

The Rights of Infants

BY THOMAS SPENCE

[One of the most remarkable of Henry George's ideological predecessors was the English bookseller, Thomas Spence. In 1775, a year before Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations" appeared, Spence delivered a lecture on "The Real Rights of Man" before the Philosophical Society of Newcastle. For this lecture, says Spence, the Society did him the "honor" to expel him. The ideas he expressed were that all men have a right to the use of the earth, and that the rent of land should be the sole source of public revenue.

Spence followed this with other treatises, among which was "The Rights of Infants," published in 1797. This was written in the form of a dialogue between Aristocracy and a Mother of Children. It was discovered in the Manchester, England, Reference Library by a friend of Henry George, in 1882. The friend copied it and presented it to George. Henry George, Jr., found it among his father's effects and presented it to Joseph Dana Miller.

We are happy to offer this interesting and powerful essay to our readers.—ED.]

FROM SPENCE'S PREFACE

IN a perusal of the following little tract on the Rights of Infants, men who dare contemplate their rights may see them portrayed boldly at full length.

The more I contemplate human affairs, the more I am convinced that a landed interest is incompatible with the happiness and independence of the world. For as all the rivers run into the sea, and yet the sea is not full, so let there be ever so many sources of wealth, let trade, foreign and domestic, open all their sluices, yet will no other but the landed interest be ultimately the better.

All dominion is rooted and grounded in land and thence springs every kind of lordship which overtops and chokes all the shrubs of the forest. But take away those tall, those overbearing aristocratic trees and then the lowly plants of the soil will have air, will thrive and grow robust.

Whether my plan of enjoying man's rights, which I have been publishing in different ways for more than twenty years be objectionable or no, it is certain it has never been answered. If I am wrong let me be confuted; and if I am not, let mankind for their own sakes pay attention to what I have to say.

THE DIALOGUE

AND pray, what are the Rights of Infants? cry the haughty ARISTOCRACY, sneering and tossing up their noses.

WOMAN: Ask the she-bears and every she-monster and they will tell you what the rights of every species of young are. They will tell you, in resolute language and actions, too, that their rights extend to a full participa-

tion of the fruits of the earth. They will tell you and vindicate it likewise by deeds that mothers have a right at the peril of all opposers to provide from the elements the proper nourishments of their young. And, seeing this, shall we be asked what the Rights of Infants are? As if they had no rights! As if they were excrescences and abortions of nature! As if they had not a right to the milk of our breasts? Nor we a right to any food to make milk of. As if they had not a right to good nursing, to cleanliness, to comfortable clothing and lodging. Villains! Why do you ask that aggravating question? Have not the foxes holes, and the birds of the air nests? And shall the children of men have not where to lay their heads? Have brute mothers a right to eat grape, and the food they like best, to engender milk in their dugs, for the nourishment of their young, and shall the mothers of infants be denied such a right? Is not this earth our common also, as well as it is the common of brutes? May we not eat herbs, berries or nuts, as well as other creatures? And have we not a right to fish with the she otters? Have we not a right to hunt and prowl for prey with the wolves? Or may we not dig coals or cut wood for fuel? Nay, does nature provide a luxuriant and abundant feast for all her numerous tribes of animals except us? As if poverty were our portion alone, and as if we and our helpless babes came into the world only to weep over each other?

ARISTOCRACY (sneering): And is your sex also set up for pleaders of rights?

WOMAN: Yes, Molochs! Our sex were defenders of rights from the beginning. And though men, like other he-brutes, sink calmly into apathy respecting their offspring, you shall find nature as it never was, so it never shall be extinguished in us. You shall find that we not only know our rights, but have spirit to assert them, to the downfall of you and all tyrants, and since it is so that the men like he-asses suffer themselves to be laden with as many pair of panniers of rents, tithes, etc., as your *tender* consciences please to lay upon them, we, even we the females, will vindicate the rights of the species and throw you and all your panniers in the dirt.

ARISTOCRACY: So you wish to turn the cultivated world into a wilderness that you may eat wild fruits and game like Indians?

WOMAN: No sophists, we do not want to be as Indians. But the natural fruits of the earth, being the fruits of our undoubted common, we have an indefeasible right to, and we will be no longer deprived of them without an equivalent.

ARISTOCRACY: Do you not in lieu of those wild productions get bread and mutton and beef and garden stuff and all the refined productions and luxuries of art and labor; what reason, then, have you to complain?

