

Robespierre 1792

On Subsistence Goods

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To speak to the representatives of the people of the means of providing for its subsistence is not only to speak to them about the most sacred of their obligations, but of the most precious of their interests, for without a doubt they are mixed in with it. It is not the cause of the indigent alone that I want to plead, but that of landowners and merchants themselves.

I will restrict myself to recalling some obvious principles that seem to have been forgotten. I will only indicate simple measures that have already been proposed, for it is a matter less of creating brilliant theories than of returning to first notions of good sense.

In every country where nature furnishes man's needs with prodigality, shortages can only be imputed to the vices of administrations or laws themselves. Bad laws and bad administration have their source in false principles and bad morals.

It is a fact generally recognized that the soil of France produces much beyond what is necessary to feed its inhabitants, and that the current shortages are man-made shortages. The consequence of this fact and of the principle I proposed could be troubling, but this isn't the moment to flatter ourselves. Citizens, it is to you that the glory to make true principles triumph is reserved, and to give just laws to the world. You are not made to drag yourselves in a servile fashion in the ruts of tyrannical

prejudices traced by those who came before you; rather you are beginning a new career, one where no one has preceded you. You should at least submit to a severe examination all laws made under aristocratic despotism, be it noble, ecclesiastic or bourgeois, and up till now you have had no other. The most imposing authority cited is that of a minister of Louis XVI, combated by another minister of the same tyrant. I saw the birth of the legislation of the Constituent Assembly on the commerce in grains; it was nothing but that of the time that had preceded it; it hasn't changed up to this moment, since the interests and prejudices that were the basis have not changed. At the time of this same Assembly I saw the same events that are being renewed in this era; I saw aristocracy accuse the people, I saw hypocritical intriguers impute their own crimes to the defenders of freedom, who they called agitators and anarchists. I saw an impudent minister whose virtue was allowed to be suspected, demand adorations of France while ruining it, from the midst of these criminal intrigues I saw tyranny emerge armed with martial law in order to legally bathe in the blood of starving citizens. Millions for the minister, from whom it was forbidden to ask for an accounting; bonuses for the profit of the blood-suckers of the people; the unlimited freedom of commerce; and bayonets to calm fear or to oppress hunger: this was the policy vaunted by our first legislators.

The bonuses can be discussed; the freedom of commerce is necessary up to the point where homicidal cupidity becomes an abuse; the use of bayonets is an atrocity. The system is essentially incomplete because it doesn't bear upon the true principle.

The errors we have fallen into in this regard seem to come from two principal causes;

1. The authors of the theory have only considered the goods necessary for life as a form of ordinary merchandise, and haven't made any differentiation between the commerce in wheat, for example, and that of indigo; they have spoken more on the commerce in grains than on the people's subsistence. And for having failed to allow this fact to enter into their calculations they have made a false application of principles evident in general. It is this mixture of true and false which has loaned something specious to an erroneous system.
2. They have even less adapted it to the stormy circumstances brought

about by revolutions, and if their vague theory were good in ordinary times it would find no application in the rapid measures that moments of crisis demand of us. They have counted for much the profits of merchants and landowners, and for almost nothing the lives of men. And why? It was the great, the ministers, the rich who wrote, who governed. If it had been the people it's probable that the system would have received a few modifications!

For example, good sense indicates this truth: that the commodities that are not essential can be abandoned to the most unlimited speculations of the merchant. The momentary shortage that might be felt is always a bearable inconvenience, and it is enough that in general the unlimited freedom of the market works to the greater profit of and state and individuals. But the lives of men cannot be subject to the same chance. It isn't necessary that I be able to buy brilliant material, but I do have to be rich enough to buy bread for myself and my children. The merchant can very well keep in his storehouse the merchandise that vanity and luxury desire up till the moment when he can sell them at the highest possible price, but no man has the right to pile up stacks of wheat while next to him his like dies of hunger.

What is the first object of society? It is to maintain the inviolable rights of man. What is the first of these rights? The right to exist.

The first social law is thus that which guarantees to all society's members the means of existence; all others are subordinated to it. Property was only instituted or guaranteed to cement it. It is in order to live that we have property in the first case. It is not true that property can ever be in opposition with men's subsistence.

The aliments necessary to man are as sacred as life itself. Everything that is indispensable for its preservation is a property common to all of society. Only the surplus is private property and is abandoned to the industry of merchants. Any mercantile speculation that I make at the cost of the life of my like is not a traffic, but brigandage and fratricide.

