

Land and Freedom

FORMERLY THE SINGLE TAX REVIEW

VOL. XXVIII

JANUARY—FEBRUARY 1928

No. 1

Comment and Reflection

THE weekly paper misnamed *Liberty*, published for the literary delectation of the half-morons who compose, if we are to judge them by periodicals of the class of *Liberty*, a goodly portion of the magazine reading public, speaking of Mexico, says, under the title of an editorial, "The People Next Door:"

"Here is a country that Nature has endowed with many rich gifts. Minerals the world needs are there in profusion. The *tierra caliente*—the fertile tropic land—yields coffee, hemp, pepper, and other things we can not grow successfully in the United States. Mexico has some of the best oil in the world, almost untouched grazing-lands, marvelous forests.

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"Under Porfirio Diaz, American money went into Mexico. Relations were friendly, industry thrived, and the twenty-six years of his benevolent despotism were the period of the country's greatest prosperity.

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"All of which leads us back to what we have always contended: namely, that the United States should exert some sort of shadowy influence over Mexico."

THOSE who talk of the land question as a negligible or even subsidiary factor in provoking wars are asked to ponder on this frank advocacy of international banditry. We say that burglary is almost ethical in comparison. Mexico is rich in mineral resources, its land is fertile, things can be grown successfully there that cannot be grown here. The people are a feeble folk and very illiterate, and therefore not to be considered. And this leads us back to what *Liberty* has always contended—that the United States should exercise some sort of "shadowy influence" over Mexico!

SATAN when he tempted Christ with the offer of the kingdoms of the world did not think of these words, "shadowy influence." One of the admirable characteristics of Satan is his candor—he rarely camouflages. A "shadowy influence" is not at all what *Liberty*, appealing to the thieving propensities of the worst element of its readers, is asking for. It is forcible spoliation and robbery accompanied by murder of as many of the "People Next Door" who might object to this scheme of seizing their landed possessions.

THIS is the kind of journalism and periodical literature we are fed up on. Its influence is far greater than is suspected. For the people who read this sort of teaching, rarely see anything else. What can they know of the ethical considerations that should govern our international outlook? What can they know of the evil consequences that inevitably follow in the wake of conquest? The certain punishment that overtakes a people in the loss of their liberties who wantonly assail the liberties of others?

THE North Hollywood (Calif.) Park Investment Company advertises lots for sale and it has the nerve to quote from Henry George. First, it prints what John Jacob Astor said: "Buy on the fringe and wait." And Marshall Field, who said: "The quickest and safest way to become wealthy is to buy and hold real estate." Andrew Carnegie is quoted: "Ninety per cent. of all millionaires became so through ownership of real estate." And Henry Ward Beecher: "There is a distinct joy in holding a piece of land. Land is a part of God's estate on the globe; when you walk over it and can call it your own it seems as if you had come into partnership with the original proprietor of the earth." And Grover Cleveland, who said: "No investment on earth is so certain to enrich its owner as undeveloped realty." And those sweet, philanthropic, sympathetic souls, Hetty Green and Russell Sage, get in with what the irreverent vulgar call "wise cracks."

BUT what in the name of all the Prophets could these peddlers of vacant lots select from Henry George? Here we have it:

"So far as we can see with any certainty the quality of value has longer and more constantly attached to the ownership of land than any other valuable thing. The possession of land is the base of aristocracy, the foundation of great fortunes and the source of power."

And this is followed by these words from Arthur Brisbane:

"A piece of suburban Los Angeles is a piece of gold. Buy it and keep it and it will eventually keep you."

IT is difficult to believe that the gentlemen of the North Hollywood Park Investment Company do not "see the cat." We suggest to them the following advertisement and charge nothing for it:

"BUY A LOT IN NORTH HOLLYWOOD NOW. DO YOU WANT PEOPLE TO WORK FOR YOU? THEN INVEST IN OUR LOTS AND GET THE REFLECTED VALUE OF ALL THE COMMUNITY DOES FOR US. DO YOU WANT TO SHARE IN THE WAGES OF ALL NORTH HOLLYWOOD WORKMEN? THE PROFITS OF ITS STORE KEEPERS? EVEN THE CAR FARES PAID BY THE SHOP GIRLS ON THEIR WAY TO AND FROM WORK? YOU WON'T HAVE TO DO A THING. BY AND BY YOU WILL BE ABLE TO LIVE ON WHAT OTHER PEOPLE DO. NOW IS THE OPPORTUNITY TO LIVE A LIFE OF EASE AND PERHAPS EVEN OF LUXURY, AND, WITHOUT CONTRIBUTING TO THE PROSPERITY OF THE COMMUNITY, GET MOST OR ALL OF THIS PROSPERITY."

