

Goethe's Social Message

By DR. OTTO JULIUSBURGER

ON THE 200th anniversary of his birthday Goethe will be interpreted and commemorated from divergent points of view: as a great poet, a profound thinker, a follower of Spinoza who was—like the great Spinoza himself—influenced to a considerable degree by Giordano Bruno. There are probably few among us that are aware of the fact that Goethe's pantheistic verse: "What kind of god were he that pushes only from without . . .", which is as beautiful as its world conception is profound, is a true translation, both in word and in tenor, of a verse by Giordano Bruno. Of course, we ought not to neglect, either, to celebrate Goethe, the scientist, the "scientific genius," as he was called by Kropotkin in his book *Mutual Aid*, while Haeckel in 1866 dedicated the second volume of his grandiose *Generic Morphology* to Goethe, Lamarck and Darwin, the "founders of the theory of heredity and evolution." I want to beg leave to title Goethe reverentially the proclaimer of a fundamental social message.

Concerning the lessons of the French Revolution Goethe expressed himself thus: "Revolutions are quite impossible if governments are consistently fair and consistently alert, so that they are able to forestall them by timely improvements, and if they do not persist in their opposition until the necessary changes are brought about forcibly from below."

In 1932 I published a paper entitled "Goethe and the Command of the Hour" in the Greater Berlin Medical Journal in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Goethe's death and of the 300th birthday of Spinoza, in which I described Goethe's lucid and sagacious insight into the basic significance of the soil to the social health of a nation, and urged that in consonance with his very own purport the demanded land reform, which had become so vital to the social recovery of the entire national organism and to the ending of the ominous unemployment, be put into practice without delay. Goethe's attention, I continued, had likely been directed toward the far-reaching consequence of the soil to the social well-being of a nation by Giordano Bruno and Benedict Spinoza, and also presumably by lectures which he attended during his studies in Strasbourg and which were, I believed, given by Moses. However, I was unable to find any illumination of this subject in any of the Goethe biographies to which I had access. I concluded my article with the serious warning that in the face of the growing brutality and unruliness of our times it would behoove us to remind ourselves of these Goethe words: "Reason and science are man's greatest strength," and never to forget that "All human pain responds to pure humanity" (Iphigenie).

We former German land reformers had an incontestable right to lay claim to Goethe as one of our great German spiritual ancestors, who was succeeded in this place by Friedrich Albert Lange with his famous *The Problem of Labor* in 1865, while several decades later Damaschke and Franz Oppenheimer performed the synthesis with the realm of ideas enunciated by the great American land reformer Henry George. A straight line leads from Goethe to Henry George—to follow it is indeed an admirable, fruitful task for German-Americans.

When Goethe sojourned in Heilbronn on the 28th day of August, 1797, the old imperial

town so impressed him that he added to all the birthday thoughts which he had recorded in his diary: "What I can gather by mere observation from what has been told me and from other symptoms is this: the wealth of the town is due in larger measure to the land that it touches than to anything else . . . the best indication of a sound economy is the fact that the town continues to acquire real estate."

Goethe's grandiose social views were resuscitated and embodied in the famed article 55 on land reform in the Weimar Constitution. If this extraordinarily constructive article had not remained a worthless sheet of paper; if it had been transformed into living reality; Germany's ground would never have been ripe for the seeds of poison sown by National Socialism. That social illness of the German people, of which the symptoms had been clearly determined in scientific terms, could have been cured in time, and untold economic, spiritual and moral distress could have been averted.