

The Fundamental Crimes

One of the “Maxims for Revolutionists” (1903), appended to *Man and Superman* (1902), is “Property, said Proudhon, is theft. This is the only perfect truism that has been uttered on the subject” (BH 2: 787).¹ In the 1840 pamphlet *What Is Property?* the French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Prudhon’s answer to his titular question became a slogan, which socialists as well as anarchists agreed with, and Shaw applauded Proudhon’s “irrefutable demonstration” that “the landlord and capitalist, in as much as they consume without producing, inflict precisely the same injury on the community as a thief does” (*Everybody’s* 16, 171). In fact, the title of Shaw’s first public lecture, on 4 May 1888, was “Thieves,” which he described as “a demonstration that the proprietor of an unearned income inflicted on the community exactly the same injury as a burglar does” (qtd. in Gibbs, *Bernard Shaw* 148). Twenty-five years later, in a debate with Hilaire Belloc, he again quoted Proudhon with approval: “I say, ‘Abolish private property’” (*Platform* 97). Not only did Shaw, throughout his life, agree with Proudhon, he also believed that property was so fundamental a crime and so underlying a wrong, that were it not for property, many other crimes would not be committed. By property, Proudhon and Shaw meant private property or real property, which is land (real estate) or fixed property that is attached to land, such as buildings, in contrast to personal property, which is movable, such as livestock or clothing, or such personal possessions as an umbrella, a tea kettle, or a child’s toy.

Stuart Baker has ably summarized and clarified how Proudhon's aphorism is the core of Shaw's view of socialism. As Baker explains, "People still are shocked—perhaps even more now, in an age that has forgotten all of the economic dialectic of the nineteenth century and accepts unthinkingly the current conventional wisdom that communism is wicked and the right to private property is sacred." A person who owns a toothbrush and a shirt or a blouse, which are personal possessions, is not a person of property. The latter means "land and capital: the means of production... The great evil of private property arises because society is divided into the haves and have-nots, and what the haves have is the right to live at the expense of others, while what the have-nots lack is the right to live at all except insofar as they are useful to the haves." Workers do not work for themselves, but for owners of property. We now "accept this concept so thoroughly that we nod mechanically when we are told to be grateful to property owners for 'creating jobs.'" When property owners "realize that they can use their resources more profitably with less labor," the pernicious effects of private property become more obvious.

That happened in England in the fifteenth century, when expanding trade increased the demand for wool. Landlords "inclosed" their land, drove off the peasants who farmed it, and converted it to sheep pastures. Thousands of people were left without a livelihood. Many became vagrants or outlaws. The authorities did what they always do when their relentless robbing of the poor leaves a class of dangerous people who have nothing to lose: they passed laws against the poor, in this case laws against vagrancy or "masterless" men. In our day we build more prisons and demand mandatory sentencing (Baker 163–164).

In recent times, the alleged "economic miracle" of Latin America left the poor "(who were wretched to begin with) worse off than they had been," because the property owners converted their land "to the production of high-profit, low-cost export goods that enriched both local owners and foreign 'investors' while displacing those who traditionally eked their existence from the land" (Baker 164).

At the heart of Shaw's socialist principles is the view that "the right to withhold valuable resources from the community is legal theft," which is "what he meant when he said that the power of the property owner is like that of the 'highwayman who puts a pistol to your head

