

Land Tenure or Tax Reform? Shall the Single Tax Be Emasculated?

WE believe the time has come for a frank exchange of views between those Single Taxers whose conception of our principles is so radically different from the doctrine as laid down by Henry George, and those who have espoused the truth as he taught it. For we appear to have arrived at a position in the history of the movement where these two groups are contending for control.

We are of those who believe in, and have consistently stood for a wide tolerance of all methods of propaganda. We have tried to be sympathetic with those who preferred to expound the fiscal advantages of the Single Tax, while laying little or no emphasis on its more important relations. That the Single Tax was the method of restoring the land to the people, and that it did not greatly matter, in that event, whether some other taxes remained in force, seemed to us the real gist of the matter. But, nevertheless, we were not disposed to quarrel with those who seemed to be doing good work by approaching it from the other angle.

MUST WE RECONSIDER OUR POSITION?

But more recent developments have led us to reconsider our position. Those who have chosen to preach the Single Tax as a fiscal measure now claim a monopoly of all wisdom. They appear to have united, not alone in the effort to minimize the doctrine as laid down in "Progress and Poverty," but to stifle every independent political expression of the Single Tax. This attitude of hostility extends, not only to the Single Tax Party, but to every effort to submit our doctrines to a referendum of the voters. While using a new terminology, and talking taxation exclusively, these advocates of the Single Tax have so emasculated the principle that it parades respectably before Chambers of Commerce and Boards of Trade. We would do well to keep in mind what Peter Witt says in an interview in the *Dearborn Independent*, that he always tries to find out what the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce stands for, and then make sure that he is right by standing for the opposite. This is a humorous exaggeration, of course, but to those who treat these bodies with homeopathic doses of Henry George it will seem almost blasphemous.

INFLUENCE OF CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE ON OUR LECTURERS

Chambers of Commerce and Boards of Trade do not make social revolutions. Such teachings of our principles as they will accept from our paid lecturers are very apt to be perfectly harmless. And the influence exerted by our speakers on such bodies is not likely to be as marked as the influence they exert in turn. If our speakers can appear before them and put the Single Tax in a way that is palatable, the proposition will soon assume that quality of moderation in which the real purpose of our doctrine

will tend to disappear. The Single Tax will soon come to be "subdued to what it works in, like the dyer's hand."

And this is precisely what is happening. A small number of Single Tax lecturers are presenting the Single Tax in a way in which we defy the spirit of Henry George to recognize his child.

MIGHT NOT THE SINGLE TAX DISAPPEAR?

Prof. Edwin Grant Conklin, in a recent article in the *Yale Review*, says that "it is possible for the human race to pass the summit of evolutionary progress, and degenerate into a state decidedly inferior to the present one." Bertrand Russell, in the *June Century*, indulges in similar speculation.

It is quite possible that civilization, possessing both the capacity and tendency to move forward, may, under the influence of forces everywhere at work, move also backward. It is also quite possible that the Single Tax movement, on which we believe social salvation depends, might be lost in this generation. The rights of mankind to the earth it inhabits is a conviction none too firmly fixed in the minds and hearts of men. There are not enough active, militant advocates of the movement to secure for it an assured longevity. Its utter disappearance is therefore not a remote contingency.

If we need proof of the possibility of its disappearance we have but to refer to the loss of similar, or rather the same movement, in history; that of the immortal Gracchi; of Gerrard Winstanley, of whom the late Louis Berens has written so entertainingly; but, chiefly, of the utter fiasco which befell the teachings of the French Physiocrats. It is easy to say, of course, that these early French economists did not see the full relation of their problem. But its further and complete development was well within the range of their vision. It matters not through what tragic circumstances that vision was obscured. Obscured it was, and one more of the great pathfinding experiments in history, its promise as well as its immediate fruits, was lost in the confusions of counsel that followed the great social upheaval of the French Revolution.

It will doubtless seem preposterous to the contented and easy-going Single Taxer that his particular doctrine may follow these other attempts to solve the land question into forgetfulness and oblivion. All that is needed to finally and completely obscure it is to attenuate it sufficiently, to systematically ignore its tremendous implications, to talk it only as a method of tax reform to the exclusion of its importance as a fundamental social change.

A REVIEW OF PAST POLICIES

It is with this aspect of the question in mind that we must refer to what has gone before. It is not pleasant to indicate that the Single Tax movement has suffered from its leader-

ship. From whatever motive, these leaders almost from the beginning frowned on organization; indeed, they distinctly gloried in their ability to prevent organization; apparently realizing, in some cases, that only by absence of organization could they maintain their nominal leadership. The absence of organization also enabled individuals to make bargains, implicit or implied, with political organizations for their own advancement. It enabled others to make their own interpretations and definitions of the Single Tax. It enabled a few of the politically ambitious to rally Single Taxers of their localities to the support of civic movements having little relation to our principles. And finally, following the example of these leaders, the men and women of the movement rushed into the Democratic Party under the theory that they could best advance their cause politically by bringing to bear such influence as they could wield on the leaders of that party.

