

## THE SPIRITUAL, MENTAL AND ECONOMIC BACKGROUND FOR THE HENRY GEORGE MOVEMENT IN DENMARK

ADDRESS BY MRS. SIGNE BJØRNER

Mrs. BJØRNER said:—

This question is often put to us: Why is it that in Denmark, especially the agricultural people, the peasant proprietors and the smallholders, seem to have embraced the cause of freeing the land and it is not so elsewhere? That will have to be explained by sketching the background of the life of the people.

One of our American friends, introducing a Henry George speaker to a very conservative audience, members of the Board of Trade in his town, said: "I have heard murmurs of 'Socialism' concerning our guest. That is absurd. State Socialism is a pessimistic proposition, sprung from a sense of dependency and despondency; Georgeism is an optimistic point of view, born of freedom and fostered by faith in the potency of liberty to solve all the problems of social relations." These words are an explanation of the position of our people as a whole. With us, Georgeism, or, as some of its adherents prefer to term it, *The State of Justice and Equity* (Retsstaten), is more than a point of view, it is an attitude of mind, a state of the spirit.

Owing to certain reforms in the beginning of last century, the farmers were liberated from the bondage in which they had stood to the large estates. From being tenant serfs, they got the freedom to settle where they wished; gradually they became freeholders. This freedom inaugurated an enormous progress. That is a matter of history, and the development of Danish agriculture to what it is to-day—something we are rather proud of—dates from that reform.

To the mental and economic progress among our peasants during this last century—for with the better economic conditions came better education, agricultural High Schools and Colleges—was added the *spiritual* development through the Danish Peoples' High Schools. These were originated by a band of enthusiastic university men, after the precepts and ideals of our great educational philisophers, Kold and Grundtvig.

This educational movement, started and carried on without official help or meddling, has been greatly developed so that now there are more than a hundred High Schools in our small country. Nearly all young people of both sexes, from the ages of 20 to 25 or so, from the homes of farmers or smallholders, and a growing number from the cities, take a term or two at these schools, in summer three months, in winter five. They come of their own accord to the school of their choice, paying for it themselves; live at the school, which is of course conducted on a plain and simple basis, quite cheaply; attend lectures by their principal and teachers; and work on the subjects which especially interest them, with books and in classes. Since there are practically no illiterates of adult age in Denmark, the object of the High School is not so much to add to the pupil's knowledge of the "three R's"—

though such instruction can also be had. The main object is to give a perspective of life and the laws of life, by means of studying our country's and the world's history, biology and the physical sciences; and also, though never by any manner of theological cramming, to bring the young people in touch with eternal life and give them occasion to glimpse at the laws which govern the life of the soul.

The aim of the High School is to open the doors and windows of mind and spirit, so that the pupils may find whatever help there is to be had, and be able to go into the world and work out their own salvation, each in his own way. Needless to say, many of our High School teachers are connected with the Henry George movement, foremost among them Mr. Jacob E. Lange, who was to have spoken here.

This, I believe, is an especially Danish institution, and perhaps accountable for the spiritual background of Georgeism, which is this: The lasting life of the soul is only carried through this world in the lives of individuals. The idea of individuals being subservient to the State ("We belong to the State") is therefore misleading. That organization is only valuable to us inasmuch as it gives security of individual freedom, only to be achieved through equal justice to all. Liberty is the first demand of the spirit, since each soul must work out its own problems without uncalled for interference, in order to reach its fullest development. Such liberty can only be had in a state of justice and equity. In the knowledge of this spiritual state of our people—you might call it religious, only we don't speak in religious terms—lies our great hope.

This hope is furthermore strengthened by the mental attitude, which is *co-operative*. In this respect we owe a debt to Great Britain, which can never be overrated. The great influence came to us through the example of the poor and hard-suffering Rochdale weavers, who showed the world an object lesson in co-operation, one of the greatest on earth, if we but learn it thoroughly and carry it out right.

The first co-operative stores in Denmark were founded by a small group of labourers, just as badly-off as the Rochdale men, instructed and led by the minister of their church, whose compassion for them was only equalled by his determination to help as he could. It was built on the same pure and equitable principles tried out by those Rochdale men, and through all later developments those principles of equality and democracy have been the leading light. There are now consumers' leagues all over the country, a store in every village and a number in the larger towns, united in a wholesale union with many branches and factories, handling the larger part of all the commodities used in the country.

But the co-operation of our *agricultural producers* has been a still greater influence toward bringing the people to our point of view, ripening them for the co-operative commonwealth, making them self-reliant, opposed to any kind of paternalistic socialization. For why should they wish for State officials to do things for them, which they can do for themselves? It has also made plain the economic necessity for freeing the land from monopoly, sharpened by the great rise in values, now privately collected.

