

# QUANDO!

by Robert Miller



**T**HERE IS NO DOUBT that the world is becoming more and more aware of the fundamental necessity for land reform. The discerning economist — and we will have no truck with any economist who is not discerning — will also notice, by methods employed and in measures proposed, a tacit but almost universally held admission that archaic and inequitable systems of land tenure, and unemployment and poverty, are not unconnected.

It is, however, upon the next urgent question to be answered by all who would right the wrong and give hope to the despondent that the world divides and subdivides: what system is not only preferable but workable?

It is not so very long ago that anyone who so much as mentioned land reform was promptly clapped in jail or otherwise effectively silenced, for it seems that much, if not all, good and bad was accepted as the will of God. "Our old . . . local customs had a great effect in making the peasant fond of his home, and the promotion of them by the gentry made him fond of his lord . . . The nation is altered; we have almost lost our simple, true-hearted peasantry. They have broken asunder from the higher classes, and seem to think their interests are separate. They have become too knowing, and begin to read newspapers, listen to alehouse politicians, and talk of reform. I think one mode to keep them in good humour in these hard times would be for the nobility and gentry to pass more time on their estates, mingle more among the country people . . ."

There are no prizes offered for naming the source of this lament; it will be found in Washington Irving's Sketch Book. Such was the good Squire's project for mitigating public discontent, and, be it noted, he is not being at all fatuous or sarcastic but is the soul of sincerity. His remarks are typical of an attitude, and one that survived long after the early nineteenth century.

How different today! Anyone, whether he be peasant or poet, economist or ecclesiastic, may propound any scheme whatever for the relief of poverty, bad housing, or the rate burden; even pop singers stand for parliament. The point is that, at long last, everyone is interested.

Argentina attempts to solve her land problem by providing credit resources to tenant farmers to purchase their holdings from landlords. Quoting from a Decree Law of May 30, 1963, we find that "it is universally recognised that the widest distribution of private ownership of land amongst farmers is one of the bases of political and social stability."

In Cuba things are a little more direct. As from October 3, 1963, "... all rural land holdings of an area of more than five caballerias (about 167 acres) are hereby

nationalised and transferred to the Cuban State." There are some exceptions, such as where an owner-occupier is proved to have been working the land in a satisfactory and industrious manner, and is willing to conform to future requirements of the state; and compensation generally is paid, but there is no compensation for absentee landlords. In Chile, similar measures have been introduced — expropriation of abandoned rural holdings, redistribution, etc.

In the Philippines an Act was passed "to establish owner-cultivatorship and the economic family-size farm as the basis of Philippine agriculture and, as a consequence, divert landlord capital in agriculture to industrial development; and to achieve a dignified existence for the small farmers, free from pernicious institutional restraints and practices."

Quite definitely there is an increasing determination in all parts of the world to solve the land problem, and we need not doubt the sincerity of those who try to implement such reforms as the above. What may reasonably be doubted is whether any good results will be lasting, or whether any lasting effects will be good, for it is sadly evident from all of these measures that, having gone to the lengths of confiscation and a wider redistribution, the golden opportunity of introducing a land-value tax has been missed. Certainly it is better for more to be land owners than few, but the fact has to be faced that they will always be a minority and in a position of power. We are proud to state that in the United Kingdom the number of freeholders is ever increasing, and it is true that the more freeholders there are in a community the more competition there will be for labour; there will be more diverse tastes and desires to satisfy, and consequently a greater variety of wealth will be produced. The land problem, however, will ever remain with us, so long as exclusive rights are vested in natural resources, no matter how many freeholders there be, and there will always be a queue for the bare necessities of life.

All men are entitled to an existence on this planet, even though it be questionable whether many actually achieve a dignified one, but it is difficult — to the discerning economist, that is — to see how land nationalisation, confiscation, expropriation — call it what you will — and redistribution of land can ever free the landless from "pernicious institutional restraints and practices" so long as the state merely proliferates vested interest in land and neglects the opportunity — more than that, its duty — to collect on behalf of all the full economic rent of land.

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