

THOMAS A. EDISON AND HENRY GEORGE

EDITORS LAND AND FREEDOM:

In the days of my youth two great discoveries were made. Edison discovered that electricity, which from time immemorial had only burned down houses, killed men, and terrified humanity, could be harnessed to drive machinery and to light the world, and he foresaw that his discovery would make for a new world of happiness. He organized a company, and the way was open to light the world. But there was a "drawback!" No one understood the nature of electricity. None of the scientists has ever been able to explain what electricity is (and perhaps they never will). If this "drawback" were taken seriously, our machinery would still be driven by hand power, and our streets and homes lighted by oil lamps.

A parallel discovery, far more important, was made by Henry George; he discovered that rent, which, since the beginnings of civilization, had worked to the degradation of society, for poverty and war, could be directed into channels where it would assure prosperity for every human-being, and make wars forever impossible.

This writer read "Progress and Poverty" at the age of sixteen, and he was as thorough a Georgeist when he closed the book as he is now after fifty years of additional study. He knew, as every Georgeist knows, that the collection of the rent by the public would end poverty and depression and war, and he rejoiced that he was entering manhood at a time when the followers of Henry George would lead the world to prosperity and peace.

But there was a "drawback!" "Education must precede action," and we must defer our campaign for rent collection until we could determine the nature of rent. Now, half a century after the discovery by Henry George, Georgeists are quarreling bitterly over the nature of rent, whether it arises from the bounty of nature or from the expenditures of government, and the quarrels grow more bitter with the years. Ingenious writers put forth new puzzles on the nature of rent, on the justice of interest, and a dozen other questions suitable for discussions to last another century. None of them has ever been settled, and if some of these discussions are not originated by real estate boards of brokers, these gentlemen are missing a golden opportunity.

Meantime, the title holders are cheerfully pocketing the rent without troubling the universities for researches on the nature of rent. They are not looking this gift horse in the mouth. Meantime, the man in the street knows Henry George as some one after whom a cigar was named. Meantime, also, wars have progressed from local quarrels to being the principal occupation of all the nations of the world. But we are making progress. We are inventing new and ingenious theories on the nature of rent.

Did we not turn electricity into the proper channels without waiting for the time, which will never come, when we will understand the nature of electricity? Could we not start a campaign *now* to teach the world the benefits of collecting the rent regardless of the nature of rent? The time is fifty years overdue when we should have talked, not to ourselves, but to the people who do not know the benefits of collecting rent instead of taxes.

In the happy world to come, where we shall see clearly, and not "through a glass darkly," we shall understand the nature of electricity

and the nature of rent. But it is in this world of darkness that we need to turn electricity into the wires, and it is in this world of poverty and desperation and war that we need to turn the rent into the coffers of the state.

Could not all those who believe, with Henry George, that to reform the world it is only necessary to collect the rent, join their forces *now* to tell the outside world of the benefits of collecting the rent and abolishing taxes? I should be glad to hear from those who believe in such action now.

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