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Life & Property **by Tibor Machan**

When both life and property are threatened, there is much talk about how property is only stuff, easy to replace, so one should be concerned only or primarily with life. There are even those who disparage the right to private property, claiming it is not really a human right at all. Some prominent academics have been calling ownership itself a myth, claiming that no one really owns anything and all wealth belongs to government that's supposed to manage it for the collective or public good. (See Murphy & Nagel, *The Myth of Ownership* [2002].)

One might have thought this kind of thinking has gone out of fashion after the demise of the Soviet socialist system in which it was put to the test and failed miserably. No such luck. Latin America today is rife with proponents of socialism, with dictators seeking and being granted absolute power to take over the wealth of various countries from private individuals and companies. Insofar as the wealth consists of such resources as oil, ones that can be harvested with little special skill once they have been discovered and captured, and are abundant for the time being, the resulting socialist and autocratic systems can exist without immediate collapse — even the USSR took some 70 years to go under and it didn't yet have cheap oil available with which to make up for its otherwise lethargic economic system.

In any case, the close ties between life and property can be well appreciated when one either nearly or actually loses it all, say in a fire, earthquake, or flood. The first thing that comes to light, if one just thinks about it a bit, is how wrong it is to think of property as mere stuff. Instead, property involves a great variety of human creations, natural resources, inventions, and works of art. When property is lost, it is clear that specific and often unique values have vanished from one's life and, indeed, that one's life itself has been significantly damaged.

Those who nearly lost it all will experience this directly when they resume their lives among their property and take stock of just how much of what was threatened had meant to them. And I don't just have in mind all those irreplaceable pictures from old-fashioned photo albums, one's favorite books and records, the paintings and posters on one's walls, those precious

knickknacks all around the house which have grown, almost imperceptibly, into the props of one's existence. Even small items, taken nearly for granted, turn out to reveal their importance.

This is especially so when one is a reasonably creative individual whose basement is teeming with unpublished manuscripts, accumulated artifacts one hasn't yet finished crafting just the way one had meant to, as well as simple utilities and products one has finally managed to be able to afford with the earnings from the labors of one's life (and some luck, as well).

All these are more or less precious treasures most of us own and only those with a dogged misanthropic ideology would turn a blind eye to that fact.

Yes, losing one's property is usually not so calamitous as losing a limb, organ or, especially, one's life, but even that isn't always right. After all, some of us old folks might consider the loss of life a better alternative to losing everything that could be so meaningful to our offspring, were those the only two alternatives we faced.

Now those, of course, who care nothing for life itself will care little for property. Certainly they will not cherish the kind of property that involves human creativity and production. Take, for example, Alan Weisman, the author of the book, [*The World Without Us*](#) (St. Martin's Press, 2007), for whom the totally untouched — perhaps even unseen — wilds matter more than anything human.

Such an outlook is too far removed from reality to be very influential except when it is expressed in the all too human language of emotive prose and poetry. Effectively packaged, nearly any idea, no matter how vile, can attract the loyalty of some. But, as Socrates taught us, for the truth of the matter it isn't wise to turn to artists — their concern, at their best, is mainly with beauty.

So, property is very much a human institution and a precious one at that. It can be corrupted, of course, as anything human can be, but when rightly understood and incorporated into one's life, it is a vital force indeed.

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