

## ECONOMIC EMANCIPATION

by

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Friends and fellow-workers.

In times like ours, times of war and after-war when every day is an eventful one, when new history is broadcasted every evening over a dazzled public, when kingdoms are made and unmade and social experiments on a gigantic scale are carried on, under our eyes — a conference like ours has little to attract the sensation-hunter. — And even to ourselves it may seem rather insignificant: some flickering moths, gathering in an obscure corner, out of the way, not likely to stay or accelerate the revolutions of the globe.

But we know in our heart that it is not only the tempest that tells, but the still wind. And we feel ourselves — be we personally ever so weak — not as moths to be wafted away by the strong currents of the times, but as *fire-flies*, of the species called by scientists «Prometheus», bearers of that celestial light which is named truth. This light we have not robbed from the gods; it was kindled for us by our great leader, Henry George. And it is our precious privilege to carry the torch, to enlighten mankind, all over the world.

But if we, the united Georgites, in the eyes of the world and to the ordinary politician be only an insignificant body, almost a «negligeable quantity», still more so are the Georgites of Denmark who now have made bold to invite you to this homely out-of-the-

way home of ours. Have we anything to tell you to strengthen your conviction or enlarge your horizon? Have we anything to show you, any results worth recording? Is Denmark in any way a country where can be seen a people striding its way towards that economic emancipation for which it is our longing to pave the way, ward off pitfalls and bridge torrents?

Certainly here is nothing for us to brag of. True, we were among the first to raise the standard. «Progress and Poverty» was translated already in 1886 and we have never ceased from

mental fight since then. But we have been few in number and the field has been rather heavy to work with our ploughshares.

Still I do think you have not come altogether in vain. Some progress we have made. The name of Henry George is probably better known here than in any other European country. His ideas have penetrated deeper into the mind of the common people. No politician can ignore them, and land-values taxation has come, freely supported by the liberal majority of the people, and I dare say it has come to stay. The seed has germinated, and we dare to hope that future generations will see it grow and fructify.

The economic emancipation of our people so far has been an evolution, rather slow and never revolutionary, but rarely brought to a complete standstill or becoming retrograde. In a peculiar way it has been the good fate of Denmark to be for the last 150 years a place, where even ill winds have blown some good and where the currents of liberty which reached our shores always engendered new and fresh life — like the «Golf-stream» to the North-european coastlands.

Even absolute monarchy — which in Denmark lasted till 1849 — was bene-

ficial so far as with us it generally stood as a bar against that economic enslavement which in many countries was the sinistre result of nobility-rule during the 17th and 18th century. The absolute King never allowed the land to be taken from the peasant-population. Even if the peasant in the dark ages which culminated about 1770 were tied to the parish of his birth, even if he had to take his land from the hand of the lord of the manor — instead of being, as of old, himself a proprietor — the lord on the other hand could not take the land from him, could not eat up whole villages or «add acre to acre that he might dwell alone in the middle of the land». The land was always to be held in tenure for life, at a customary rent. And when the days of tilling in common were over and the fields of every village were divided into independent farms, no aristocratic parliament existed to enact an enclosure-legislation «to steal the common from the goose», to deprive the people of the commons;

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but all such were divided for the benefit of the population.

And when in the latter part of the 18th century the ideas of the *Physiocrats* from France permeated all the continental countries Denmark was — I believe — the only place where these ideas were, to a certain extent, acted upon. All the peasant-liberation-enactments of the 1780es — which may truly be called the foundation of modern Denmark — sprung from this seed, and fortunately were not — as in other countries — ploughed under almost before the seed had begun to germinate.

Thus enjoying a certain freedom of trade and benefiting from an effective (although old-fashioned) land-values-taxation (i. e. on agricultural value) the Danish peasant comparatively

quickly bought out the interest of the lords in his land and became a proprietor. And feeling the yoke fall from his shoulders, he slowly roused himself, ready to rise and take the first strides in his uphill course.

And later, when the great struggle for *Free Trade* in England ended by the total repeal of the cornlaws, thus opening up to us the market of the world, the position of the peasant-proprietor was further improved, and his activities stimulated.

Shortly after (1849) *political emancipation* with equal suffrage was attained by peaceful means (while in Germany the revolutionary efforts in the same direction were frustrated by reactionary powers). And though a similar reactionary movement soon set in and — thanks to the general enervation brought about by the crushing blow of the war with Germany which almost bled the people to death — succeeded in abrogating political freedom by transforming the Upper House into a stronghold for the upper classes, more especially the big landed interests — even this was not without a beneficial effect on our whole public life. Nay, what was planned as a *bar* against the onward march of the people became a *lever* for its true emancipation. For the continuous struggle of the succeeding 50 years for regaining what was lost, in a most beneficial way united town and country in a common cause. The landowning peasantry — the great bulk of the country population — refused to be used as a heavyweight-force by the aristocracy

against the classes below: the industrial worker, about that time organizing under socialistic banners. On the contrary the peasant, naturally wary of progress and inclined to a somewhat conservative narrowmindedness, became the central body of the

liberal host. This his political position — or rather this tendency towards progress political — also influenced his mind towards progress economic. Unable to get the upper hand by main force, in his political strife with the aristocracy landowner-party he took up the battle in his own way: outdoing the big landowner in the field, in the byre and in the dairy.

This was the mental and political background for that extensive and widely ramificated *cooperation*, which was to become to the generations following such a strong lever for overcoming the difficulties of the times. And this was the secret of its success. Created by the country-population itself, in times of need, these cooperative undertakings have been improved and extended by the constant attention of the people. Felt to be a most important means not only of economic betterment but of emancipation, their owners, the peasant-proprietors, — generally slow-going and pretty close managers who weigh the shilling in their hand before spending it (or rather turn it twice and then put it back again) — would spare nothing which could further their economic success. And engaged in a dire struggle against political privilege even the well-to-do big peasant-proprietor could not think of reserving for himself any privileged place in their management. And consequently almost all these undertakings were built up on a foundation of absolute democracy: one man one vote, so that a poor fellow with only one cow had as much to say as a big boss with a hundred. Thus was secured that *unity in advance* which is at the root of our agricultural progress — as of all true democracy.

