

# Land and Freedom

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## Comment and Reflection

THE death of Eugene V. Debs, on October 20, removes from the scene one of the most lovable and most abused men of the century. He was indeed a remarkable character. He had a host of friends who did not share his economic convictions; he was tender hearted, generous in his sympathies, tolerant of differences. He had immense courage. He was so bitterly opposed to the savagery of armed conflict between nations that he was willing to go to a federal prison for the right to speak freely his opposition to our entry into the World War. It is creditable to President Harding that he was finally pardoned without a gesture of condescension on the part of the then Chief Executive. And Debs came out of prison to reiterate the same determined opposition to a chaotic civilization. Wherever he went he was greeted with the love of thousands, a love that was dearer to his heart than the acceptance of the political views he stood for.

IT was inevitable, or nearly so, that a man of Debs temperament should accept socialism rather than the more virile doctrine of Henry George. It is no disparagement to his fine intellect to say that the emotional characteristics predominated. Socialism, too, was in the air—he found a party already organized when in 1897 he helped in the formation of the Social Democratic party. The Single Tax was the belief of a sturdier but politically unrecognized group. His experience as a labor organizer had also created an environment favorable to the course he took. At all events he became the leader of the Socialist party; he typified more its social aspirations than its economic structure, for it was not in his nature to accept the rigidity of Marx's social mechanism despite a formal approval. It was the human side of Socialism that drew him, and it was this side that he lived to expound. Now that he is dead we who differed with him must nevertheless be conscious that a great and generous spirit has gone, and that the world is richer for his having lived in it.

SUPPOSE you were asked to deliver an address to graduating students at some college or university on what the country most needs from its educated young men and women. Being a person more or less enlightened would you not begin in a strain something like this:

"To you who have been fortunate enough to have had a college training the country looks for openmindedness

and a courage to follow all inquiries to a conclusion. We look to you for that passionate love of truth and desire for justice on which true citizenship and the future well-being of our country depend. We have a right to expect from you an independence of judgment, and no such over-weening respect for authority as negatives the fullest and unprejudiced investigation of social and economic problems—almost if not quite in the spirit that impelled Dr. Thomas Arnold, the master of Rugby, to say that he arose each morning with the conviction that everything was an unsettled question. We have a right to ask that in this attitude of mind you confront the problems of the world."

SOMETHING like this you might have said. But this is not what President Coolidge told the graduates of Georgetown University. The address was made some time ago, but so characteristic is it of the man that it may even now serve as a text for Reflection and Comment. Here it is. "I would not venture to say what our country most needs from its educated young men and women. But one of its urgent needs is a greater spirit of loyalty which can come only from reverence for constituted authority, faith in things as they are."

THE final arbiter of all intellectual truth is the mind; of all moral truth the conscience. These are the real authorities, and the duty of subjecting all things to the test of reason and conscience a man owes to his fellowmen, and to God. It is the most solemn of all obligations, for truth is the most valuable of all earthly possessions. How great a wrong then he commits by a slavish subservience to authority. The fallibility of human reason is not to be disputed—we hear much of it, certainly too much. But the fallibility of authority is of an infinitely more tenuous nature. We may decide wrongly by following our own mental processes. But ultimately the path if persisted in leads to truth. To the rational processes of the mind there is no other destination. But Authority is the rock in the way of intellectual and social progress. It is a tyranny that keeps kings on their thrones and fakirs in high places; that moves armies across the prostrate bodies of peoples; that sends Conscience that should rule the world quaking and trembling into dark corners.

WHAT credentials has Authority beyond its apparel, insignia, gold lace or sounding titles? Can it "point with pride" to its record, or "view with alarm" the results of disobedience to its commands? Has it such achievements to its credit that justify the suppression of con-



science and the reasoning faculty to its obiter dicta? Read the record and decide. For instead of being usually right this most worshipful Authority is nearly always everywhere wrong. Its history trails with blunders, bristles with fallacies; it is even now pompous with theories long exploded; everywhere it has cheated, humbugged and tyrannized over reason and conscience.

