CERTAIN CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS *

Addressed to Women Agriculturists

By Ethel Wedgwood

The recent influx of women into every branch of industrial life has had the effect of bringing them, as a sex, into direct personal touch with two vital economic problems which hitherto had had for the majority merely an academic, or, at most, a second-hand interest—the Land Question and the Question of the Labour Market.

These two problems are not independent of each other; indeed, they are so closely related that the solution of the second is contained in the solution of the first.

Their direct importance to women is not likely to diminish as time goes on, but rather to increase; while the prospect of the political vote intensifies women's responsibility for a right practical solution.

Let us begin with the second problem: Overcrowding and Undercutting in the Labour Market.

It seems, unfortunately, probable that for the next twenty years the number of women who from necessity, not from choice, will lead a single, wage-earning life must be very abruptly and greatly augmented. A large number of others, having once broken down the conventional barriers which kept them hitherto out of certain occupations, will voluntarily choose to continue in them, and their lead will certainly be followed by many of the on-coming generation.

So far the absence at war of some six million male producers has prevented the new women workers from suffering from the usual overcrowding of the labour market; they have been invited, urged, to enter it, skilled or unskilled, to fill up the sudden deficit, and where they have suffered, it has been from prejudice rather than from economic competition.

But after the war the scene must change. In the first place, many forms of unproductive labour (such as munitions-making), in which a great host of women are now finding employment (for which they are paid not out of the results of their labour, but by general taxation), will cease to exist, and these women workers will be forced into normal kinds of labour. At this identical moment the labour market will also be flooded by the return of many hundred thousand men, who, though damaged in nerve and body, will yet be able to resume many of their old occupations. These will feel, and public opinion will support them, that they have a right not to find their old places filled. At the same time, the women workers will equally rightly think—and it is to be hoped that a grateful nation will at last think, too—that they have no less a claim in justice to maintain their footing in all branches of industry. They have "come to stay," and any attempt to exclude them, now they have entered the field, must inevitably fail. Yet, undoubtedly, unless the right remedy is found for the ensuing competition and congestion of labour, sex-war will result, and, despite trade unions, depression in real wages,—both results too deplorable and disastrous to be easily accepted.

Organisation of women's labour can do something to maintain nominal wages, little, however, to prevent a fall in "real" wages; nor can it materially diminish the number of the unemployed. Organisation can arrange existing factors to better advantage, ensure fairer distribution of produce, &c.; but, since it cannot open to the worker fresh sources of production which in themselves are remunerative, organisation alone will not regenerate industrial life.

On the other hand, popular ownership of the means of production, as usually planned, *i.e.*, State purchase and control of land, mines, factories, &c., has three main drawbacks:—

(1) It involves, to be successful, a control almost military in its despotism over the lives of the workers.

(2) It involves machinery too rigid to be suitable to the rapid developments of modern industrial relations and methods.

(3) It saddles the community at large with a burden of taxation for which they receive but a doubtful return.

There is one obvious way of employing more people, and that is by opening up more sources of employment on productive work—work which out of its own produce shall pay adequate wages; and if there is a method of doing this, which at the same time shall destroy a monopoly which is inflating food prices and inflating rents, it will go a long way towards dispelling some of the storm clouds that threaten us.

There is evidently only one source of productive employment, and that is the Land, as including, of course, every form of raw material for manufacture. Let us, therefore, turn to the first problem: the Land Question.

The Land Question is usually thought of as an agricultural one, and in this form has become familiar to women volunteers and women organisers during the war; and this aspect of it will serve sufficiently as an illustration of a system, which no less affects urban land and all land whatever as a necessary factor in all employment and all existence.

Everyone embarking on an agricultural scheme is immediately met by the difficulty of obtaining land of suitable situation, area, and quality at a price (or rent) which will allow it to be worked with profit. In addition to this main difficulty come those that, on reflection, are seen to be derived from it: lack of adequate housing for the workers, absence of domestic comforts and even decencies, the low standard of agricultural wages, absence of that intelligent co-operation for machines, transport, &c., which would lessen the cost of production and distribution.

