



Karl Marx,
"The Duchess of Sutherland and Slavery"*
(1853)

London, Friday, January 21, 1853 — During the present momentary slackness in political affairs, the address of the Stafford House Assembly of Ladies to their sisters in America upon the subject of Negro-Slavery, and the “affectionate and Christian address of many thousands of the women of the United States of America to their sisters, the women of England”, upon white slavery, have proved a god-send to the press. Not one of the British papers was ever struck by the circumstance that the Stafford House Assembly took place at the palace under the Presidency of the Duchess of Sutherland, and yet the names of Stafford and Sutherland should have been sufficient to class the philanthropy of the British Aristocracy — a philanthropy which chooses its objects as far distant from home as possible, and rather on that than on this side of the ocean.

The history of the wealth of the Sutherland family is the history of the ruin and of the expropriation of the Scotch-Gaelic population from its native soil. As far back as the 10th century, the Danes had landed in Scotland, conquered the plains of Caithness, and driven back the aborigines into the mountains. Mhoir-Fhear-Chattaibh, as he was called in Gaelic, or the “Great Man of Sutherland”, had always found his companions-in-arms ready to defend him at risk of their lives against all his enemies, Danes or Scots, foreigners or natives. After the revolution which drove the Stuarts from Britain, private feuds among the petty chieftains of Scotland became less and less frequent, and the British Kings, in order to keep up at least a semblance of dominion in these remote districts, encouraged the levying of family regiments among the chieftains, a system by which these *lairds* were enabled to combine modern military establishments with the ancient *clan* system in such a manner as to support one by the other.

Now, in order to distinctly appreciate the usurpation subsequently carried out, we must first properly understand what the clan meant. The clan belonged to a form of social existence which, in the scale of historical development, stands a full degree below the feudal state; viz., the *patriarchal* state of society. “Klaen”, in Gaelic, means children. Every one of the usages and traditions of the Scottish Gaels reposes upon the supposition that the members of the clan belong to one and the same family. The “great man”, the chieftain of the clan, is on the one hand quite as arbitrary, on the other quite as confined in his power, by consanguinity, &c., as every father of a family. To the clan, to the family, belonged the district where it had established itself, exactly as in Russia, the land occupied by a community of peasants belongs, not to the individual peasants, but to the community. Thus the district was the common property of the family. There could be no more question, under this system, of private property, in the modern sense of the word, than there could be of comparing the social existence of the members of the clan to that of individuals living in the midst of our modern society. The division and subdivision of the land corresponded to the military functions of the single members of the clan. According to their military abilities, the chieftain entrusted to them the several allotments, cancelled or enlarged according to his pleasure the tenures of the individual officers, and these officers again distributed to their vassals and under-vassals every separate plot of land. But the district at large always remained the property of the clan, and, however the claims of individuals

might vary, the tenure remained the same; nor were the contributions for the common defence, or the tribute for the Laird, who at once was leader in battle and chief magistrate in peace, ever increased. Upon the whole, every plot of land was cultivated by the same family, from generation to generation, under fixed imposts. These imposts were insignificant, more a tribute by which the supremacy of the "great man" and of his officers was acknowledged, than a rent of land in a modern sense, or a source of revenue. The officers directly subordinate to the "great man" were called "Taksmen", and the district entrusted to their care, "Tak". Under then were placed inferior officers, at the head of every hamlet, and under these stood the peasantry.

Thus you see, the clan is nothing but a family organized in a military manner, quite as little defined by laws, just as closely hemmed in by traditions, as any family. But the land is the *property of the family*, in the midst of which differences of rank, in spite of consanguinity, do prevail as well as in all the ancient Asiatic family communities.

The first usurpation took place, after the expulsion of the Stuarts, by the establishment of the family Regiments. From that moment, *pay* became the principal source of revenue of the Great Man, the Mhoir-Fhear-Chattaibh. Entangled in the dissipation of the Court of London, he tried to squeeze as much money as possible out of his officers, and they applied the same system of their inferiors. The ancient tribute was transformed into fixed money contracts. In one respect these contracts constituted a progress, by fixing the traditional imposts; in another respect they were a usurpation, inasmuch as the "great man" now took the position of landlord toward the "taksmen" who again took toward the peasantry that of farmers. And as the "great men" now required money no less than the "taksmen", a production not only for direct consumption but for export and exchange also became necessary; the system of national production had to be changed, the hands superseded by this change had to be got rid of. Population, therefore, decreased. But that it as yet was kept up in a certain manner, and that man, in the 18th century, was not yet openly sacrificed to net-revenue, we see from a passage in Steuart, a Scotch political economist, whose work was published 10 years before Adam Smith's, where it says (Vol.1, Chap.16):

"The rent of these lands is very trifling compared to their extent, but compared to the number of mouths which a farm maintains, it will perhaps be found that a plot of land in the highlands of Scotland feeds ten times more people than a farm of the same extent in the richest provinces."

That even in the beginnings of the 19th century the rental imposts were very small, is shown by the work of Mr Loch (1820), the steward of the Countess of Sutherland, who directed the improvements on her estates. He gives for instance the rental of the Kintradawell estate for 1811, from which it appears that up to then, every family was obliged to pay a yearly impost of a few shillings in money, a few fowls, and some days' work, at the highest.

