

# Land Monopoly in England and America

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IF it is true that the picture Henry George saw in 1879 is not the same as that of today, it is only in that every line in that picture of fifty-one years ago is more deeply etched in our present social and economic life. If there was poverty then, our poverty today is the far graver because it is the more unnecessary. If there was injustice in the private appropriation of community earned wealth in 1879, it is a greater injustice today, for land values have increased many fold. If our system of taxation was inequitable then, it is the more so today, for, while the incidence of taxation has not been changed appreciably, governmental services paid for by taxes have expanded with the growth of the country and the natural desire of the community to share in the progress of an advancing civilization. If thousands were unemployed in the panic shortly preceding the publication of "Progress and Poverty," were not millions unemployed in the recent times of barmecidal prosperity?

Indeed, it would be to misconceive the nature of Henry George's proposal to regard it merely as a simple solution for a simple age. Rather, the relation which he saw between the rise of land monopoly and the persistence of poverty amidst increasing plenty is a relation that may be traced to any country at any period in the course of world events, and by the least skilled student of human affairs.

When and where the people have had free access to the use of land, whether that land be known as the commons as in English history, or as the western frontier in American history, in those times and in those places freedom and independence have marked individual community life.

The period of one hundred and fifty years in English history, from 1700 to 1850, the period known as the Industrial Revolution, witnessed the greatest increase in the productive power of mankind known up to that time. It was the period of the growth of political freedom culminating in the Reform Bill of 1832. Parallel with these two phases of English accomplishment came, ironically, the enclosure of the commons and the loss of the independence of the English laborer.

In the typical English village of 1700, before the enclosures, the homestead was individually owned, but all the land outside of the village, known as the commons, belonged to the community. The village laborer did not depend on his wages alone. He had the use of the commons for pasturing his cow, for gathering his kindling wood and fuel, perhaps a patch of ground for a garden. He was not merely a wage earner, receiving so much money a day or a week for his services in a village shop, but in

part he maintained himself and his family as his own employer on the land.

With the rise of the factory system came the need for workers in the cities and the determination on the part of the industrial leaders to secure them at the lowest possible wages. To do this by any means short of chattel slavery it was necessary to destroy the independence of the village laborer, and to do this it was also necessary to enclose the commons. The industrial leaders therefore openly espoused acts to fence out the village worker from the land which tradition and justice had given him for generations. He was driven to the city factories, for unless he could be forced to leave the village it would have been necessary to attract him with higher wages than he could make in his own town assisted by the commons. Such a measure as this, however, was not in the scheme of the Industrial Revolution as the leaders saw it at that time.

Apologies were not forthcoming. One writer, urging the enclosure of certain commons of a thousand acres or so, complaisantly prophesied that "when the commons are enclosed the laborers will work every day in the year, their children will be put to labor early, and that subordination of the lower ranks of society which in the present time is so much wanted would be thereby considerably secured."

"Having gained the trifling advantages of the commons," complained one, "it unfortunately gives the minds of the workers an improper bias, and inculcates a desire to live without labor, or at least with as little as possible."

A few years later after the enclosures had taken place, it was Arthur Young who was to remind the landlords who were complaining of the *high poor rate*, that "the despised commons had enabled the cottagers to keep a cow, and that this, so far from bringing ruin, had meant all the difference between independence and pauperism. A man," he told them, "will love his country the better even for a pig."

The enclosure of the commons was therefore the successful instrument whereby the steady exodus of the agricultural laborers to the cities was effected. Pay fell off, prices rose. There was suffering among the small farmers left in the country, and as great if not greater suffering among the poor who went to the cities. The moral and physical condition of the workers in both city and country deteriorated.

Poaching and stealing of game on what had previously been the commons now were serious offenses. The Justices of the Peace, being the landlords themselves in most cases, became more interested in the preservation of game than of human life. There is more truth than poetry in an old rhyme to the effect that:

You prosecute the man or woman  
Who steals the goose from off the common,  
But leave the larger felon loose  
Who steals the common from the goose.

With the collapse of the economic position of the laborer



during the last lap of the English enclosures, and with its resultant poverty and misery among the masses, we find "remedies" now being offered from every corner—not in the form of attempts to retrace those steps which had led to social calamity, but as substitutes for those steps, as substitutes for the enclosed commons.

