

DK: *This is ARREST from the Punk Ethnography website, my name is Douglas Kidd.*

*ARREST is a series of short pieces that uses anecdote, theory and reflection to share an idea that we hope you find arresting- an idea that stops you and helps you think a little differently.*

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## Property is theft

I am telling this story in February 2024 from my home in Groningen, a city in the north of the Netherlands. When I first moved here in 2022, I lived for a few months in the ORKZ, a beautiful building which was a hospital serving Groningen until 1979. When it was decommissioned, the city authorities made the decision to hand the site to developers to build luxury flats, but before that could happen, a large group of activists occupied the building, squatting there and setting up a community. After several years of battles and negotiations with the local authority, the squat was legalised in 1985 and is still there today as a self-organised community, with the building formally owned by a housing association who rent the building to the residents' group.

The ORKZ is organised around the old hospital wards. Each corridor is made up of a series of rooms which share a kitchen, bathroom and storage rooms, and each organises cleaning, social events and the choosing of new residents. The room I sublet was next to the bathroom and when they had retiled the shower, the residents of the corridor had chosen simple plain tiles, all save one. At head height, one tile was decorated with a silhouette of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the phrase: Property is Theft.

Each morning, as I showered with Proudhon, I would reflect on this phrase.

Pierre-Joseph Proudhon wrote the book "What is Property" in 1840. In explaining his claim that property is theft he begins by distinguishing property-as-possession from property-as-dominion.

He describes possession as a fact. Possessions are the clothes on my back, the food on my plate, the place where I lay my head. It is the stuff of life; what I need to continue to exist. We might debate how big a house I need, how much food I have. But we would not debate the fact of those needs.

Property as dominion, which he often just shortens to property in contrast to possession, is something different. If possession is the clothes on your back, property is the ownership of a clothing factory, if possession is the food on your plate, property is the farm, and if possession is the place I live, property is the landlord.

Property then is a kind of dominion or sovereignty that assigns absolute rights to the proprietor. The right to do whatever you want with the property, the right to use it or abuse it, to destroy it, withhold it, extract rent or profit from it, all with impunity.

In chapter 2 of "What is Property", Proudhon writes:

*The proprietor may, if he chooses, allow his crops to rot under foot, sow his field with salt, milk his cows on the sand, change his vineyard into a desert, and use his vegetable-garden as a park: do these things constitute abuse, or not? In the matter of property, use and abuse are necessarily indistinguishable.*

I think this begins to point to how property can be equated with theft.

The statement begs the question: theft from whom?

If I go fishing and catch a fish for a meal, we would consider that fish my possession. If I claim the river as mine, that is dominion. I can now prevent anyone else from fishing and keep all the fish for myself, I can sell rights to the water to a range of farmers or businesses and dry the river. I can sell rights to factories to discharge waste into the river and pollute it. My dominion is complete- I can use or abuse the river as I see fit, and so my theft is of that which was once common to all. I have stolen from the commons.

The theft of the commons is fundamental to feudalism. There are some wonderful old words in English that relate the rights to use common land. **Pannage** was the right to keep your pigs in the woods, **turbary** was the right to cut peat for fuel, **estovers** the right to collect firewood and **piscary** the right to fish for food.

When common land was enclosed and defined as the property of landowners- for example through acts of parliaments or through colonisation- this cast the commoner from the land, removed their rights to possession and forced them to become serfs, labourers or even criminals as their previous rights became the crimes of trespass or poaching.

In capitalism the proprietor owns the means of production. In addition to the theft from the commons of the raw materials for production and the harder-to-see theft of the shared liveability of the planet caused by the waste products of production, the ownership of the means of production allows for a theft of the value labour adds- and particularly what Proudhon calls the collective force- the creativity and energy of a common endeavour- the light work that many hands can make of a task shared amongst a group.

So this incendiary phrase that greeted me each morning points to the root of oppression. Any elite, whether defined by gender, class, race, birth or membership of a group with special status, any elite that claims property rights automatically claims sovereignty or dominion over others. That will be enacted through exclusion, the extraction of rent, profit, tax, servitude, enslavement- the propertied become one group and the rest are the Others. A good example of this Othering is the English word commoner which changes from

encapsulating rights and freedoms to denoting vulgarity and inferiority: the term 'commoner' becomes an insult.

My room was my possession at the ORKZ. Until it wasn't, because the friend I was subletting from returned from her travels to take her room back. Now it is her room until she gives it up and the corridor chooses a new resident. We shared each of us in turn the right of use, but not of abuse. The common areas such as the bathroom we shared the cleaning and maintenance of. The corridors of the old hospital we cleaned every few months collectively with people joining in to share the work as their availability allowed.

I still volunteer at the cinema that takes place every Monday and Saturday at the ORKZ, run by a committee of volunteers providing weekly films to residents and locals alike.

The ORKZ is one of many attempts, noble and flawed as any human attempt, to create spaces outside of this logic of property as a theft.

To create common spaces, where shared human labour and creativity can benefit all and possession is sufficient to a good life without theft from the common good.

Douglas Kidd, 10/2/24.