

A LACUNA IN HUMAN RIGHTS—By P. Prins, Holland

A Paper addressed to the International Conference

On the night between August 4 and 5, 1789, the National Assembly of France repealed the privileges of the nobility and the clergy. In a few hours the feudal system that for centuries had been responsible for a regime of oppression and abuse of power, of extortion and despotism, was overthrown. New times of peace, prosperity and happiness were to dawn for the French people. The seeds zealously sown by Rousseau, Montesquieu and other thinkers, who had exposed the great defects of the established system, bore abundant fruit. The new society that was to rise on the ruins of the old was to be built on solid foundations. The natural and fundamental rights of man were to be clearly proclaimed. In the minds of the members of the Assembly there echoed the words in the American Declaration of Independence of 1776—"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness . . ." And the National Assembly "considering that ignorance, neglect or contempt of the rights of man are the sole causes of public misfortunes and corruptions of government," enacted its famous Declaration of the Rights of Man and of Citizens, in which among other affirmations there was stated that: 1, "Men are born and always continue free and equal in respect of their rights . . ."; and 2, "These rights are liberty, property, security and resistance of oppression."

These articles still hold good. In the constitutions of other countries, written since 1789, these fundamental rights have been embodied, though oft and again in periods of terror their principles have been set at naught.

To-day, we have to admit that the Declaration has not brought about the prosperity, peace and happiness that the authors undoubtedly hoped and expected from it. The Declaration was incomplete. It could not but fail because one essential right had been overlooked, a right that was necessary to secure the full validity of its other provisions. We mean: the equal right of all men to the land of the country they live in.

Centuries of exclusive private ownership of land involving extortion of the landless and unlimited luxury for the landlords had uprooted the primeval equality of all people in the bounties of the earth and had blotted out the memory of it. Thus under the new constitution not only did the freed serfs gain the licence to expel and slay their landlords, to destroy the castles and the cloisters, but the bourgeoisie in the towns were allowed to acquire the vacant lands for a mere song, taking the place of the former landlords. The people had merely changed their masters. Essentially, the new constitution left the institution of property in land untouched. New rents and mortgages were in fact no less than the manorial rights that had been abolished. The continuing private appropriation of the rent of land has brought about the unfair distribution of wealth which is continually robbing labour and invention of the fruits of their efforts. The authors of the Declaration missed the splendid opportunity to end that wrong, and other

countries that never had such a chance were not able to do anything about it.

After the last world war, the United Nations became aware of the inadequacy of the 1789 Declaration and resolved to formulate a better one. After laborious discussions, a modern Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed on December 20, 1948, with 30 articles instead of 17. It was a profound disappointment. Had the fault of the 1789 Declaration been recognised and rectified? Not at all. The new Declaration breathes the spirit of the paternal State. For Mrs. Roosevelt and her collaborators, Henry George seems to have lived in vain. They thought to rectify the deficiencies of the old Declaration by establishing all sorts of minor purely presumptive rights, for example, the right to labour, the right to leisure, the right to care in old age, etc.

Therefore it is our task to remedy the mistake of 1789. We need not apply to the United Nations to get our principles inserted in a new Declaration of Human Rights. The opportunity has gone.

Every country separately will have to take the required and appropriate measures toward this goal. This does not imply that the people need education as to their equal rights to land. To a greater or less extent all people are aware of it. But it is necessary to make them understand that these rights are not a trivial affair but of paramount importance. It is of such importance that it should be worth while to start and maintain action that the principle of equal right to land be written into the constitution of each people's country, as part of the fundamental rights of all men.

The Dutch Georgeist Union, *Recht en Vrijheid*—Justice and Liberty—the Executive of which asked me to be its representative at this Odense Conference, has taken a first step on this road. It has begun the dissemination of a manifesto containing the essential points in this paper, and that along with other propaganda material is being sent to carefully selected persons. These people who are regarded as able and prepared to influence public opinion are asked to co-operate with us in order to get into the constitution of our country an article explicitly declaring the equal rights of all our people to the land of our country. We present this idea for consideration and discussion, in the belief that it is worthy of attention. Social conditions in the world of to-day are a warning for us and *periculum in mora* should be our motto—there is danger in delay.

Henry George on Economic Justice. New edition of the favourite "Gems from Henry George," being significant passages from his writings and addresses. 3s. 6d.

The Theory of Human Progression. By Patrick Edward Dove, abridged by Julia N. Kellogg. 2s. 6d.

Speeding Through History. The story of two billion years by foremost historians. 28 pages. 2s. 0d. post free.

A Free Copy of "Land & Liberty" is an invitation to become a subscriber. Monthly 1s. By Post 10s. a year; U.S.A. and Canada, \$2.