

HENRY GEORGE AND DENMARK

(Address by Mr. Jacob E. Lange at the Annual Convention of the Danish Henry George Union, September, 1925; and translated by him for LAND & LIBERTY.)



JACOB E. LANGE

It may seem strange, nevertheless it is a fact that in Denmark the ideas of Henry George have won wider acceptance and understanding among the common people to a greater degree than in any other country, America and England not excepted.

No practical politician can pretend to be ignorant about Land Values Taxation. Even people who have no interest in politics at least know Henry George by name; and many have read PROGRESS AND POVERTY from beginning to end who have never ventured even to open Karl Marx's book DAS KAPITAL.

What reason or reasons can be given to account for this? Fame and renown are partly accidental. Seeds may be carried to foreign shores by the wind or by migratory birds; whether they will germinate and thrive depends upon affinities between the nature of the seed and the climate and soil of its new home. And so with ideas.

What is it that has made Denmark a particularly suitable soil for the ideas of Henry George, while all over the rest of the world the philosophy of Karl Marx (the only name worthy of comparison) has spread and practically dominated where the field was open to new ideas, overgrown neither by the barren thorns of a lifeless conservatism nor the desolate heaths of a stagnant liberalism?

No one, not even the greatest among us, evolves his ideas entirely uninfluenced by the social and mental conditions of his time. Nay, the ideas of the greatest thinkers may truly be said to bear most deeply this stamp that they are, so to speak, a general expression of their time and of its life and aim. Thus also the social philosophy of the two great thinkers: Karl Marx and Henry George.

When Karl Marx (in 1848) left Germany for good and settled in England, his new home was a country in which the industrial revolution was a generation or two ahead of the somewhat similar—if not identical—evolution in his Fatherland and in France. This revolution naturally became to him the evolution, the representation of the universal evolution. His whole philosophy was "machine-made," as it were, by this

mechanical age in which the personality of the worker was more and more separated from his work.

First and foremost, the workers, the great majority of mankind, always to his mind remained, as he saw them, men in the mass—mere appurtenances of the factories, without a will of their own, without initiative, almost no better from an economic point of view than cattle belonging to a farm. Like his antagonists, the "bourgeois economists," he never looks upon the worker, but always on the capitalist, as the prime mover. Like them, he always begins his examination in this fashion: "A capitalist, owning £5,000, uses £3,000 of this sum for erecting, say, a spinning-factory, while the rest is his fluid capital, which he uses as wage-fund for his labourers. . . ." Naturally Karl Marx from such a starting-point never gets beyond replacing the capitalist by the State as the active factor in production and the maintainer of labour, the dumb mass of men, which like the cattle of the farmer cannot exist independent of shelter, feeding and care provided by others.

Compare with him Henry George, living and writing at an epoch where labour's conquering of a continent was the all-predominating fact. And this unequalled feat of labour was certainly not realized according to the formula: "A capitalist, owning £5,000," etc., but quite the reverse: John, Patrick and Peter, their entire capital being a yoke of weary oxen, a plough, some few sacks of corn and flour, an axe and a saw, started out west to win for themselves a new existence. The capitalist with his initiative and "wages fund" was far away and the State still farther. The America of the sixties sprang with magic speed from land under the hand of labour. And so rich was the "sap of the soil" that even the most depressed and disheartened European wage-slaves straightened their backs boldly and lifted their eyes as soon as they put foot on the ground in "the land of the free."

So near at hand was the land, so strong therefore its invigorating power, that even the factory-workers' conditions and whole turn of mind were formed by it. When gazing out of the factory windows his eye saw the land; if the air became too close or the boss too overbearing—well! Plenty of room outside! But when the English or German factory worker gazed out across the 1,000 threads of his loom all he saw was the street, in which neither bread nor freedom grew. No wonder that *The Prophet of San Francisco* had a new message to bring to the toiling workers of Europe that startled the scribes and pharisees.

Of these two social economic philosophies, born under such extremely different conditions, that of Karl Marx became for the generation after him the fundamental and distinctive, the standard of mighty hosts and a sign of wrath to others. The reason for this is plain. Not only was it first in the field, it was, so to speak, a ready-made dress to be put on by the mighty labour organizations springing into existence long before PROGRESS AND POVERTY was written; it also fitted in with the European conditions from which it originated. In the decades after 1870 the only stratum of society susceptible to modern ideas was the new proletariat of factory workers. They found in the philosophy of Karl Marx a kind of higher or universal expression for their antagonistic feelings towards their masters, who thus to them became the living embodiment and representatives of "Capitalism," whose yoke was on their neck. Organization of the wage conflict became to them the all-absorbing problem of the day, while at night they dreamt of the socialistic future which would arise when the mighty hand of the State had totally crushed private capitalism.

And between these two no room for the ideas of Henry George was to be found in their mind.

The host of "liberal-minded" citizens who by embracing the ideas of Henry George might have been brought to a wider and broader conception of that freedom which was still their official watchword, was smouldering away, its scattered remnants driven by fear of advancing labour into the retreats of middle-class reaction.

