

2016-04-18 From the preparatory notes for Class 01 of the introductory course on political economy: ‘The evolution of property and how it rules the world’.

PRE-CLASS ASSIGNMENT GIVEN TO THOSE ATTENDING THE COURSE:

Ask people in your family or community what they understand by the term ‘property’. Ask at least three different people and write their responses down. Lastly, write down in not more than two sentences what you understand by the term ‘property’.

Everyone present receives a notebook and is expected to bring it to each class.

The attendance register is taken before each class begins.

This slide is put on the screen before the class begins; the class is asked to guess who wrote it. (Anyone who already knows the answer should first give others a chance.)

‘Everyone knows nowadays, that wherever there is a revolutionary convulsion, there must be some social want in the background, which is prevented by outworn institutions from satisfying itself. The want may not yet be felt as strongly, as generally, as might ensure immediate success, but every attempt at forcible repression will only bring it forth stronger and stronger, until it bursts its fetters. If, then, we have been beaten, we have nothing else to do but to begin again from the beginning.’

Answer (given on a following slide): Frederick Engels, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Germany, 1851-1852*.

Here is an outline of the course in three parts:¹

¹ The outline below has been modified slightly to reflect the actual sequence of topics discussed during the course. Also, lack of time prevented discussion of economic crisis in the detail initially intended.

Course outline

The evolution of property and
how it rules the world

— an introduction to political
economy in three parts

Part 1

THE EVOLUTION OF PROPERTY

- ▶ What is property?
- ▶ What have been its predominant historical forms, and how are these different forms explained?
- ▶ Production and distribution of material wealth

Part 1 continued

- ▶ The system producing objects of property for exchange
- ▶ The meaning of 'surplus' in the modern economy
- ▶ What is the predominant form of property today?
 - ▶ How is property continuing to evolve?

Part 2

THE ENGINE OF INEQUALITY

- ▶ What is economic value in the system of production for exchange?
- ▶ How is profit made and appropriated?
- ▶ How does the financial economy operate in this regard?

Part 3

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

- ▶ How can social inequality be overcome?
- ▶ The global impasse of the property system
 - ▶ Keystones of an effective program for social change

The main argument of this course — to be studied, questioned, and dismissed or confirmed — is that *property rules the world*.

What is property?

Class reports back on the pre-class assignment. Most identify 'property' with *objects* that are

owned. But in fact ...

property is not a thing

Marx, in writing *Capital*, said that from his standpoint the development of the economic formation of society was 'viewed as a process of natural history'.² We propose to follow a similar approach in exploring with you the nature of property and its evolution to the present day.

We begin with the case of the 'white' rhino.



The case of the square-lipped ('white') rhinoceros

The square-lipped ('white') rhinoceros of Southern Africa is distinctly territorial. According to *Smithers' Mammals of Southern Africa: A Field Guide*, pages 144-145:

'Females and their young live in overlapping home ranges of 6–8 km² where food is abundant, increasing to 10–15 km² under poorer conditions; ... On patches of good grazing small amicable groups are formed.

'Mature bulls are territorial and solitary but tolerate other males in their territories as long as they behave submissively and keep away from females. ... Borders are marked with faeces deposited in middens. After defecating a bull kicks the faeces around and gouges the soil of the midden with his hind feet; young males kick only weakly, and females do not kick at all. Neighbours may share a midden, and square-lipped rhino middens may also be used by hook-lipped ['black'] rhinos.

[... continued]

² *Capital*, vol 1, Preface to the first edition, Penguin translation, p 92.

‘Neighbours meeting on their common boundary rub their horns on the ground and stand head to head pushing sideways against each other’s horns. Bulls who have no water in their territories leave every 3–4 days to drink, passing through other bulls’ territories as they go. If confronted they squeal and shriek and hold their ears back to demonstrate their submission, and are usually allowed to proceed. ... Fights are usually over territory or females. ... Bulls that are supplanted by challengers may be allowed to remain in their old territories as long as they behave submissively.

‘... 50% of male deaths are due to fighting.’

Points to observe during the discussion:

Territorial behaviour of the rhino bulls is directly connected to survival (in terms of grazing or other food sources, access to water, and possession of females). Force plays a major role. But the natural tendency is to avoid fighting in favour of a sensible accommodation.

