all over the world, in Liberia, Ukraine, Brazil, Indonesia, Cambodia, Mali, and the list goes on. Meanwhile, large-scale monocropping has produced a host of problems: increased vulnerability to epidemics and infestations, pollution, degradation of soil, concentration of political and economic power, reliance on fossil fuels, and climate change.

As sociologists Charles Geisler and Fouad Makki write, «new enclosures surpass the enclosures of bygone centuries in scale and speed».¹² The phenomenon is not limited to what Gita Dewan Verma calls «the great terrain robbery»,¹³ but includes the privatization of other formerly common resources, such as water, minerals, precious metals, fish, and genetic materials, such as seeds; it also includes the pollution of common resources like air and water for private gain. In her important work on "surveillance capitalism", Shoshana Zuboff has recently argued that the mining of personal data for sale by Google, Facebook, Verizon and others is the most recent mutation

11 Fred Pearce, *Land Grabbers ...* 3-16.

12 Charles Geisler and Fouad Makki, «People, Power, and Land: New Enclosures on a Global Scale», *Rural Sociology* 79, no. 1 (March 2014): 28.

13 Gita Dewan Verma, *Slumming India: A Chronicle of Slums and Their Saviours* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2002).

of primitive accumulation.¹⁴ Human experience is like “virgin” land was to the colonists. Without our knowledge or consent, our online habits -and increasingly our movements in the world of things- are tracked and mined to establish behavioral profiles of individual users that are then sold to marketers who target us with increasingly successful attempts at behavior modification. Each individual’s behavior, tracked through online activity and “smart” devices and spaces, becomes a kind of behavioral surplus that is expropriated by powerful others for the sake of profit. The process is marked by a drastic asymmetry of knowledge and power; they know all about us, but their operations are unknowable to us. Whereas industrial capitalism thrived at the expense of nature, surveillance capitalism thrives at the expense of human nature. Humans are the “sources of raw-material supply” for surveillance capitalism;¹⁵ «ownership of the new means of behavioral modification eclipses the ownership of the means of production as the fountainhead of capitalist wealth and power in the twenty-first century».¹⁶

One of the ironic implications of this new situation is that, while primitive accumulation as expropriation of land and resources operates by privatizing formerly common goods, primitive accumulation as data mining operates by violating privacy on a massive scale. Instead of privatizing common goods, surveillance capitalism invades one of the last spaces beyond the reach of corporate control -the privacy of one’s own habits, thoughts, and feelings- and expropriates it, without consent, for profit. In American jurisprudence, free speech has long been linked to private property rights; corporate spending on elections, for example, is protected as free speech. As a result, US courts have been quick to stop government overreach, but reluctant to check corporate power. It becomes apparent that the defense of private property that accompanies pri-

14 Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (London: Profile, 2019), 99-100.

15 *Ibid.*, 69-70.

16 *Ibid.*, 11.

primitive accumulation is not simply about defending the individual from interference by greater forces like government and corporations, but is rather central to the defense of the ability of the wealthy and the powerful to expropriate what belongs to common people for the sake of profit.

II. Theodicy and idolatry

The justification of dispossession has always and everywhere been accompanied by a kind of theodicy, an explanation for why the gods of dispossession are not unjust in acting as they do. Marx famously pointed out how primitive accumulation was commonly explained by laborers' -or their ancestors'- lack of virtue, a capitalist version of the theological tale of original sin: Somewhere in the misty past, some people were hardworking and frugal while others were lazy and dissolute. As a result, some had property and others had nothing but their labor to sell.¹⁷ Other theodicies view the division of labor from capital as necessary, the "lot of man," according to which the poverty of some is beneficial to the whole. As one observer in 1815 put it:

«Poverty is that state and condition in society where the individual has no surplus labor in store, or, in other words, no property or means of subsistence but what is derived from the constant exercise of industry in the various occupations of life. Poverty is therefore a most necessary and indispensable ingredient in society, without which nations and communities could not exist in a state of civilization. It is the lot of man. "It is the source of wealth", since without poverty, there could be no labour; there could be "no riches, no refinement, no comfort", and no benefit to those who may be possessed of wealth».¹⁸

Most commonly, however, the privatization of property is defended with a theodicy that claims that private ownership and the exploitation of resources guided by self-interest will in fact work

17 Karl Marx, *Capital*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), vol. 1, 873 [chapter 26].

18 Patrick Colquhoun, quoted in Perelman, *Invention of Capitalism ...* 23.

to the benefit of all. “Modernization” and “efficiency” are the key terms. In the industrial revolution, those in power assumed that factories, not subsistence farming, contributed to economic growth, an export economy, and national wealth. The story goes that sheep whose wool fed the Midlands textile factories made more efficient use of the land than peasant farmers; their labor was better put to use in those same factories. National wealth depended on peasants being “freed” from the land to work for wages.

