

THOMAS JEFFERSON ON CONCENTRATION OF LAND AS A CAUSE OF POVERTY

Thomas Jefferson wrote to James Madison from France in 1785:

"[On my walk to Fontainebleau] as soon as I had got clear of the town, I fell in with a poor woman walking at the same rate with myself and going the same course. Wishing to know the condition of the laboring poor, I entered into conversation with her . . . [I] proceeded to enquire into her vocation, condition and circumstances. She told me she was a day laborer, at 8 sous or 4 pence sterling the day; that she had two children to maintain, and to pay a rent of 30 livres for her house (which would consume the hire of 75 days), that often she could get no employment, and, of course, was without bread. As we had walked together near a mile . . . , I gave her, on parting, 24 sous. She burst into tears of gratitude. . . .

"This led me into a train of reflections on that unequal division of property which occasions the numberless instances of wretchedness which I had observed in this country and . . . all over Europe. The property of this country is absolutely concentrated in a very few hands. . . . These employ the flower of the country as servants (some as many as 200 domestics). . . . The most numerous of all classes, that is the poor, cannot find work. I asked myself what could be the reason that so many should be permitted to beg who are willing to work, in a country where there is a very considerable proportion of uncultivated lands? . . . I am conscious that an equal division of property is impracticable. But the consequences of this enormous inequality producing so much misery to the bulk of mankind, legislators cannot invent too many devices for subdividing property . . . The earth is given as a common stock for man to labour and live on."

In 1785, Jefferson also wrote from France to Mrs. Trist:

"Of 20 million people supposed to be in France, I am of the opinion that there are 19 millions more wretched, more accursed in every circumstance of human existence than the most conspicuously wretched individual in the whole United States."

However, Jefferson, admittedly an intellectual genius, failed to subdivide his Monticello estate, just like he failed to free his slaves, despite his repeated attacks on slavery. ●●●●●●●●●●

Page 4