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William Ogden's Article on Tax Reform or Land Reform

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Editor Single Tax Review :

Having been on terms of greatest intimacy with Mr. Wm. J. Ogden, of Baltimore, since the inception of the Single Tax movement, it very naturally happens that I am much interested in his recent article in The Review on "Tax Reform or Land Reform ?" I desire to emphasize my opinion that Mr. Ogden, in taking the position he does, is not actuated merely by notions of expediency, but says what he does because he has come to believe as a matter of principle that private ownership of land is not unjust. With him it is more than a matter of terminology. It is an ethical position—a moral position— a matter of right or wrong.

While not coinciding with Mr. Ogden wholly in his view, I beg leave to draw attention to what I believe to be a historical fact which has a bearing upon the subject. In the article in the Encyclopedia Britannica entitled "Landlord -and Tenant," a statement is made by the writer (presumably a great authority) that private ownership of land does not exist at common law —that is wherever the common law of England is recognized as the ordinary method of procedure private ownership of land is not the law of the land. According to this view, the King of England is to-day the only true land- lord in the realm, he acting as a sort of trustee for the whole English people. Under the feudal system, this trusteeship was much more apparent than it is with us to-day. It is seen, however, in the survival of the legal terms in regard to land, which have come down to us mostly from the Norman French or mediaval Latin. For example, technically speaking, a landowner, as we now call him, is in legal phraseology, a "tenant in fee simple." Suppose we render this phrase literally into modern English, using the usual method of philology. "Ten- ant" comes from the Latin verb "to hold"—"fee" is fee or tax payment rendered—"simple" is old English for single. The whole phrase therefore can be rendered "holder in tax single," which we are justified in claiming to be a term meaning exactly the same as if we

say, "a landlord subject to the Single Tax." If the foregoing be true as a statement of the true philosophy of the law, which is the rule of action in nearly every State in the Union and throughout the British Empire—the two predominant forces in the modern world—why should we dispute over the question of private ownership of the land, when the law fails to recognize this as a fact? Etymology gives us another definition which lends force to the view of the question in the meaning of the word "rent." Literally rent means a rendering of a service owed to a superior, commonly called a lord. Democracy consists in transferring this overlordship or trusteeship to persons elected by the masses of the people from kings, emperors, etc. Rent is therefore a possible synonym for tax, to pay for the service rendered by the persons elected to perform services for the whole people. It is one of the practical points in real democracies that all public servants should be paid. For example we pay our Congressmen, while in England the members of Parliament are not paid salaries. In democracies it is a real principle that labor for the public benefit should be paid for, as well as that rendered to private individuals.

Mr. Pleydell intimates that a government can exist without taxation. It is impossible to conceive an organized community without government. The first function of government is to lay a tax, either in money or kind. No government ever existed without taxation of some kind. No voluntary society of private individuals ever existed without taxation, and the true conception of government is but an elaboration of the idea of voluntary private association for certain purposes.

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