

The Henry George Movement in Denmark; Efforts and Achievements over Fifty Years

By Dan Björner

The supreme interest of the Conference will be advancement on the roads leading to the realisation of its declared aim and object. Through the instructive addresses and profitable discussions, we will gladly gain new and fresh impulses for the great work that lies ahead of us. However, while the programme was being drafted, the wish was expressed that the Conference might hear about the growth and development of the Henry George movement in Denmark, having especially in mind the fact that on March 2nd of this year our Henry George Union celebrated its 50th Anniversary. The men and women here in Denmark who have been in the forefront of the work for our cause have of a truth seldom had time to pause and look back on this or that achievement. Most of them probably felt there was little to boast about, so instead of that they went steadily ahead with their educational effort which was often hard going. But if it is true, as one of our poets has it, that unless the hold has been stowed with history, the ship will sail into the future in ballast, then what I have to say here may be of some importance to you and to the progress of our ideas.

From our friends abroad we often hear that in the matter of a general knowledge of land value taxation and free trade and an understanding of the social importance of these questions, Denmark has advanced farther than most other countries; and we are often asked what can be the reason. Without seeking to dive into long and tedious historical research, it is yet necessary that I glance back somewhat farther than these 50 years, if I am to give a tolerably satisfactory answer to that question.

The emblem of this Conference represents the monument which stands in the middle of Copenhagen, right in the heart of a big city's pulsing life. The monument was raised by Danish peasants in gratitude for reforms which heralded new and better times for the whole Danish community. It is called the Liberty Memorial and every Dane knows it. The reforms which took shape in the land legislation and in

the freeing of trade, were inspired by the ideas of freedom which at that time spread over Europe, given birth by men like Adam Smith and the French Physiocrats. These reforms came in the years around the great French revolution, and thanks to a few wise and unselfish men, who enjoyed the confidence of the then absolute monarch, the reforms adopted here in Denmark were a real revolution, and that, without any bloodshed. In the past, the common people had lived in poor circumstances and conditions were especially hard for the peasants. The land of the country was nearly all owned by the noble families. Trade was stricken and near to death in the strangle-hold of the crazy mercantilist ideas. The vast majority of the population were in a sore state and that was the case all over Europe at that time. But whereas the changes in most countries came as the result of bloody revolutions, we in Denmark got our reform in another way, so that co-operation between the former privileged classes and the peasants could proceed to the advantage of all parties, and at the same time the permanence of the reforms was ensured.

What, then, were the reforms and why should they become so important for the economic development and the understanding of the ideas with which we are concerned here? Up till the year 1788 the peasant had for long been an unfree man. In order that he should provide the landlord with cheap labour he was denied the chance of seeking his living elsewhere. He was regarded almost as part of the livestock of the estate. It is true he was a leaseholder under the landlord but the landlord played fast and loose with the terms of the lease just as suited him. In 1788 the peasant was set free from the villenage that tied him to the soil; and at about the same time by Royal Edicts, the leasehold relations between peasant and landlord were made clear and definite. Through subsequent legislation based on these edicts, and as the years flowed on, more and more land passed over from leasehold to freehold. The emancipation of the peasant roused his sense of responsibility and gave incentive to his industry. It need not surprise any of us that the outcome was a steep rise in the market value of farm properties. In the years up to 1802 following these reforms the value had doubled. And as land prices rose, so grew mortgage debts.

To look back again, we should remember that the greater part of the State revenue was then derived from the land in the form of the hundred years old "hartkorn" tax*, which unfortunately was wholly repealed at the beginning of this century, but the basis of that tax had become outdated. The assessments and the provisions for certain privileges no longer corresponded with the circumstances. The leading

* An assessment of land based on its natural fertility and potential productivity.

men of that time were acquainted with the single tax ideas of François Quesnay and under their influence a new valuation was undertaken which should be the basis for collecting the amount of revenue required to meet the increased expenses of the State. But, unfortunately, that work came to a stop. The misfortunes of war and state-bankruptcy brought down much in ruin: nevertheless up to the beginning of the present century a substantial proportion of the state revenue rested on land values through the incidence of the hartkorn taxes. They were a kind of recognition of the principle that the value of land should be shared amongst the people as a whole. Along with the land-law reforms above mentioned, the foreign trade of the country was liberated.

As already stated, the country's overseas trade had almost withered away. The same was true of trade and industry within the country itself. State trading and the guild restrictions reduced production and increased the price of everything needed for sustenance. The tariff reforms going hand-in-hand with the land reforms paved the way for a freer industrial life and commerce was able to flourish. Let me add here, what deserves a passing note, that Denmark, imbued with this sense of freedom and taking action a few years later, was the first country to abolish negro slavery; and that our old and time-honoured Merchant Guild of Copenhagen placed the symbol of freedom, the Phrygian bonnet, in its seal.

