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SOCIALIST LAND OR FREE LAND?

By ARTHUR ARNOLD,

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ACTIVELY or passively, we are all connected with one operation—the evolution of society. What are the best conditions under which human society can exist? Outside our own homes there is no question so important, nor does any public question enter so largely into family life. In this sense, those who are active, those who are putting their hands to aid this evolution, are all socialists. Apart from the great domain of civil, moral, and personal rights, including forms of local and national government, there is the necessary, indispensable platform, the basis of all the operations of mankind, the land upon which we live, and move, and have our being. There can be no more interesting matter than is involved in examination of the proposals concerning one of the necessities of all life, including the plans of those who appropriate to themselves the name of socialists, and who claim that their method alone can satisfy the progress of humanity.

We learn from the past that this evolution is aided by efforts of all kinds. Many which have been wild, extravagant, fantastic, did their work and played their part, not uselessly because they were ideal rather than practical. We may note the false principles and the failure, but we cannot say that these visionary schemes were of no avail. The doctrine that men have natural and social rights with regard to land, was at one time regarded as wanton and wicked, tainted with the flavour of felony. The general progress of society towards the greatest social happiness is regulated by the average opinion. But it is not only the wisest, nor those alone whose capacity for the construction and reform of law is highest, who bring about new conditions of society. It has been said that "if at the commencement of new projects sensible men had always been consulted, we should still have been painting our bodies and living on acorns." I will not go so far as that, but I do agree with the author of "the Co-operative Commonwealth" that "the evolution of society takes place through the conscious efforts of men."

It is most natural that those who, from the midst of distress, look with longing hope upon the future, should fix their thoughts upon the

land. A man is born into the world by the will of others; if he has a right to existence, it must be upon the land, from which also must be provided all the materials of his food, clothing, and for the building of his workshop and his home. When the eyes of his mind are opened, he finds that this natural agent in the production of necessities of life, and of all wealth, is limited by geographical boundaries, and that by permission, and under protection of the government, it is appropriated by certain persons. Thinking further, he finds that their claim must have limits, that it cannot be absolute, because if it were, he and all the millions, who can call no particular part of the land their own, would be liable to notice to quit the country, and so, without difficulty, he gets as far as to comprehend that a nation cannot exist and does not live upon the sufferance of the proprietors of land. It would be intolerable if Acts of Parliament were to begin with reciting not only the authority of the Sovereign, "the advice and consent of the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and Commons," but also the sanction of the landed proprietors. By such reasoning he arrives easily at the actual provision of the general law, which denies absolute property in land to any individual, but secures to any person possessing a better title than that of any other person, a private property in land which is valid against individual claims, but never against those of the local community or of the nation, for objects of public utility and sanitary improvement. All men making conscious efforts for the evolution of society into more widely diffused happiness, may go together thus far; they see that free men have some vested rights and property in land,—a thought well expressed by Lord Sherbrooke in the saying that—"Land is a kind of property in which the public must from its very nature have a kind of dormant joint-interest with the proprietor." The socialists—I speak of those who bear the name—are not content with the acknowledgement of this undefined and undivided share. They have sought to obtain for each man, in tangible participation, that share of the national property in land which the members of the Free Land League assert may most advantageously be exercised and utilized by the sanction of private property in land, regulated and taxed by representative government, both local and imperial.

This, I think, is a plain statement of the divergence of the two parties of reformers. Both are working to obtain that which they believe a better condition of society. The socialists claim that the land ought to be "nationalised," and therein seem to doubt that it is national property. The Free Land League observes that the absolute ownership of land is by English law vested in the state, and asserts that this property is the firm, fixed, and inalienable possession of the people. The socialists decry private property in land as giving advantage to individuals at the cost of the community. We regard the institution of private property in land as necessary in order to obtain the most advantageous cultivation and improvement of the land; we are convinced that the principle of private property in land is sound and salutary. We seek to remove from it the offensive and injurious developments which class interest has introduced, mainly in order to support the hereditary principle of succession. We say that the socialists' idea—that of obtaining for each man particular possession of the land, is incapable of realisation; that their attempts in that direction lead to decline of production, by withdrawing the stimulus of personal profit and enjoyment, and to general poverty and failure; and we maintain that our method of reform is to obtain the widest diffusion of property in land which is compatible with the greatest welfare of the people.

