

"SINGLE TAX GEORGE"

THE EDITOR,
Land & Liberty.

Dear Sir,—I recognise it is generally considered unwise for an author to cross swords with a hostile reviewer; nevertheless permit me to offer some comments on the unfavourable notice of my book on *Single-Tax George* which appeared in the last issue of *Land & Liberty*.

My complaint of the review is exactly the same as the reviewer's complaint of my book. "The tone and outlook are entirely misleading." Anyone reading the notice would imagine I had deliberately set out to play the part of devil's advocate to George's reputation. Nothing was further from my purpose. I wished to give a balanced estimate of his place in the history of social thought and action, and I was therefore compelled to make some reference to his faults as a man and his errors as a thinker. At the same time, as anyone will see who reads the book, I have paid ample tribute to his real greatness of mind and his distinction as a social philosopher.

Your reviewer is concerned that I alluded to some of George's temperamental weaknesses. My excuse is that I was painting the picture of a man, not adding more plaster to the statue of a saint. In his own lifetime, George suffered from the indiscriminate adulation of some of his followers. It would be a thousand pities if such a fate pursued him after death. No surer means could be devised of ruining his reputation with posterity.

As for his theories, I was bound to criticize them, but I claim I have not criticized them unfairly. The point I made is that George unduly simplified the social problem. In *Progress & Poverty* he spoke as if the land were practically the only source of economic exploitation. No intelligent observer of our present system can subscribe to this view. The world we live in offers innumerable opportunities for exploitation. There are other monopolies besides land monopolies and state monopolies. Think of the history of trusts in America and elsewhere. *Pace* your reviewer, the ownership of anything that is scarce, whether it be land, capital, commodities or services, gives an opportunity for economic exploitation. In a society that is honey-combed with monopoly, it will require more than a tax on rent to protect producers against legalized robbery. What about interest, for example? What is the fundamental distinction between rent and interest that makes the one a legitimate source of income and the other a form of theft?

Of course, George himself was dimly aware of all this in his later years, and he tried to salvage his theory by vague statements that the single tax must not be regarded as a panacea. But he never openly contradicted his bold thesis in *Progress & Poverty* that a single tax on rent would cure poverty. And this, in my opinion, is the chief blot on his fame as a thinker.

I have no desire, however, to enter into a discussion on the merits of the single tax. All I want to do is to try to correct a wrong impression which your reviewer, perhaps unintentionally, gave of my book. It was not meant as a sustained attack on Henry George. It was an attempt to pass an impartial judgment on him as a figure of history. A biographer, who discharges his task faithfully, must bring out the shadows as well as the lights of his subject. That I have tried to do so in the present instance does not mean that I am animated by any hostility or prejudice against Henry George. I hope therefore that single taxers will not put my book

on their *Index Expurgatorius*. The output of books on Henry George is, at present, so meagre, that his disciples cannot afford to overlook any account of him, however much it may contradict their preconceived ideas. I, on the other hand, would be deeply disappointed if your readers got the impression that my book was not worth their attention. The section of the reading public interested in Henry George is so limited that if my book is not read by the people who read your paper, it runs a grave risk, I fear, of never being read at all.

Yours sincerely, ARTHUR BIRNIE.

I entirely accept Mr Birnie's statement of his objects in writing his book and that he had not consciously intended to belittle either Henry George's achievements in social philosophy or his character as a man. Whether Mr Birnie accomplished his object, I leave to those who read his book.

Mr Birnie says that he "wished to give a balanced estimate of his (George's) place in social thought and action." Henry George's practical proposal was to raise public revenue by taxation of land values with corresponding abolition of other taxes. I think it will be difficult for the reader to discover what Mr Birnie's view of this proposal is. To give an example: Does Mr Birnie consider that it is equitable and economically advantageous that the whole burden of municipal taxation in this country should be imposed upon the occupiers of immovable property and that the recipients of economic rent should be exonerated from contributing to public services which maintain and increase that rent?

Is it a "chimera," one of the "unsubstantial creations" of George's brain, to suggest that this position should be reversed? If so, it is held by more than two hundred local authorities in this country. What I complain of in Mr Birnie's book is that it omits to deal with any concrete issue of this kind, or to indicate any opinion as to the value of Henry George's proposals. He is so concerned to deny that taxation of land values is a panacea, that he conveys the impression that it is of no importance.

I should not attempt to deny that there are other infringements of economic freedom besides those directly arising from our system of land tenure and taxation. Perverse ingenuity has in recent years created a whole host of them through quotas and other restrictions. If space allowed, I could elaborate how closely connected they are with land monopoly. I will content myself by quoting Prof. John R. Commons' statement: "If size of fortunes is taken into account it will be found that perhaps 95 per cent. of the total values represented by these millionaire fortunes is due to those investments classed as land values and natural monopolies, and to competitive industries aided by such monopolies."

Mr Birnie will perhaps think that Professor Commons and I are afflicted by "the intransigence of the abstract reasoner." As one who has taken some practical part in public life for a quarter of a century, I may retort that what the world is suffering from is the incurable sloppiness in the reasoning of those who are unable to see any guiding principles of conduct in human affairs and who endeavour to solve each isolated difficulty by an *ad hoc* remedy regardless of its repercussions on other problems.—YOUR REVIEWER.

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