

Georgeism and Thomism*

By ROBERT C. LUDLOW

THE opening chapters of Henry George's "Science of Political Economy" are so congenial to Thomistic thought that the question in many minds is why neither system has made any great use of the other or why attempts at a rapprochement are met (usually by Thomists) coldly. I think there are two basic reasons for this—one, that each school looks at problems with a different "mind-set" and the other, difficulties rising from verbal definitions—the use of words having a distinct meaning to one and an indistinct meaning to the other. The use of the word "capital" is an example of this latter and to it we could add such words as "freedom," "liberty," "laissez-faire."

As to "mind-set" (and it is probably the most difficult obstacle in the way of assimilation), a typical Thomist outlook is expressed in the recent statement of the episcopate that "there are two attitudes which represent extreme positions respecting our economic and social order. The one attitude is espoused by those who reject any and every kind of economic planning or organization. They constitute the group of extreme individualists or so-called school of economic liberalism. They want no interference whatsoever with the individual either from the government or from the social pressure of group organization. They will tolerate no restrictions upon individual initiative or personal enterprise. They are liberal only to the extent that they wish to be liberated from all social responsibility. They call it free enterprise, but the freedom is for those who possess great resources and dominating strength rather than for the weak or those who depend simply on their own labor for well-being." Or, to put it briefly, the Thomist casts his lot quite definitely with the "social planners." His outlook is historical. He might see that if the sources of production were free, free enterprise holds no dangers—but he sees that in fact they are not so and seldom have been so and on that basis he forms his judgments.

But the Georgeist has his own "mind-set." To quote Mr. Frank McEachran: "Granted the public appropriation of land values, capitalism in its essence would still remain, but so changed in range and manner of operation that the first to derive benefit from it would be the worker and the worker, moreover, as an individual. . . . Far from being too laissez-faire the nineteenth century was not laissez-faire enough and it is possible that in

pointing this fact out we may perform a service of the greatest importance."

Here we have the two outlooks. Can they assimilate? I think so, when Georgeists forget a bit about paper logic and Thomists realize that, provided the possibility of private (absolute) ownership of natural resources be abolished by public appropriation of economic rent, the best kind of planned economy may be an unplanned one. But the way is not made easier by uninformed treatments of the Georgeist philosophy common among Thomists, or by uncritical approaches to current affairs shown in some Georgeist books.

And now as to verbal disagreements. The word "capital" will serve as an example. While it is true there is nothing to fear from capital, as George presents capital, yet the Georgeist system is not the capitalist system as it exists today. And while Georgean writers speak of capital with a logical definition of it in mind they often overlook the psychological reaction in the radical mind to the terms "capitalism" and "laissez-faire"—this because they are almost invariably considered by most people in the historical rather than the logical sense. And that capitalism and laissez-faire, historically considered, are not compatible with the Georgean system seems rather evident to me. It will of course be pointed out that the Thomist criticism of capitalism is only criticism of the capitalist in the role of land-owner. But that overlooks what many writers term the "soul" of capitalism. And it is this "soul" or "spirit" that many radicals have in mind when they reject the system.

Thus by capitalism in the historic sense I mean capitalism as a system of thought or a mode of life—as related to the rise of Protestantism by Weber, Tawney and O'Brien and traced further back by Fanfani, or, more recently, dissociated from Protestantism by Forrester. Of course when we come to the "capitalist," Georgeists are correct in seeing him a person for evil only in his role of landowner. Nevertheless historians do write of capitalism and we do have a period we speak of as the capitalist period and we do connect laissez-faire with the Manchester school of economics, and that school of economics is certainly no foundation for the Georgean doctrines. Not that principles of the Manchester school cannot be utilized, but that Georgeism is more than Ricardo tacked on Adam Smith.