SUCH an advertisement is only a little more frank and candid than the one that lies before us. We have merely reduced its terms, and it is capable of further *reductio ad absurdum*. Concealed in its insidious appeal to avarice and ignorance is the element of indifference to a great social wrong that takes from those who labor the wealth they create for the benefit of the idlers. Can civilization be anything but what it is when, rooted in laws and custom, this great wrong persists?

PROF. LEE BIDGOOD, of the Department of Political Economy in the University of Alabama, is the author of a book used in his classes, and in it (page 152) he says: "Again Single Taxers are incorrect in supposing that increase in value without the effort of the owner—the unearned increment—is peculiar to land. We see such increase going on everywhere in respect to all sorts of property. The ethical basis of the Single Tax is therefore fallacious."

SO that ends it. If there is any species of property that increases in value outside of old books, old violins, old wines, and old paintings, the Professor fails to indicate them. "All sorts of property," says the Professor. That is pretty inclusive. Yet "all sorts of property" tend to disintegration and decay. Houses built thirty years if not constantly renovated have arrived at their hour of dissolution. Machinery is shorter lived. Clothes shorter yet. Foods shorter still, unless we except plum pudding. Ah, plum pudding! The unearned increment in plum pudding has eluded the Professor. Yet it supplies another fine excuse for not taking for public purposes the socially created land values of the community!

BUT even plum pudding is a product of labor. It can, unlike land, be produced *ad libitum*. That is the reason why labor products do not increase in value. To urge the increase in value that comes to a few things which

are not commodities and owe their value—always fluctuating and uncertain—to the vanity and wealth of collectors—looks like a joke or an evasion. And it is a joke. It is a joke on the Professor. Delivered with the air of an oracle it may have an effect on some of the youthful minds Prof. Bidgood teaches. But we call on his students to challenge this contention. He is teaching economics—the values he no doubt has in mind, values only to the virtuoso, are not the values which enter into the science of economics.

Concerning Land Ownership

ALTHOUGH Henry George is a master of the art of lucid exposition of economic subjects, it would be idle to deny that there has been some misunderstanding of the meaning to be attached to certain phrases which he uses in describing the evil which he finds to lie at the root of social injustice and which paralyzes all attempts to ameliorate social conditions as long as the fundamental error lies unremedied. This evil he finds to be "private property in land," or "private ownership of land," because such property or ownership, if carried to its logical conclusion, permits the exclusion of all persons not owning land from their natural right to live by the application of their labor to land. Many people jump to the conclusion that the only alternatives to private ownership of land are public ownership of land or common ownership of land, and are disposed to believe that so far as land is concerned Henry George was a communist. Others interpret his language to imply that he approved a limited socialism, making land the property of the State. That he meant neither of these things has always been clear to Single Taxers, who have combatted these economic errors for half a century.

Perhaps the question will be asked, if ownership does not vest in the individual, in the State or in Society (here understood as the community in its non-political aspect) to whom then does it belong? If one answers that question in the strict sense, it can not belong at all, in the same sense that personal property belongs to its producer, one is suspected of being visionary or metaphysical.

Perhaps the best comprehension of Henry George's meaning may be attained by a parable. A certain man, having land which he wished to use for the benefit of his children, decides during his life-time, to create a trust for its management in their interest, they themselves having the power to choose the trustees. Clearly the heirs do not own the property, for the father still lives and may revoke the trust. The heirs have a clear right to bargain among themselves for possession of such parts of the estate as each may think he can manage to the best advantage, subject to the approval of the trustees, who in the common interests exact from the possessor as much annual rent as any other heir will give for the exclusive possession of the