**L**OOK at the long record of Authority in every department of human activity. Authority supported slavery; it guided the whip in the hand of the overseer as it fell upon the quivering shoulders of the black; it sounded in the boom of cannon whose dreadful messengers brought death and sufferings to millions of men; its voice is forever on the side of war. And how has it treated the great ones of the earth? To Socrates it gave the poisoned draught; the Gracchi it stoned; Garrison it drove through the streets of Boston; Giordano Bruno it burned; Christ it crucified.

**I**T was Authority that threw Roger Bacon, the ablest man of his time, in prison. It was Authority that in the person of Calvin put Servetus to death. It was Authority that lit the Smithfield fires, that presided over the horrors of Siberia. It was Authority that exiled Cameons, and the glory of Portuguese poetry saw the light on an inhospitable Chinese coast. Authority has denounced the teachings of the prophets of all the ages as heretical, from the Hebrews to those of the present day. What a biting poison it is should be obvious to those who reflect how instantaneously and completely a man is transformed when its mantle falls upon him, and how strikingly it effects a metamorphosis from humility to arrogance.

**I**T is the tyranny of Authority that keeps the Arab sheik of today like the sheik of Abraham's day; that has petrified Chinese civilization; that in the Middle Ages desolated western Asia from the Bosphorus to Jerusalem. It was Authority that hissed "Jacobin" to every proposition for social reform as now it shrieks "bolshhevik." In Egypt Authority enthroned the cat and made sacrosanct the crocodile. It has been polygamist, monogomist, polyandrist, as suited its purpose. It put kings on white elephants and clothed them in mail of precious stones. It has invented all kinds of evil spirits from Belzebub to Hobomoko for men to bow before—and industriously they have made obeisance. They have yielded to Authority as did men in fabled Athens to the bed of Procrustes, to which they have accommodated the proportions of such independent judgments as they were capable of forming.

**T**HE advertisements of realtors and real estate boards are amazingly frank. They are teaching more political economy than you can get from the books. They

ignore the moral implications, and these the reader must supply for himself. This advertisement from the Youngstown Real Estate Board is a sample: "Babies and Real Estate. Why does land continually rise in value? The Lord quit creating land long ago. He still creates people—and they all need land. If a city like Youngstown grows from 45,000 in 1904 to 145,000 in 1924 what happens? Land is greater in demand and prices go up."

**J**UST so. And babies are dependent upon land, the element on which they must live, the reservoir from which mankind must draw its sustenance. God has stopped creating it. What blasphemy is it that tells us He has not already amply provided for all these babies born into the world? That when He "quit creating land" there was not enough and to spare for all that were to come? The Real Estate Board of Youngstown does not imply that the city needs more land, for taking the city as a whole there is no crowding, though here and there, as in all cities, there are congested centers, people living too closely together, while elsewhere there are spacious quarters unimproved, vacant lots, land unused. And always it is the poor that live in these congested centers. Did God quit creating land only in those portions of the city occupied by the poor? The rich are never uncomfortably crowded. Did God provide for the latter class while ignoring the claims of the former?

**I**F the Real Estate Board of this Ohio city claims this they are lying humbugs. Perhaps they are that anyhow, since there seems always a tendency for "realtors" to ignore the moral implications in their appeals to investors. The land in Youngstown is not going up in value because God "quit creating land." It is going up because population creates certain advantages, because the production of wealth becomes easier where many people are gathered, and because the city government has added pavements, and roads, and schools, and police, and because there are social advantages. And those who are invited to buy land—such at least as wish to speculate—are invited to profit by what others are doing. By "others" we mean those who comprise society and government. Reduced to its final analysis the appeal is addressed all who want to grow rich by other men's labors—and that is not honest. No man is entitled to what he does not earn, and "earn" means produce. It means payment received for some real service. And these impudently blasphemous sellers of God's bounty try to bolster up their trade by throwing the responsibility on the Creator. No wonder the innately honest Abraham Lincoln in his youthful manhood instinctively shrank from it.

**T**HERE is no more independent body of thinkers among Catholics, nor indeed among Protestants either, than