

WAR: land-value taxation and the survival of the species

*Bloody Balkan warfare
illustrates the folly of mankind,
and threatens extinction,
laments DAVID REDFEARN*



THERE WAS ONCE an Englishman who, returning to England on retirement from a university post in Zimbabwe as a lecturer in biology, was presented with a copy of Henry George's *Progress and poverty*.¹ When he had finished reading it, he wrote in the following terms: 'I find I agree with Henry George except on one point, that I don't think he understood Darwin on Evolution'. The clue to this at first sight mysterious comment is to be found in the 'Conclusion' to the unabridged edition, where George states that many people's religious belief is undermined in two ways. Firstly, they cannot reconcile the idea of a beneficent Creator with the obvious "wretchedness and degradation" of the mass of mankind. In the second place, "the idea that man mentally and physically is the result of slow modifications perpetuated by heredity irresistibly suggests the idea that it is the race life, not the individual life, which is the object of human existence."

Both these statements are valid, but leave more to be said. George's proof that mankind's "wretchedness and degradation" are self-inflicted in so far as they stem from the maldistribution of wealth goes no way to explain misery related to natural causes beyond our control. Yet this too is capable, and with more justification, of destroying faith in a beneficent Creator. More importantly for our present purpose, cumulative evidence, unavailable to George, of the vast time scale over which evolution has operated, as compared with the infancy of the human race, makes

it appear less and less likely that our existence has any object outside itself, or that the individual human life is any more than an infinitesimally small moment in a universal drama in which our 5 billion-year-old planet itself has but a short part.

Moreover, the human race is only one among countless other species, both existing and extinct, and the chances of its having been singled out, as George came to believe, for the privilege of a life after death for its members are small indeed. Perhaps, if he were alive now, he would be ready to reconsider his attempt, by reference to the failure of our individual worldly existences to conform to the otherwise universal pattern of cause and effect, to prove such an after-life. The good life, he argued, often comes to a sad end that looks like a punishment, while the evil life appears to be rewarded. Therefore death is not the end.

TWO QUESTIONS

A reconsideration of this syllogism, hardly more convincing than the one Plato devised to prove the same theory,² would enable him to put his matchless eloquence and powers of persuasion to the more useful purpose of demonstrating that, after all, the life of the human race is more important than that of its individual members, and that one of its numerous current follies is going to be the conspicuous cause of an irreversible effect - its extinction. Of these follies, war seems at present most likely to apply the *coup de grace*.

Whenever war is considered, the question must arise as to whether the taste for it is part of man's instinctual make-up, and therefore linked to the remote origins and history of the human race, or, on the other hand, whether it is an economic phenomenon of more recent provenance. Part of the answer must certainly be that the immediate causes of war are verifiably economic, and have been established beyond all reasonable doubt. They may be summarised as follows.

(1) Economy of effort

The first law of political economy, and the one on which all economic reasoning ultimately depends, is that we aim to satisfy our needs and desires with the least possible effort. Cooperation in the hunting of big game, for example, and the accompanying challenges to our mental faculties, including the devising of more effective weapons and more sophisticated strategies, are considered to have brought about our development, over a period, brief in evolutionary terms, of half a million years or so, from the status of homo erectus to that of homo sapiens sapiens. The invention and rapid spread of domestic labour-saving devices such as the vacuum cleaner, the refrigerator and the washing machine are modern examples of the same drive.

(2) Exploitation

None of this presents an immediate threat; but it is when the im-

pulse is pushed to the limit of seeking to exert no effort at all that the dangers arise. It would have been after the invention of agriculture some time during the 7th millennium BC, that the thought must have occurred to some ambitious tribe that, rather than cultivate their own plots, they would invade those of their neighbours, and enslave their occupants. Thus would be brought into being the embryo of a two-tier society of producers held in subjection by a ruling military caste of non-producers; and the pattern would have been set for the early empires of the Middle East, the violent nature of whose founding and maintenance is attested by both the archaeological and the literary records. At some time, varying from place to place, the rulers would have come to realise that ownership of the land would establish the most effective claim to an unearned share of its produce. The biblical story of how Joseph made Pharaoh the owner of the land of Egypt is an interesting example of this development.³

THE ANCIENT WORLD

The earliest wars of which we have evidence took place from c.3050 BC to c.2750 BC between the rival Sumerian city-kingdoms of Mesopotamia, who were striving to increase their holdings of land, and with them the wealth and power of their rulers. These petty states were at last forced to combine against the incursions of Semitic nomad Akkadians from the north; but the nomads at length prevailed, and formed with the Sumerians a United States of Sumer and Akkad. The tendency of such enclaves of spoliation to grow has been constant through the ages. By 2100 BC this union had come under the control of the Amorite kings of Babylon, the most notable of whom were Sargon and Hammurabi. These events were typical of the ancient Middle East, as were also the successive supremacies of the Egyptian Empire (15th century BC), the Assyrian Empire (7th century BC), and the Persian Empire (6th century