and demands your money or your life' [*Intelligent* 38]." With society divided between "those who own the means of production and those who do not, the owners can—and do—say to the proletarians: 'We will allow you to live, if, and only if, you make yourselves useful to us.'" Since laborers can produce nothing without land and capital, they must work for those who own both, which the latter consider a fair exchange. This business deal is like the highwayman's. The landlord forces the laborer to sell his labor the same way a thief takes money at gunpoint. When labor is so plentiful that its price is merely subsistence—as it was in the nineteenth century—this state of affairs becomes obvious, since subsistence wages for unskilled laborers was the cost of keeping them alive. When supply surpasses demand, the value of labor is zero. In nineteenth-century Britain, unskilled laborers had no protection. "As long as there was widespread unemployment, workers could be had for the asking; the subsistence wage was really only the cost of maintaining a slave or providing fodder to draft animals." In fact, according to Shaw, "the employer had less incentive to provide for such workers than he would for slaves or draft animals because there was no capital investment to protect." Laborers earned what was, in effect, "a subsubsistence wage, and when they were worn out they were sacked." They were expendables, or in economic terms, "a disposable commodity. Because this situation kept wages at the absolute minimum, employers convinced themselves that it was a necessary condition of economic health, and they spoke righteously about the economic necessity to maintain, in Marx's famous phrase, a 'reserve army of the unemployed.'" The apparent difference between the relation of highwayman to victim and of property owner to worker is fictitious. A man with a gun has no right to snuff out a person's life, yet we accept that the property owner has the right to deprive those without property of the means to live. To Shaw, the "Sacred Right of Private Property" is a social evil that is the source of poverty and much injustice (Baker 164–165).

Although property may be considered theft, it was not—unlike a highwayman's action demanding one's money or one's life, a statutory crime until the Soviet Revolution made it one in the USSR, although it did so under different conditions than Proudhon or Shaw had in mind in their prerevolutionary writings. We will turn to this subject in the chapter on capital punishment. As the first sentence of this paragraph suggests, and as I have made explicit in the introductory chapter of this book, I treat crimes that one does not always find on the statute books,

such as unwarranted or unprovoked police brutality. As the (Anglicized) title of August Strindberg's play reminds us, *There Are Crimes and Crimes*—that is, there are different kinds of crimes. As a possible corollary, there are crimes that are punished and unpunished.

The second of Shaw's fundamental crimes is poverty, on which he expounds primarily in *Major Barbara* and in his Preface to it (1906). In the play, we learn that Lord Saxmundham, otherwise known as Bodger, a distiller of whisky, restored a cathedral, in return for which the king made him a baronet, which is immediately lower than a baron but higher than a knight and which, unlike a knighthood, is hereditary. After Bodger gave half a million pounds to his party—unnamed, but presumably the Conservative Party (Prime Minister Arthur Balfour led the Conservative Government from 11 July 1902 until 5 December 1905, the latter date coinciding with the third performance of *Major Barbara* during its initial run in London)—the king, who traditionally acts upon the prime minister's recommendation in such matters, made him a baronet. Bodger's offer of £5000 to the Salvation Army—a tiny sum compared to his gift to his political party (ironically, Undershaft calls him one of the country's greatest public benefactors)—is, according to Undershaft, probably to save his soul. "Heaven grant it may!" exclaims Mrs Baines, salivating at the prospect of Bodger's donation (BH 3: 130–131). Such quid pro quos are common, but they are not thefts. The only commonly recognized theft dramatized in the play is Snobby Price's robbery of the pound that Bill Walker puts on the Salvation Army drum as recompense for having hit Jenny Hill. But Snobby's deed is petty larceny. Shaw is after bigger game in *Major Barbara*.

Adapting Proudhon's dictum, Shaw has Undershaft call poverty the "worst of crimes. All the other crimes are virtues beside it," and in the Preface to the play, in harmony with the religious establishment it dramatizes, Shaw calls this "The Gospel of St Andrew Undershaft." Echoing Undershaft, Shaw's Preface uses almost the same words as Undershaft's: "the worst of our crimes is poverty." Private property is theft, but—paradoxically—what is worse than this type of theft is one of the results of private property: poverty. Undershaft is eloquent on this subject: "All the other crimes are virtues beside it: all the other dishonors are chivalry itself by comparison." Snobby's pilfering of a pound, which is personal property, is partly the result of poverty (and partly of character) and is insignificant. As Undershaft, in this case speaking for Shaw, declares, poverty is an evil that creates people who "poison us