I should agree with the socialist who condemned the remark of a Liberal statesman: "That the most desirable condition for the working classes is that which enables its worthiest members to most easily rise out of it," if the illustrious speaker did not mean that it is a happy condition of society, in which those who have taste and capacity for some other form of work than that in which they may be engaged, can realise their wishes. As the words stand, they may seem to be born of the evil suggestion that work is a curse instead of a bountiful blessing. If in that sense the words were true, we ought to long for the abolition of the working classes, which would be absurd. That which we should desire is, that the labour necessary for subsistence should not be too toilsome; that it should nourish and hold in health the higher faculties of mankind. Fifty years ago, Robert Owen, a socialist who made great sacrifices for his opinions, bought 30,000 acres of land in the United States, and established a community upon the principles of common property and the equal value of every man's labour. Within a year of his prophecy that those principles would soon overshadow the earth, he was compelled to resort to the system of private property. The principles were false to human nature, and, therefore, their success was impossible. But I am far from

saying that Owen's generous experiments were useless. I refer to his experience and to that of others, and to the sayings and doings of socialists of later days, not because I deny the existence of evils against which their efforts were and are directed, not because I am less zealous than they for change in the proprietary order of society, but because it is by such references we may learn that theirs is a method of reform which we are not to follow and which it is certain will end in failure. The cardinal error of what is called socialism, lies in the supposition that the most useful vigour of human effort can be obtained without the promise of individual reward, and also, perhaps especially, in a desire, born in natural feelings of hatred and horror for the contrasts of money and misery, of wealth and wretchedness by which we are surrounded, to accomplish its full and final evolution by purely mechanical arrangements. After Owen there was Fourier. Human society was to be divided into three million phalanxes, with Constantinople for a centre. In order that men might love labour, it was proposed that any filthy work should be performed by children, encouraged to it by marks of honour. When a sample phalanx was set up, the general principle adopted with reference to payment was that the highest rates were to be paid for labours of repulsive and exhausting character. The most effective trial took place in the State of New Jersey. Of course it failed. The men were not all similar. Like other men, their efforts were various, and so were their claims to reward. Some had families. Some gave offence because their pleasing arts had so arranged their place of work that they were near the dinner bell, and got the best bits at table. There was good in it. The social idea in what may prove its true and lasting form gained, doubtless, some promotion, but the principle was radically wrong, because it was alien and foreign to the natural and necessary motives of human action. We may mark the progress of civilisation by the increasing distance which men are willing to place between the exertion of labour and its reward. But specific reward there must be, even if they have abundant food. No man could hire savages upon the basis of weekly wages; if they render a service they hold out their hand for immediate recompense. I do not speak only of material satisfaction. The purest of philanthropists looks for reward in the success of his labours.

We shall see presently that in later years the socialist ideas concerning land have become less visionary, and that is a most hopeful symptom upon which to found expectations of an ultimate union of popular views of reform. But the error which brought Owen's and Fourier's experiments to ruin is not yet extinct. It runs through the