Even when the error of this policy was clearly perceived, no effort was made to retrace our steps. By this time most of the leaders were lost to us; others who remained, with still ungratified ambitions, were too strongly imbued with early habits of thought to advocate any change of policy, and then again their turn might come.

SINGLE TAX BECOMES MORE AND MORE ATTENUATED

It is no marvel that the Single Tax should now have begun to show signs of modification and softening of its full demands. Single Taxers pointed with pride to concessions to our principles made by the dominant parties—not important at any time. With these they pretended to be satisfied—indeed, they had to be. But the inevitable tendency was to lay less emphasis on the principle, and more on the things that merely slanted our way. In short, the Single Taxer became less of a Single Taxer and more of a Democrat. It was all very natural and to be expected.

ERECTING STRAW MEN AS OBSTACLES

The great principle of the restoration of equal rights to the land now almost lost itself in talk of local option in taxation; abolition of the personal property tax; proposed exemptions, in whole or in part, of labor products. Worse, still, we were told that we should devote ourselves to securing the Initiative and Referendum as an instrument to get the Single Tax, and the Fels Commission spent thousands of dollars of Single Taxers' money to obtain the passage of direct legislation laws in States where these did not exist, though ten or more already had them.

We were not to say publicly what we wanted the I and R for, though how the open espousal of that reform by the Fels Commission, which was the mouthpiece of the movement at the time, could have been kept a secret, was not disclosed. We were not to talk Single Tax in connection with our advocacy of the I and R for fear of arousing opposition to direct legislation. Always it was something that had to be done first before we could begin to work for the Single Tax.

Curiously enough, it now appears that even if you get the I and R the work for the Single Tax must be postponed from time to time for fear of imperilling the instrument so tenuous is the thing we struggled so hard to obtain. For a group of Los Angeles Single Taxers tell us we must abandon the effort to get on the ballot in California this year so that the existence of the I and R may not be endangered. Approximately 200,000 voters of that State who have voted for the Single Tax in previous years, must be denied the privilege of voting this year, so that the I and R may continue as the law of the State, though just how the situation will be changed two years from now we are not told. No, do we see what use the I and R is to Single Taxers if it cannot be used to get votes for Single Tax measures.

THE INEPTITUDE OF OUR LEADERSHIP

To the outsider the ineptitude of our leadership must appear the most astonishing thing in the history of the movement. Our leaders have so distrusted their own ability to maintain their leadership that organization, as we have shown, has been expressly deprecated. It was a leadership that losing sight of the principle, has swung the support of the great bulk of their followers, now to Bryan now to Hearst, or some other clay idol who has temporarily dazzled the vision of the thoughtless.

It is true that Henry George urged the support of the Democratic Party when Grover Cleveland threw his tariff message into the arena. There seemed ample justification for this course; it seemed as if the whole labor question would be opened up as a consequence of the discussion that would follow. But Henry George was quick to repudiate Grover Cleveland, throw off his party allegiance, and stand in open rebellion. He did not advocate the formation of a Single Tax Party at that time, but he stood for the next best thing, an independent, voting and working Single Tax solidarity. He was twice an independent candidate for mayor. The men back of him were, for these campaigns, a Single Tax Party, whether they called themselves so or not. If this tendency to group action had been preserved, the need of a Single Tax Party might not have existed; at all events, because it would have served the same purpose. But this perhaps would have been too much to hope, with big political plums reserved only for those whose partisanship in the Democratic Party was of a more inflexible kind.

CURRENT MODIFICATIONS OF SINGLE TAX

The movement started by Henry George with the publication of "Progress and Poverty"—started rather with his dramatic campaign in 1886—had for its purpose the securing of equal rights to land. In writing his first great book he set himself to consider the "Problem of the Increase of Want with the Increase of Wealth, and the Remedy." Such is the sub-title of the work.

The method of attaining the equal rights to the use of the earth, of throwing open the natural opportunities to labor, and thus abolishing poverty and unemployment, was

a secondary consideration, an important one, of course, but secondary. For it is conceivable that there might have been other methods of accomplishing this result. On examination there does not appear to have been any other, so this method—the Single Tax—was selected. It had the advantage of being in accordance with customs pursued in civilized and stable communities, and the instrument for its effective administration already existed in our taxing machinery.

The point I want to emphasize is this. That when we dwell solely upon the advantages of the so-called Single Tax as a tax measure, we are exalting the advantages of what is only a method. We begin where we should leave off. We are losing sight of the greater results which the method is designed to effect. For it is not necessary to get rid of all taxes—it is conceivable that a number of taxes might remain and yet the land be open to all on equal terms. What is chiefly desirable—what utterly overshadows any, even the most important tax consideration—is that the earth should be made free to men. That this great social change we advocate can be brought about by a method which has advantages of its own, is merely one more recommendation for it.

