

Modern Land Ownership A Type of Parasitism

THE landowner, as such, contributes nothing whatever to production. It cannot be argued that he provides the land. This nature does. Neither does he provide the advantages of situation which inhere in the land. This, so far as it is not done by nature, the growth of society does. The landowner simply stands in the way and forbids the use of what nature and society have provided, until he has collected a toll from the persons whose activity and accumulations make industry productive. The landowner is a toll collector. The rest of us pay him for the privilege of living on and using the land and, regarding him solely in his capacity as landowner, we pay him for nothing else.

If it be said that most landowners have improved some of their land and so are not merely parasites, it is to be answered that, so far as they have done this they are able to get additional remuneration for the use (or by the self use) of their improvements. That is to say, they get interest on their capital, presumably earned, in addition to the unearned rent of their land. What they receive for the use of the unimproved land (whether from tenants or from sale of its production direct) is clearly payment received for no service rendered by the recipients to those from whom payment is accepted. And so far as landowners are recipients of such rent they are parasites on the rest of society and nothing else.

The parasitism of landowners as such is no less to be asserted when the present owners have bought their land than when they have inherited it. If we divide society, in thought, into the landed and the landless, we may truthfully say that the latter have been paying tribute to the former since private land ownership began. When one person buys land of another, he simply buys the privilege of collecting a periodic income from the landless masses without giving any service in return. So far as these masses are concerned, the purchase of land by one person from another is but a change of masters, *a change of parasites of which the landless masses are the multitudinous collective host.*

To be relieved of the burden of supporting social parasites by rent payments while at the same time supporting government out of taxes, and instead to let the rent serve also as the taxes, also would mean a clear and large net gain to the classes previously exploited. Yet many of the exploited, understanding little what is happening, and failing to distinguish between property incomes based on service and property incomes purely exploitive, prate pseudo-learnedly of surplus value, the class struggle, and the prospective evolution from capitalism to socialism. The socialistic theory in outline is simple. To the mind unused to analysis it seems to be both a comprehensive and a conclusive account of the nature of exploitation. But its doctrine regarding the nature of interest on capital is utterly

fallacious and the prospect that its programme could be put into effect and made to work is exceedingly dubious. The classes which profit by privilege, are, in their understanding of economic and social phenomena, but little superior to the exploited masses. Were this not the case, and were there not the fear of Bolshevik violence, we might well expect them to be almost exultant at the relative strength of socialism among reform movements. For socialism almost hopelessly diverts the minds of those who might be the principal protestants against the receipt of unearned incomes into an indiscriminate opposition to earned and unearned incomes alike. And it serves to prevent recognition of facts the recognition of which by the masses might mean to those who hold economic power based on privilege rather than service, real danger of its loss. The one chief virtue which socialism, as currently preached, does have, is its insistence that evils exist, that present conditions are far from ideal and that the opinions and sentiments of the privileged classes are not to be accepted as final truth.

The creed and formula of socialism will not do. The workmen, small farmers and tenant farmers require a new creed and a new formula. Their programme must have in it the tang of revolution. And it must be a programme capable of appealing to both groups, as socialism does not. But half measures will not suffice. To tax only *future increases* of land value is not to cheapen land and make the acquisition of farms and homes more easy. It is simply to prevent such acquisition from becoming more difficult. It is not to do away with exploitation, but only to prevent the indefinite future increase of exploitation. Again, to put an additional tax only on *vacant* land, although proposals of this sort are not infrequently supported by working men, by farmers and by socialists, is but a poor compromise with justice. Such a plan ignores the fact that, whatever may be the objections to the speculative holding of land, the direct exploitation of the masses consists in the payment to landowners of a rental yield for the use of land which is not vacant. And to leave this rental yield untaxed is to make necessary the taxation of improvements, commodities, etc. The defenders of privilege will not definitely ally themselves with movements of this compromise sort, any more than they ally themselves with socialism, for they will not approve of the curtailment of any of their privileges. Nevertheless, so far as the real issue is clouded by such movements, these classes stand to gain by virtue of them.

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KING EMANUEL of Italy has announced that he intends to relinquish all his crown lands for the benefit of the peasantry and those who have fought for Italian unity. He has also announced that hereafter his own private property will be taxed the same as that of the subjects.

SPAIN has recently authorized the municipalities to tax the unearned increment, graduated according to profit on sales ranging from 5 to 25 per cent.