Even though our country became the victim of unfortunate wars, the idea of liberty was now very strongly rooted in the minds of the people, and throughout the nineteenth century the idea was fostered and confirmed in various ways. Our great religious philosopher Grundtvig, who in the middle of last century was one of those who worked out our Constitution, said:—

“The people must be the landowners of their own country and they can never legitimately by any law lose this ownership—thus only the benefits from the use of land can legitimately under the law be treated as shareable goods or become the objects of purchase and sale. What the jurists call a full property right, such as a man may have to his money, his clothes, and his furniture, no one excepting the people has to the land, which must bear and feed them.”

This man put the individual before the community and in everything he voiced the cause of freedom. In association with some few others he founded the Folk High School, where especially our young people from the countryside learned to understand the deeper causes making for progress, while at the same time their interest in social problems and a cultural life was awakened. All this taken together made it possible

to build up and expand our internationally recognised co-operative movement, where the small landholder and the biggest landowner have the same voting power in matters of joint concern. This practical co-operation on an equal footing has been of great benefit to our democracy and has given our legislature many capable men and women.

But the great monopolies: the private appropriation of almost all the land rent and the tariff monopoly had not been abolished. The social inequality these monopolies had helped to create had also been a fertile soil for the Marxist conception of history and this came to exert a powerful influence from the end of last century up to the present day.

You may think that all this has been related in rather much detail, but the explanation has been necessary in order to give you a picture of the Denmark which encountered Henry George's ideas, and let you understand how they gained attention here.

We all know what struggles Henry George himself went through, but we know also what great response, in the English-speaking world, was given to the man and his ideas, in his later years. His books were published in large editions, and thousands flocked to his platform both in the new world and in the old; but we know also that the interest cooled off remaining so until within the last few years. Here in Denmark events took quite a different course. The beginning was modest and so was the first growth. It was made by people belonging to the Folk High Schools. They chose the often arduous yet sure road of education instead of the dearer and quicker though less certain and less durable method of propaganda. It can be said of most of our pioneers that they believed that the men entrusted with making the laws could not fail to see the clearly obvious justice of the ideas, and that it would only be a matter of a few years before land value taxation, free trade, and the abolition of other taxes were introduced here in this country. But at the same time they reasoned in this wise: "What good will these reforms do if the whole people do not understand the principles underlying them? For if they do not the reforms will soon be lost again." Therefore they devoted themselves to the work of education as the most important, at the same time doing their best to make their influence felt with the legislature. It is difficult to over-estimate the significance of the stress thus laid on the educational work.

In 1879 Henry George published *Progress and Poverty*, and only seven years later it was translated by V. Ulmann, the Norwegian Folk High School principal, who was deeply impressed by its philosophy. Shortly afterwards he gave some lectures on the subject here in Denmark, but it was the former principal of this Odense school, Jacob E. Lange, who

first really gained a hearing when he expounded the same thoughts. He was at the time a young teacher at the nearby Dalum Agricultural School, and on a study tour to England he became acquainted with Henry George's ideas. In 1888 he wrote some articles in *Höjskolebladet* (journal of the Folk High School) which fortunately enough evoked opposition. That started the ball rolling. A couple of years later Lange met Henry George in England and discussed with him the questions that had been raised in controversy, and they remained in contact through correspondence. The first discussion in *Höjskolebladet* and other periodicals, to which several outstanding men contributed, were of the greatest importance. Such great interest was aroused by these discussions that steps were taken by which the first Henry George Union was started. This happened here in Odense in 1889. Ulmann published a periodical in Oslo, *Vor Tid* (Our Time). It was chosen as the organ of the Union, but when Ulmann a few years later gave up his paper, the new Union was disabled from keeping in touch with the public, and the days of this first movement were numbered.

However, the new thoughts had been sown, and when in 1902 an adherent inserted an advertisement in a newspaper inviting Henry George supporters to a meeting in Copenhagen with the object of forming a Henry George Union, possibilities were at hand for establishing something that would strike root. Circumstances favoured the foundation of our Union, which has now existed for 50 years, and which is joint convener of this conference. The men, about 20 in number, who met on the 2nd of March, 1902, as its founders, quickly agreed on two things, first of all the statement of aims and objects, which has remained unchanged ever since and reads as follows: "The object is to work for the solution of the social problem through the economic emancipation of the people in the way Henry George has shown; that is: the carrying into effect of *fuld grundskyld* (land value taxation in its fulness) and free trade, and the abolition of taxes on all labour created values and incomes. For attaining this aim we seek associates from all classes in the community and from all political parties." Secondly, it was desired that the Union should as soon as possible make itself superfluous.

As conditions are to-day, we have unfortunately reasons enough for believing that there is still need for the educational work we carry on and even though in essential matters legislation has gone against us, and there is nothing much for us to boast about, yet (in other respects) our Union has had a not altogether negligible influence on legislation in this country.

