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- 1 The French Revolution witnessed a massive reorganisation of property; this much has been well established since the event itself. Revolutionary lawmakers made property a focus of reform, a means to clear away the Old Regime and a lever for revolutionising society. The legal parameters of property changed as old forms of property, such as feudal claims, were abolished. Revolutionary reform of property carried with it multiple, not-always-harmonious visions of social relations—perhaps egalitarian, or perhaps market based and competitive. Property was a central source of conflict in the Revolution, as a result of the categories of property that were abolished, including guild and feudal property, and also as a result of the categories that were not swept away as readily, such as the property in human bodies accorded by slavery. But revolutionary leaders of various stripes also turned to property as the solution to the problems of economic prosperity and social harmony. Whatever one hoped to achieve through revolution, property seemed to be the means of doing it.
- 2 Historians ever since have used property to assess the intentions of the Revolution's leadership, along with the overall success or failure of the event. In the opening paragraph of his monumental work on property reform in the Revolution, Marcel

Garaud quoted Hippolyte Taine: “quels que soient les grands noms dont la Révolution se décore, elle est, par essence, une translation de propriété ; en cela consiste son support intime, son moteur premier et son sens historique.”¹ Taine, of course, viewed this “translation of property” as a bad thing; others have looked for a transfer of wealth in the Revolutionary era more hopefully. In any case, generations of scholars approached the question of property as Taine—and Garaud—did, by considering it to be a question of distribution. In this respect, two aspects of the Revolution take on particular significance: the abolition of feudalism and the seizure and sale of *émigré* property. Who lost property as a result of Revolutionary action, and who gained it? Was there a net transfer of wealth from the propertied to the property-less? William Sewell reframed the question, turning his attention away from distribution and asking how property was defined.² He found a vast divergence between the understanding of property set forward by legal reforms and the understanding that artisans derived from their labour.

- 3 Since 2000, the focus has turned to the role that property reforms played in shaping a new kind of society.³ In the last five or six years, property itself has been interrogated more fundamentally, with a variety of new works asking, in one way or another, how property came to be defined during the Revolution, and with what consequences.⁴ These works, however, build very much on what came before, as they understand revolutionary legislators to have used property as a tool for reforming society, and are attuned to the different ways that different social categories thought about property. The issue of distribution, and of *émigré* property in particular, has remained central, as evidenced by Bernard Bodinier and Eric Teyssier’s assertion that the auctions of seized property represented “l’événement le plus important de la Révolution.”⁵ To discuss how property will be distributed, however, already supposes a way of defining it. Much revolutionary policy dealt not only with who would get property, but who could have property—that is, what types of property would be recognised.⁶ The exclusion of feudal and corporate property, versus the inclusion of property rights in enslaved people, makes evident that issues of distribution were inseparable from the work of definitions; definitions themselves contained decisions about whose rights would be prioritised.
- 4 The idea of this special issue is to broaden our thinking about property in the revolutionary era by drawing together a variety of approaches. When property is reorganised, its effects are felt in many arenas. Property connects the ideal and the physical, and in doing so it is a centre where we find layered law and institutions, social relationships, as well as economic and political ones. Changing the legal status of property leads to new interpersonal relations at the local level; at the same time, circuits of economic exchange in a city or region inflect the politics of property and may bear on its legal aspects. This issue will thus also examine these points of nexus and consider the organising role of property, which knits together ideals, practices, and tradition in unexpected ways. What is the role of property in creating a regime that is different from what came before, but also not exactly what was envisioned by the lawmakers and intellectuals who sought to bend property to their vision?
- 5 The lessons of several generations of work on *émigré* land sales and the liquidation of feudal claims make it clear that the social impact of revolutionary redistributions cannot be extrapolated from the laws themselves: it differed greatly from one region to the next and from urban to rural contexts. The impact on property owners of revolutionary policy was also extremely heterogeneous. If, across the board,

revolutionary law was largely protective of property rights, some categories of property owners saw their rights liquidated as their status changed or as the type of property they owned was reformed out of existence. This was particularly true for *émigrés*, the owners of feudal rights, and colonial landowners.