BC). They were based on inequality, oppression and conquest, which have always led to failure in the end.⁴

The spread of the Persian Empire into Europe was halted by the Athenians in 490 BC; and the Empire itself was destroyed by the combined Macedonians and Greeks under Alexander the Great in the following century. Long before this, however, in the 7th century BC, increasing maritime skills had begun to encourage warring nations to extend their activities westwards across the Mediterranean, in search, not only of new lands to occupy, but also of new openings for trade. The fertile island of Sicily was the main prize in wars, first between Greeks and Carthaginians, then between Carthaginians and Romans. The second war between the latter contestants, in the 3rd century BC, was carried by the Carthaginians on to the mainland of Italy, thus both hastening the ruin of the Italian peasantry and intensifying the desire of the ruling oligarchy for yet more plunder overseas. They found it in all the countries bordering on the Mediterranean, and finally in Britain. The Empire so built up seemed supreme and unassailable until it collapsed, first in the west, where the apathy of the dispossessed cleared the way for Germanic tribes migrating under pressure from Attila's Huns, then in the east, under the assaults of the Turks.

THE MODERN WORLD

Modern history has been little but a repetition, on a world-wide scale, of the ancient history that was centred on the Mediterranean. When the chaos of minor conflicts had been resolved, and the common danger to Europe from Arabs and Turks removed, the same force of maldistribution of wealth, leading to land-hunger and competitive selling overseas of goods unsaleable at home by reason of poverty induced by land monopoly, brought about wars involving Spain, Holland, Britain, France, Russia and Germany, culmi-

nating in the First World War between the Austro-Hungarian and German Empires on the one hand, and, initially, the British, French and Russian Empires on the other. In the last year, after the Russian defeat, the British and French were joined by the United States of America, which then made their first significant entry into the field of international conflict.

The Second World War, which was for all intents and purposes a re-run of the First, except for the entry of Italy and Japan "on the German side" (they were allied with England, France and the USA in the First!) finished, as is well known, with two colossal empires, the USA and the Union of Socialist Republics, facing each other across the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. The point at issue was whether or not the command economy, with the 'means of production' owned by the State, and industry and trade under the direction of departments of a bureaucracy, should spread, or be prevented from spreading, from its homeland of the USSR and its more recent converts of Poland, East Germany and China. What was the nature of these two empires or superpowers, as they came to be known?

SUPERPOWERS

* The USA

When Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown in the Spring of 1782, the 13 newly independent American colonies would have seemed the least likely candidates for becoming a world power within little more than a century and a half, especially since the popular feeling was against any form of union other than a loose federation, with the chief political power remaining with the states themselves. This was the ideal of Thomas Jefferson, who considered that only thus could the rights of the individual be adequately secured. The opposite view was held by Alexander Hamilton, who, with his associates, was all for a strong central authority.

There was a good reason for this.



A BALKAN EXECUTION CAUGHT BY A CAMERAMAN FOR THE INDEPENDENT ON SUNDAY

Obtaining a title to land in advance of occupation, purely as a speculative investment, had been a feature of life in the American colonies from the outset; and it was the London government's attempt, in its own interest, to restrict this practice to land to the east of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, rather than any dispute over duties on tea, that had led to the rebellion in the first place. It was therefore a profitable policy on the part of the leading American politicians, many of whom had made fortunes from land speculation, to keep such operations under Congressional control.

The way in which they achieved their end was of dubious legality. The original Articles of Confederation, following Jefferson, provided that no change should be made to them except with the consent of all 13 state legislatures. The constitution devised by the Convention of 1787, however, and passed by it on September 17, was to take effect after ratification by only nine of them, and in fact did so. This revolutionary step ensured that the USA started its new life, despite protestations about liberty and the pursuit of happiness, as an enclave of spoliation after the European models from which their citizens' fore-

bears had escaped.

It were so to remain throughout its expansion to the western seaboard and beyond by means of settlement, purchase and war; and the principle of union was confirmed with blood in the Civil War of 1861-5. The southern states, with their outmoded economies based on slavery, had seen their influence in Congress dwindling with the founding of each new 'free' state, and felt the need to establish an independent political power as the Confederate States of America. When, in response to their secession, the Union government ordered the provisioning of Fort Sumter on the border, they took this as a warlike gesture, and the fighting began that was to put an end for the foreseeable future to any prospect of upsetting the monolithic structure of the giant state.

* The USSR

Matters were to turn out differently for the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, whose predecessor, the Russian Empire, was founded with blood rather than with adroit diplomacy. This Empire was assembled piecemeal over a long period with

vague legendary beginnings in the time of the Vikings, some of whose leaders are said to have been invited to rule over turbulent tribes who lived in the forests between Lake Ladoga and the upper reaches of the Dnieper. By the beginning of the 13th century, the local princes so set up had extended their possessions as far south as Kiev; and the first among them, by right of superior force, were the Princes of Muscovy. Then, after two centuries during which Tartar conquerors reaped the benefit of Russian peasants' labour, these Princes resumed their conquests, and the power and unearned wealth that went with them, assuming eventually the title of Tsar of all the Russias.