Contemporary Catholic defenses of privatized ownership do not reject the social purpose of property, but tend to construct theodicies in which private ownership more efficiently promotes social purposes. An example is Philip Booth’s critique of *Laudato Si’*. According to Booth, Pope Francis, like Pope John Paul II before him, emphasizes that private property is under a “social mortgage”, and that the care of the environment cannot be left to market forces. There is, however, another strand of Catholic social teaching according to which, in Booth’s words, «private ownership helps deliver the social mortgage in general, if not always».¹⁹ Booth cites Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* for its defense of private property rights as “inviolable”; private property rights are a natural right, based on the right to the product of one’s labor.²⁰ According to Booth, however, private property can also be justified by arguments for the common good, in this case, for the sake of our shared environment. For Leo, workers will work harder on and take care of that which belongs to them.²¹ In this light, Booth also invokes a much-cited article from 1968 entitled “The Tragedy of the Commons” in which Garrett Hardin argues that no one will take care of land over which no one has exclusive property rights. While rejecting Hardin’s advocacy of compulsory population control, Booth accepts the idea

19 Philip Booth, «Property Rights and Conservation: The Missing Theme of *Laudato Si’*» in *Pope Francis and the Caring Society*, ed. Robert M. Whaples (Oakland: Independent Institute, 2017), 163.

20 Note that Pope Francis expressly denies this inviolability: «The Christian tradition has never recognized the right to private property as absolute or inviolable, and has stressed the social purpose of all forms of private property» Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §93.

21 Booth, «Property Rights and Conservation», 160-61.

that defending private property rights is best for the environment.²² Booth argues that there is empirical evidence that deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon is caused by insecure property rights, and that this evidence is generalizable. Another study suggests that former British colonies have better records on deforestation because they allowed the “pioneers” direct property rights, whereas in Spanish colonies timber was property of the Crown, to be exploited by a powerful elite often living far from the land itself.²³ Booth chides Francis for ignoring the importance of property rights for protecting the environment.

There are several telling gaps in Booth’s argument. In the first place, Pope Leo was defending the private property rights of workers to their wages. As Leo writes «Now, when man thus turns the activity of his mind and the strength of his body toward procuring the fruits of nature, by such act he makes his own that portion of nature’s field which he cultivates».²⁴ Leo was attempting to combat what he saw as the evil of communism, the expropriation of the worker’s labor by the state. Booth makes the leap from the worker’s labor to other kinds of property. The Church’s tradition, he says, has always forbidden depriving a person of their justly earned wages. «If justly acquired property simply amounts to wages in another form, the entitlement to property is much stronger than if such entitlement is justified on the prudential grounds of promoting the common good».²⁵ The problem is that all “justly acquired property” is not the same as wages for labor; if “justly acquired property” includes inherited property or the capital gains stockholders acquire through the labor of others, then wages for labor are something quite different. In a system of private property rights, it is possible to make fabulous amounts of money without doing any labor at all.

²² *Ibid.*, 164.

²³ *Ibid.*, 167.

²⁴ Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, §8, as quoted in Booth, «Property Rights and Conservation», 161.

²⁵ Booth, «Property Rights and Conservation», 161.

