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Karl Marx, *[On Inheritance]*³⁸

The working class, who had nothing to inherit, had no interest in the question.

The Democratic Alliance was going to commence the social revolution with the abolition of the right of inheritance. He [Marx] asked would it be policy to do so?

The proposition was not new. St Simon had proposed it in 1830.

As an economical measure, it would avail nothing. It would cause so much irritation that it would be sure to raise an almost insurmountable opposition which would inevitably lead to reaction. If at the time of a revolution it was proclaimed, he did not believe that the general state of intelligence would warrant its being sustained. Besides, if the working class had sufficient power to abolish the right of inheritance, it would be powerful enough to proceed to expropriation, which would be a much simpler and more efficient process.

To abolish the right to the inheritance of land in England would involve the hereditary functions connected with the land, the House of Lords, etc., and 15,000 lords and 15,000 ladies would have to die before it became available. If, on the contrary, a workingmen's parliament decreed that the rent should be paid into the treasury instead of to the landlord, the government would obtain a fund at once without any social disturbance, while by abolishing the right of inheritance everything would be disturbed and nothing got.

Our efforts must be directed to the end that no instruments of production should be private property. The private property in these things was a fiction, since the proprietors could not use them themselves; they only gave them

³⁸ This text is the synopsis of a speech by Karl Marx (see note 1) to the GC, on 20 July 1869, during debate on the agenda for the Basel Congress. Partly reproduced here, its full version is in GC, III: 128–32.

dominion over them, by which they compelled other people to work for them. In a semi-barbarous state, this might have been necessary, but it was no longer so. All the means of labour must be socialized, so that every man had a right and the means to exercise his labour power. If we had such a state of things, the right of inheritance would be of no use. As long as we had not, the family right of inheritance could not be abolished. The chief aim of people in saving for their children was to insure them the means of subsistence. If a man's children were provided for after his death, he could not care about leaving them wherewith to get a living, but as long as this was not the case, it would only result in hardships, it would irritate and frighten people and do no good. Instead of the beginning it could only be the end of a social revolution. The beginning must be to get the means to socialize the means of labour.

The testamentary right of inheritance was obnoxious to the middle class; with this the state could safely interfere any time. We had legacy duties already, all we had to do was to increase them and make them progressive, as well as the income tax, leaving the smaller amounts, £50, for instance, free. Insofar only it was a working-class question.

All that was connected with the present state of things would have to be transformed, but if testaments were suppressed they would be avoided by gifts during life, therefore it would be better to tolerate them on certain conditions than do worse. First, the means for a transformed state of things must be got, then the right would disappear of itself. [...]

If the state had the power to appropriate the land, inheritance was gone. To declare the abolition of inheritance would be foolish. If a revolution occurred, expropriation could be carried; if there was no power to do that, the right of inheritance would not be abolished.