

Land and Freedom

FORMERLY THE SINGLE TAX REVIEW

VOL. XXIX

JULY—AUGUST, 1929

No. 4

Comment and Reflection

AN editorial in the Los Angeles *Herald* tells an inquirer that there are "no definitely good books on political economy—that is to say, no permanently accurate books." And the writer adds, "Ruskin despised by many teachers has possibly written as much economic truth as any man. Henry George in "Progress and Poverty" has presented theories which have done good in stimulating thought."

AND to show the writer's confusion and his inability to come to any conclusion, he adds:

If you wrote a letter to the professor of political economy at Johns Hopkins University, or any other large university, he would probably give you a list of the latest books now considered the best. If we had to write a book on economics it would be a short one, and would read about as follows:

"What can be done in the present state of civilization to diminish suffering, poverty and anxiety without eliminating the desperate, brutal, selfish struggle that alone produces real effort among half savage human beings?"

That would be the end of the book, because we should not answer our own question, except with the unsatisfactory words, "Time and evolution."

IT is hopeless to expect any sane conclusions from a writer who couples the name of Ruskin, with his fancifully weird notions, with Henry George with his carefully reasoned diagnosis and remedy for social ills. And the lame and impotent conclusion to avoid all further thought on the question: "Time and Evolution." Evolution proceeds from human thought as well as human necessity. What is to be done and how? Are there no laws of distribution? Are the injustices in human society—especially that injustice which gives socially created values to private individuals—to be permitted to continue while editors and professors and preachers loll back comfortably in their easy chairs, and say, "Oh, leave it to evolution." Those who complained of piracy on the high seas would hardly have been satisfied with the comforting assurance that the matter might safely be left to evolution.

PROGRESS and Poverty not only supplied some suggestive thoughts on political economy (sic) as the editor condescendingly intimates, but answers the inquiry of his correspondent. It propounds a remedy for our social ills. Despite the mental gyrations of our editor, who may have read the book, but probably has not, it rendered nearly all political economy written up to that time quite useless. Why does he not tell his correspondent about it and his own conclusions regarding it?

THERE is today a great literature—great in the sense of magnitude—devoted to business, and comprising books, periodicals, brochures, pamphlets—truckloads of them. These treat of mass production, wages, profits, and are concerned with the practical details of production, or with theoretical speculations and conjectures. It is rare to find among this solid impenetrable mass the faintest glimmerings of perception as to any laws of distribution.

FOR any explanation how wealth is distributed after it is produced, the obstacles that must be overcome before a successful business can be established, the position occupied by the silent partner in all industry, who is never even indicated—the land-rent receiver who contributes nothing to production but is only a tribute-taker,—we may look in vain through all this mass of literature. Business is just capital and labor with all the other factors left out. The simplicity of the problem is overlaid with a multiplicity of details, words without end, idle speculations, confusion as to the importance of minor factors—explanations, for the most part fanciful, of what constitutes prosperity, and how it can be brought about. We are wondering what will happen to all this "literature" when the alphabet of business is learned, and when the image of Industry's Toll Taker finally breaks upon the startled vision of these gentlemen who are darkening counsel by this fearful unending stream of printed words.

SOME of this airy speculation has been admirably parodied in Dickens, whose prevision in these matters seems almost uncanny. The following from *Little Dorrit* is an example:

Bar regarded this power in wealth to draw wealth to it, as something remarkably interesting and curious—something indefinitely allied to the loadstone and gravitation. Bishop, who had ambled back to earth again, when the present theme was broached, acquiesced. He said it was highly important to Society that one in the trying situation of unexpectedly finding himself invested with a power for good or evil in Society, should become, as it were, merged in the superior power of a more legitimate and gigantic growth, the influence of which (as in the case of our friend at whose board we sat) was habitually exercised in harmony with the best interests of Society. Thus, instead of rival and contending flames burning with a lurid and uncertain glare, we had a blended and a softened light whose genial ray diffused an equitable warmth throughout the land.