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Clarifying my Views on the Private Ownership of Land

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To the Editor of the Review :

I hope I am only one of the many who are pleased to find the columns of the Review open to the discussion of what is the best practical attitude for American Single Taxers to assume upon the question of Private Property in Land. The hospitality of the Review is thus extended, as I believe, not to personal controversy, but to a fresh and fair representation and exchange of differing views upon the critical point whereon too much light cannot be shed, after which the case may perhaps rest, awaiting the final verdict of time and reflection as to how the cause of the Single Tax may be best advanced.

Two reasons appear to justify an effort toward unity of present thought and action.

First: There is the conviction that the position frequently taken by Single Taxers concerning Henry George's remedy in effecting the abolition of the Institution of Private Property in land has operated more than any one to impede the movement.

Second: Single Taxers have before them a specific task, viz: the application of Mr. George's practical remedy, "The Abolition of all Taxes save those upon Land Values." The abolition of private property in land would be, were it undertaken, another and more Herculean task, not necessary to the accomplishment of the first, and, it is submitted, that for the good of both, it would better be classed as a separate reform and second in order.

Perhaps Mr. George never had an abler or fairer opponent, or one more analytical in his treatment of the issue, than Mr. Edward

Atkinson. Mr. Atkinson, early in his argument at Saratoga in 1890, in order to limit their discussion to their differences, proceeded to eliminate their common agreements, chief of which, to his mind, was that land should remain private property. It may be said that Mr. Atkinson's authority upon such a point as this, has little binding force with Single Taxers, but, considering the importance of the discussion in which they were engaged, it would seem to be significant that Mr. George made no attempt then or later to contradict Mr. Atkinson's representation, nor did the other principal speakers in opposition, Professors Andrews, Clark, or Seligman, charge Mr. George with advocating the abolition of Private Property in Land.

As a matter of curiosity it may interest the older as well as the younger generation of Single Taxers, to recall a few excerpts from the proceedings upon that interesting occasion.

In the course of his remarks, Mr. Edward Atkinson said:

“Mr. George and myself concur in one point: namely, that there is no absolute property in land in any States which are founded on the English common law. In fact, there is, I believe, no absolute property in land anywhere. Conditional property in land—i. e., peaceful individual possession of specific parcels of land—is admitted to be necessary to its use by Mr. George and myself.”

Mr. George holds throughout his argument to the absolute necessity of giving conditional ownership, or complete, full and peaceable possession of land, to those who may choose to take it under the new condition; and he has justified this ownership in many ways, not only in fact, but in words.

He says, 'In applying to public use the power of drawing on the general wealth which pertains to the ownership of land, we discourage ownership without use.'

In that phrase he admits the ownership which he later justifies in the following words: 'It (i. e., ownership) arises from the necessity which comes from the highest use of land of giving individual possession, and comes from the difference in the capacity of land.'

And, finally, after advocating the Single Tax on land valuation, he justifies it only in these significant words:

'Under such conditions, men would not care to hold land which they did not want to use; and users of land, where their use was more than transient, would become the legal owners, having the assured privilege of peaceable possession and transfer as long as the tax was paid.'

What is the right of transfer except the right of purchase and sale ? What is peaceable possession and legal ownership, except a grant of property in land by the State ?

Mr. George sustains the necessity of private ownership of land in the most positive terms; and he is right. To haggle about the difference between possession and ownership of land is mere word-catching. But Mr. George uses the term "ownership" (i. e., private ownership) in the most positive way. Neither he nor myself sets up absolute ownership. Therefore, it follows of necessity that the only ground of difference between the advocates of the Single Tax system, who concur with Mr. George in admitting the absolute necessity of private ownership of land, under suitable conditions, to which all shall be subject alike, is as to the conditions under which that private ownership and possession shall be granted, and under which peaceable possession through all time and through all transfers that may be sustained by the whole power of the State.

In the present discussion, it has appeared that Mr. George and myself agree:—

1. That there is no absolute ownership of land under the English Common Law. We agree that what individuals now possess is "an estate in land" which is subject to many conditions. These conditions may be varied.
2. We agree that all rents, taxes, wages, profits and earnings, are liquidated in products which are derived primarily from land, but which are rendered suitable to the necessities of men by conversion and reconversion.
3. We agree that the world is very poor, always within a year or less of

starvation, therefore supported mainly from each year's product.

4. We agree that the individual possession of land is necessary to productive use, in order that humanity may be sustained; in other words, that the land must be impropriated.

5. We agree that, while all things have been land, all things will be land— dust to dust in the old form. Therefore, all forms of material substance consist of the products of land converted into a different form."

Although not relevant to the argument, I feel sure it will interest your readers to recall a few exceedingly clear sentences uttered by two other of the Saratoga speakers.

Prof. J. B. Clark, then of Smith College, now of Columbia University, said:

"If private holding of land be a wrong, it is one that has a tinge of anarchism about it. The community has created the value that resides in land, and whoever usurps the ownership of it deals a blow at the community. What is more, he strikes at the basis of the civil order, since governments have been evolved in and through the effort to secure to each producer the value that he brings into existence, and it is anarchic in principle to habitually counteract this effort.

"Of the wealth that resides in land, the State is certainly the creator and the original and lawful owner. As a sovereign it has a certain ultimate ownership of all property. Treasures of every kind are, in the last analysis, its own. As the creator, however, not of the substance of the earth, but of the value residing in it, the State has a producer's immediate right to use and dispose of its product. If any theory depreciates either the State's reserved right over all wealth or its special producer's claim to the wealth residing in land, so much the worse for that theory."

E. Benjamin Andrews, President Brown University, said:

"To turn the golden stream of economic rent partly or

mostly into the State's treasury, where it would relieve the public of taxation in burdensome forms, seems to be extraordinarily desirable. I by no means concur in all the reasons which many assign for this; nor should I expect from it, even if carried to Mr. George's length, more than half the benefits to society which he anticipates. Still the proposition to lay the main tax on land impresses me as just, safe, accordant with the best canons of public finance, and in fact every way excellent."

If it is actually, as it is apparently, true that Henry George's language is contradictory, are we not justified in giving precedence to his later and more specific declarations? For one, I do not admit this contradiction or inconsistency in Mr. George's thought. When, in the following and similar statements, he said: "If private property in land is just, then is our cause unjust," he must, to my mind, have been speaking of that kind of private ownership which carries with it the private appropriation of ground rent.

The appalling distress and havoc caused by tenant eviction in Scotland, Ireland and New York would be abolished when the evictors (the wrong owners) had to pay as much for land to be held idle as the evicted are willing to pay for it to use, and Mr. George's prediction would be realized that the users of the land would become the owners. An unjust ownership would give place to a just ownership. The wrong is not in a just ownership, but in an unjust because untaxed and hence monopoly ownership. Eviction is the fruit not of private property in land, but of the absence of private property in land.

What Mr. George plainly aimed at was to destroy the latter and conserve the former.

To my mind the literal admission of this qualification, as by a judge in face of conflicting testimony, is in harmony with the whole argument of Progress and Poverty, as well as with what there is of truth outside of Progress and Poverty, and is simple justice to Mr. George himself. This plea for unity is addressed only to American Single Taxers, because the work is going forward triumphantly in New Zealand, in Australia, in

Scotland and in England, but it proceeds upon the merits of the Single Tax and not upon the demerits of the institution of Private Property in Land.

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