Land and Freedom

FORMERLY THE SINGLE TAX REVIEW

VOL. XXXVII JULY—AUGUST, 1937 No. 4

Comment and Reflection

THERE is a remarkable chapter in Henry George's "Social Problems" in which he contrasts the condition of the Black man under slavery and his status since "emancipation." We shall be pardoned if we elaborate further on this picture.

THE Black man under slavery enjoyed many advantages of which he is now deprived. It is no defense of slavery to list these advantages for comparison. But briefly they may be indicated. The Southern slave was to all intents a member of the family. When the family was kindly disposed and when the slave was loyal he was more often than not, a beloved member. He was the recipient of many favors. If sick he had the care of the family physician; when death overtook him the ministration of the beloved pastor of the family flock.

UNLESS compelled to do so no Southern gentleman would sell a slave. The slave trader was looked upon with contempt and was unwelcome in the best Southern society. The love of the slave for his master was often as greatly reciprocated. Instances were common where the slave would name in his will the beloved master to inherit the simple belongings he had accumulated in a life time of servitude.

WE have heard much of the "overseer" made familiar to us in Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Simon Legree." It is significant that the overseer was often selected from the colored members of the household. Such was the custom in North Carolina, the most liberal of the Southern states in its treatment of the slave. It is significant, too, that the more reactionary of the Southern States, fearing the lax discipline that might be imposed by overseers who had grown up with their Negro neighbors provided that overseers should be secured from adjoining states.

THERE seems every reason to believe that where no racial conflict was involved the Black man was accorded even-handed justice. Before the minor law courts he stood in a rather better position than the poor white. The spirit of noblesse oblige would influence the court's decision.

SO much for the ante-bellum days. Today the worker, Black or White, has no such advantage. He never sees the family physician of the boss of the factory that employs him, or that of the plantation owner for whom he works. If he offends or is derelict he faces discharge with no bed to return to and no chance of a square meal, of which under the slave regime he was assured. Or if a depression occurs, one of those mysterious visitations which nobody in authority seems to understand, he wanders forth in search of a new job. There is no personal appeal possible now. With the best of intentions and the kindliest feelings the employer finds it impossible to do anything—the problem is now so impersonal. His employees are no longer members of his household—they are just "hands" now. In what way, let us ask, does the *new slavery* compare favorably with the old?

IT was a frequent reproach made by the defenders of slavery in ante-bellum days that the condition of the free Negro in the North was distinctly inferior to that of the slave Negro in the South. In the North he was the victim of poverty and unemployment and suffered acutely in times of depression. In the South the Negro under slavery was assured against these calamities, was well cared for and free from all anxious thought for the morrow. That extraordinary character, Parson Brownlow, made much of this contrast in his debates with Northern abolitionists. And the comparison carried its sting.

HERE is a speech which might have been delivered to any audience of the unenlightened by one impatient with the slow mental processes of the average hearer; as follows: "Fellow morons:—When I look upon your vacuous faces I realize how difficult it is going to be to make you understand such a simple proposition as ours. I know how well educated you are, and therefore how much you have to unlearn. If what we have to tell you were more profound and complicated you would swallow and believe it. It would not be true to say you would understand it, for understanding is something different again. Who can understand Stuart Chase, or Professor Tugwell, or Professor Fairchild, or the lesser groups of misinterpreters?"

THERE is one group that does understand, and that group is "the rent crowd." While you seem to have great difficulty in comprehending this simple proposition of taking the rent of land for public purposes, these people of whom we speak have no difficulty at all in collecting this rent for private purposes. They go about it in a very thorough way. You hear no discussion among them as to the difficulty of ascertaining the rental value of land, or the capitalization of that rent in the selling price. They are good economists and perfect assessors.

THEY do not argue as to what causes interest. They are absolutely certain as to what causes rent. It is strange how little other questions seem to trouble them. Nor are they bothered the least bit by the ethical considerations involved. But that is something that should bother you. If it is your presence and your activities and the public service you pay for that make this rent of land, what right have these people to it? Does it not look as if what you make you have a right to?

PIRACY and highway robbery have force behind them. You do not consent to them. But the private collection of the rent of land goes on because you consent to it. You seem to think it is all right for 5 per cent of the people to privately collect what 100 per cent of the people create. Isn't that rather stupid of you?

YOU do not seem to recognize how wealth is produced. You do not seem to know that speculation in monopoly rent is a tribute paid by you out of your earnings and that there is no other reasons for depressions than land held out of use. General Hugh Johnson seems to have a pretty keen sense of it. In his syndicated column under date of July 5, he tells the story of the opening up of Oklahoma to settlers and the conquering of the then existing depression by those who found free land.

General Johnson seems to see clearly that all that labor needs is access to land and he uses the Oklahoma incident as an illustration. This was the last of the public lands remaining unclaimed. There is no more free land. But this does not daunt the General. "There may be no more new frontiers," he says, "but there is plenty of undeveloped country within the old frontiers—country as rich as any yet developed." If the General follows this line of reasoning a little further he will have the whole story.

MAYBE you can see what the General sees. But you will find many sophistical and ingenious arguments against our proposal. The most subtile appeal will be made to your home-loving instincts, to that natural desire of every individual to live under his own vine and fig tree. It will not occur to you at once that this is just the condition that we are striving to bring about, a condition where every man will own his own home. It is quite clear that the present system does not encourage this condition. The number of those who own their homes free and clear is very small and there is every reason to believe is constantly diminishing.

EFFORTS will be made to show that your interest in a possible few hundred dollars increase in the value of your little piece of land makes your case and that of the Weyerhausers, the Hearsts, and the Astors identical—and you may be fooled by it. But you cannot ultimately profit by the system. Very few land speculators gain. And in the meantime the system that closes the avenues of employment, that filches from you your earnings, goes on to ever recurring depressions that are the despair of the half educated, the political planners, and the curiously confused economists in our colleges and universities.

WE have read with considerable interest Mr. L. O. Bishop's comments in the *Fairhope Courier* on Henry Ware Allen's letter in LAND AND FREEDOM on government ownership of public utilities. We think if Mr. Bishop had read Mr. Allen's letter more carefully he would have noted that Mr. Allen does not repudiate the principle but does express doubts as to the practice under present conditions. We offer the following illustration. In a city not a thousand miles from here certain owners of public utilities sensed far in advance the coming of motor car and bridges and terminal competition. So a campaign for public ownership was worked up by a certain set of newspapers, the property bought by the City, and amid the sounding of brass bands the people celebrated the event. It was subsequently discovered that some millions had to be spent to put the property in condition, to say nothing of the original high cost to the citizens. The property has since been run at a ruinous loss to the city and each year shows more and more traffic diverted from it. But it furnishes many jobs for the political machine.

Civilizing the Heathen

"AS I understand it," said the heathen, "you propose to civilize me." "Exactly so." "You mean to get me out of habits of idleness and teach me to work." "That is the idea." "And then lead me to simplify my methods and invent things to make my work lighter." "Yes." "And next I will become ambitious to get rich, so that I won't have to work at all." "Naturally." "Well, what's the use of taking such a roundabout way of getting just where I started? "I don't have to work now."—*Washington Star.*