

Marx to Friedrich Adolph Sorge In Hoboken

Abstract

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... Before your copy of Henry George ^[1] arrived I had already received two others, one from Swinton ^[2] and one from Willard Brown; ^[3] I therefore gave one to Engels and one to Lafargue. Today I must confine myself to a very brief formulation of my opinion of the book. Theoretically the man [Henry George]^[1] is utterly backward! He understands nothing about the nature of surplus value and so wanders about in speculations which follow the English model but have now been superseded even among the English, about the different portions of surplus value to which independent existence is attributed--about the relations of profit, rent, interest, etc. His fundamental dogma is that everything would be all right if ground rent were paid to the state. (You will find payment of this kind among the transitional measures included in *The Communist Manifesto* too.) This idea originally belonged to the bourgeois economists; it was first put forward (apart from a similar demand at the end of the eighteenth century) by the earliest radical followers of Ricardo, soon after his death. I said of it in 1847, in my work

against Proudhon: “We can understand that economists like Mill” (the elder, not his son John Stuart, who also repeats this in a somewhat modified form) “Cherbuliez, Hilditch and others have demanded that rent should be paid to the state in order that it may serve as a substitute for taxes. This is a frank expression of the hatred which the industrial capitalist dedicates to the landed proprietor, who seems to him a useless and superfluous element in the general total of bourgeois production.”

We ourselves, as I have already mentioned, adopted this appropriation of ground rent by the state among numerous other transitional measures, which, as we also remarked in the *Manifesto*, are and must be contradictory in themselves.

But the first person to turn this desideratum [requirement] of the radical English bourgeois economists into a socialist panacea, to declare this procedure to be the solution of the antagonisms involved in the present method of production, was Colins, a former old Hussar officer of Napoleon’s, born in Belgium, who in the latter days of Guizot and the first of Napoleon the Less, favoured the world from Paris with some fat volumes about this “discovery” of his. Like another discovery he made, namely, that while there is no God there is an “immortal” human soul and that animals have “no feelings.” For if they had feelings, that is souls, we should be cannibals and a realm of righteousness could never be founded upon earth. His “anti-landownership” theory together with his theory of the soul, etc., have been preached every month for years in the Parisian *Philosophie de l’Avenir* [Philosophy of the Future] by his few remaining followers, mostly Belgians. They call themselves “rational collectivists” and have praised Henry George. After them and besides them, among other people, the Prussian banker and former lottery owner

Samten from East Prussia, a shallow-brained fellow, has eked out this “socialism” into a thick volume.

All these “socialists” since Colins have this much in common that they leave wage labour and therefore capitalist production in existence and try to bamboozle themselves or the world into believing that if ground rent were transformed into a state tax all the evils of capitalist production would disappear of themselves. The whole thing is therefore simply an attempt, decked out with socialism, to save capitalist domination and indeed to establish it afresh on an even wider basis than its present one.

This cloven hoof (at the same time ass’s hoof) is also unmistakably revealed in the declamations of Henry George. And it is the more unpardonable in him because he ought to have put the question to himself in just the opposite way: How did it happen that in the United States, where, relatively, that is in comparison with civilised Europe, the land was accessible to the great mass of the people and to a certain degree (again relatively) still is, capitalist economy and the corresponding enslavement of the working class have developed more rapidly and shamelessly than in any other country!

On the other hand George’s book, like the sensation it has made with you, is significant because it is a first, if unsuccessful, attempt at emancipation from the orthodox political economy.

H. George does not seem, for the rest, to know anything about the history of the early American anti-renters,^{**} who were rather practical men than theoretical. Otherwise he is a talented writer (with a talent for Yankee advertisement too) as his article on California in the Atlantic proves, for instance. He also has the repulsive presumption and

arrogance which is displayed by all panacea-mongers without exception.

1. Marx is referring to Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* [available at [Ludwig von Mises Institute](#) — MIA].

2. John Swinton (1830-1901) — American journalist of Scottish descent, socialist, editor of several New York newspapers, friend of Marx.

3. Willard Brown — American journalist, socialist.

* GEORGE, HENRY (1839-97) American bourgeois economist, earlier a sailor, gold-digger and printer. He was the founder of the land reform movement.

** Settlers in New York State in the 'thirties and 'forties of the 19th century who refused to pay rent for their land and shot down the sheriffs' officers who came to enforce payment. The no-renters numbered thousands and turned the scale at several elections.
