

LAND and LIBERTY

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COVER PHOTO: New York City's 42nd Street, where the human derelicts seek distraction with drugs and prostitution. What part does the property tax play in the Economics of Adam & Eve? — Story, Page 26.

Thieving barons

MARX got a few things right. For example, he had a clear understanding of the institution of slavery.

Slavery is the celebration of the dependence NOT of the slave on the master/landowner, but of the landowner on the slave.

The slave does not depend upon the master: he earns his meagre bread with sweat and tears. And honour.

The master depends on the slave: he idly waits for the men who toil the fields to deliver the riches to him.

A SURFEIT of land without labour does not lead to riches. Wealth can only be acquired by applying one's labour to land.

Landowners in regions where labour is short have no alternative but to press-gang men into labouring for them. By slavery, the landowner may enrich himself, but only by depriving people of the fruits of their labours.

This highlights one of the issues which Marx got wrong. The primary ingredients for producing wealth — for earning a living — are labour and land; capital is secondary, an adjunct, to the process.

Others — especially the people who "liberated" the slaves — failed to recognise the primacy of this relationship. People were cut "free" from the land, but not given access to alternative resources.

The former slave owner was delighted: he could adapt with ease to the new circumstance of rootless labourers searching for jobs that did not exist.

It was this combination of circumstances that imposed an exploitative character on the wage-work system. The former slaves, after all, were boxed in: they could not return to their original homelands to reclaim their birthright — the traditional use rights that gave them access to the pastures of their ancestors.

SLAVERY is not a thing of the past. In Brazil, today, fourteen land barons have been accused of

keeping 9,000 people on remote rubber plantations in one of the most inaccessible areas of the Amazon jungle.

The slaves are said to be mostly Caboclos, mixed-race descendants of whites and native Indians. They are bound for life to their masters by a system of perpetual debt. They are paid for tapping rubber, but must buy all their goods at the owners' shops at prices up to 500% higher than their wages.

This slavery is not a purely rural phenomenon. A similar formula, based on debt, is to be found on the building sites of cities in India.

Analytically, however, the role of indebtedness is a red herring. Wage-based slavery has its roots in the condition of landlessness, which is another way of saying that people are denied the right to earn a living wage. This, consequently, renders them vulnerable to the moneylenders and the price-fixers.

SLAVERY, then, is not a subject for the history books; it is a live political challenge. And it is the essence of labour markets in the industrially most advanced nations of Europe and North America today.

We can condemn it in moral terms; that would be easy. Slavery denies the individual his liberty. But the charge of THEFT is the criticism that slave-owners, and their modern manifestations, would regard as most threatening.

For this charge enables the victims to claim restitution from the wrongdoers, rather than merely leaving the slaveowners to square themselves with their consciences.

Social justice demands that the compensation should be paid out of the rent of land — the community-created fund which the slave-owners appropriate unto themselves.

Once the force of that argument is understood, the spurious arguments in defence of private property in land begin to collapse.