Why?

The accommodation is reciprocal. Territorial exclusivity of the bulls is preserved while making concessions necessary to avoid constant war. The rhinos display a sophisticated set of evolved social habits.

What does this tell us about the nature of property? Rhino bulls’ property is about the relationship between rhino bulls – in regard to grass, water, females, etc. It is not a simple relationship between the rhinos individually and the material objects that are important to their survival. Property is not a thing (or things). Property is a *social relation* in regard to things, with deep natural roots.

We can also see that property is not a special characteristic of some individuals as distinct from society as a whole. It depends on the *social* recognition of an exclusive entitlement, whether that entitlement is a recognised individual entitlement or the recognised entitlement of a group from which others are excluded.

Note that a specific power of enforcement (apart from self-help through fighting) is absent. The property relation is sustained by a mutual interest in doing so.

Note the effects of scarcity and plenty. The property relation relaxes and softens where resources are abundant, and hardens or tightens where resources are scarce.

Note how rhino females are treated as objects of male property.

In their *Field Guide to Mammals of Southern Africa*,³ Chris and Tilde Stuart say this about white rhinos: ‘The home range of cows may overlap with the territories of several territorial bulls but when a cow is receptive for mating the bull will attempt to keep her within his area.’

Territoriality in animals is not found in every species, but it is very common. In different species it takes different forms.

Female animals may also be territorial. [An example of female leopards fighting each other for territory in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park was mentioned, but the text in that regard omitted for lack of time.⁴]

But fighting is avoided if it can be. The social behaviour of the **titi monkeys** provides an illustration of this. Here is a short extract from something RP is in the process of writing up:

Like all species in the wild, the titi monkeys of the Amazon rainforest cannot take their habitat for granted — and not only by reason of human encroachment. They are regularly at risk from rivals of their own kind. The field biologist Ian Redmond describes the daily ritual repeated before breakfast in each group’s narrow range:⁵

‘At dawn, a titi group will emerge from the tangled vines in which the monkeys have rested together. The first activity on the family’s agenda is to head to the edge of their territory to reinforce the boundaries and see if any neighbouring groups are nearby. Loud, distinctive vocalizations reverberate around the trees during these shows of territoriality, and these can be heard throughout the forest.’

When confronting another group, the calling may be reinforced by displays of jumping, fur-bristling, tail-lashing and chasing. After this exchange, however, ‘contact is broken off and groups spend the rest of their day away from the outer boundary of the home range.’⁶

Territory cannot be secured against rivals without a willingness to fight, but for any species a war of all against all does not hold good prospects of survival. As with sabre-rattling, the object of a show of territoriality is just as much to avoid fighting as it is to prepare to fight. Despite — indeed because of — these regular pugnacious demonstrations, the titi monkeys rarely engage in physical fighting.⁷

[DISCUSS]

³ 3 ed, 2001, p 174.

⁴ 20160125 SanParks Wild Card, *Kgalagadi Leopard fight.pdf*

⁵ Redmond, *Primates of the World*, p 84. Cf also Marc G. M. van Roosmalen, Tomas van Roosmalen, and Russell A. Mittermeier, ‘A taxonomic review of the titi monkeys, genus *Callicebus* Thomas, 1903, with the description of two new species, *Callicebus Bernhardi* and *Callicebus Stephennashi*, from Brazilian Amazonia,’ *Neotropical Primates* 10 (Suppl.), June 2002, pp 27, 42.

⁶ K. J. Gron, *Primate Factsheets: Dusky titi (Callicebus moloch) Behavior* (19 December 2007), http://pin.primate.wisc.edu/factsheets/entry/dusky_titi/behav (accessed 2013 February 12).

⁷ R. M. Nowak, *Walker's Primates of the World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), p 111.

Discuss the following hypothetical situation:

During the temporary absence of a member of the class, another member takes and holds onto an item of the absent member's property (e.g. a laptop or a bag). What would happen? Would other members of the class intervene? If so, why? If not, why not? Would it make a difference if a stranger entered and took the item of property?

More specifically: How is ownership of the bag recognised? If other members of the class would intervene, how would they do so?

In general, how is ownership enforced in society and what is the reason for it?

Assignment in preparation for the next class: ATTEMPT A BRIEF DEFINITION OF 'PROPERTY'