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My Views on Land Ownership

By C. J. BUELL.

Editor Single Tax Review:

I have carefully read the articles on Land Ownership, and feel like adding a word.

I. The right to possess and use land is a natural, inherent right, belonging to each individual regardless of any act of government or society. It existed and was enjoyed by men long before government existed—before society developed any form of organization.

II. The natural right of each person to possess any particular piece of land is exactly equal to the right of any other person. But he who has taken possession of any piece of land and put it to use, now has a greater right to that particular piece than has any other person, and he may not be dispossessed for the benefit of any other person, nor for the benefit of any number of persons. His right to peaceable possession of his land is just as sacred as his right to enjoy any fruits of his labor. Society cannot confer this right. It can only secure and protect it, and this is one of the chief duties of government.

III. But it frequently occurs that land held in private possession is needed for common use—usually for common highway. In such cases the combined rights of all the people are greater than the individual right of the possessor. This is the basis of the so called "right of eminent domain." Under this right the individual may be dispossessed, but he must be fully compensated for all real loss or damage incident to yielding possession.

IV. Again, increase of population and the construction of public improvements cause land to have a value independent of anything the owner may do. This value of course, belongs to the community, and must be taken by the community and used for public purposes in which all shall share equally. Or, if not needed for public purposes,

this land value may justly be divided equally among all the people, for all are equal heirs of the common inheritance.

V. These fundamental principles have always been recognized by all people the world over; and every government has, more or less, embodied these principles in its laws and regulations. The right of private possession is everywhere recognized, subject, of course, to the principles of eminent domain, and everywhere society exacted from the possessor of land, so called "taxes," or "tribute," or "rent"—not as a compensation for possession, but as a return to society for the value that society gives to the land holder. That society has levied all sorts of other taxes,—that it has neglected to collect all the land value, and thus botched and bungled the whole job of doing justice among men—has nothing to do with the fundamental question of land ownership, or "land tenure," as we usually term it. The entire fault has been in our system of securing public revenues, not in our system of "land tenure."

Every title deed to land simply conveys the right of peaceable possession—nothing more.

Every title to land is held subject to the power of "eminent domain," and also subject to taxes. There is no problem of land reform, but there is a vital problem of tax reform. When society shall get its revenue justly, no man will care to hold land that he is not using to the best advantage. There will be plenty of land for all; each person will have the full product of his labor, and society will have just the revenue it is fairly entitled to.

C. I. Buell.