

# History of an Issue – Property

Niadi-Corina CERNICA, *Lecturer Ph.D.*  
*Department of Human, Social and Political Sciences,*  
*“Ștefan cel Mare” University of Suceava, Romania*  
*niadi.cernica@yahoo.com*

## Abstract

*Property becomes a issue of philosophy and political reflections owing to Platon`s “Republic”. In this dialogue, the military class of his political Utopia is obliged not to possess goods. So that the Republic is more important than their interests. For this reason the military class is obliged not to have family. The interest of Republic is more important than the individual interests.*

*David Hume thinks the right comes from the property (the two concepts have developed correspondingly). Property is a result of human natural needs. The needs are complied with the property. Human nature implies the property.*

*John Locke affirms property comes from work, so it is a moral right.*

*J.J. Rousseau thinks the property is the origin of social and political inequality, in contrast with natural equality of human beings.*

*Karl Marx affirms property is the origin of alienation. Property is the origin of estrangement of human beings from themselves. “Marxist humanism” implies to regain the dignity of work and the social dignity.*

*Other philosophers think the property is a warrant of freedom.*

*Property was tied to social interests (Platon), to morality (Thomas Morus, John Locke), to human nature (J. J. Rousseau, David Hume, Karl Marx) and freedom.*

**Keywords:** *Property, Nature, Culture, Ethics, Liberty.*

Property became an issue which was examined by philosophers and political thinkers in the modern epoch, with two remarkable exceptions: Plato and Thomas Morus.

In the dialogue “Republic”, Plato examines the problem of property when he discusses about the class of soldiers from his ideal State. The soldiers should not have the right to property (and also they should not have family) because the good of the State must be more important than their own good. Property and the care for property are synonymous with their personal interest which are opposite to the interest of the State (or it can be opposite to the interest of the State). Property is at the basis of the conflict between the citizen and the State, between individual and

society. Therefore the soldiers must not have family (they must not have wives and the education of their children must be entrusted to the State). The domain of private life, the domain of family and property is an inferior domain from Plato's point of view.

Property and family are the domain of the individual (the private life of the individual aims and interests), which can prevail over the general interests of the State. Property and family are the origin of the power of individual against the power and the interest of society.

Since the beginning, the dispute about property acquired an important place.

Middle Ages did not take into account the issue of property, but the Christian thinkers expressed negative opinions about it. Poverty was one of the virtues of the Christians and an obligation for the monks. The situation influenced the thought of Thomas Morus, the author of the work "Utopia" and an important personality of English Catholic Church. "The personality of Thomas Morus surprises someone concerning his destiny because in 1886 the Catholic Church canonized him and before Marx the thought of Thomas Morus as a source of his own thought, and Engels, in his turn, in some works (some of them after 1886) referred highly to Thomas Morus and considered him a source of socialism advanced by Engels himself"<sup>1</sup>. "Utopia" contains two parts – the first part is a criticism of the English society which had problems determined by polarizing of wealth (terrible poverty for many people, accumulation of means of a few by the textile industry), England at the beginning of industrialization when "the sheep was eating the man"; the second part is a description of an imaginary society, a society of justice and equality. The two parts of the "Utopia" must be correlated, and the second part can be understood as an answer at the problems of England described in the first part. In "Utopia" Thomas Morus proposes the renunciation at private property and the replacement of private property with collective property, which brings on justice and equality. The latter terms are key-words concerning the future debates about property. The difference of wealth leads to injustice (the abuses of wealthy men, the suffering of the poor, the unequal chances – all these are realities and consequences of difference of wealth). The economic inequality is considered an injustice (and economic equality is possible only through collective property). Moral defects which the economic differences bring on in society (both wealth and poverty can bring on moral evil) can't be otherwise liquidated from the point of view of Thomas Morus. Justice and equality are arguments for renunciation at

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<sup>1</sup> Gh. Al. Cazan, *Introducere în filosofie (Introduction to Philosophy)* (Bucharest: Universitară Publishing House, 2006), 389-390.

private property which will be invoked both in the XIXth century (the century of Karl Marx) and in the XXth century (the century of communist totalitarianism). The ideal of justice related with to economic equality, the economic inequality and private property as reasons of suffering and injustice are new ideas in the political thought and they appeared because of the extreme poverty caused by the beginning of industrialization of the English population. Until Thomas Morus nobody considered the society marked by injustice and economic inequality; they were considered natural. Injustice was related only with moral field, and equality was not a theme of political thought. A literary writing as “Utopia” of Thomas Morus changed the theoretical framework of debates about property.

