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Karl Marx, [*On the Right of Inheritance*]⁴⁰

The right of inheritance is only of social import insofar as it leaves to the heir the power which the deceased wielded *during his lifetime* – viz., the power of transferring to himself, by means of his property, the produce of other people's labour. For instance, land gives the living proprietor the power to transfer to himself, under the name of rent, without any equivalent, the produce of other people's labour. Capital gives him the power to do the same under the name of profit and interest. The property in public funds gives him the power to live without labour upon other people's labour, etc.

Inheritance does not *create* that power of transferring the produce of one man's labour into another man's pocket – it only relates to the change in individuals who yield that power. Like all other civil legislation, the laws of inheritance are not the cause, but the effect, the juridical consequence of the existing economical organization of society, based upon private property in the means of production; that is to say, in land, raw material, machinery, etc. In the same way, the right of inheritance in the slave is not the cause of slavery, but on the contrary, slavery is the cause of inheritance in slaves.

What we have to grapple with is the cause and not the effect – the economical basis, not the juridical superstructure. Suppose the means of production transformed from private into social prosperity, then the right of inheritance (so far as it is of any social importance) would die of itself, because a man only leaves after his death what he possessed during his lifetime. Our great aim must, therefore, be to supersede those institutions which give to some people,

⁴⁰ This text is an excerpt from the *Report of the General Council on the Right of Inheritance*. It was written by Karl Marx (see note 1) on 2 and 3 August 1869, and was presented by Johann Georg Eccarius (see note 34) on 10 September 1869, at a session of the Basel Congress. It received 19 votes in favour and 37 against, making it the first report of the GC not approved at an IWMA Congress. It was originally published in B1869 and is located in the GC, III: 322–4.

during their lifetime, the economical power of transferring to themselves the fruits of labour of the many. Where the state of society is far enough advanced, and the working class possesses sufficient power to abrogate such institutions, they must do so in a *direct way*. For instance, by doing away with the public debt, they get of course, at the same time, rid of inheritance in public funds. On the other hand, if they do not possess the power to abolish the public debt, it would be a foolish attempt to abolish the right of inheritance in public funds.

The disappearance of the right of inheritance will be the natural result of a social change superseding private property in the means of production; but the abolition of the right of inheritance can never be the starting point of such a social transformation.

It was one of the great errors committed about 40 years since by the disciples of St Simon, to treat the right of inheritance not as the legal effect but as the economic cause of the present social organization. This did not at all prevent them from perpetuating in their system of society private property in land and the other means of production. Of course, elective and lifelong proprietors, they thought, might exist as elective kings have existed.

To proclaim the abolition of the right of inheritance as the starting point of the social revolution would only tend to lead the working class away from the true point of attack against present society. It would be as absurd a thing as to abolish the laws of contract between buyer and seller, while continuing to present state of exchange of commodities.

It would be a thing false in theory, and reactionary in practice.

In treating of the laws of inheritance, we necessarily suppose that private property in the means of production continues to exist. If it did no longer exist among the living, it could not be transferred from them, and by them, after their death. All measures, in regard to the right of inheritance, can therefore only relate to a state of social transition, where, on the one hand, the present economical base of society is not yet transformed, but where, on the other hand, the working masses have gathered strength enough to enforce transitory measures calculated to bring about an ultimate radical change of society.

Considered from this standpoint, changes of the laws of inheritance form only part of a great many other transitory measures tending to the same end.

These transitory measures, as to inheritance, can only be:

- a. Extension of the inheritance duties already existing in many states, and the application of the funds hence derived to purposes of social emancipation.
- b. Limitation of the testamentary right of inheritance, which – as distinguished from the intestate or family right of inheritance – appears as arbitrary and superstitious exaggeration even of the principles of private property themselves.