

Mankind and the Common Earth

"THE EARTH HATH He given to the children of men." So said the Psalmist, but certainly what is called the civilized portion of mankind has completely forgotten the statement or limits its application to those sufficiently astute to take advantage of a situation contrary to the divine proclamation. In all the years men have lived upon the earth, by no one, it is safe to say, has the Psalmist's declaration received more eloquent demonstration than by Henry George. He spoke as if with the tongue of an angel. No man who has read his flaming appeal in *Progress and Poverty* can for a moment fail to have been powerfully affected by its words. No wonder that men were found ready to give up hope for a prosperous and easy future to efforts to make good the essential truth of the words of David so developed and demonstrated by the American writer. Whether he was equally conclusive in pointing out the way to effect the injunction ascribed to Deity we shall have occasion to discuss.

But it is not necessary in order to agree with the position of Henry George to accept the words of David as definite proof of the design of the Deity. Without undertaking to rehearse in detail the positions of the American writer, his fundamentals may be outlined as follows: All men have a right to live on the face of the earth. To preserve this right it is necessary that all should have a right

to the benefits to be derived from its use. To deny this right by allotting to a portion of mankind control over the earth and giving to such on terms fixed by them the power to sell to others the privilege of living on it, is to deny a right to live at all in this world. Hence in some manner, if we would do justice, we must ensure to all access to the earth.

Few people will have the hardihood to deny these propositions. Some have attempted it inferentially as, for instance, the Duke of Argyle, who conferred upon George derisively the title of "The Prophet of San Francisco." His argument may be summed up in a few words: Despite all that George may say, the intention of the Almighty may be inferred from the fact that certain individuals are today possessed of large powers over the surface of the earth and in many instances have not found these profitable, while others have exercised their control for the general benefit of the community. The question of the validity of the original designation of such powers is waived aside, and their abuses, to the detriment of the community and its individual members, are ignored. That the Duke, in view of the fact that he was one of the greatest landholders in Scotland, and the further fact of the milieu in which he was educated and moved, should have remained ignorant of the wants and rights of the common man, whether scripturally expressed or otherwise, is not entirely strange. But no man has made a more plausible denial of the common right of mankind to the use of the earth.

If George had been the first to point out the doctrine so associated with his name, we might well have been disposed to question it, however arrayed in words of eloquence and with whatever display of logic. But fairly from the beginning of time men have been found to recognize it and to die for it when apparently necessary. It is no part of our purpose to greatly elaborate upon this

point. Reference to a few men or events will sufficiently indicate this. We learn from Plutarch that Lycurgus "found a prodigious inequality, the city overcharged with many indigent persons, who had no land, and the wealth centered in the hands of a few." To "root out the evils of insolence, envy, arrogance, and luxury, and those distempers of a state still more inveterate, and fatal, I mean poverty and riches," he cancelled the then divisions of land and restored equality so that the only distinctions between men were "in virtue." The lands were divided into lots of equal fertility and capable of producing sufficient for health and a good carriage of body. He rejoiced when able to say "How like is Laconia to an estate newly divided among many brothers!" The Gracchi met their death because they sought to limit holdings of land among the citizens of Rome and to put an end to great landed estates.

With the Jews the social unity was the family, and the law provided for the year of Jubilee when the originally equal division of the lands was restored and each family again came into its own. Yet even among them there was room to disobey the law or evade some of its consequences, for Isaiah threatens: "Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth."

We learn from La Tourette's *The Chinese: Their History and Culture*, that repeatedly Chinese emperors sought to bring about equality in ownership of land and in consequence in some instances lost their lives.