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glittering delusions of Mr. Henry George, which have acquired much hold in this country. Let us take one example. Mr. George says : "In the simplest state we can conceive, each man digs his own bait and catches his own fish. The advantages of the division of labour soon become apparent, and one digs bait while the others fish. Yet evidently the one who digs bait is in reality doing as much towards the catching of fish as any of those who actually take the fish." That may not be true ; the digger of bait may be doing more, but he may also be doing very much less than those who take the fish. The fisherman may have directed him by superior knowledge where to dig, and the fisherman may possess peculiar skill. What Mr. George may mean, but does not perhaps dare to say, is that the digger is devoting his powers, such as they are, to his work, and that therefore his labour is equal to that of any other man who is doing and can do no more, and is to have the same reward. It is just that view of equity in the valuation of various efforts which human society will always repudiate. The value of labour, as to its various classes, must be appraised by some form of competition. Fourierism died at Brook Farm, where it was proposed to establish a spurious equality by giving highest honours to the lowest labour. If noble sentiments could produce crops, Brook Farm would have excelled the Garden of Eden. The socialists of that land had for their motto :—

"Unity of man with man in true society ;
 Unity of man with God in true religion ;
 Unity of man with nature in creative arts and industry."

The socialists of the present time, with perhaps the exception of Mr. George, make far less profession of sentiments. But it is true ideas which are immortal ; the plans of to-day are simply matter to be dealt with according to the general and common sense of the governing community. I can never mention the greatest idealist whom socialism has ever claimed without respect. St. Simon may have written some nonsense ; few are the men who write much without liability to that imputation. But we may reverence the memory of one who said that which is true better than others. These were among his last words :—"Remember that to accomplish great things passion is needful. All my life may be summed up in a single thought : 'To secure to all men the freest development of their faculties.'" St. Simon died long before I was born ; but I knew one of his most faithful disciples—M. Arles Dufour—who was the friend of Cobden, and in later years of myself. I asked what was the result of his life-long devotion to the best of socialist ideas ? He replied, with the gaiety which none but an imaginative man retains at eighty, "All that I know of St. Simonism may be summed up in this way : 'The golden age, which the ignorance of man placed in the past,

lies in the future.'" In regard to the question of socialist land or free land, I maintain the truth of these ideas, and that socialist plans of land-law reform are a hindrance, while those of the Free Land League are in harmony with these ideas, and must tend to their fulfilment. I am willing to test the accuracy of our principles of reform as against those of socialists, by bringing them to touch with the words of St. Simon.

We must now descend from the lofty region of ideas to the hard realities of labour in co-operation with the natural forces of the soil. The modern socialists have made progress. They remember that the plans of Owen and others, for cultivation of the land in common, and by associated labour, were shattered by the experience of a single trial. But the theory of "common labour, common enjoyment" is still extant, and some men have yet to learn that it is a descending and degrading system, alien from, and opposed to, human nature. If men had equality of wants, equal strength, equal aptitudes for labour, equal families, equal health, were of one age and temperament, if the work to be done in the world were of one quality, then, though it would be a world in which no intelligent man could desire to dwell, yet the doctrine of "common labour, common enjoyment," would seem not impossible. The socialists speak of nationalizing the land, which to my ears seems just like saying that it is desirable to englishize Englishmen. The land is not and cannot be other than national. There is no such thing as private ownership of land exclusive of national rights. The great question which we have to determine is whether private property in land is or can be made the most suitable instrument for obtaining, for the welfare of the whole people, the greatest possible advantage from the soil. The wholesome principle of private property in land is now overgrown, and to a great extent obscured, by noxious laws and practices, the natural outcome of the sway of the landed gentry and their dependants for ages past in Parliament. When Mr. George says :—"There is on earth no power which can rightfully make a grant of exclusive ownership of land," I agree with him ; and because I endorse that sentence, I may add, that Mr. Herbert Spencer writes as nearly as his philosophic pen can go to nonsense, when he says—"Equity does not permit private property in land." I impute that character to his statement, because private property in land never has been and cannot be an exclusive right of property. When Mr. George says "that in Great Britain to-day the right of the people as a whole to the soil of their native country is much less fully acknowledged than it was in feudal times. A much smaller proportion of the people own the soil and their ownership is much more absolute," I concur. But I will never admit, and in this I

am supported by the law, that we have abandoned the national property in land because the best use of that property has been grossly neglected by the Legislature, and has been placed in strict subordination throughout the country to the political policy of accumulation of bloated estates by a system of hereditary settlement.

