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EQUAL RIGHTS TO LAND.

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"What I, therefore, propose, as the simple yet sovereign remedy, which will raise wages, increase the earnings of capital, extirpate pauperism, abolish poverty, give remunerative employment to whoever wishes it, afford free scope to human powers, lessen crime, elevate morals, and taste, and intelligence, purify government and carry civilization to yet nobler heights, is—to appropriate rent by taxation." Henry George.

The Henry George tide that is now sweeping over Britain and her English-speaking Colonies, seems to be a cumulative recurrence of the wave that followed the prophet of San Francisco when, a generation ago, he traversed those lands. It appears as the natural outcome of a patient, diligent, prolonged appreciation in the English mind of the spirit of the man and his prophecy.

It is interesting to recall in Book VII of "Progress and Poverty," the fashion in which Henry George presents his main conclusion. Boldly asserting that "there is no necessity for making a man the absolute and exclusive owner of land, in order to induce him to improve it," he straightway concedes the right of permanent possession with power to "buy, sell, bequeath, and devise" that stable tenure, which is known to present custom and law as an "estate in land," and plants himself squarely upon the solid platform—"to appropriate rent by taxation." This proposal he further explains to mean—"The taking by the community for the use of the community of that value which is the creation of the community"—the taxation of pure economic rent.

Elsewhere in Mr. George's writings are found confirming statements. In "Progress and Poverty" he says, "Rent of land does not arise from the productiveness or utility of land," and again, "I may have very rich land, but it will yield no rent and have no value, so long as there is other land as good to be had without cost." Yet again, in his conversation with David Dudley Field, he similarly says: "Land has no value on account of improvements made upon it or on account of its natural opportunities." Plainly,

fertility as an attribute cannot be predicated of agricultural land alone. It belongs equally to any other land which yields to labour its product whether in food, mineral, or metal. Land may be fertile in many ways, and in countless gradations. It may be fertile in wheat, corn, and potatoes. It may be fertile in cotton, in tobacco, or in rice. It may be fertile in diamonds, in gold, silver, copper, lead, or iron. It may be fertile in oil, coal, or natural gas. But this fertility, instead of being a factor contributing to the value of land, is rather the land itself—the passive and otherwise valueless object to which market proximity of various degrees gives differing values, the value in each case being the site value of land of a particular fertility, but none the less it is a site value. Thus the above definition of rent as “the creation of the community” must be regarded as effectually excluding such elements as “soil,” “productivity,” or “fertility,” because these are not the “creation of the community.”

While yet continuing to tolerate the current agricultural definition of rent in the agricultural terms in which to this day ninety per cent, of the discussion of rent has been conducted, Mr. George had outgrown the insufficiency, if such it was, of the agricultural conception and rent became to him, not a Physiocratic notion of the positive “produit net” of the soil, nor yet comparative fertility inherited from Ricardo,* nor indeed the idea largely prevalent today of a comparative fertility value, combined with site value, but it lay in his mind as the rent sublimated, the annual site value alone—that value which is solely “the creation of the community”—pure economic rent.

*“The rent of land is determined by the excess of its produce over that which the same application can secure from the least productive land in use.”

Thus it seems to have remained for Henry George effectually to supercede the faulty logic of preceding thinkers by applying to a public product the same rule of right as to private product, namely, the right of creation.

Coincident with the ever pressing land question, and marshalled always against its abuses and wrongs, has been the triumphant argument of the equal right of all men to land—an a priori argument which has been for all the ages appealed to to eradicate

a great injustice; yet the case has constituted one of those instances of legal fiction, as it were, in which the court, while giving the law to the plaintiff, has so far given the oyster to the defendant, and so today, by inheritance from the past, the same argument of equal rights to the bounty of nature, to standing room and living room upon the earth, is mistakenly summoned in support of the common right of all men to the rent of land.

Rights to land are generally classified as individual rights and are so conceded. The vital contention of the Single Tax is that individual right to land does not and ought not to carry with it the right to rent. This simple lesson is the more easily learned if we keep separate in our minds what by its lack has impeded clarity of thought on the part of professor and student, as well as the man in the street; namely, the concept of “land” as distinguished from the concept of the “rent of land.”

Individual “possession,” or “ownership,” or “property” in land not only should not imply the right to rent, but it may obtain, without prejudice to the joint enjoyment of rent. Conversely, the common right to rent should not involve common property in land itself. There is a common right to rent because rent is the creation of the community. No similar or kindred argument holds concerning equal rights to land. When the rent of land is appropriated by taxation, the occupancy and use of land, worth £40 a square foot, is no more an invasion of any equal right to land than is the occupancy and use of land worth a shilling or a penny a square foot, or of land bearing no rent at all.

Are we sure that the relation between right to land and right to rent, instead of being that of premise and conclusion, is not that of two independent propositions, neither of which is supported by argument for the other? Is it not a case in which a jury, divided as to equal right to land, might yet be unanimous as to common right to rent? If this position is tenable, is it not desirable that the economic chart be corrected to date, noting prominently this advanced landmark as confirmed by the latest surveys?

The truth is, as cogently put by an eminent economist, that “the

principle itself of equal rights to land is not satisfied either by land nationalization or by taxation of rent. The attempt to represent either of these plans as a logical fulfilment of the claim of equal rights is misleading and disingenuous. The question here involved is not one of natural rights, but only of social justice and public utility. On the latter ground a logical and consistent argument may be built up for the taxation of rent, as the practical fulfilment of the principle of common right to rent. The doctrine of equal rights to land affords no solid foundation for this proposal.”

Henry George not only cleared the field of a vast amount of debris, but pointed the direction in which, step by step, the process of clarification may go on free from traditional ambiguity. May not the followers of Henry George profitably ask of themselves whether they are keeping up with their leader, or what is far more important, whether they are leading “civilization to yet nobler heights” by keeping his standard always in advance of a following world?