David Hume considers that property appeared as a result of natural needs of the man, therefore the right to private property is a natural right. From property (as possession and a complex of rules associated with possession) come the rules of justice in society. Since he considers property a natural right (though it is not named so), Hume brings a new accentuation in the debate: property as a right of men (not as a merit due to work and not as a right of the first arrive, concerning the land). Property is simply a right of every person which is justified by natural needs of every person. Besides this, society developed due of property.

John Locke considers property a merit, a right acquired by work, but it is restricted by the harm that property can bring to other persons. It is an ambiguous standpoint: it is not sure that property is a natural right (in my opinion it isn't; Locke affirms clearly that property is a right acquired by work) and the restriction of right to property of a person when his property brings harm to other persons shows that other rights may restrict the right to private property. State has the right to settle the private property, to conciliate the right to property with other rights of persons.

J. J. Rousseau considers property the origin of social and political inequality, in contrast with the natural equality of men.

All the debates about right to property made evident the different implications of the standpoints. The debates about the problem of property have motives and consequences which make it a theme as difficult as other themes such as liberty and rights, fundamental themes of political thought. Perhaps the reflections are partial, but the theoretical frameworks of the reflections show that the meditations about right to private property have wide implications.

We shall examine another theory about property, Karl Marx's theory, from his early works.

According to Lawrence Wilde “the essence of the political thought of the young Marx can be found in the notion of essence itself or, more precisely, in the notion of human essence”<sup>2</sup> and “the great theme of the writings from 1844-1845 is the theme of alienation (Entausserung) or estrangement (Entfremdung)”.<sup>3</sup> The essence of man is the liberty which he lost because he was caught in a complex of social relations which are in relation of property. Liberty is “the development of human forces which is its own aim”<sup>4</sup> affirms Wolfgang H. Pleger.

Marx thought “modern worker lives four forms of alienation. First, the alienation concerning the product of his work, which doesn’t belong to the worker, but to the employer. Secondly, the alienation concerning the act of production in the framework of the process of work, since the work is forced and is lived with pain and weakness. Thirdly, the alienation concerning the existence as species (Gattungswesen), a term from Feuerbach which refers to what is characteristic of mankind. Marx refers frequently at dehumanization of the worker, with the implication that this system of production deprives him of something which belongs to him as human being. (...) The fourth aspect of alienation – a consequence of the others – is «the alienation of the man concerning the man».”<sup>5</sup> Marx comes to the conclusion that emancipation of the workers include “the universal emancipation of the man, because the whole human servitude is implicated in the process of production”.<sup>6</sup>

The abolition of private property is the answer, from the point of view of Karl Marx, because the relations of property and the estrangement of the product of work, of the work, the dehumanization because of the estrangement and the loss of the relation with men (because of dehumanized social relations and the fulfillment of the ideals in religious ideologies), have as base the private property. As Feuerbach, Marx considers that (Lawrence Wilde) “the essence of the man is only in community and in the union of human being with human being”. Commencing from this postulate, the social injustice because of the private property, the replacement of human relations with relations of production and property (which are the basis of the social relations), which transformed the creative work in merchandise and simple source of subsistence, led to the loss of the human essence.

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<sup>2</sup> D. Boucher and P. Kelly (eds.), *Mari gânditori politici (Political Thinkers: From Socrates to the Present)* (Bucharest: ALL, 2008), 373.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, 375.

<sup>4</sup> Ferdinand Fellmann (ed.), *Istoria filosofiei în secolul al XIX-lea (History of Philosophy in the 19th century)* (Bucharest: ALL, 2000), 173.

<sup>5</sup> Boucher and Kelly, *Mari gânditori politici*, 375.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, 377.

It is a complex analysis of the relations of property and of the right to private property, but even the consideration of the human essence as a social essence and the reduction of the society at the relations of property were strongly criticized. Because he thought that his philosophy must be transformed in action, Karl Marx was the founder of the communist ideology which led to the historical disaster of XXth century – the communist totalitarianism.

The right to private property must be defended. But the debate extended and became more difficult. The philosophical inheritance of the problem of property may be turned, from our point of view, to Plato, with an inverse approach – the private property is a guarantee of autonomy and the power of the individual in his relation with society and the other individuals.

In the history of political philosophy, property was connected with the good of society (Plato), justice, equality and morality (Thomas Morus, John Locke), human nature (J. J. Rousseau, David Hume, Karl Marx) and liberty. It was a theme which was subordinated to other themes of political philosophy or it was a central theme of political philosophy.

History will bring new debates on this theme, such as the problem which was intuited by John Locke, if a right (even the right to private property) can be limited by another rights and in which situations.

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