In accordance with this principle, what is the problem to be resolved in the matter of

legislation on subsistence? It is this: to assure to all members of society the enjoyment of the portion of the fruits of the earth that is necessary to their existence: The price of their industry for landowners and cultivators, and the delivery of the excess to the freedom of commerce.

I defy the most scrupulous defender of property to contest these principles, unless they openly declare that they understand by this word the right to despoil and assassinate their like. How then could it have been claimed that any kind of hindrance or rather, any kind of rule, about the sale of wheat was an attack on property and how could this barbarous system be disguised under the specious name of freedom of commerce? Don't the authors of this system see that they are necessarily contradicting themselves?

Why are you forced to approve the prohibition of the exportation of grains to the exterior every time abundance isn't assured for the interior? You yourselves fix the price of bread; do you fix that of spices, or of the brilliant products of India? What is the cause of all these exceptions if it isn't the very obviousness of the principles I have just expounded upon? What am I saying? The government sometimes subjects the very commerce of luxury items to the modifications that healthy policy calls for. Why would that which deals with the subsistence of the people be necessarily freed of this?

Doubtless if all men were just and virtuous, if cupidity was never tempted to devour the people's substance, if the rich, docile to the voice of reason and nature, looked upon themselves as the economists of society, or as the brothers of the poor it would be possible to recognize no other law than that of the most unlimited liberty. But if it's true that avarice can speculate on poverty, and tyranny itself on the despair of the people; if it's true that all the passions declare war on suffering humanity, why would the laws not repress these abuses? Why wouldn't it stop the homicidal hand of the monopolizer, as it does that of the ordinary assassin? Why wouldn't it occupy itself with the existence of the people after having occupied itself for such a long time of the enjoyments of the great and the power of despots?

What then are the means of repressing these abuses? It's claimed that they are impractical; I say that they are as simple as they are infallible. It is claimed that they offer an insoluble problem, even for those of genius; I say that they present no difficulty to good sense and good faith. I say that they don't harm neither the interests of commerce nor the rights of property.

Let circulation throughout the entire extent of the republic be protected, but let the necessary precautions be taken so that circulation take place. It's precisely the lack of circulation that I complain of. For the plague of the people, the sources of shortages, are the obstacles put before circulation under the pretext of rendering it unlimited. Does public subsistence circulate when greedy speculators keep it piled up in their granaries? Does it circulate when it is accumulated in the hands of a small number of millionaires who remove it from commerce in order to render it more precious and rare, who coldly calculate how many families must perish before the merchandise has reached the time fixed by their atrocious avarice? Does it circulate when it only crosses the regions that produced it, before the eyes of indigent citizens who suffer the torture of Tantalus before filling the unknown abyss of some entrepreneur of public starvation? Does it circulate when, next to the most abundant harvests, the needy citizen languishes for not being able to give a piece of gold or a piece of paper precious enough to obtain a parcel?

Circulation is that which puts products of premier necessity within the reach of all men and brings abundance and life to the hearthside. Does blood circulate when it is engorged in the brain or the breast? It circulates when it freely flows through the body. Subsistence is the blood of the people, and its free circulation is no less necessary to the health of the social body than that of blood to the life of the human body. Favor then the free circulation of grain by preventing all harmful engorgements. What is the means of fulfilling this object? Remove from greed the interest and the ability to carry it out. Three causes favor this: secrecy, freedom without restraint, and the certainty of impunity.

Secrecy: when each can hide the quantity of public subsistence which he deprives all of society of. When he can fraudulently make it disappear and transport it either to

foreign countries or to storehouses in the interior. Simple methods, then, are proposed: the first is to take the necessary precaution of learning the amount of grain produced by each region and the amount harvested by each landowner or cultivator. The second consists in forcing grain merchants to sell them in the market and to forbid any transporting of purchases during the night. Neither the possibility nor the utility of these precautions needs to be proven, for neither is contested. Is it their legitimacy? But how could we look upon rules of general policy, commanded by society's interests as attacks on property? Who then is the good citizen who could complain of being obliged to act with loyalty in broad daylight? Who are the shadows necessary for if not monopolists and rascals? In any event, haven't I proved to you that society has the right to demand that portion that is necessary for the subsistence of citizens? What am I saying? It is the most sacred of obligations. How then could the laws necessary to assure its exercise be unjust?

