

Karl Marx on Henry George

The *Neue Zeit* publishes in an article on the "Labor Movement in the United States," a letter written by Karl Marx in 1881 to a friend in New York who had sent him a copy of George's book "Progress and Poverty." The passages from the letter that refer to the single tax are instructive reading for all those who pay more than superficial attention to the evolution of social economics, besides being highly interesting coming from the founder of scientific political economy and so keen a critic as Karl Marx. This is what he says:

London, June 20, 1881.—Before your copy of Henry George's book reached me, I had received two others. I shall here limit myself to a very short expression of opinion. In point of theory, the man is a back-number. He has no inkling of the nature of "surplus value." Following the example of English writers, but following even these far in the rear, he takes up his time with speculation upon the component parts of surplus value—upon profit, rent, interest, etc. His fundamental dogma is that order would prevail were ground rent paid to the state. (You will find allusions to that scheme in the Communist Manifesto among the transitional steps therein mentioned.)

This theory originated with the bourgeois or capitalist economist. Apart from similar propositions advanced toward the end of the 18th century, it was first brought forth by the radical followers of Ricardo immediately after his death. As far back as 1847, in my article against Proudhon, I said upon that subject: "We can conceive how economists such as Mill (the elder, namely, not his son John Stuart, who repeats his theory in a modified form), Cherbuliez, Hilditch and others have de-

manded that rent be turned over to the state to the end of removing taxation. This is the frank expression of hatred which the industrial capitalist entertains for the land owner who seems to him a useless and superfluous entity in the scheme of bourgeois or capitalist production."

We ourselves, as stated above, incorporated this appropriation of ground rents by the state among numerous other transitional measures, all of which, as stated in the Manifesto, are, and of necessity must be, full of contradiction.

To turn this desideratum of the radical English bourgeois economists into the Socialist panacea, to explain the procedure whereby the contradictions that are comprised in the present method of production were to be solved—that job was first undertaken by Colins, a Belgian by birth and an old officer of hussars under Napoleon who subsequently, during the later days of Guizot's administration, and the commencement of that of the lesser Napoleon, favored the world from Paris with several thick volumes upon his "discovery," and likewise upon his other discovery that, while it was true that there was no God, yet there was an imperishable human soul, and that animals had no "feelings," because, if they did, they must also have a soul, in which case we were all cannibals, and such a thing as a Kingdom of Justice could never be founded upon the earth. Colins's anti-private property in land theory, together with his theory upon the soul, etc., has been preached for years and still preached monthly by the *Paris Philosophie de l'Avenir* by his few surviving followers, most of whom are Belgians. These people style themselves "rational collectivists," and they have bestowed their praise upon George. After these, contemporaneously with them, and among others, a certain Russian banker and quondam lottery collector of East Prussia, Samter by name, a numskull, has is-

sued a thick volume in which this sort of "socialism" is ground out.

All these "socialists," Colins included, have this point in common, that they allow wage labor, i.e., the capitalist system of production, to continue, and by juggling with words fool themselves into the notion that by the conversion of the ground rent into a state tax all the ills of the capitalist system of production would vanish of their own accord. In other words, the whole thing is simply an attempt, doused with Socialism, TO RESCUE THE RULE OF CAPITALISM, in fact, TO REAR IT ANEW UPON A FIRMER BASIS THAN ITS PRESENT ONE.

This cloven hoof, together with the donkey's ears, peeps unmistakably out of the declamations of Henry George, only that, with him, it is all the less pardonable, seeing that he should have turned the question around and asked himself: "How did it happen that in the United States, where (relatively speaking, i.e., in comparison with civilized Europe) the land was and to a certain degree (again relatively speaking) is still accessible to the masses, the capitalist system and its correlative enslavement of the working class have developed more rapidly and shamelessly than in any other country?"

For the rest, Henry George seems to be wholly ignorant of the history of the early American anti-renters, who were rather practical than theoretic. Otherwise he is a talented writer, not without the Yankee talent for advertising, as is shown by his article on California in the *Atlantic*. Furthermore, there is about him that repulsive presumptuousness and boastfulness which are the unmistakable characteristics of all such hucksters of panaceas.

Fraternally,

Karl Marx.

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