

# Poverty, Land and the Food Fallacy

LAND AND LIBERTY

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By PAUL KNIGHT

"THE OWNERSHIP OF LAND," wrote Henry George in *Progress and Poverty* "is the great fundamental fact that ultimately determines the social, the political, and consequently the intellectual and moral condition of a people." That it is the poverty springing from the monopolisation of land, not the productivity of land nor population growth that is at the root of hunger, is a lesson yet to be fully learned. In spite of the vast effort of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations in recent years, the problem of hunger in many parts of the world remains as intractable as ever. The latest report from FAO, October 1965, confesses that "food gains of a decade have been wiped out by population growth." It also says, significantly: "Preliminary estimates show the production of food per person in 1964/65 over the average of the years 1952/53 to 1956/57 rose in the developed countries by 14 per cent, but in the developing lands by only one per cent." But this is not simply a matter of productivity alone. If a poverty-stricken people cannot give anything in exchange for the extra food they need it will not be produced.

The relationship between land ownership and hunger is a recurrent theme in *The United Nations at Work*\* published last month, but it is not intended by the author that this point should receive the greatest emphasis. Indeed, the main theme of his book is concerned with technical assistance to aid food production, giving the impression that this provides the primary answer to the problem of world hunger. Whatever the political reasons for aid to underdeveloped countries (and there are some), one cannot but be impressed by the genuine concern of the many administrative workers battling with formidable technical problems in order to increase the productivity of land.

It must also be conceded that in certain parts of the world ignorance, superstition and poor land are factors that contribute to the problem. But when this has been said, the larger problem remains.

The need for land reform is pointed out many times by the author: "There are many countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa where, no matter whatever

else is done, agriculture will not thrive without thoroughgoing land reform and agricultural credit. To work assiduously a farmer must have incentive and that incentive must be either ownership of his own land or an adequate share of what he produces from his labour."

A little later, writing of the need to give industrialisation the highest priority in the field of agriculture, he

qualifies its importance with these words: "Industrialisation is without question essential, but what is even more important is the productivity of labour... This will require land reform, and revolutionary changes in the attitudes to life and work of the masses of poverty-stricken peasants on the farms. . . ."

"The FAO invested years of patient unspectacular effort promoting land reform... In many countries FAO regional officials and specialists have worked actively with the government not only in the preparation of reform legislation but in its execution." But what perhaps they do not realise is that the more productive land becomes, ultimately the higher goes its rent, nullifying much, if not all, of the value of technical assistance to the landless peasant.

Progress in Latin America is hampered by "antiquated systems of land tenure," and without reform "the overwhelming majority of the peoples in Latin America living on the land will continue on the margin of existence . . ."

The author tells of a visit to Rio de Janeiro where he met a group of young people from land-owning families whose "persistent subject was land reform." They were all in favour of it and one young lady admitted to the ownership of several thousands of acres of excellent land in the interior of Brazil. With magnanimity (and foresight) she invited its appropriation by the peasants. "They should take it. And they will take it. I shall scream and protest of course, but they will take it and they should take it."

In Chile the author met a rich man who owns and cultivates 1,500 acres of land inherited by his wife. This man has a running argument with his friend and neighbour who inherited, as did his father and grandfather before him, 10,000 acres of excellent land, parts of which is completely unused and untended. "Rich, living on money invested abroad, the neighbour was clearly on the defensive." These may be welcome signs but the hard core of land owners is likely to resist to the last any attempts to take away its privileges.

The author, rightly observing the indignity and the doubtful value of simple give-away schemes says: "No country, no people, is happy or willing to be dependent indefinitely upon the charity and caprice of others for the primary necessity of life. Basic food, if nothing else, they want to be able to produce or buy. Moreover, unless precautions are taken and limits observed, bulk give-away of food, other than in emergencies and for special uses,

disrupts normal commercial markets or prevents their expansion, generates discord in international relations and discourages local food production." (Our italics).

That food is produced in accordance with the effective demand for it and that its production is therefore limited by this factor needs no further demonstration. We come back to our original starting point that the poverty of the landless, not lack of production as such, is responsible for hunger and malnutrition.

\**The United Nations at Work* by Joseph M. Jones, Pergamon Press Ltd. 21s.