The remedies offered in 1795 in the midst of the enclosures do not differ in spirit from those advocated popularly in many English circles today. Diet reform was one proposal. A "judicious change of diet," thought the upper classes, "would enable the laborer to face the fall of wages with equanimity." Painful complaints soon arose from such eminent men as Pitt—complaints of the "groundless prejudices" that made the poor refuse to eat mixed bread instead of the wheaten bread to which they were accustomed.

One of the most ingenious "remedies" which has come to my attention is discussed with favor in a contemporary English magazine in a "Review of Unemployment Remedies." "It is recognized," says the writer, "that the worst feature of prolonged idleness is the loss of personal quality, the inertia and the despair which make men unfit for re-employment." The aim of the "treatment by work" remedy, as he terms it, is, then, to "take men away from the hopeless districts, provide them with hard outdoor work, physical exercise, and a regular disciplined life to restore their working habits, and finally, after an eight weeks' course, to help them to become absorbed into the industrial life of busy and expanding towns where they will probably find their best chance of employment on road schemes or the like." By a curriculum similar to this eight weeks' course in rock breaking he would create "employment value" in young men!

In advocating unemployment juvenile centers the same writer says that, "Indeed, all parties agree in principle that no boys and girls between 14 and 18 ought to be unprovided . . . ." And does he say unprovided with modern schooling, comfortable homes with plenty of lawn, garden space and fresh air, homes with the lifetime inspiration of family life by the hearth? No. He says they should not be unprovided "with some sort of supervision and occupation during their spells of unemployment!"

Such were the substitutes offered in place of the restoration of the commons in England.

### FREE LAND IN THE WEST

At the time when the last of the six million acres of English commons was being enclosed, about 1830, the importance of the vast domain of over one billion acres of rich, fertile lands west of the Alleghenies in this country was only beginning to be felt. At the time when the English laborer was losing his last thread of independence the American worker was just beginning to assert his. At the time when the landed-manufacturing interests of England were congratulating themselves upon their successful "subordination of the lower ranks of society," and upon

their keeping down wages, the New England landed-manufacturing interests were futilely attempting to lobby the American government into withholding the land in the West at a price sufficiently prohibitive to prevent the drain of their poorly paid workers from their factory sweatshops to these new lands of hope and promise.

More important than any consideration of the influence of the free land in the West upon the political and social philosophy of the American people was its effect upon their economic status. The American frontier of free land, like the English commons, gave the people a feeling of economic security. Their acres were policies of unemployment insurance, of protection against "hard times," a sure means "to duck the w. k. business cycle pendulum on its low swing."

The wind of democracy that blew so strongly from the West as to bring shudders of political agony to the perpetuators of the established order in the East, was also to bring chills to their pocketbooks. At the same time that even the older states in New England and the South were calling constitutional conventions and liberalizing their constitutions, the labor population of the cities began to assert its power and the determination to a share in government.

The Eastern industrial magnates always feared the results of an unregulated advance of the frontier and tried to check and guide it. In the "Great Debate of 1830" it was reasoned by the congressmen from the East that "if the federal government continued to invite all classes to purchase the Western land at prices meant merely to cover the actual expenses of the government in making the preparation for settlement, not only those with capital but also the better part of the laboring classes would be constantly drawn away from the East and her industrial system greatly embarrassed." What was the use of a protective tariff which shut out competition, they whined, if wages were to be perpetually kept at a maximum by this drain of population toward the West?

Are not the motives here expressed for withholding the free land in the West exactly the same as were the motives for the enclosure of the commons: to maintain a large landless labor market in the industrial centers where competition would be keen enough to keep down wages?

While free land won in this early skirmish for democracy no provision was made to keep the free land free, that wage might be kept "perpetually at a maximum," as some of the Easterners needlessly had feared they would be. For, in so short a time as sixty years after the Great Debate of 1830 the vast domain of a billion acres of opportunity was almost completely appropriated by a comparative small proportion of the people, who, as the country developed and the need for land increased, were to demand that the new settlers and future generations "relinquish more and more of their earnings for the permission to earn at all."