morally and physically: they kill the happiness of society; they force us to do away with our own liberties and to organize unnatural cruelties for fear they should rise against us and drag us down into their abyss. Only fools fear crime: we all fear poverty.” It is the cause of ignorance, disease, slums, hypocrisy, and other problems. So bad is this “worst of crimes” that Undershaft’s remedy for poverty, which he unambiguously says he hates, is extreme. He does not urge preaching against it in sermons or reasoning about it in articles, for poverty has shown itself to be impervious to both methods. He does not simply command that it be eliminated or eradicated. Instead, Shaw has him use an image associated with his business, manufacturing weapons of murder. Shockingly—and in the theater the spoken passage is more devastating than it is on the page—Undershaft demands that poverty be killed. Killing, he emphasizes, is “the final test of conviction, the only lever strong enough to overturn a social system, the only way of saying *Must*.” A millionaire who used to live in London’s East End slums, Undershaft uses his autobiography—or, more precisely, his spin on it—as a solution to this social horror. He starved while he was moralizing, he claims, until one day he swore that nothing—be it reason, morals, or the lives of other people—would stop him from being “a full-fed free man ... except a bullet ...” In actuality, he did not kill anyone; rather, he so successfully demonstrated his business abilities to Andrew Undershaft VI, who may have been his employer, that this man appointed him his successor and, in accordance with the firm’s tradition, gave him a name reflecting the succession, Andrew Undershaft VII. When Shaw, the Fabian socialist, speaks in his own words, rather than those of his character, his denunciation of poverty is just as strong as Undershaft’s, but his solution differs. In addition to calling for parliament to enact a legal minimum wage and old age pensions, he proposes the idea of his fellow socialist, the artist and bookbinder T.J. Cobden-Sanderson, “to give every man enough to live well, so as to guarantee the community against the possibility of a case of the malignant disease of poverty, and then (necessarily) to see that he earned it” (BH 3: 23, 25–27, 31, 172–174).

Perhaps surprisingly—and, as far as I know, without reference to either Shaw or Cobden-Sanderson—a variation of this idea has sprung to life a hundred years later as “Universal Basic Income” (UBI), a policy that its proponents claim would solve economic problems endemic to changes already taking place in the twenty-first century, such as joblessness because of automation and robotics. The government of a nation—or

state, province, or city of a nation—that adopts UBI would pay adult citizens a fixed income at regular intervals, in cash rather than vouchers, with neither a means test nor (unlike Shaw’s or Cobden-Sanderson’s proposal) a requirement to work or seek work (thus eliminating an expensive bureaucracy to scrutinize all of these factors). Although specific payments vary among different countries, the average proposals are roughly \$10,000 per year. Finland has begun a pilot program for UBI; and Canada, the Netherlands, France, Italy, New Zealand, plus the cities of Utrecht in Holland and Oakland, California, are among other places that have initiated feasibility studies and trial experiments. Switzerland is considering \$2600 per month and Kenya is testing \$1000 per year (Basic Income Earth Network, “About Basic;” Hamilton, “The Netherlands;” Goodman, “Free Cash;” Brancaccio, “What Universal Basic Income Could Mean”). As Miya Tokumitsu observes, “UBI is a slippery concept, adaptable to both the socialist left and libertarian right, but it essentially entails distributing a living wage to every member of society.” Perhaps surprisingly, it appeals to a number of people both on the left and right. Its proponents on the left, she adds, tend to advocate link UBI with stronger public welfare measures, including health care and tuition-free education, whereas some libertarians view UBI as a means “to pare down the welfare state, arguing that it’s better simply to give people money to buy food and health care directly,” rather than making them deal with food stamps and Medicaid, thereby increasing governmental bureaucracies (Tokumitsu, “The United States of Work” 57). As expected, of course, others on the right dismiss UBI as “little more than socialism on steroids” (Jones, *Beware the Universal Basic Income*).

NOTE

1. Bernard Shaw’s plays and prefaces are from *The Bodley Head Bernard Shaw: Collected Plays with Their Prefaces*. They are cited parenthetically in the text as BH, followed by volume and page numbers.

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