As is common in theodicies of property rights, the whole question of how people came to possess property in the first place is simply not addressed. Booth ignores the question of primitive accumulation. How did the “pioneers” come into possession of the land in the first place? They did so by violently dispossessing indigenous communities who owned the land in common. Deforestation was not a problem in the Amazon until “pioneers” of European descent with international corporate ties began clear-cutting and burning enormous tracts of the jungle for the purpose of logging, mining, and large-scale agriculture. The commons was not a tragedy under indigenous control; the Amazon is being destroyed to sell beef to Burger King. The privatization of the commons is not captured by Booth’s picture of hardy and responsible pioneers taking good care of their land (that they just happened to find empty of people); it is rather, as Pearce documents, more generally a tale of coercion and exploitation.²⁶

What really marks Booth’s argument as a theodicy is his contention that «private ownership helps deliver the social mortgage in general, if not always». Particular evils are justified by a supposed general good; a prior belief in the general good thus permits all subsequent particular evils. Booth’s argument does not make private ownership “contingent on” serving a social purpose, but simply assures us that, in general, it does serve a social purpose. The notion of a social mortgage found in Catholic Social Teaching, by contrast, is contingent, like a home mortgage: you can live here and be considered the owner of this house, “provided that” you continue to make payments on a prearranged schedule. For a social mortgage, those payments are the service rendered to the good of others, most especially the poor. Any instance of private property is only justified insofar as it actually does serve a social function. As Pope

26 To Booth’s credit, he discusses Elinor Ostrom’s work on communal property rights that give local communities the power to determine the best use of common resources; *ibid.*, 171-77. I don’t see why he thinks this is a correction to Pope Francis. Booth seems to envision the commons as a kind of non-ownership, whereas communal property rights give people a legal stake in the land’s preservation. Pope Francis, on the other hand, attributes the ownership of everything to God. As discussed below, any human ownership can only be a participation in God’s ownership.

Francis writes, «If we make something our own, it is only to administer it for the good of all. If we do not, we burden our consciences with the weight of having denied the existence of others».²⁷ It is in this sense that private property is “subordinate” to the universal destination of goods, as Pope Francis writes,²⁸ or private property is “under” a social mortgage, as Pope John Paul II says: «Private property, in fact, is under a “social mortgage”, which means that it has an intrinsically social function, based upon and justified precisely by the principle of the universal destination of goods».²⁹ The social mortgage is not a desirable state of affairs “delivered” by private ownership; it is a stringent requirement placed upon private ownership, such that any particular instance of private ownership is only justifiable if it serves a common need.

To recognize that general defenses of private property are types of theodicy is to recognize that there is a type of *theos*, a god, implicit in regimes of private possession and dispossession. As in the story of Elijah from I Kings, dispossession, absolute ownership, and the alienation of property are densely intertwined with the worship of an idolatrous god. Pope Francis has repeatedly made use of the language of idolatry³⁰ in describing the faith that people put in market forces to shed their grace on the poor and dispossessed, despite all evidence to the contrary. Francis refers to a “deified market” that has become absolutized, so that the true God can appear only as an “unmanageable” threat, and the poor and the environment a nuisance.³¹ Francis writes of the sacralization of the market and the theodicy that causes people to believe it is always about to -though it never actually does- deliver its benefits to all: «some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that econo-

27 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §95.

28 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §93.

29 Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, §42.

30 I detail Francis' use of idolatry to describe economic realities in my article «Return of the Golden Calf: Economy, Idolatry, and Secularization since *Gaudium et Spes*», *Theological Studies* 76, no. 4 (December 2015): 698-717.

31 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §56-57.

mic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world. This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system». ³² As a result, writes Francis, «We have created new idols. The worship of the ancient golden calf (cf. *Ex* 32:1–35) has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose». ³³

What kind of practice of ownership does Pope Francis think can resist such idolatry? He does not suggest a regime of state ownership of property. Rather, quoting Scripture, he attributes the ownership of everything to God. «The created things of this world are not free of ownership: “For they are yours, O Lord, who love the living (*Wis* 11:26)”. This is the basis of our conviction that, as part of the universe, called into being by one Father, all of us are linked by unseen bonds and together form a kind of universal family, a sublime communion which fills us with a sacred, affectionate and humble respect». ³⁴ Any human ownership, therefore, can only be a participation in God’s ownership, which draws us out of the confines of the self and into communion with God’s people and God’s creation. All ownership is communal. In *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis refers to a “communitarian salvation,” an «experience of community in which the walls of the ego are torn down and the barriers of selfishness overcome». ³⁵ A sane practice of property is one in which we recognize in our material lives our inherent connection to one another in God.

32 *Ibid.*, §54.

33 *Ibid.*, §55.

34 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*, §89.

35 *Ibid.*, §149.

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