Now Georgeans are rightly annoyed when told it is moral reform we need rather than economic reform (indeed it is, but only in the sense that economics, as the Thomists say, is but a subdivision of moral theology), and point out that however angelic man may be, if our present system remains unchanged, poverty and social grief will still be with us. But this should not be made cause for asserting that after Georgean principles have been adopted (in a sense we quibble, for will Georgean

*By Thomism is meant the doctrines of Thomas Aquinas. It is considered the official philosophy of the Roman Catholic Church, and is accepted by most Catholic thinkers. Mr. Ludlow, the author of this article, is a graduate of the correspondence course of the Henry George School of Social Science.

principles be adopted without moral reformation?) moral reform will follow of itself—and so make unnecessary any attack on the capitalist spirit as such. And this because capitalism (historically considered) has starved the souls of men, has made the economic criterion supreme and has denied the legitimacy of extra-economic considerations. And it has mechanized man and has debased culture to the seeking after gain, has commercialized the stage, corrupted our newspapers and hindered the progress of science.

Criticisms of the capitalist system by such men as Penty, Robbins, Belloc, etc., are not to be lightly passed over. As regards machinery, for example, Penty contends that it should be restricted where it conflicts with the claims of personality or with the claims of the crafts and arts—and not be allowed to trespass seriously upon the world's supply of irreplaceable raw material. And there is room in Georgeist thought to treat of these things—for George did not offer his system as a panacea and would not contend that the single tax when applied would do away with all the problems connected with industrial capitalism. To socialize land rent is not necessarily to solve the money problem or the problem of the mechanization of man.

Fanfani contrasts the capitalist and pre-capitalist spirit—pointing out that the pre-capitalist “considers that appraisements of value in the economic sphere should be governed by moral criteria” while the capitalist “would make the economic criterion the sole norm of such appraisements.”

“Capitalism,” says Berdyaev, “turns relations of men into relations of things. . . . Marxism is a revolt against capitalism, but it has been bred by it and carries the fatal mark of its materialistic spirit.”

It is the refusal of capitalism to consider extra-economic standards which proves so formidable a barrier to the acceptance of Georgeist teachings. And this because James' philosophy of pragmatism gives foundation to the capitalist outlook and denies George's teachings. For once we deny objective morality, once we accept only relativist and evolutionary standards we undermine the whole structure upon which Georgeism as a philosophy rests. If the test of truth is the practical success of it *here* and *now*, if there are no such things as natural rights and if fundamental truths are not proof against the ages—how can we argue the truth of Georgeist teachings? Who is to tell pioneer man his ownership of land is unjust when it “works” for him here and now? We can say nothing to him if we have no teachings valid in themselves, we cannot answer him if we ourselves are pragmatists and deny the existence of natural rights.

And then what of laissez-faire liberalism? Critics accuse Georgeists of making a fetish of the land. They

might as well arraign them for making a fetish of the air. But they might be on firmer ground were they to charge some Georgeists with making a fetish of freedom. For to make freedom an end in itself is to make a fetish of it. There may be some people who think of the supreme good in terms of the pleasure of choosing between this and that, but not many can think thus. A stringent philosophy of liberty fails to meet the psychological needs of peoples. And it comes of carrying the doctrine of rights too far—it assumes the compulsion of always exercising rights in the individualistic sense. A man has a right to the products of his labor, but is there any moral principle preventing him to forego that right and pool his products in a communitarian society? And so with freedom—it is a means, not an end. The end of any economic system must be the common good, and that takes into consideration man's dignity and does no violence to his freedom and so does not end in totalitarianism. And because the end is the common good it presupposes the people to be willing to forego certain individual goods for the common good. And George, I think, would admit that, and that is not laissez-faire liberalism. For laissez-faire liberalism makes a fetish of freedom, refuses to allow the State to function for the common good, and ignores the communal nature of man. Of this George said, “I differ with those who say that with the rate of wages the State has no concern”—and his whole system calls for the State to put it in action.

The Georgeist teaching on the dignity of man and the necessity of objective moral standards and the right of extra-economic considerations to prevail over capitalist materialism—all these are held in common with Thomists and are the need of men today. In a short article such as this the many problems to be considered in an attempted rapprochement between the two systems of thought cannot all be mentioned and even those mentioned are treated cursorily. But that an earnest attempt of such an assimilation should be made will, I am sure, be the hope of both Georgeists and Thomists.

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