It was only after 1811 that the ultimate and real usurpation was enacted, the forcible transformation of *clan-property* into the *private property*, in the modern sense, *of the Chief*. The person who stood at the head of this economical revolution was a female Mehemet Ali, who had well digested her Malthus — the Countess of Sutherland, alias Marchioness of Stafford.

Let us first state that the ancestors of the Marchioness of Stafford were the "great men" of the most northern part of Scotland, of very near three-quarters of Sutherlandshire. This country is more extensive than many French

Departments or small German Principalities. when the Countess of Sutherland inherited these estates, which she afterward brought to her husband, the Marquis of Stafford, afterward Duke of Sutherland, the population of them was already reduced to 15,000. My lady Countess resolved upon a radical economical reform, and determined upon transforming the whole tract of country into sheep-walks. From 1814 to 1820, these 15,000 inhabitants, about 3,000 families, were systematically expelled and exterminated. All their villages were demolished and burned down, and all their fields converted into pasturage. British soldiers were commanded for this execution, and came to blows with the natives. An old woman refusing to quit her hut was burned in the flames of it. Thus my lady Countess appropriated to herself 794,000 acres of land, which from time immemorial had belonged to the clan. In the exuberance of her generosity she allotted to the expelled natives about 6,000 acres — two acres per family. These 6,000 acres had been lying waste until then, and brought no revenue to the proprietors. The Countess was generous enough to sell the acre at 2s 6d on an average, to the clan-men who for centuries past had shed their blood for her family. The whole of the unrightfully appropriated clan-land she divided into 29 large sheep farms, each of them inhabited by one single family, mostly English farm-laborers; and in 1821 the 15,000 Gaels had already been superseded by 131,000 sheep.

A portion of the aborigines had been thrown upon the sea-shore, and attempted to live by fishing. They became amphibious, and, as an English author says, lived half on land and half on water, and after all did not live upon both.

Sismondi, in his *Etudes Sociales*, observes with regard to this expropriation of the Gaels from Sutherlandshire — an example, which, by-the-by, was imitated by other “great men” of Scotland:

“The large extent of seignorial domains is not a circumstance peculiar to Britain. In the whole Empire of Charlemagne, in the whole Occident, entire provinces were usurped by the warlike chiefs, who had them cultivated for their own account by the vanquished, and sometimes by their own companions-in-arms. During the 9th and 10th centuries the Counties of Maine, Anjou, Poitou were for the Counts of these provinces rather three large estates than principalities. Switzerland, which in so many respects resembles Scotland, was at that time divided among a small number of Seigneurs. If the Counts of Kyburg, of Lenzburg, of Habsburg, of Gruyeres had been protected by British laws, they would have been in the same position as the Earls of Sutherland; some of them would perhaps have had the same taste for improvement as the Marchioness of Stafford, and more than one republic might have disappeared from the Alps in order to make room for flocks of sheep. Not the most despotic monarch in Germany would be allowed to attempt anything of the sort.”

Mr Loch, in his defense of the Countess of Sutherland (1820), replies to the above as follows:

“Why should there be made an exception to the rule adopted in every other case, just for this particular case? Why should the absolute authority of the landlord over his land be sacrificed to the public interest and to motives which concern the public only?”

And why, then, should the slave-holders in the Southern States of North America sacrifice their private interest to the philanthropic grimaces of her Grace, the Duchess of Sutherland?

The British aristocracy, who have everywhere superseded man by bullocks and sheep, will, in a future not very distant, be superseded, in turn, by these useful animals.

The process of *clearing estates*, which, in Scotland, we have just now described, was carried out in England in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries.

Thomas Morus already complains of it in the beginning of the 16th century. It was performed in Scotland in the beginning of the 19th, and in Ireland it is now in full progress. The noble Viscount Palmerston, too, some years ago cleared of men his property in Ireland, exactly in the manner described above.

If of any property it ever was true that it was *robbery*, it is literally true of the property of the British aristocracy. Robbery of Church property, robbery of commons, fraudulent transformation, accompanied by murder, of feudal and patriarchal property into private property — these are the titles of British aristocrats to their possessions. And what services in this latter process were performed by a servile class of lawyers, you may see from an English lawyer of the last century, Dalrymple, who, in his *History of Feudal Property*, very naively proves that every law or deed concerning property was interpreted by the lawyers, in England, when the middle class rose in wealth in favor of the *middle class* — in Scotland, where the nobility enriched themselves, in favor of the *nobility* — in either case it was interpreted in a sense hostile to the *people*.

The above Turkish reform by the Countess of Sutherland was justifiable, at least, from a Malthusian point of view. Other Scottish noblemen went further. Having superseded human beings by sheep, they superseded sheep by game, and the pasture grounds by forests. At the head of these was the Duke of Atholl.

“After the conquest, the Norman Kings afforested large portions of the soil of England, in much the same way as the landlords here are now doing with the Highlands.” (R. Somers, Letters on the Highlands, 1848)

As for a large number of the human beings expelled to make room for the game of the Duke of Atholl, and the sheep of the Countess of Sutherland, where did they fly to, where did they find a home?

In the United States of America.

The enemy of British Wage-Slavery has a right to condemn Negro-Slavery; a Duchess of Sutherland, a Duke of Atholl, a Manchester Cotton-lord — never!

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