

NINETY-SEVEN YEARS AGO!

[There has come into my hands a copy of *THE REPUBLICAN*, No. 21, vol. 6, dated Oct. 18th, 1822. It is a small 8vo of 32 pp., published at 6d., and edited by R. Carlile, who had just completed the third year of his imprisonment for his political and religious opinions. The leading article is dated from Dorchester Gaol, "Oct. 14th, year 3 of the Spanish Revolution." The number before me contains part of a correspondence between the Editor and Mr. Allen Davenport, of Upper Seymour Street, London. Mr. Davenport's letter, from which I give some extracts, is rather discursive, but the following extracts show that he had an unusually clear perception of the fundamental importance of the land question, and that he was advocating the abolition of private property in land and the substitution of what was—except for his inclusion of houses with land—essentially the Single Tax. The letter was written at a time of high taxation, violently suppressed liberty, and arrogant land-monopoly, following on a great war; that is, under circumstances very much like those of our own day.—F. V.]

"I read with great attention your letter addressed to me . . . concerning equality of property in land. You could hardly suppose that I meant all sorts of property. To make such a division as that, we must divide everything afresh. I disclaim the idea. It would be unnatural, unjust, and absurd. . . .

"You say, 'The premises are correct, as to the land being the people's property, who are born and live on it; but cannot a better system be established, than that each individual should hold and cultivate his proportion of the land? Cannot you see that if every man cultivated his land, and produced food for himself and his family, he must necessarily become his own taylor, and shoemaker, and hatter, and hosier, and, in fact, jack of all trades, as far as his wants, or the wants of his family stimulated him? Cannot you see this? . . .

"You say, if the Grand Sultan had not more power over the lives and properties of his subjects, than over the lands on which they vegetate, he would not be able to play the despot as he does. My dear sir, it is the land that gives him the power which he exercises over the lives and properties of his subjects. 'The land is the foundation of empire.'

"Let a law be enacted in Turkey to increase annually the number of landed proprietors, and you would find in a few years that that empire would descend to an aristocracy; and if this law kept operating till every member became a landholder, no power on earth could prevent it from being a democracy blest with a popular government, founded on a representative system.

"On the other hand, if a law was to be enacted in the United States, to reduce annually the number of landed proprietors, you would see in a short time that that government would become an aristocracy, and from that proceed to an absolute monarchy. This balance is founded on the principles of Nature; no human power can alter it. It is a power which nature reserves to herself, to reward wise, and punish foolish nations. . . .

"The late French War operated upon England with all the force, and almost all the regularity of that law which I have said would convert the United States into an aristocracy; it has raised the aristocracy of England to an unnatural height, from which they look down,

having one foot on the neck of the King, and the other on the neck of the people, with the most sovereign contempt on all below; and the King himself, having no portion of the land, they either reduce to a cypher; or make an instrument of deception, and oppression. Nor will they suffer reform, or any change to take place in this country, till . . . some external commotion shall affect the internal administration of this unhappy land. The last continental war enslaved Europe; the next will free the world of tyrants. . . . I know this general revolution will come, and that is why I wished to call your attention to private property in land. All that I have written hitherto has only tended to show the importance of land, and how it operates on Society in all countries; it shall now be my task to point out how it ought, in my opinion, to be disposed of for the happiness of mankind.

"It is calculated that the total yearly rent of all the land, houses, (*sic*), mines, fisheries, etc., of England, Scotland, and Ireland, amounts to £150,000,000. Now £50,000,000 out of this rental would be nearly sufficient to defray all the expenses, even of the present establishments. If such a scheme was to be acted upon, it would put an end to all taxes, and the remaining £100,000,000 may be divided equally amongst men, women and children. The whole population of the empire being 20,000,000 souls; each would, therefore, receive £5 for his share, and what he could make of his industry besides; would not this be better than a system of taxation? But I will exhibit it in miniature. If the land of the whole empire was divided amongst her population, it would run to nearly seven acres each, but I will say six. Now the miniature commonwealth I am going to describe shall contain a population of one thousand souls; the land therefore will be six thousand acres; which, instead of being divided into lots as was the case with the Israelites under Moses, the Spartans under Lyncurgus; the Athenians under Solon; the Romans under Numa, etc., this commonwealth shall hold their land as joint stock. The land and the houses may be let on leases, and leaseholders may let it to tenants at will; mechanics, and labourers, would follow their usual occupations, and be paid their wages according to their agreement. But all the rents of this commonwealth must be paid into the hands of a Committee, or board, who shall be appointed for that purpose, and who shall quarterly, after deducting all the expenses this little government may incur in building, repairing, etc., divide it in equal shares, to every man, woman and child in the community. In such a commonwealth all would be happy, because all would be free; all would be brothers and sisters, because all would be equal; all would be contented, because all would be just; all would be generous, because all would be exempt from present, and the dread of future want. If a whole country were divided into districts, or communities, on this plan, each district would send its deputy or deputies to the National Convention to enact such laws as would but suit such a state of society. . . .

"You see, sir, in this agrarian scheme, there is no necessity for a man to be jack of all trades, nor to cultivate his own share of land; and there is as little fear that there would be any want of business, . . . if there would be no princes, there would be no beggars; if there were no lords, there would be no paupers."