WOMAN: Are you serious? Would you really persuade us that we have no reason to complain? Would you make us believe that we receive these productions of art and culture as a fair compensation for the natural produce of our common, which you deprive us of? Have we not to purchase these things before we enjoy them?

ARISTOCRACY: Sure, woman, you do not expect the fruits of men's labors and ingenuity for nothing! Do not the farmers, in the first place, pay very high rents for their farms; and in the next place are they not at great trouble and expense in tilling and manuring the ground and in breeding cattle; and surely you cannot expect that these men will work and toil and lay out their money for you for nothing?

WOMAN: And pray, ladies and gentlemen, who ever dreamed of hurting the farmers, or taking their provisions for nothing, except yourselves? It is only the privileged orders, and their humble imitators on the highway, who have the impudence to deprive men of their labors for nothing. No; if it please your nobles and gentlemen, it is you, and not the farmers, that we have to reckon with. And pray now, your highnesses, who is it that receive those rents which you speak of from the farmers?

ARISTOCRACY: We to be sure; we receive the rents.

WOMAN: You to be sure! Who the D-v-l are you? Who gave you a right to receive the rents of our common?

ARISTOCRACY: Woman! Our fathers either fought for or purchased our estates.

WOMAN: Well confessed, villains! Now, out of your own mouths will I condemn you, you wicked Molochs! And so you have the impudence to own yourselves the cursed brood of ruffians who, by slaughter and oppression, usurped the lordship and dominion of the earth, to the exclusion and starvation of weeping infants and their poor mothers. Or, at the best, the purchasers of those ill-got domains? O worse than Molochs! now let the blood of the millions of innocent babes who have perished through your vile usurpation be upon your murderous heads! You have deprived the mothers of nature's gifts, and farmed them out to farmers, and pocketed the money, as you audaciously confess. Yes, villains! You have treasured up the tears and groans of dumb, helpless, perishing, dying infants. O, you bloody landed interest! You band of robbers! Why do you assume soft names, you beasts of prey? Too well do your emblazoned arms and escutcheons witness the ferocity of your bloody and barbarous origin! But soon shall those audacious Gothic emblems of rapine cease to offend the eyes of an enlightened people, and no more make an odious distinction between the spoilers and the spoiled. But, ladies and gentlemen, is it necessary, in order that we may eat bread and mutton, that the rents

should be received by you? Might not the farmers as well pay their rents to us, who are the natural and rightful proprietors? If for the sake of cultivation we are content to give up to farmers our wild fruits, our hunting grounds, our fish and game, our coal mines and our forests, is it not equitable that we should have the rents in lieu thereof? If not, how can the farmers have the face to sell us again the produce of our own land?

Hear me! Ye oppressors! ye who live sumptuously every day! ye for whom the sun seems to shine and the seasons change, ye for whom alone all human and brute creatures toil, sighing but in vain for the crumbs which fall from your overcharged tables; ye for whom alone the heavens drop fatness, and the earth yields her increase, hearken to me, I say, ye who are not satisfied with usurping all that nature can yield; ye who are insatiable as the grave; ye who would deprive every heart of joy but your own, I say hearken to me! Your horrid tyranny, your infanticide is at an end! Your grinding the faces of the poor and your drinking the blood of infants is at an end! The groans of the prisons, the groans of the camp, and the groans of the cottage, excited by your infernal policy are at an end! And behold the whole earth breaks forth into singing at the new creation, at the breaking of the iron rod of aristocratic sway, and at the rising of the everlasting sun of righteousness!

And did you really think, my good gentlefolk, that you were the pillars that upheld the universe? Did you think that we would never have the wit to do without you? Did you conceive that we should never be able to procure bread and beef and fuel without your agency? Ah! my dear creatures, the magic spell is broke. Your sorceries, your witchcrafts, your priestcrafts, and all juggling crafts are at an end, and the Meridian Sun of Liberty bursts forth upon the astonished world, dispelling the accumulated mists of dreary ages and leaves us the glorious blue expanse of serene unclouded reason.

Well, then, since you have compelled, since you have driven us, through your cruel bondage to emancipate ourselves, we will even try to do without you, and deal with the honest farmers ourselves, who will find no difference, unless for the better, between paying their rents to us and to you.