These secondary, though very real, hindrances obviously proceed from the first one—the difficulty of obtaining suitable land; and this lies not so much in its high rent, as in the restrictions which landlords place in the way of its use, and in the large size of estates, which gives a few landowners a monopoly power of control over a whole district. Moreover, rural land is not regarded in England primarily as an economic factor, but as a source of social power, a condition of personal enjoyment. Hence land is not only withheld from others, but misused by the existing owners, to the ultimate impoverishment of those landowners themselves who have no other source of income, and to the general degradation of rural life.

Of the rural land of England and Wales over 16,000,000 acres is under permanent grass (Agricultural Statistics, 1915, Part I.); and of this area over 11,435,000 acres is classified as "not for hay," and it may be taken as certain that a great part of this is practically unused, or is held as pleasure ground. (These figures are exclusive of 3,764,000 acres of "mountain and heath land used for grazing.") The official figures for Scotland show that almost a fifth of the area is devoted exclusively to sport. Of this, the Times, September 19th, 1916, says that "nearly 2,000,000 acre throughout the Highlands will need to be taken back from deer after the war."

The non-use or mis-use of these acres of land is not only a dead loss to the whole population by so much potential food and raw material buried and unproduced, it is the direct cause of unemployment to as many men and women as might be working on it, and, through them, of the over-competition and strife of the Labour Market. It has also a third more important economic effect in raising to an artificial height the price of all land whatever; for every acre of land that is withheld from profitable use intensifies the demand and raises the price of every acre that is so available; so that

* The above article has been reproduced in pamphlet form, and may be obtained from The United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values, 11, Tothill Street, Westminster, S.W. (1s. per 100, post free.)

we have in England to-day rents and prices which are not the equivalents of a site's natural advantages, but are caused solely by artificial restriction of supply, and thus the public as a whole is not only losing what might have been produced, but is actually paying landowners in proportion to this very non-production.

Yet all the time the price of food and other simple necessaries continues to rise, the physical and moral evils due to overcrowding continue, and industrial strife for " the right to work " is constantly disturbing all united effort; while at this crisis we are being urged to save our country by increasing the production of all that comes directly from land—milk, vegetables, corn, fodder, &c., as well as supplies such as coal, timber, &c.

Such a state of things cannot be reasonable; indeed, it needs only to be recognised to be condemned (even though its disastrous effects on society may not be fully perceived); and until this monopolising of land is abolished it is futile to seek further for remedies to our industrial and social troubles.

At present our whole system of rating and taxation actively fosters this monopolisation of the source of all supplies and of all employment, and it would be better to do away with it before discussing elaborate and coercive machinery for social reconstruction. The principle at the back of our existing land taxation is that of putting the heaviest charge on land which is most profitably used, and this principle needs to be totally changed, as is evident to anyone who considers it in operation. Every improvement that is now made upon a piece of land, every dairy-house, tool-shed, greenhouse, or other means of increasing the land's yield, enters into the assessment, and an additional rate increases the costs of all such improvements. On the other hand, unproductive or semi-productive land, waste ground, large tracts of grass land, sporting preserves, &c., are rated as poor unproductive land (agricultural land), however fertile in quality or however valuable in site they may be—even though they may be immensely costly vacant sites in a city.

Obviously, the result of such a system of assessment must be, and is, to check land development, especially to check developments by small owners and tenants who have but little capital to risk, and, on the other hand, actively to encourage bigger landowners and those who have independent incomes in the disuse of their estates. It is a policy of stagnation.

The remedy lies not in Government purchase (which wou'd raise the monopoly price of land as the Smallholdings Act raised it, and tax the public for private benefit), but in reversing the system of assessment, so as to encourage instead of discourage the leasing and development of land.

