

The Russian Land Question

COUNT Ilya Tolstoi, at a dinner in New York on the 27th ult., given by the Single Tax Party, presented some particulars about the Russian peasants and their landholdings which are of distinct interest. He says that as a matter of fact the amount of land in European Russia available for distribution among the peasants is not large. The great estates that belonged to the Czar and the government are principally in the cold and inhospitable North and consist mainly of forests. The usual nobleman's estate is perhaps of a size we should call very small, viz., about 200 acres, on the average. These, divided among millions of the peasants, will not go very far. Proof of the foregoing is apparent in the statements we are already receiving through the press that emigration to Siberia has set in on so large a scale that the present government of the Bolsheviki has issued orders for the movement Eastward to cease.

The land of Russia is very largely in the hands of the peasants and has been so from time immemorial. That a peasant should be provided with a small tract of land for the use of himself and his family has always been a matter of course in Russia. A serf was property; he could be bought and sold; he frequently changed owners. But the land that he occupied always was his; it was an appendage of himself, like his own mother. How then comes it, said Count Tolstoi, that with this ancient system, which the Russian peasants believe God-given, they still are plunged in so much poverty and distress? The cause may be stated as follows: the peasants live in villages, some of moderate size, say of a hundred cottages; some as large as congeries of a thousand houses, with a population oftentimes of five thousand. In spite of their size they are still called villages and are managed the same as the smaller ones. It is easy to see that the lands owned by the inhabitants must necessarily extend for great distances in all the radiating directions from the village as a center, and so remote are many of these holdings and so difficult of access that a peasant's time is often spent in the journeying to and fro, with little or no time for actual work on the land and enormous bodily waste and fatigue in the incessant journeyings. For it must also be observed that the poverty, superinduced by this inefficient system, prevents the peasant owning the horses and conveyances which might otherwise save this wasteful labor of which we are speaking.

Another curious fact was brought out by Count Tolstoi. The underlying principle of this Russian system of land tenure has been from the beginning the just distribution of the land among the peasants of the village community, with the purpose of setting up an equality of land holdings as between man and man. Now in order to realize this equality, thought had to be taken of the natural inequalities in the value of lands of varying productiveness and location. Thus, let us say, some dozen or more different qualities of land have been distinguished and differentiated. Thus it would be manifestly unfair and unjust for one peasant to have his holding consist of the prime, first quality, easily cultivated land, while his neighbor was given a parcel of rocky, unmanageable upland or a swamp undrainable and useless. No such injustice is attached to the system. There was the will to do what was fair and right. But the method of doing this was primitive in the extreme, and just here is one of the most interesting features of Count Tolstoi's remarks. What the time-honored procedure has been is this: The nature and qualities of the entire lands surrounding the village received the most careful study. All the dozen or more varying qualities of the soil were evaluated by the community itself under a system that, repeating itself year by year for generations, expressed the common opinion to a nicety. Nor was there any more room for dispute as to the difference in value of locations. Nearness to the village, nearness to the river, nearness to the highway, all these and other advantages of a like nature became common knowledge, bred in the flesh and bone of all. So that in the will to establish justice, of which mention has been made, what more simple and direct a mode could present itself to these primitive and righteous folk than to rule that every peasant should have his just share of every one of these several locations and qualities, share and share alike? By which method it is not difficult to see that a peasant instead of owning a simple tract of land (which would in all likelihood be of more value or of less value than the average), was the owner of a dozen tiny holdings located here, there and everywhere, according to the natural variations spoken of. Imagine the time and effort wasted in the endeavor to cultivate these widely separated "morcelements." In the endeavor to be just the system led to the utmost waste and inefficiency. So that while the Russian peasants are as near to being "saints" as any peasantry ever were, they are as backward in the simplest arts of modern civilized life as it is possible to conceive.

Therefore, according to Count Tolstoi, the will to justice being part and parcel of the peasant nature, the scientific mode to adopt in order to establish and safeguard a justice that can be enjoyed is the institution among them of the Single Tax. Count Tolstoi spoke of his father, Leo Tolstoi, as one who had long since adopted the idea of Henry George as the one best suited to the solution of the land question in Russia. For his father clearly saw and never failed to point out that the justice

which the peasants desired in the distribution of the land could best be obtained, not by the foolish parcelling out and minute subdivision of varying tracts, but the allocation of any serviceable tract to a peasant in quantity sufficient for his occupation and use, with, besides this, his common right and share in the entire ground rent of the lands held by the community, that is to say, his common right and share in all the advantages of location and quality of which we have been speaking. So that with labor freed from all taxation and the fair share of the common ground rent fund returned to every peasant in the shape of communal improvements and benefits of all kinds, with possibly a dividend or pension as well, the peasant would enter upon a new kind of existence and his "Land and Liberty" become to him a realization instead of forever being a dream.

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