

## Justice pays

progress towards justice benefits everyone, even those formerly advantaged by injustice, argues **Thorkil Sohn**

Kaj Munk, the poet priest and outspoken debater, who was shot in January 1944 by Danish collaborators on the instructions of the German occupation forces, said in his last sermon – “Justice is not only right – it even pays.”

We feel that Munk is onto something important. In these words he touches upon something central to human nature. As a rule, when our highest concern is the organisation of society, the only question we are permitted to ask is “is it right”? We are not really allowed to ask if *it pays*. But in reality what is right is also what best pays.

Of course we often debate what is justice. But when it comes to the basic things we are seldom in any real doubt. We have an instinctive sense of what is right. It soon came to be clear that Abraham Lincoln was right when he claimed that slavery was a terrible injustice. It soon came to be clear that Nelson Mandela was right when he demanded electoral law as ‘one person – one vote’.

The history of human progress is, in a way, identical with the history of the progress of justice. An advance in justice is not only a spiritual progress, it is also a material progress.

When the great peasant reforms in Denmark – the abolition of serfdom, the move away from copyholding to self ownership, the enclosure movement, and so on – were implemented in the late 1700s, there was progress in justice. The landlords who had profited from the earlier unjust arrangements were, of course, at the time very much against the reforms. (Although it should be noted that Reventlow and Bernstorff and other progressive officials,

who engineered the reforms, were landlords themselves.)

But in fact it was not only the peasants who were to gain from the reforms, but also the landlords.

One could look at it in this way: a small upper class can, under an unjust system, live in great wealth, even though the general population is poor and downtrodden. Before the peasant reforms the landlords could ride around on rough roads in fine gold chariots. But when justice let the progressive forces free, a new development started. It has brought us to the point where any of us may drive a car on a fine motorway.

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I know that it was not the peasant reforms alone that brought the social foundations for the inventions behind the car and the development of our motorway network. There were contributions from many subsequent movements for justice – such as those for democracy, parliamentarism, more free trade, etc. Still we can say that if our ancestors had not achieved the peasant reforms then the landlords could probably still be riding around on terrible roads in golden chariots.

But we see that the progress to justice also gave *them* cars and good roads – and also things like hospitals so they do not die at 35. We see that even those who ‘lose’ their privileges come to gain, in the long run, much more than they lose – in broad terms, and certainly in intergenerational terms.

In modern Denmark the thing which seems to me a most obvious injustice is the fact that – as all through the West – homeowners can earn enormous sums while they sleep in their beds. Windfall gains from properties abound. Do we not instinctively sense that it is not right that someone can earn more from simply owning property than others can earn from working?

We sense that it is most just that there is pain where there

is gain. And that we who make money without effort are, in a way, stealing – we are letting others work for us for free.

But today the homeowners defend themselves. And we do this for two reasons. Because, firstly, the case is not straightforward. People who make windfall gains through their house have indeed invested their money in their property. Why should they not enjoy the benefits?

A similar argument was used to defend slavery. The owners did after all buy and pay for the slaves. And then, what about the poor slave owning widow: all she owns in the world is her two slaves; would it be justice to take her only supporting assets from her?

The second reason for the strong defence is that, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so many of us indeed make money from such windfall gains. And even if homeowners can see that it cannot be entirely fair that they become millionaires without moving a finger, it is still difficult for them to let the money go. Justice opposes its two old enemies – selfishness and stupidity.

But the circumstance will turn out just the same as the landlords with their golden chariots. If we can right the wrong that we can make money unjustly without deserving it – then even the wealthiest homeowners can win in the long run.

The question of the enjoyment and sharing of the benefits of homeownership just needs to be thought through. We must pursue justice, and it will pay us all that we do so. The object can be formulated as simply as justice can always be formulated: thou shalt not steal. **L&L**

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