We have not to acquire the soil upon which we must live or we cannot live at all. I should be false to the principles I have followed; I should be a fit subject for ridicule, if, in language like that of Tiberius Gracchus, which socialists are fond of quoting, I were to say:—"Men of England, you are called lords of the world, yet you have no right to a square foot of its soil." I would rather say:—"Men of England; this fair heritage, this fruitful and fertile island, is yours; there is no foot of English soil from which it is possible wholly to separate and to exclude your right. Come, let us make the best laws for its government." Gracchus said:—"The soldiers of Italy have only water and air." I would rather not waste time in rhapsody; it is more important to bethink ourselves that for want of good land-laws many of the men of England have filthy water and foul air. Mr. Hyndman describes socialism as "an organized attempt to substitute an ordered co-operation for existence for the present anarchical competition for existence." Let us rather make a well-ordered competition. Mr. Hyndman's socialism must fail, because it would take the savour and main-spring out of all human action. I prefer the socialism of St. Simon, and am willing to labour in order "to secure to all men the freest development of their faculties;" a sentiment as good for the land as for the law. Will any man contend that this can be accomplished by any agricultural system which excludes competition, and in which private property in land is not common, simple, and secure? The socialists of to-day do not go out into the wilderness and demonstrate the folly of their doctrines by experience; they are wiser in their generation than the Owens of the past. Mr. George is, perhaps, the most powerful leader of English-speaking socialists, and his project is, however, so plain, that we can test it upon a sheet of paper. He says:—"It is not necessary to confiscate land; it is only necessary to confiscate rent." Now, let us try whether that is the best way to obtain value for the people from the land. We may admit that for a legislature all ways are lawful, and not only those which are just and convenient. Say there is a bog which is worthless. A man has obtained a right of property in 500 acres of it, and spent £12,500—he could not do the work for less—

in making it yield grass, or crops of grain. Years after he has rendered this valuable service to the community, the land so reclaimed is let for a rent of which nine-tenths are the fair return upon his outlay. Just the same suggestion may be made of a single acre reclaimed by the labour of the proprietor. Is this to go to the common purse in the "ordered co-operation"? "Yes," says Mr. George:—"There are improvements which in time, become indistinguishable from the land itself. Very well, then the title to the improvements becomes blended with the title to the land; the individual right is lost in the common right." Is it possible that under such conditions men would give the labour of their lives to the reclamation of land? From this example it may be seen that socialist land is still cumbered with the errors which brought to ruin those fantastic experiments of the earlier socialists. They attempted the evolution of society by a mechanism from which the power is omitted. They still try, as in the days of Owen, to reconstruct society by leaving out the competition which, under fair conditions, would give to life its interest, its welfare, its safe and happy progress. We seek "the freest development of their faculties" for every man upon the soil. That involves competition. We do not say the country should be cut up into large farms or small farms; our aims are travestied when it is said that we demand nothing but changes in the methods and expenses of transfer; that we should be satisfied with land-laws like those of France or of America; our programme is far wider than that. We may all become socialists, or we shall convert the socialists, if all recognise the simple facts of the case. To that end, we must accept—no one can deny—that the only absolute ownership of land is that of the nation, or the State. We must not suppose it possible that land, which is limited, can be cultivated by a nation which is unlimited; we must understand that in these conditions, land must be held as a monopoly; that no laws, no co-operation or competition, can make it other than a monopoly; we must endeavour to provide that no man who is excluded from this monopoly shall be deprived of his proper share of the national interest in land. That interest must be secured by laws which will generally promote the most productive cultivation, and will also obtain direct contributions, in a proper measure, to the general expenses of the country. And we must remember that justice and security, added to the sanction of private property in land, are not only dutiful, but in the highest degree expedient, in order to win the best yield of such produce and taxation.

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