- 6 This does not mean that lawmakers misunderstood property: Rafe Blaufarb argues that the programme of *rachat* was actually popular, as people from diverse social backgrounds took advantage of it. *Rachat* was a corollary to the abolition of feudalism, by which feudal tenants were required to reimburse their landlords for lost dues before their property could be freed from feudal servitudes. The relative success of *rachat* suggests that it was a reasonable undertaking, in spite of the fact that it was repealed in 1792 in favour of a complete abolition of feudalism without indemnity. Ultimately, Blaufarb makes clear, we need to pay more attention to the execution and impact of revolutionary reforms, because their success or failure can't be judged on paper alone.
- 7 Political relations were transformed as corporate and venal property were eliminated and the individual became sole bearer of property rights, but as important as these changes were, they were not the only ways in which property relations reshaped the role of the state—and vice versa. Anne Conchon shows that, already in the final decades of the Old Regime, the administrative practice of expropriation for public utility reflected a more systematic approach to property rights. Increased road building activity in the 1770s led to a larger volume of requests for indemnity by expropriated landowners. Over the course of the 1770s and 1780s, regional administrators worked to regularise the indemnity process and create a more equitable system for paying out claims. This did not prevent engineers and royal administrators from thinking about property in different ways, placing the emphasis more on the economic value of the property or more on the legal aspects of title, respectively. The lessons of Old Regime expropriation highlight the importance of approaching property in a longer chronology, considering the Revolutionary era as including the important reform periods of the 1770s and 1780s. In addition, Conchon's work demonstrates the important role administrators played in shaping property alongside lawmakers and private stakeholders.
- 8 At the local level, sales of Church and *émigré* property operated large transfers of property out of the hands of Old Regime elites. And yet, even as these properties changed hands, in the Rhine region, they simply moved from one set of traditional elites to another, Gabrielle Clemens finds. The transfer of property from nobles to bourgeois long looked for by scholars of *émigré* property does not offer much insight into what is going on here. And yet, clearly things did not remain the same. Many of the buyers engaged in speculation, reselling properties rapidly. As Clemens points out, the sales represented a massive investment in the emergent real estate market in the region. In the context of an expanding real estate market, one might expect new meanings to be attached to landed wealth. Instead of looking for competition among social groups, then, these *émigré* property sales encourage us to think about how a changing economic context affected social relations. It was not only social hierarchies that were put in flux by the Revolution, the sources of wealth that these hierarchies relied on also took on a new aspect.
- 9 Clemens finds the market for *émigré* property in the Rhineland was quite strong, in contrast to the pervasive idea that *émigré* property was sold for much less than it was worth, a finding that supports what scholars have found in other regions. Blaufarb's

claim that many feudal tenants took advantage of the opportunity to buy out their servitudes provides an interesting echo. Both suggest a more positive response to aspects of revolutionary property policy than is generally assumed. As Blaufarb points out, broader investment in reimbursing feudal claims suggests confidence in the Revolutionary government. It also suggests property owners may have been strategic in their response to revolutionary upheaval. The sale of *émigré* property has long been viewed as having forged a bond between buyers and the state; one might consider the same to be true of those who reimbursed feudal charges. Seen in another light, however, the individuals concerned might have thought they were making prudent investments or even hedging against the future. A speculator who rapidly bought and sold *émigré* property would have little solidarity with the revolutionary regime; a feudal tenant may have cleared his title quickly, fearing that feudal claims would be restored. That is, people may not have thought in terms of supporting the state or not, focusing instead on how to protect their assets and turn the political upheaval to their advantage.