We therefore urge on your consideration:—

(1) That all rates should be taken off every sort of improvement upon land, so as to relieve the market-gardener, the farmer, and the landowner who develops his property from all charges that act as a deterrent.

(2) That revenue should be raised by a tax on the selling price of land (valued without the improvements on it) sufficient to induce owners to defray the tax by bringing the land into remunerative use by themselves or others.

The results of such a simple reform would be far-reaching. This stimulation to the use of land hitherto unused would find employment for a whole new agricultural population in conditions very different to those of the old village labourer, and it would break down the present " monopoly " price of land,* which is so high solely by reason of its indispensability and of the artificial restriction in its supply. The effect on the real wages of hired labour from such an opening up of natural resources can best be gauged by the labour conditions in new Colonies, while the facilities for small independent farmers and gardeners would be greatly increased.

The matter is urgent, in view of the social reconstruction imminent before us at the close of the war, as well as from our " war-time " needs. We therefore commend this reform—known as the Taxation of Site Values and Unrating of Improvements—to the careful consideration of all organisers of women's agricultural (and other) labour, as well as of all women who themselves intend to make a profession of work upon the land as market gardeners, poultry farmers, fruit growers, and otherwise; and we urge all women working for the franchise or taking any part in municipal government to give it a foremost place in their programme of legislative reforms.

This policy is no new one. It has a strong, organised body of supporters in this country, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and America, as also on the Continent, and, in one connection or another, has repeatedly been brought before the attention of the British Parliament. To obtain the necessary data for such a valuation it would be only necessary to require each landowner to make and to return his own estimate of his land at its capital, or selling, value, stripped of all improvements.

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Within these short limits it is impossible fully to discuss this matter in all its economic bearings, but we can recommend lecturers (women or men) competent to explain the subject to groups who desire to study it. Pamphlets dealing with its various aspects can be obtained from the office of the United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values, 11, Tothill Street, Westminster.

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* It is sometimes imagined—even by persons acquainted with the familiar arguments for Free Trade—that a tax on the site value of land would, like a tax on trade commodities, raise (not lower) its price. To see that this is an error it is not necessary to refer to such authorities as Mill and Marshall. When an article is produced in order to trade in it, its price can lie between two extremes, *i.e.*—above, what a buyer will pay rather than go without it; below, what the seller feels worth while to supply it for (*i.e.*, in the case of regular business, the " cost of reproduction," taken at an average over an indeterminate period). With ordinary trade articles subject to competition, or where the goods are perishable and must be sold, their price tends to the lower level, below which—if trade is to continue—it cannot persistently sink; and, in these cases, any tax on the article is an addition to the cost of production and is added on to the price.

Where, however, a monopoly of a trade article is created by a " ring," the price at once rises towards the maximum; and the effect of a tax on the owners of such an article (since they cannot shift the tax by raising the price) is to make them more eager to " do business "; so that the artificial monopoly breaks down and the price sinks. Similar is the case of property—such as personal possessions—in which the owner has no desire to trade. They are not to be bought at all, or only at the maximum that any purchaser will give. Taxation could not, therefore, raise their price further, but tends to induce the owner either to part with them (as an expensive luxury), or to make them a remunerative investment.

Land has the peculiarity of partaking both of the nature of a personal possession and of that of a trade monopoly. Many landowners desire neither to trade in, nor to make profitable use of their estates; whilst, from the fact that land cannot be reproduced, and that each site has the advantages attached to a special fixed position, even land available to the public for use is traded in under monopoly conditions. Hence any tax on land ownership as it exists to-day must both encourage its use and also lower its price.

Land is like Aladdin's lamp. It contains all manner of potential riches; but the owner, so long as he is comfortable, does not care to evoke the gigantic smoky forms of the Genii of labour. But, demand a toll for the possession of this latent wealth, and the Jinn must be summoned to pay the toll. Tax the owner still further, and he may even part with the lamp itself to those better suited to deal with its imprisoned Spirits.