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Paul Voituron

The Right to Labour and Property (1848)


Paul Eugène Voituron was born in Ghent (Belgium) on 14 February 1824. He studied mathematics and philosophy at the University of Ghent, but eventually graduated as a lawyer. In the period 1846–51 he was the secretary of the ‘Société Huet’, a group of students and colleagues of the French philosopher François Huet who gathered at regular intervals to discuss social issues. In the 1860s he became involved in local politics, and was elected for the liberal party in the city council of Ghent where he served twice as alderman. Throughout his life he published on various philosophical, political and literary issues. He died in Ghent on 12 February 1891. In March 1848 Voituron wrote *Le Droit au Travail et la Propriété*. He might have conceived it as an article, but as far as we can see he never published it. In all probability he wrote it to clarify his views on property and inheritance, which were at that time controversial issues in the Société Huet. An ongoing debate opposed partisans of full private property rights to those who were in favour of various ‘communist’ solutions. Gradually a kind of compromise was reached around a mixed property regime, with the idea of a dotation appearing in the notebooks of the Société Huet for the first time in November 1848. In *Le Règne Social du Christianisme*, the book which Huet published in 1853 after his resignation from the University of Ghent and his return to Paris, the dotation idea occupied a prominent position. Although we do not claim that Huet took the idea from Voituron, it is clear that Voituron’s paper is the first document coming from the Huet circle which mentions it.
We are endowed with reason and feeling, we are essentially intelligent and free, yet we are born weak and imperfect, destined for evil and error. While incessantly carried away by our passions and our sensory illusions, we nevertheless feel that our genuine greatness, our real life lies in our reason and in its domination of our body and our environment. Man is thus put on earth to shape his intellectual, moral and material perfection, to let wisdom and virtue excel in himself and in society, and to put the inferior forces of nature to the service of the superior power of his reason. To attain this goal he has a right to claim his rightful share of the instruments of development which God has given to all. This is the general principle which leads to the right to work and to the conditions to exercise this right.

The most indisputable human right is the right to live. Each viably born human being derives from God and from the mere fact of his birth the right to continue to live. But on its own this right would be of no use to man, because he needs the material means to exercise it. Since man has not been given these means by nature, he has to acquire them for himself. He can only do so through his own industry, his own activity. Consequently he has the right to fulfil the condition which is absolutely indispensable to his existence. This condition is work.

From the right to live, which is equal to all, follows the right to work, which is its condition. But in order to work one needs instruments. Therefore every man has an equal right to the natural instruments of labour.

We have seen that three indissolubly linked rights derive from the fact of man’s existence on earth. These three rights are: the right to live, the right to work and the right to instruments of labour. They form each other’s condition. The first cannot be exercised legitimately without the other two. That is why they form one single right that we shall call: the right to live by one’s labour. The right to property is intimately linked with this right.

As usufructuaries of the natural instruments of labour which God has given to humanity as a whole, we are the exclusive owners of the fruits of our labour. The products of our industry are as it were the extension of ourselves. It is as though through our activity we have imprinted on them the seal of our personality. That is why we have such power over them. We are accountable only to God for the use we make of them. Before man, we have an exclusive right to them within certain limits. As long as his individual rights and his rights to solidarity are not infringed, no man can impose a limit on our will in the exercise of our right of ownership over the fruits of our labour. The foundation of this right, then,