The process of forcible annexation continued until not far short of the Revolution of 1917, and as far south as the Caucasus. The Revolution, unfortunately, disappointed expectations, in that it replaced privilege based on land ownership with privilege based on Communist Party membership, and left the condition of the people at large but little improved.⁵

Now, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, two of the Tsars' acquisitions from the early part of the 19th century, namely Armenia and Azerbaijan, are making both war and history. The questions we may ask in the context of these crucial local events are: 'What will happen to the components of a superpower when once the force that held them together has been withdrawn? Will individual rights become the public concern, as Jefferson had hoped they would in America? What would be the effect in Armenia and Azerbaijan of the application of Henry George's solution to the economic problem? Are there psychological barriers, rooted in our evolutionary history, and therefore unfamiliar to Henry George, to the application of his solution? If so, what more can be done to keep our hopes of peaceful co-existence alive?'

The answers to the first two questions are simple and admit of no doubt. In this particular instance they

are fighting; and no widespread concern for individual rights is as yet apparent. Enmity between peoples of different ethnic origin and religious persuasion in this former outpost of the Ottoman Empire, between the Black and Caspian Seas, has been endemic for centuries; but the present war between Christian Armenia and Muslim Azerbaijan broke out in February 1988, only to become intensified in 1992 as the power of the former Red Army to act as a 'peace-keeping force' steadily declined. The situation is made all the more intractable by the fact that Azerbaijan, whose capital is Baku, an important port on the Caspian Sea, contains the autonomous region of Nagorny Karabakh, inhabited mainly by Armenians.

ECONOMIC REMEDY

As a matter of economic principle, Henry George's single tax on the value of land would be capable of solving the practical problems underlying this war, which is "a struggle for land and resources,"⁶ if all the parties concerned could somehow be induced to behave according to the dictates of reason and morality. The concept of land "ownership", which is now, and has been for five millennia, a potent instrument of exploitation and oppression, and one that is surfacing again in the former Soviet Union after more than 70 years of Marxist ideology, would gradually give way to the concepts of land-holding for use and the right of the community as a whole to the economic rent, or "the return to landownership [as now conceived] over and above the return which is sufficient to induce use."⁷

The oilfields of Baku, which are said to contain 15% of the world's oil reserves, constitute a case apart. Why, after all, should people who merely happen to inhabit such a region have any special claim to vast riches that were accumulating millions of years before anything resembling humanity appeared on Earth? A scheme, based on ratios of local populations to the population of the world, for the international sharing of royalties

on non-renewable mineral resources, including oil, has been formulated by Professor Nicolaus Tideman of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.⁸ It may not be the last word to be said on the subject, but would be a useful starting point for negotiation.

ALTRUISM

Here we have the germs of peaceful solutions to the economic and political problems, not only of the Caucasus, but of the whole world; but is the human race psychologically capable of rising to such heights of altruism? We are now in the realms of speculation; but a little consideration of our evolutionary background will furnish us with some guidelines.

The territorial imperative, which we share with most other vertebrates, is likely to cause most trouble. Just like the robin in the back garden, we think: "This land belongs to me!" or, like the troop of howler monkeys, gesticulating and screaming at the troop across their border: "This land belongs to us!" It is a far step from all this to thinking: "The Earth is the common heritage of mankind."

Next comes the killer instinct. Our cousins the baboons, endowed by the evolutionary process with built-in lethal weapons in the shape of four long fangs and a powerful jaw to drive them home, have acquired at the same time the complementary endowment of restraint in their use. They threaten each other in the course of establishing hierarchies within their troops of between fifty and a hundred, but that is all. The troops are mutually hostile, but take the safe course of avoiding each other. As an example of what they can do in case of need, two male baboons have been observed to attack and kill a leopard that was stalking their troop, losing their own lives in doing so.

The same evolutionary process has so far neglected to give the human race any such restraining instinct; for our ancestors adopted hand-held external weapons somewhere between twenty and two million years

ago, and gradually lost their natural ones of teeth adapted for fighting. A fair proportion of us, in the absence of serious provocation, do refrain from killing our own kind; but all except a small minority can be turned into fighters by military training, which teaches people above all to do unquestioningly what they are told to do. Perhaps in the absence of such training the peaceful elements among us would on the whole prevail. Even in the Caucasus we have the evidence of Armenian survivors from a pogrom in Baku that Azeri neighbours had saved from the bands of killers.⁹

Our best hope lies in this. Though we are swayed by animal instincts, we are also the animal to make most use of reason, and to work out consciously a moral code common in theory to both Christianity and Islam, among other religions. We need not wait, we cannot wait, for evolutionary forces to teach us to live with each other in peace. *We can and must learn.*

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