Sir Henry Maine's *Early History of Institutions*, failing in large degree to appreciate the situation as to land, nevertheless finds that "the general proposition that land is limited in quantity and is distinguished by this limitation from all other commodities which are practically capable of indefinite multiplication, has always, of course, been ab-

stractly true" (Page 108). He discovers that in a large part of Russia "each household of the village was entitled to a share of the village lands proportioned to the number of adult males it contained." Again he says (Page 115): "Our nearly exclusive familiarity with it [landholding by private individuals], has led, I think, to our very commonly overestimating the extent it prevails over the world, or even over Western Europe." The same book declares (Page 80) that in Hindoo village communities "the land tends to become the true basis of the group; it is recognized as of preminent importance to its vitality, while private ownership is allowed to show itself in moveables and cattle."¹ On pages 101-102 the author states that "I have ascertained that the families which formed the village communities only just extinct in Western Highlands had the lands of the village redistributed among them by lot at fixed intervals of time; and I gathered from Mr. Skene's valuable note on 'Tribe Communities in Scotland' (appended to the second volume of his edition of *Fordan's Chronicle*) that he believes this system of redivision to have been once universal, or at least widely extended, among the Scottish Celts." That like conditions and beliefs prevail among people closer to nature than the most of us, is shown, among scores of examples which might be given, by illustrations cited by Negley Farson's *Behind God's Back*, as to conditions prevailing among the natives in Congo and French Equatorial Africa, Kenya and other parts of Africa. The

¹This statement is well borne out by Nehru in his *Glimpses of World History*, who says: "The strength and perseverance of India in the past seems to have lain in her wide spread system of village republics or self-governing *panchayats*. There were no big landlords and no big *zamindars*, such as we have today. Land belonged to the village community or *panchayats* or to the peasants who worked on it. And these *panchayats* had a great deal of power and authority. They were elected by the village folk, and thus there was a basis of democracy in this system."

white man, introducing private ownership in land, has ruined the natives, creating poverty to a degree never before experienced. But illustrations of this general nature need not be multiplied.

"By their fruits ye shall know them," was written of old. This remains applicable to the results of our maintenance of unrestricted private property in land. Pragmatism may not be rejected. We must judge of the rightfulness of our actions or the opposite by the effect upon others and upon ourselves. Private ownership has had its chance to prove its rightness. Does it measure up in the scale? Let us first consider it in a material way. We can then the better form an idea of the correctness of the views of Henry George.

Our first settlements were along the Atlantic seaboard. Very speedily speculation in land values began and settlers were early forced to seek lands lying at some distance from the Atlantic coast. Those who desired to farm could not pay the price demanded. The remote situation compelled loss of the education and comforts which neighboring villages and towns might have afforded them. Further, it meant severe hardships and perpetual conflicts with the Indians. Meanwhile large intermediate tracts of land were left unused. There are great areas in the East to this day left uncultivated. This is manifest to any traveler who journeys but a few miles out of New York, Philadelphia, Boston or Baltimore. Superior fertility and yield of prairie and other distant fields can but partially account for the Western trek. All the considerations named served to retard the intensive growth in civilization to which we were entitled. The cost of government was infinitely increased. Untold millions have been added to expenditures for food and supplies. While it may be said that a wilderness was subdued to the hand of man, yet we find the conditions around great cities of which mention has been made.

Within the cities and towns speculation involved in this unrestricted private ownership of land has left devastating results. Cities which might have enjoyed a regular growth have been irretrievably disfigured and altered for the worse. Scarcely a town is left without great stretches of idle land between improvements, in many instances placing attractive homes next to slums. Across the tracks esthetic beauty is ignored. At the same moment naturally attractive spots for the location of settlement are passed over and men are asked to live in unhealthful neighborhoods and existence and spread of disease is helped along. To get to their work men are compelled to travel long distances past vacant lands held at speculative values never reflected upon the tax rolls, all this on the pretense that at the moment they yield little or nothing to the landowner. Orderly development is not regarded. As in the case of Washington, high and level land was too expensive and inhabitants were driven to land which was redeemed at public expense from its swampy condition. One was compelled to imagine "streets in morasses." All this adds infinitely to the charges and expense of government to be met out of the toil and sweat of the people. They must, first or last, pay for the streets and sewers rendered needful to meet unnecessary costs of government. The new values the community has created in only small measure enure to the benefit of the common man, but serve to enrich the few who hold the land titles.

