

Human Rights — An Economic Paradox

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IT IS BELIEVED that the two propositions concerning human rights as given below are each descriptive of conditions that are essential to the freedom of the individual. On the other hand, it seems that, if one of these propositions be true, the other cannot be true. Here then is the paradox to be resolved. How can these two apparently contradictory propositions be reconciled?

Proposition No. 1: That every human being when born into the world has by that fact alone an equal right with all other human beings to a place on the earth and to the use of the earth's natural resources. This right is violated if any one or more persons or nations can effectively claim *exclusive possession* of any portion of the earth.

Proposition No. 2: Every human being has a right to the full product of his labor. In order to secure this right, he must have temporarily or permanently the *exclusive possession* of the portion of the earth on which his labor is to be expended so that his labor may not suffer from interference, nor his product be acquired by others.

Now it may be that some persons will at once deny that the above two propositions constitute any paradox at all, because one or the other or both of the two propositions include statements of human rights which, in their opinion, are not valid. Or, they may maintain that such a thing as a human right does not exist. It is well, therefore, to examine these statements and to compare them with the ideas of some of the leading thinkers of the world as to their validity. For this purpose the following quotations are offered, first those in regard to the statement of a human right as given in Proposition No. 1 and then those in regard to the statement of a human right as given in Proposition No. 2.

QUOTED STATEMENTS IN REGARD TO PROPOSITION NO. 1

The Declaration of Independence:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Thomas Jefferson from Ford's *Writings of Jefferson*:

"Whenever there are in any country uncultivated lands and unemployed poor, it is clear that the laws of property have so far been extended as to violate natural law. The earth is given as a common stock for men to labor and live on."

Abraham Lincoln from *Lincoln and Men of his Time*:

"The land, the earth God gave to man for his home, sustenance, and support, should never be the possession of any man, corporation, society, or unfriendly government, any more than the air or water, if as much."

Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Vol. III: 901-2:
"From the point of view of a higher economic form of society, the private ownership of the globe on the part of some individuals will appear quite as absurd as the private ownership of one man by another."

Henry George, *Progress and Poverty*, page 294 - 50th Anniversary Edition:

"... As land is necessary to the exertion of labor in the production of wealth, to commend the land which is necessary to labor, is to command all the fruits of labor save enough to enable labor to exist."

Sumner Welles, Acting Secretary of State, July 22, 1941:

"... No peace which may be made in the future would be valid or lasting unless it established fully and adequately the natural rights of all peoples to equal economic enjoyment. So long as any one people or any one government possesses a monopoly over natural resources or raw materials which are needed by all peoples, there can be no basis for a world order based on justice and on peace."

Herbert Edgar Holmes *The Makers of Maine* 1912:

"We may pass with barely a thought the fact that European sovereigns had no rights, founded on the principles of justice, to assume to grant to favorite subjects vast tracts of land in the Western Hemisphere from which all existing land titles have emanated. For the sovereigns did not receive title to the land by gift of God."

Leo Tolstoi in *Resurrection*:

"The earth cannot be anyone's property."

Herbert Spencer:

"Equity, therefore, does not permit property in land. For if one portion of the earth's surface may justly become the possession of an individual and may be held by him for his sole use and benefit, as a thing to which he has an exclusive right, then other portions of the earth's surface may be so held, and eventually the whole of the earth's surface may be so held; and our planet may thus lapse altogether into private hands."

Harold R. Stassen, Boston Gardens address,
April 1, 1949:
"I have a deep and abiding faith [in] the concept of the natural rights of man."

QUOTED STATEMENTS IN REGARD TO
PROPOSITION NO. 2

Henry George, *Progress and Poverty*, page
334 - 50th Anniversary Edition:

"What constitutes the rightful basis of property? It is not, primarily, the right of man to himself, to the use of his own powers, to the enjoyment of the fruits of his exertions? As a man belongs to himself, so his labor when put in concrete form belongs to him. And for this reason, that which a man makes or produces is his own, as against all the world — to enjoy, to exchange or to give. No one else can rightfully claim it, and his exclusive right to it involves no wrong to anyone else."

John Locke in *Essay on Civil Government*:

"Yet every man has a property in his own person. The labor of his body and the work of his hands are properly his."

Thomas Paine in *Agrarian Justice*:

"... It is the value of the improvements only, and not the earth itself that is individual property."

John Stuart Mill in *Principles of Political Economy*:

"The essential principle of property being to

assure to all persons what they have produced by their labor and accumulated by their abstinence, ..."

Chamber of Commerce, *Nation's Business*,
August, 1941:

The Three Vital Rights: The right to work in any lawful occupation. The right to refuse to work. The right to the fruit of such labor.

VIOLATIONS

The inability to reconcile these two propositions has resulted in the violation of both the rights involved in them, namely the rights of every human being (a) to a place on the earth and to the use of the earth's natural resources, and (b) to the full product of his labor.

Let us see how number 1 right has been violated. Under our social order, which permits the private holding of exclusive title to a portion of the earth's surface, it is obviously possible for the titleholder to demand payment from others for the use of land, thus depriving others of their primal right to the earth. A feature of the consequent disorder is withholding of valuable land from use for speculative purposes, thus restricting industry and promoting involuntary unemployment.

On the other hand, a man's right to the full value of his product is violated whenever it becomes liable to seizure by others, even when seized by government itself in the form of taxation. Here are two definitions of taxation:

From the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:
"That part of the revenues of a State which is obtained by compulsory dues and charges upon its subjects."

Webster's *International Dictionary*, Second
Abridged Edition 1940:

"A charge or burden, usually pecuniary, laid upon persons and property for public purposes; a forced contribution of wealth to meet the public needs of a government."

According to these definitions of taxation, it is clear that taxation is a violation of the right of an individual to the full product of his labor, since taxation bears no relation to the services rendered by the government but is purely arbitrary in character.

Just how the revenues of government are to be obtained, if not by taxation, but as payment for and in proportion to services rendered by the community, including government services, is the crux of the question. The answer leads directly to the solution of the paradox submitted above. It is thought that every well informed student of Henry George must know what this answer is. Nevertheless, in very brief form, the following solution is presented:

The private holding of exclusive title to a location on the land, which appears to violate our number 1 human right, will not be a violation if the titleholder is required to compensate the public for the privilege granted him. This is accomplished if the full rental value of his location is taken for public purposes as Henry George proposed should be done.

Taking the full rental value of all locations on the land for public purposes, will ultimately enable taxes to be abolished. This will secure our number 2 right, namely the right of the individual to the full product of his labor.