AN ANALOGY

The viewpoint is analogous to the habit of pious churchmen to whom the church, and not the thing it stands for, becomes exalted in their imaginations to the disadvantage of the higher spiritual outlook. It is the most natural thing in the world, as Herbert Spencer has shown us in a series of valuable illustrations, for men to exalt the symbol over the thing symbolized. At last memories of the original source of this symbolism pass utterly away, and only the almost meaningless symbols survive.

A CURIOUS PHASE OF ATTENUATION

Henry George approached his problem in this way: "The tenure of land is the fundamental fact which must ultimately determine the conditions of industrial, social and political life." No word here of "setting up a sane tax system." (See *Tax Facts*, for June, edited by Stoughton Cooley, Los Angeles, California.) Setting up a sane tax system follows merely as a consequence of the method, which Mr. George leaves to later consideration. The object to be attained is first stated, which is so to change the existing tenure of land that the industrial and social life of the people may be determined for the better.

Land and Liberty, the organ of the Single Taxers of Great Britain, in a recent issue, has so well stated our purpose that we venture to quote:

"We hold to the truth that as all have equal rights to life so all have equal rights to land. We propound the theory that the land belongs to the people. The value attaching to land as land (apart from improvements) is a public value. The wealth produced by capital and labor is the private property of those who produce it, but the landlords theory is that they can rightfully appropriate

wealth they do not produce by charging rent for the use of land. It is only on land and from land that wealth can be produced at all; and in considering the production of wealth, of all the definite facts we come across none is more undeniable than land as such varies in value according to its situation and the opportunities it affords. The law of rent is no myth. It commands the respect of mankind. Consciously or unconsciously every one must recognize it from those who willingly pay £100 a square foot for a site in the heart of London, to those who by experience know that 10s. an acre on some hillside is an excessive price for a foothold.

This public value attaching to land is a fact that no one can gainsay. Examination of the causes that give rise to it leads to the conclusion, that the private appropriation of the rent of land is a deep-seated wrong; a wrong that permits some privileged persons to hold the natural resources of the country to ransom; a wrong that registers itself in the definite facts of poverty in the midst of abundance; unemployment, gruesome housing conditions and hardship for all who live by labor. The definite remedy for this wrong is to get rid of it as speedily as may be by asserting the common ownership of land, and on that principle, taking the rent of land in taxation for the use and benefit of the whole community."

I am going to contrast this with the smug defence of the land speculator which the issue of *Tax Facts* for June now before me contains: It is as follows:

"It appears to be the fashion in some quarters to call the land speculator hard names, and to say he is an enemy of society, to be run out of the community. That is hardly fair. The land speculator is just like other men, no better, and no worse. He obeys the great economic law that we all obey, which is to gratify our desires by the least exertion.

The land speculator seeks wealth. He sees that land in growing communities, when lightly taxed, increases in value faster than would the interest on a like amount of money. He thinks it easier and safer to get this increase than to bother with building houses, or engaging in business. In short, he becomes a land speculator because he thinks that the easiest way to satisfy his desires."

The justification of the land speculator, that he seeks in this way to "satisfy his desires with the least exertion," would, of course, apply with equal cogency to the man who waylays the unprotected traveller on the highway. Dick Turpin and Claude Duval are exonerated "by the same token," as our Irish friends would say. They obeyed the same economic law; highway robbery was not effectually prevented, and indeed did not at the time lack a share of popular approval.

In a communication to a recent number of the *REVIEW* Mr. Cooley condemned those who call landlordism "robbery." Mr. George was as severe as that in his characterization of those who profit by that institution. He indicated that they were potential thieves and murderers. In his "Answer to the Pope" this paragraph occurs, which we leave Mr. Cooley to ponder over:

"Thus Cain and Abel, were there only two men on the earth, might by agreement divide the earth between them. Under this compact, each might claim exclusive right to his share as against the other. But neither could rightfully

continue such claim against the next man born. For since no man comes into the world without God's permission, his presence attests his equal right to God's bounty. For them to refuse him any use of the earth which they had divided between them would therefore be for them to commit murder. And for them to refuse him any use of the earth, unless by laboring for them or by giving them part of the products of his labor, would be for them to commit theft."

A FINAL WORD

Until the Single Tax movement purges itself of all camouflage, and advances into the open with its message of glad tidings to the poor and needy; until it announces boldly what it wants and why it wants it; until it thunders against the institution that makes for poverty and misery, its preaching will fall upon deaf ears.

At a time when civilization trembles, when statesmen and politicians palter, when the masses grope blindly, it is tragic that we, the bearers of the Message that is the only conceivable solution of this perilous problems, should talk in terms that are not of sufficient power to ruffle the feathers of a canary.

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