- 10 Revolutionary politics influenced the way that property policy took shape, leading to different outcomes depending on the social and economic context. This was decidedly the case in Guadeloupe, where major landowners stayed much longer than they did in other regions. Frédéric Regent shows the particularity of Guadeloupe, while keeping sight of the important intersections between the colonial and metropolitan contexts. The *émigré* laws were applied, but plantations placed under sequester were not sold. The state rented them out, as they did many properties in the metropole, in exchange for payment in sugar. The particulars of colonial cash-crop cultivation, however, meant that renters of seized plantations continued to use methods of constraint and punishment against plantation workers that had been practiced before the Revolution, a dynamic that highlights the ways that plantation production maintained many of the social relations practiced under slavery even after formal emancipation. In some ways, the Revolution transformed plantation property, converting it into national lands that contributed to state revenue and, most importantly, freeing the enslaved labourers who worked the land. But, in other ways, the plantations themselves inflected Revolutionary law, limiting the effects of property reform. The high value of sugar and the entrenched practices of plantation labour regimes imposed their logics.
- 11 Tracing the history of *émigré* properties naturally draws the chronology outside the usual limits of the Revolution itself. The return of the *émigrés* and their ongoing machinations to reclaim their assets dragged on into the Napoleonic era and beyond. But *émigré* property is not the only area in which revolutionary contestations continued into the new regime. William Sewell found an enduring “language of labour” that workers carried into post-revolutionary society, but Tyson Leuchter finds that corporatist language endured in a very different social category. Leuchter’s contribution on the Company of Parisian Brokers finds that brokers pieced together an unusual understanding of property out of a mixture of corporatist and liberal ideas. Leuchter identifies a corporatist approach to monopolies combined with a rigorously individualistic understanding of responsibility in the brokers’ arguments defending themselves against a lawsuit. Clearly, the arguments were self-serving, but presumably the brokers would not have used them if they didn’t think they had a chance of working. The unorthodox quality of their arguments suggests a diverse pool of ideas about property was available, and that the brokers may not have seen any contradiction in recombining them. This leads one to wonder about the afterlife of such

claims: clearly soldered together fortuitously, did this practical hybrid fall apart immediately, or did it inspire others? Reading Leuchter's piece alongside Anne Conchon's, one finds a useful re-interrogation of what was old and what was new after the Revolution. One set of ideas did not so much displace another as take root amidst it. Grouping his piece with Gabrielle Clemens' further emphasises that aspects of property that stayed the same looked different in a post-revolutionary context, so that even property relations that were not entirely upset by the Revolution took on a different meaning in the new regime.

- 12 The body of work that is presented here, as a representation of the array of work on property in the Revolution that is being undertaken, coheres around a number of themes. Revolutionary property reform is contextualised in a longer period of reform and contestation beginning in the 1770s and extending well into the nineteenth century. Indeed, these articles make clear that isolating revolutionary policy from what came before and after renders it illegible. Further, if much work on property has focused around the crucial issues of feudal property and *émigré* property, it is important to situate these particular forms of property—land and feudal claims—within a larger constellation of assets, including financial instruments and property in human bodies.
- 13 Within these broad similarities, some specific areas emerge as well. Administrators had an important role to play in outcomes as they applied the law. Whereas the focus is often on the dyad of lawmakers and property owners, administrators represent a crucial category of actor. These contributions also encourage us to interrogate what change looks like when it comes to property: in some contexts—Guadeloupe, the Company of Parisian Stockbrokers—what stayed the same was as important as what changed. Instead of a focus on winners and losers, or on the establishment of rights versus a failure to defend them, one is confronted by the question of how the concepts laid out in law evolved as they took shape in practice. Ultimately, then, one returns to perhaps the most salutary outcome of this group of articles: to highlight that the question of property in the Revolution remains very much an open one, and that many avenues for future research beckon.

NOTES

1. *Les origines de la France Contemporaine*, vol. II, Paris, Hachette, 1878, p. 386.
2. William H. SEWELL, *Work and Revolution: The Language of Labor from the Old Regime to 1848*, New York, Cambridge University, 1980.
3. See for example Suzanne DESAN, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France*, Berkeley, University of California, 2004; and Anne JOLLET, *Terre et société en Révolution : approche du lien social dans la région d'Amboise*, Paris, CTHS, 2000.
4. Rafe BLAUFARB, *The Great Demarcation: The French Revolution and the Invention of Modern Property*, New York, Oxford, 2016; Rebecca SPANG, *Stuff and Money in the Time of the French Revolution*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard, 2015; Miranda SPIELER, *Empire and Underworld: Captivity in French Guiana*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University, 2012.

5. *L'événement le plus important de la Révolution: la vente des biens nationaux (1789-1867) en France et dans les territoires annexés*, Paris, Société des études robespierristes/Éditions du CTHS, 2000.

6. Questions of legitimacy have been posed more forcefully in adjacent historiographic traditions. See for example Marie-Danielle DEMÉLAS and Nadine VIVIER, *Les propriétés collectives face aux attaques libérales (1750-1914): Europe occidentale et Amérique latine*, Rennes, Presses Universitaires, 2003; Rosa CONGOST and Rui SANTOS, *Contexts of Property in Europe: The Social Embeddedness of Property Rights in Historical Perspective*, Turnhout, Belgium, Brepols, 2010.