It would carry me too far if I were to dwell upon various movements of the time, spiritual and others, which — running parallel or in opposite direction — furthered or stimulated this emancipational movement. I must limit myself to the evolution of that ever fundamental problem: *the land question*.

To the peasant in the generation before — especially the larger peasant-proprietor — the land question was so to speak non-existent. The land was his already. The only thing wanted was to alter what still existed of life-tenancy into peasant-proprietorship and perhaps to win back for the peasantry part of those wide manorial fields which the aristocracy by means foul or fair had succeeded in carving out for themselves of the village-fields and commons. He was not even alive to the great and danger-wrought fact that a landless class was constantly growing round about him. Why, if only they were diligent and clever enough, could they not buy land and become peasant-proprietors themselves? And if that did not suffice, there was America with plenty of room.

And the landless man himself dumbly acquiesced. If ever his thoughts went beyond his daily round of work and long march to and fro, morning and night, he thought of America or the town.

To such a community in which the peasantry, chiefly led by the fairly well-to-do proprietor, was coming more and more to the front, economically and politically, in the late 80es and the 90es came the ideas of Henry George. What could be their fate?

*Free Trade* was natural to the mind of the peasant-farmer. In contradistinction to the protectionistic squire, who dreamt of cornlaws of the Bismarckian type, his ideas centered about the world-market on which he was quickly working his way to the front. But also that principle of taxation: not the diligence and activity of the *man*, but the value of his *land* is the natural gauge of his dues to the community, was not foreign to him. But a living and clear conception of the *equal right to land* was rarely met with; and the problem of easier access to land left the peasant-proprietors as a class rather indifferent. Still that firm belief in the abilities and possibilities of the common people, that spirit of independency that permeates all the works of Henry George won for him a general sympathy in a people arising to a position of self-reliance.

Politically the few followers of H. George were — till the end of last century — totally without influence — and the outlook for immediate

results almost none. But this was altered by the rising tide of the *small-holder* (*Husmand*).

Very few before the end of the 80es perceived how fatal was the rapid growth of a landless or quasi-landless class, already in the middle of last century more numerous than that of the farmer-peasant. The *Husmand* had grown in the shade. And while the peasant-proprietor steadily strode forward in his uphill course, the *Husmand* on the other hand in the 60es and 70es, deprived of outlook, initiative and hope, was on the way to become proletarianized like his fellows in other countries.

This retrograde movement was barred by two important facts 1) *Equal suffrage* had been given already in 1849, even to the landless worker. In the standing political strife between the liberal peasant-proprietor and the reactionary large landowner the vote of the *Husmand* might turn the scale either way. He decided for the for-

mer, left the waggon of the lord which formerly took him to the polling-place, preferring the cart of his neighbour, the peasant-proprietor. 2) The *economic evolution* in agriculture taking place at the same period, greatly enhanced the possibilities of the *Husmand* as a farmer. And cooperation on a strictly democratic basis was an outstretched hand to him which helped him on.

This movement was greatly facilitated by the whole structure of the *Husmand*-class. It was not merely a big crowd of landless farm-labourers but included besides the entirely landless, the cottage-owners and small farmers of all descriptions, straight away without missing links up to the big peasant-proprietor. And such an unbroken chain may serve as a natural conductor for social and mental currents from top to bottom which may transmit any motion, even to the very lowest.

Thus instead of making an organized strife for *higher wages* the central part of their mental activity —, like the industrial *proletariat* — their leading thought and ultimate goal was *independent farming*.

But as soon as the opening of the way to an independent economic existence became the all-overshadowing aim of the new *Husmand*-organization, the *land-question* at once leaped to the front.

Whoever has an intimate knowledge of the new smallholder-movement will know what an important place in its history was played by a few men of wider views, all Georgites of the true metal, who understood from the very beginning to broaden the minds of its leaders into a clearer and fuller conception of the land-question in general. But even for these the task would have been an impossible one if

it were not for the fact that these broader views came as a natural development of the social and mental evolution sketched out above, which has brought the »Husmand« to look for his future neither in America nor as a wage-earner in the town but on the land of his forefathers, where to create that new community of independent workers for which he is longing.

In what ways the Husmand-movement has influenced the political parties' interest in the land-question I need not here explain. But the claims of the Husmand and the firmness and strength behind them has been so far decisive for the practical results which we have scored.

The ideas of Henry George grow and bear fruit in this land of ours not only by our speeches and resolutions or the pamphlets we write. Every Husmand and his wife who on their 10 or 15 acre plot of land by their life and daily work make it evident to their next-door neighbour — and to the world — that the small man not only can *stand on his own feet*, lead an independent life, but that he can *move on*, make progress, take his place in the vanguard — these are our sturdy helpmates.

For on the longing after and working for economic independency, based on self-help, which in the bosom of the small man naturally is deeply associated with the idea of cooperation and a profound feeling for the equal rights of all, on these more than on anything else depends the future of the people.

Those fundamental democratic ideas were the dynamic force that in America united »proletarians of all countries« for the grand task of making the desert blossom like a rose-garden. From this great feat of in-

dependent labour naturally sprung in the mind of our great leader that deeper and fuller conception of economic freedom which pulsates through all his works. And whenever this dynamic force, in any country, animates the life of the people, vistas are opened to a new horizon, nearer to that true humanity, for which we are longing.

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