That was the general aspect of the political conditions of Europe. But in Denmark it was somewhat different. With us there was still place for such a regenerated, truly liberal movement, its roots chiefly among the peasants and having as a matter of course the idea of "land and liberty" as the burden of their song. While in England the peasant was almost extinct, in Prussia partly so, or at least deeply submerged under "Junker" rule, and while in Russia the peasantry was barely freed from serfdom and still more had its stamp on their minds, the peasantry of Denmark had fared better.

Even in the darkest days of the 18th century our land laws maintained the peasant-farm intact, making it illegal to shorten the customary life-tenancy; or reduce the number of peasant-farms; or enclose the commons in order to establish big manorial farms. Consequently when the great liberation period was inaugurated (in 1789) the peasant—feeling the yoke fall from his shoulders—was ready to rise and take the first strides in his journey up the hill.

And to all those who did not look upon the liberation of 1789 as the *keystone* of the new building, but as its *foundation*, the fight for the fuller acknowledgment of the rights of the *peasant* became the central movement in the everlasting battle for the full liberation and emancipation of the *people*.

United by a common political tie, waging the same war against the domineering upper class and their unconstitutional minority-rule during the eighties and nineties, the landowning Liberal peasant and the Social Democratic labourer in the towns were on friendly terms from the beginning. Consequently the peasant-host in Denmark could not be marshalled—as in other countries—by the upper classes as a barricade against the masses of organized labour.

Although their attitude towards organized labour was a friendly one, the peasant-proprietors would naturally never have anything to do with the new Marxian ideas. On the contrary, everything that smacked of State interference or State supremacy would be an abomination to the peasant-proprietor of the eighties and nineties, who was more likely to be an extremist in the opposite direction. Even then, he was fundamentally right, for the feeling of self-dependence is the root of all true democracy. And this feeling was greatly strengthened when in the course of the late eighties and nineties the *economic* leadership passed from the corn-growing large landowner to the butter and bacon producing peasant with his widely ramified co-operative establishments and his more intensively cultivated land.

In such a progressive and freedom-loving peasant community, a degree of sympathy for the ideas of Henry George could be awakened. Not only *Free Trade* came naturally to these peasants, but also the principle that the value of one's land, not the diligence and activity of one's work, is the right gauge of one's dues to the community. A living and clear conception of the *equal right to land* was comparatively rare. And the problem of easier access to land left the peasant-proprietor as a class rather indifferent—the *land was theirs already*—even if the squires and lords had carved out for themselves too big a piece.

Thus, although the field was rather hard to plough

and difficult to sow for the pioneers of the ideas of Henry George, part of it could be worked. Especially in the People's High-School Circles progress was visible—although it might be looked upon with a certain suspicion by the leaders.

Politically of course we were entirely without influence—even if the first legislation in the nineties providing "land for labourers" was indirectly due to our stirring up of the land question. But all this was altered by the rising tide of the *Husmand*, the *Houseman*, or small holder or *crofter*. The *Husmand* had grown in the shade. The great anti-serfdom legislation of 1789 had hardly affected him. Until 1849 he continued subject to the hated socage or personal servitude which had been abolished for the peasant-farmer before 1800. He was, so to speak, undiscovered. To the "enlightened citizen" of the towns and Copenhagen—the leading liberal of the time of our grandfathers—all country-people were "peasants," whether their farm was of 200 acres or some few square yards. And was not the peasant liberated in 1789? And was not that the end of it? And to the leading men in the land-owning peasantry itself, when it advanced to take an active part in politics, the land question was just a question of promoting freehold in place of life-tenancy.

The economic revolution that has taken place in agriculture greatly increased the chances of the *Husmand* as a farmer, even if his acres were few and narrow. And co-operation on a strictly democratic basis was an outstretched hand to him which helped him on.

This movement was greatly facilitated by the fact that the *Husmand* was not as a whole a landless class of farm labourers but included, besides the landless, the cottage owner, the small farmer of all descriptions and grades link by link up to the big peasant-proprietor. And such an unbroken chain serves as a natural conductor for any social or mental current from top to bottom, which may transmit any progressive motion even to the very lowest link.

Thus instead of making a conflict for higher wages the central part of his activity, the leading idea and ultimate goal of the *Husmand* always was *independent farming*. The land question as such was of little interest to proprietors of medium-sized farms; but it leaped at once to the front when the opening of the way to an independent economic existence became the all-commanding aim of the new *Husmand* organization.

Whoever has an intimate knowledge of the new smallholder movement knows very well what an important place in its history was played by a few men of wider views, who understood from the very beginning to broaden the minds of its leaders into a clear conception of Henry George's ideas and the land question in general.

The ideas of Henry George grow and bear fruit in this land of ours not only through our speeches and resolutions and the pamphlets we write. Every *Husmand* and his wife who, on their six or twelve acres of land, by their daily work and life make it clear to everybody that the small man not only can *stand on his own feet* and lead an independent life, but that he can move on and make progress and take his place in the vanguard—these are our sturdy helpmates.

Economic independence, based on self-help, always deeply associated with the idea of mutual aid and belief in the equal rights of all men—it is upon the aspiration after these things and the determination to work for them that the future of our cause depends, and the future of the people.