The co-operative dairies, bacon factories, egg packeries, etc., have made smallholdings profitable and therefore created a growing demand for dividing up the land. Under the old system of separate churning, cheese making, etc., the small farmer could never compete with the large

estates, which could afford better facilities and skilled workers and were sure of their markets, while the little farmer had to barter with an astute town merchant, whose business it was to give as little as possible for the product.

Now, when the milk from each farm is sent—rather called for—straight to the dairy each day, in separate and individual cans, the contents of which are tested by experts and paid for according to quality, the milk from the one-or-two-cow place is as good as, they say often better than, that from the larger farms. At any rate, the land of the small farms, being worked intensively and by the smallholder himself and his family, yields comparatively more than the larger farms or estates and of course, in the political wisdom of our day, is taxed—financed—accordingly. The proportion of taxes payable by the smallholder is as five to three payable by the larger farmers, and five to one payable by the large estates, for the same unit of land value, the difference being tax on improvements, tariff taxes and income taxes.

The injustice of this is plain to everyone, not least to those who suffer directly for it, and under the new land subdivision laws their number is growing. Be it said to the honour of our small farmers: they have never once asked for reductions or exemptions for themselves. But on the initiative of intelligent leaders from their own rank and file and instructed by such able Georgeist leaders as Mr. S. Berthelsen and Mr. Jacob E. Lange, the smallholders have for years been constantly demanding an equal and equitable system of sharing the expense of the community, that is, by abolition of taxes and the replacing of them by *Jordskyld* or *Grundskyld*, *dues paid on land value only*. We do not call the land-value contribution a "tax," nor is it.

All these things explain the position of the small peasant proprietor. And there is still another. Some might think that, with land values continually rising, even the small farmer would be tempted to let his personal interest in holding on to his share of the increment get the better of his natural instinct for justice. But he looks farther ahead. There is a strong family instinct, as strong as with any scion of a noble estate, with our farming people, and especially among those where the work of husband, wife and children go to build up the home. All share the labour and the fruits of it, and the main consideration is not to grab something for yourself, at the end of a strenuous life, something which you haven't earned, but which you think you may be entitled to, because you have had to deliver so much of your own earnings to others, with no returns. This position might be explained, even condoned. But our farmers know, that while they might get an old age pension by selling their land for so much more than they paid for it, that would mean that each of their children, when setting out to get land on which to build their home, would have to pay just as much more

for admission to labour and permission to build. For the family, that would mean a much larger loss, the necessity for still larger loans with the credit societies (also co-operative) than they had been engaged in paying interest for all their lives; and for the children and their families, even less returns for their labour. Hence, for spiritual, moral and practical reasons, the clear and emphatic demand for justice, nothing but justice. This is the very strong and growing political influence backing our demand—the influence of our smallholders and the small farming classes.

Then too, the politico-economic development seems to aid. There has been a strong tendency among politicians of all parties toward State Socialism, or at least toward socialization. Not that they all subscribe to the idea, that would not be consistent with the point of view of their constituents. They do not espouse the paternalistic ideal openly, but it seems to have been the easiest way when the class of voters on which each had to rely for re-election, put up a distress signal, to barter with colleagues in Parliament—who may be in a position to need help another time—and secure a subsidy of some sort for the distressed, "passing the buck," as an American phrase puts it, to the taxpayer. And with subsidy comes State control, a new set of officials, the chance to supply political supporters with jobs.

The *Tax Bolshevism*, as George Brandes calls it, in our country, has reached such heights that it is crippling industry, thus diminishing the possibilities for filling the ever hungry Exchequer and defeating its own aims. More than any other form of graft devised by collaboration of politics and high finance, this blending of public and private interests is proving to the people that the more we all mind our own affairs and the less we leave for politicians to mind for us, the better.

I am not casting a slur on our public men; they are as good and honest as any, always much better than the system under which they have to work, by which they are often compelled to help on developments they never intended. But a distinction must be made. The man who sees the bottom problem, that of freeing the land by requiring *dues* paid by every holder, in proportion to value received, and freeing industry by abolishing taxes, and who goes after results according to his convictions, is a statesman. Any other could be nothing but a politician, not entitled to public respect or consideration.

#### DISCUSSION

Mr. Abel Brink and Mrs. Signe Bjorner were asked and answered many questions. The discussion was interrupted by the incident about to be reported. It was resumed later and was followed with exceptional interest, especially in view of the practical progress achieved in Denmark, where Valuation and the Taxation of Land Values has been initiated.