Just as the enclosure of the commons meant the loss of the economic independence of the English people, the



gradual private appropriation of the land and natural resources of the United States has meant the loss of that economic satisfaction that marked the earlier periods of America's industrial and social growth. The effects of land monopoly in this country have been somewhat mitigated by the great increase of productive power, by the large free area, and by the partial taxation of land values which has tended to make it unprofitable to hold land out of use.

While these factors have cushioned the impact of an otherwise crushing land monopoly, yet page after page in current literature is devoted to a consideration of the concentration of economic and social power in the hands of the few, of privilege in politics, of low wages and unemployment, and of all the accompaniments of a maladjusted economic system based on land monopoly. These pages are evidence of a myriad of attempts, many of them sincere, to find substitutes for the former safeguard of democracy and individual independence: the disappeared free lands. All are based on the assumption that unemployment, in the words of Stuart Chase, is the "nemesis of American business," that unemployment is in the natural course of events and there is no real solution to the question.

There are many inarticulate pleadings of men for land which may be heard if we but listen. That there is still that desire to seek independence on the land has been shown in the recent depression when farm land companies of Michigan, for instance, have reported an increased demand for cheaper lands. In one of the provinces of Western Canada, where an area of free land has been just opened to settlement, the line of men waiting to get grants, I am told, looked like a line of men getting jobs. And that is just what they were doing, for these men knew that a piece of land was the equivalent of a job.

It is significant to observe, further, that in those countries which have most recently had free land, the proportion of the population that is unemployed is less. Popular though conservative estimates of the unemployed during the past year reveal one in thirty unemployed in England, where access to free land ended between 1830 and 1850; only one in forty in the United States, where the frontier of productive free land disappeared in 1890; while in Canada only one in one hundred—where there is still some considerable free land available.

If the monopoly of land could in so short a time as a few generations give rise to poverty and unemployment and their attendant and existing evils, we may well ask if a freeing of the land would not give rise to the opposite and desired state of society which we all seek? Our problem is simply one of projecting upon the highly developed health-producing civilization which we know today the freedom of opportunity that existed during the period of free land.

Henry George, in his very greatness of mind and powers of analysis, presented a simple method by which this can be accomplished—by which, in effect, the commons can

be restored to the English people, the frontier to American life.

By diverting to the public treasury the annual value of the land, the Single Tax would serve, year in and year out, to free the land by removing any privilege in mere possession of title to land, and by removing the opportunity which that privilege now gives to exploit others. There would be no incentive for holding land out of use for a rise in value, since that value as it arose would be taken for community purposes. While the annual value of the land would increase as the presence of society made it more productive, no part of this increased value would go to individuals as such, nor give them advantage over others without land. Use would then be the basis of possession of land as it was under the common field system in England, and as it was in the early settlement of our frontier.

I believe we may agree with Woodrow Wilson that every social institution must abide by the issue of two questions, logically distinct but practically inseparable: "Is it expedient? Is it just? Let these questions once seriously take hold of public thought in any case," he said, "which may be made to seem simple and devoid of all confusing elements, and the issue cannot long remain in doubt."

The Single Tax, the freeing of the land, the freeing of men, as proposed by Henry George, is such an issue.

## Land and Water in California

PERHAPS nothing in the public economy of California is more striking to the Eastern student of public affairs who has some of the Georgian slant to his philosophy, than its different methods of approach toward municipal and public improvements, and as well toward public utilities.

As to the initiation and conduct of public improvements there is little material difference from the Eastern method excepting that the property owner is not considered to the same extent as in the East in the initial steps. It is, however, in the assessment and collection for the cost of municipal and public improvements of a widespread character to which I wish to direct attention.

The Eastern student has been accustomed to the legal practice of municipalities paying for improvements of a general nature (sewerage systems, tunnels, etc.) out of the public treasury, very frequently financed by bond issues, which are a charge on the municipality as a whole. That the cost of any improvement affecting the welfare and serving the needs of a wide area such as a general sewerage system or a tunnel, whether abutting thereon directly or not, might be assessed against all the territory conceivably benefited thereby is wholly foreign to him.

True, there were some feeble attempts in some of the Eastern states many years ago, before public wealth and revenues had grown so great, to spread the cost of improving great highways by assessments against the area generally benefited, whether abutting or not. But when the courts held such assessments "unconstitutional" no further