The Union has spread the knowledge of its principles by the publication of Henry George's works, by the circulation

of our journal and pamphlets and by meetings held all over the country, and several of our political parties have endorsed these ideas in their programmes. Bearing my introductory remarks in mind you cannot wonder that the ideas found their way to the countryside and the movement gained great support especially from the small-holders. Their clear declaration of 1902 became of great importance—the so-called Køge Resolution in which they stood for land value taxation and the remission of taxes on labour and its earnings. This gave impetus to the political work and it was largely responsible for our having secured during the first world war the valuation showing separately the value of land apart from improvements. In this valuation the land value was assessed by taking quality and situation into account. By later legislation, in 1919, concerning cession of land from certain large estates and land owned by the State in order to establish self-existent small-holders, it was possible to set up those small farms on the basis of land rent. This meant that the new holder did not have to give the purchase money for the land, but contracted to pay an annual rent equal to 4 per cent. of the land value, as assessed in the course of the general valuations of all land. As you drive through our summer land you will see these small-holdings colonies, proving to everybody that they can exist on these conditions. I will not go farther into the part our movement has played in legislation. You will surely get more details during the Conference, but I should like to mention that in 1922 we got a law which for the first time, since the abolition of the hartkorn taxes at the very beginning of this century, recognised land values as a basis of taxation. We are indebted to the political party *det radikale Venstre* (the Radical Liberals) for the enactment of this law which, although from the revenue point of view it was an extremely small instalment, did after all established a principle in our legislation.

As I mentioned before, the declaration from Køge brought the movement into politics, and there is good reason to say a little more about it. It was not just by chance that it was among the small-holders that the new ideas found acceptance fifty years ago. The co-operative system had given new opportunity for the independent activity of small farmers, and with these new possibilities there grew an understanding of how important it was that there should be cheap access to land. The declaration has been printed so often, both in Danish and other languages, that it will suffice for me to give it in general terms:—

“As the small-holders consider their form of husbandry to be the most advantageous for themselves and for the community, their economy cannot be based on subsidies and contributions from the state or from other sections

of the community. They seek no favours for themselves in the way of tax legislation, but on the contrary, the earliest possible removal of all tariffs and taxes on consumption or earnings of labour; and they demand instead that, for meeting the public requirements, taxation be levied on the land value which is not due to any person's individual work but arises from the growth and development of the community. Such charges will not weigh upon labour but, on the contrary, will make land cheaper and thereby make it easier for every man to have a home of his own."

This manifesto of a large and important section of the community was impressive and left its mark on political life.

In recent years there has been no legislation on the lines of our ideas. Indeed, on the question of free trade it has gone directly against us; but there is the old saying that it is always darkest before dawn. At this Conference you will hear about all that is of present interest in Danish politics; about the Parliamentary Commission on Land Values, which at the instance of *Retsforbundet* (the Justice Party) has been appointed to investigate the possibilities of adopting *fuld grundskyld* (land value taxation in its fulness) and also how to meet the demand for freer trade.

I wish only to emphasise here that the Henry George Union has adherents within most of the political parties. The Parliamentary Commission on Land Values could hardly have been appointed if that were not the case. Those who helped to found *Retsforbundet* (the party that must be said to stand most keenly for the consummation of our ideas) belonged to this Union, but they came at the time from widely differing political camps. Nor must we forget that many who were in favour of the same ideas remained with the old parties in order to preserve their influence there. The Henry George Union still continues to count its members within most of the parties. It desires to be a free forum for all who, no matter what their political ties may be, seek to work for the propagation of our ideas. It is quite true that this has often involved a clash of opinion. Those who have previously attended a Conference like this will know that we are not and cannot be agreed on all aspects. Often the waves rise high, but one thing is sure—on the fundamental principles we are agreed.

To-day, land value taxation and free trade are in daily debate all over the country. It is not necessary, and it would hardly be possible for us, to hold meetings on these questions. Our work is now confined in the main to the circulation of our journal and publications as the most important side of our educational activity, together with the support we can give to the Ecotechnical High School (the Henry George School), started as it was before the war and inspired by the

School in America. With the principal Georgeist works as text books, the School conducts every year a series of study circles in many parts of the country and it supplies those circles with the study material which is on display here at the Conference.

As you will have noticed I have as far as possible avoided mentioning names. If I had mentioned all the men and women who have put a great and unselfish effort into our movement during the last fifty years I would have run far beyond the bounds of this paper and I am sure that would have caused tedium. My Danish listeners know them, and they will come across the names again and again. My purpose was to give you an impression of the work that has been done by these our pioneers, and of the conditions under which they worked.

In memory of the man who was the leading personality in the emancipation of the peasant there stands a monument, and thereon is carved the following verse:—

 Their pains we write
 In sand alone,
 The fighter for freedom
 His name in stone.

Sooner or later even the hardest granite will disintegrate but all those who preceded us and showed us the road of liberty, they have impressed their features in something much more durable.