I said that the other causes of the disastrous operations of monopoly were unrestricted freedom and impunity. What more certain way to encourage cupidity and to free it from any hindrance than to pose as a principle that the law doesn't even have the right to oversight in order to impose the slightest constraint? That the only rule prescribed for it is the power to dare to do anything with impunity? What am I saying? Such is the degree of perfection to which this theory has been taken that it has almost been established that those who corner markets are impeccable, that monopolists are humanity's benefactors, that in the quarrels that arise between them and the people it is the people who are always wrong. Either the crime of monopoly is impossible, or it is real. If it's a chimera how is it that this chimera has always been believed in? Why have we felt the ravages since the first moments of the revolution? Why do credible reports and incontestable facts denounce these guilty maneuvers to us? If it is real, by what strange privilege does it alone obtain the right to be protected? What limits would the pitiless vampires who speculate on public misery put on their attacks if bayonets and the absolute order to believe in the purity and beneficence of the monopolists were opposed to any demand? Unlimited freedom is nothing but the excuse, the safeguard and the cause of this abuse. How could it be the remedy? What is complained of? Precisely those ills that the current system has

produced, or at least the ills it could not prevent. And what remedy is proposed? The current system. I denounce to you the assassins of the people and you respond: let them be. In this system everything is against society, everything is in favor of the grain merchants.

It is here, legislators, that all your wisdom and circumspection are necessary. Such a subject is always delicate to deal with. It is dangerous to redouble the fears of the people and to even seem to authorize its discontent. It is even more dangerous to be silent about the truth and to hide principles. But if you follow them all inconveniences disappear: principles alone can dry up the sources of evil.

I well know that when we examine the circumstances of this or that particular riot, excited by either the real or man-made shortages of wheat, the influence of a foreign cause can sometimes be recognized. Ambition and intrigue feel the need to stir up troubles. Sometimes it is the same men who excite the people in order to find the pretext to slaughter them and to render freedom itself terrible in the eyes of weak and selfish men. But it is nonetheless true that the people are naturally upright and peaceful; they are always guided by pure intentions: those with evil intentions can not move them unless they present a motive both powerful and legitimate in its eyes. They profit from discontent more than cause it, and when they bring the people to ill-considered actions, using subsistence goods as the pretext, it's only because they are predisposed to receive these impressions by oppression and poverty. A happy people has never been a turbulent people. Whoever knows men, whoever especially knows the French people, knows that it is not in the power of a fool or a bad citizen to rise the people up without any reason against the laws they love; even less against its elected representatives and the freedom it has conquered. It is up to the representatives themselves to bear witness to the confidence given them and to disconcert aristocratic evil by taking care of the people's needs and calming their fears.

The very fears of the people must be respected. How can they be calmed if you remain inactive? The very measures proposed, even if they weren't as necessary as we think; it is enough that the people desire them, it's enough that they prove in their

eyes your attachment to their interests in order to determine you to adopt them. I have already indicated the nature and the spirit of these laws; I will content myself here with demanding priority for the projected decree that proposes precautionary measures against monopoly, reserving to myself the right to propose modifications if it is adopted. I have already proved that these measures, and the principles upon which they are founded, were necessary to the people. I am going to prove that they are useful to the rich and all landowners.

I don't take from them any honest profit, any legitimate property. I only take from them the right to attack that of others. I don't at all destroy commerce, rather the brigandage of the monopolist. I only condemn them to the penalty of letting their like live. Nothing then could be more advantageous to them: the greatest service that a legislator can render men is to force them to be honest men. Man's greatest interest is not to amass treasure, and the sweetest property is not to devour the subsistence of a hundred unfortunate families. The pleasure of relieving his like and the glory of serving the fatherland are easily worth this deplorable advantage. What use could the unlimited freedom of their odious traffic be to the greediest of speculators? To be either oppressed or oppressors. This latter destiny is atrocious. Rich men, egoists: know how to prevent and prevent in advance the terrible results of the struggle of pride and cowardly passions carry out against justice and humanity. Let the example of nobles and kings teach you. Learn to appreciate the charms of equality and the pleasures of virtue. Or at least content yourselves with the advantages fortune gives you and leave the people bread, labor and morality. It is in vain that the enemies of freedom act to tear at their fatherland's breast. They can no more stop the course of human reason than that of the sun. Cowardice will not triumph over courage. The genius of intrigue must flee before the genius of freedom. And you, legislators, remember that you are not representatives of a privileged caste, but that of the French people; don't forget that justice is the source of order; that the surest guarantee of public tranquility is the happiness of citizens, and that the long convulsions that tear states apart are nothing but the combat of prejudices against principles, of egoism against general interest, of the pride and passions of powerful men against the rights and needs of the weak.

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