

## Letters to a Socialist Friend

### II

MY DEAR BOB:—

**I**N my last letter I dealt with the proneness of the average socialist to think with the heart instead of the head. That seems to me the fault of most socialists. It is admirable to feel with the heart but a perfectly preposterous thing to think with it. Hence the delightful vagueness of their economic theories.

I do not reject entirely the idea of the state, nor the advantages of cooperation. The latter has vast possibilities. I do not care what the ultimate form of society may be. I do not look upon the individualistic philosophy as expounded by Herbert Spencer as the last word on the subject. It seems to me that what can be predicated of the state may be more accurately prefigured in a free society. What the state is in a diseased society, with the corruption and defects that are inseparable in it as a reflex of the corruption and disease in society itself as now constituted, is another matter. The case for the state is not closed, nor are the limits fixed as to what it may safely undertake in a free society. I refuse to repose in a Procrustean bed.

And, after all, I am not concerned about it. As a Single Taxer I want to see men free. They can only be made free by making the earth free. I know then that they will work out their own salvation, political as well as economic. I know, or I think I know, reasoning by precedent and not by analogy, the advantages that flow from freedom. Therefore instead of building an artificial framework for society after the manner of socialists, I would remove the restraints that impede natural processes—the barriers that bar men from the use of the earth, the restrictions that interfere with the equitable distribution of wealth—tariffs, internal taxes and landlord extortion.

I said in my last letter that I would deal in my next with the laws which "make inevitable the breakdown of your social Utopias." Of course, I am referring to that kind of socialism which for the most part builds on present foundations and substitutes the powers of the state for the natural laws which govern distribution.

I have indicated that I consider essential to any reorganization a concept of property that will accord with the nature of society, with ethical perception, and with orderly procedure. This concept, I am convinced, includes the inviolability of property in things produced by human labor. I believe it essential that men shall be permitted to say of many a thing, "This is mine." I think it one of the profoundest instincts of human nature. A limited communism that may be worth while might spring from a universal cheapening of products (and these might include many products) and insensibly relax the claim of ownership and for convenience induce men to voluntarily submit to general participation in their enjoyment. We have nearly reached this point in a few things—matches

and cigarettes, for example. But as a rigid system that should include all products of labor, or products generally, communism is an impossible ideal.

The very idea of property comes from love when it has not in a much smaller degree its springs in human selfishness—that is to say, we want to call something our own that we may give or leave it to those we love, that we may share it, not universally, but with those to whom our affections turn. The socialism that points even slantingly towards communism, or would weaken the idea of property, is in conflict with this primal instinct.

In that we would wrest the idea of Property from its ignoble associations, strengthening rather than weakening it, we Land Restorationists, Georgians, Commonwealthers, whatever we choose to call ourselves, would remove the cause that, above all others, tends to degrade the true concept of Property.

Why do we ask that the rent of land be diverted to the State? Because land rent is communal property, and to permit it to go into private hands is a violation of the true idea of Property. Because the diversion of this common fund from the true purpose it should serve, namely the payment for governmental service, federal, state and local, compels us to levy upon the private property of the many, thus again committing us to the violation of a true right of Property.

Socialists ignore this vital truth, or where they do not ignore it, fail to give it the proper emphasis. Yet the well-being of society is bound up in its consideration. We are called upon to solve the question, What is Property? Not to answer it correctly is to make all property insecure and to play havoc with distribution. If we cannot answer, and by our answer solve it, we shall always have poverty and its resultant evils with us.

We cannot build social utopias, or cooperative communities, and ignore what is at the basis of distribution. We must answer the question, What is Property? The thing we seek to bring about, a better social state, will elude us to the end of the chapter if we do not decide that there is real property in what is correctly defined as wealth, the things produced by human labor, and differs from land in which no justifiable claim of property can be set up. This is the great truth, whether we elect to try it by natural law or by utilitarian tests, in the supreme meaning we attach to the word "truth."

The true law of Property must be understood and established if we would attain equality of distribution in the products of labor. But there are other laws which are associated with it, which the taking of the rent of land would conserve, and which shall be dealt with in my next letter.

—JOSEPH DANA MILLER.

MINNESOTA'S iron ore tax having been declared valid, Minnesota will now tax all of us for the benefit of her land-owners.