This review shows that the evils private ownership with its accompanying speculation have brought upon the country at large are repeated *pari passu* in the case of the individual units—the municipalities.

In other ways present evils are repeated. Who does not know of industries which could be located to the general advantage in particular areas which, because of the high price asked for the best suited pieces of land, are com-

pelled to locate on less desirable plots? This involves loss to the manufacturer and the public as well as making production most costly. And often such prices for land prevent new enterprises and thus interfere with the employment of men and comfort of communities.

No one has pointed out better than George the close connection between our constantly-recurring panics and speculation. Not to refer to any earlier one, the great panic of 1837 was widely recognized as brought about by land speculation. Again in 1857 the predominant cause of the panic was the same. This condition again came to the fore in 1873, when industry was paralyzed as never before, and this lasted until at least 1878. It was under the influence of this condition that *Progress and Poverty* was written. Since that time we have grown used to crises at more frequent intervals and of relatively great severity. For several years after 1929 we suffered from what was treated as industrial panic, largely brought to a head through Wall Street. This need not surprise us for the stocks of Wall Street are to the extent of billions based upon land values and control of natural resources through private hands. How many corporations even by their titles witness this fact! We have steel, copper, sulphur, zinc, silver, gold, coal, oil, and a hundred other companies, which find advantage in controlling for selfish purposes beds of every kind of mineral, and, as well, companies monopolizing public opportunities in specialized shapes, such as the railroads and public utilities of every character.

Let us not forget that the farming neighborhoods, such as are contained in states like Iowa, Missouri, the Dakotas, Illinois, Nebraska, Kansas, have built up imaginary land values, only to see them topple over as in the 1920's, at the first breath of adversity, carrying with them banks and industrial enterprises and ruining millions of farmers who had been led astray by a vision of speedy wealth. Simi-

larly, though within another immediate sphere of action, or rather non-action, in Florida were thousands ruined by seeking quick financial return through beds of sand turned into city lots, which were believed to be speedily convertible into gold through the "investments" of later-like fools. All this represented the wastage of hundreds of millions of dollars; yes billions.

Turn to other aspects of the uncontrolled private ownership of what is really public wealth. The farmer has abused the trust reposed in him. The natural values in the top soils of hundreds of thousands of acres of land, particularly in the Southern States, has been allowed to be washed away down to the ocean through careless and thoughtless non-action. The farmer found it easier to exhaust the richness of his land and move on to another than to maintain the wealth of the first.

Once our wealth in the forests was enormous. We turned them over to private ownership and with few exceptions the owners have found it most profitable to deplete them, without any attempt to restore their former condition. The welfare of the community demanded their maintenance, and this is something ignored. The immediate private interest has been subserved and the larger public interest forgotten. So also our gas and oil and coal supplies have suffered at the hands of the private owners. We have given away our patrimony to the first comer and have suffered accordingly.

But from other points of view than that of the purely financial, the country is sustaining serious losses demanding speedy cessation. Depriving the majority of our population of a fair share in the blessings of Nature, we have driven a large proportion of them to poverty and crime. For such share we have substituted all manner of aid-out-of-work benefits, old age pensions, artificial government employment, and the like. Poor houses play their part.

With every panic it is necessary to enlarge prisons. The self-respect of our citizens is being steadily weakened. We mourn the degeneracy of the times and by the denial of right compel the thing we deplore. With the ancient declaration before us that "the latifundia destroyed Italy" we create our great landed estates, the thing that of old Pliny protested against. Without the slightest hesitancy we denounce those who protest against this as Communists, Socialists, Bolshevists and others whose philosophies, even if we do not understand them, we habitually dislike. The summary escape from these conditions we find to be in war. At such a time direct employment in making and using implements and means of destruction gives good wages and temporary employment to all though at the expense of the future.

Verily, the truth of all that Henry George said about the primal right of all to the enjoyment of the gifts of Nature has been established, by its denial and the pragmatic test of experience.