And whereas we have found our husbands, to their indelible shame, woefully negligent and deficient about their own rights, as well as those of their wives and infants, we women mean to take up the business ourselves and let us see if any of our husbands dare hinder us. Wherefore, you will find the business much more seriously and effectually managed in our hands than ever it has been yet. You may smile, tyrants, but you have juster cause to weep. For as nature has implanted into the breasts of all mothers the most pure and unequivocal concern for their young, which no bribes can buy, nor threats annihili-

late, be assured we will stand true to the interest of our babes, and shame, woe and destruction be to the pitiful varlet that dare obstruct us. For their sakes we will no longer make brick without straw, but will draw the produce of our estate. If we deprive ourselves of our common in order that it may be cultivated we ourselves will have the price thereof, and we may buy therewith, as far as it will go, the farmers' produce. And so far as our respective shares of the rent may be adequate to the comfortable and elegant support of ourselves and infants, so far will we cheerfully, by our honest endeavors, in our several callings make up the deficiency and render life worth enjoying. To labor for ourselves and infants we do not decline; but we are sick of laboring for an insatiable aristocracy.

To convince your highnesses that our plan is well digested I will lay it before you. You will find it very simple, but that is the sign of the greater perfection. As I said before, we women (because the men are not to be depended on) will appoint in every parish a committee of our own sex (which we presume our gallant lock-jawed spouses and paramours will at least for their own interest not oppose) to reserve the rents of the houses and lands already tenanted, and also to let to the best bidders, on seven years' leases, such farms and tenements as may from time to time become vacant. Out of those rents we can remit to government so much per pound, according to the exigencies of the state, in lieu of all taxes, so that we may no longer have taxes nor tax gatherers. Out of these rents we shall next pay all our builders and workmen that build or repair our houses, pave, cleanse and light our streets; pay the salaries of our magistrates and other public officers. And all this we women shall do quarterly, without a bank or bank-notes, in ready money, when the rents are paid in; thus suffering neither state nor parish to run in debt. And as to the overplus, after all public expenses are defrayed, we shall divide it fairly and equally among all the living souls in the parish, whether male or female; single or married, legitimate or illegitimate; from a day old to the extremest age; making no distinction between the families of rich farmers and merchants who pay much rent for their extensive farms or premises and the families of poor laborers and mechanics who pay but little for their small apartments, cottages and gardens, but giving to the head of every family a full and equal share for every name under his roof.

And, whereas, births and funerals and consequent sickness are attended with expense, it seems requisite to allow at quarter days to the head of every family a full share for every child that may have been born in his house since the former quarter day, though the infant may then be but a day old, and also for every person who might have died since the former quarter day, though the death should have happened but a day after it.

This surplus, which is to be dealt out again among the living souls in a parish every quarter day, may be reasonably supposed to amount to full $\frac{2}{3}$ of the whole sum of rents collected. But whatever it may amount to, such share of the surplus rents is the imprescriptible right of every human being in civilized society as an equivalent for the natural materials of their common estate which by letting to rent for the sake of cultivation and improvement they are deprived of.

Wherefore, now, ladies and gentlemen, you see the glorious work is done, and the rights of the human species built on so broad and solid a basis that all your malice will not be able to prevail against them. Moreover, when we begin with you, we will make a full end of your power at once. We will not impolitically tamper with the lion, and pluck out a tooth now and then, as some propose to melt down your strength by degrees which would only irritate you to oppose us with all the power you had remaining. No; we will begin where we mean to end, by depriving you instantaneously, as by an electric shock, of every species of revenue from lands which will universally and at once be given to the parishes to be disposed of by and for the use of the inhabitants, as said before.

But yet be not cast down, my good ladies and gentlemen. All this is done for the sake of system, not revenge or retaliation; for we wish not to reduce you to beggary as you do us, for we will leave you all your movable riches and wealth, all your gold and silver, your rich clothes and furniture, your corn and cattle and every thing that does not appertain to the land as a fixture, for these you know must come to the parish with our estates. So that you see you will still be the richest part of the community and may by your cheerful acquiescence be much more happy than you are now under the existing, unjust system of things. But if by foolish and wicked opposition you should compel us in our own defence to confiscate even your movables, and perhaps also to cut you off, then let your blood be upon your own heads, for we shall be guiltless. It will, therefore, be your interest and wisdom to submit peaceably and fraternize cheerfully with us as fellow-citizens, for instead of you then having the revenues of the country to carry on war against us, as you have now, the parishes will then have these revenues to carry on the war against you. And as to your movable property, we are not afraid of it, for it would soon melt away in supporting you in a state of hostility against the strength and standing revenues of the country unburthened with debts and pensions. So prepare yourselves peaceably to acquiesce in the new system of things which is fast approaching. And when you shall hear of the blessed decree being passed by the people, that the land is from that day forth parochial property, join chorus with your glad fellow creatures and joyfully partake in the universal happiness.