

A Socialist View of the Land Question

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The Conservatives won over Labour in the recent British election. If the Labour Party ever again achieve a majority in the House of Commons, it is to be hoped that they will have done so as a result of having grasped the fundamental importance of the land question, and understood the only tried and proven way of answering it.

The work of convincing them, however, could present difficulties, as may be demonstrated by an examination of Robert Tressall's famous masterpiece, The Ragged-Trouser Philanthropist (London, The Richards Press Ltd and The Daily Herald, 1914), which depicts the grim reality of the hand-to-mouth existence of English manual workers in the years leading up to the First World War. The view expressed in the book of what was needed to release a large part of our population from the traps of poverty and despair is open to question though still current.

Throughout the book Tressall speaks through the mouth of Frank Owen, a house painter and artist of superior intellectual quality to his fellow-workers, who both encourage him to lecture them and sneer at him when he attempts to do so. The great divide between his ideas and their lack of them comes to light in the very first chapter, ironically entitled "An Imperial Banquet" when he is provoked by Harlow's remark, "The greatest cause of poverty is over-population." He at once disposes of the Malthusian fallacy by drawing attention to the "thousands of acres of uncultivated land in England without a house or human being to be seen!", and quoting the example of Ireland, where the population had been reduced by half within the past fifty years, but the poverty still remained. One is left with the impression, not only that Tressall recognised the relevance to poverty of land monopoly, but also that he had some familiarity with the writings of Henry George.

"Ow's it goin' to be altered?"

In Chapter X, "The Upper and the Nether Millstones," Owen, when pressed to name the causes of poverty, names them in this order: money; private ownership of land; private ownership of railways, tramways, gasworks, water works, factories, and of the other means of producing the necessaries and comforts of life; competition in business. At this point he is interrupted with a question about how it happens and begins his first lesson, not as one might suppose, with money, but with land. Like a good teacher, he draws a visual aid in the shape of a circle to represent England, and within it a tiny black square standing for the landed classes, and a much bigger one for the landless majority. Having done this he stresses that "These people are land animals, therefore they must live on the land" - an obvious reminiscence of Henry George. He then draws the logical conclusion that the minority, being possessed of an exclusive right to the soil, can demand as rent the utmost that the rest are capable of paying, and so reduce them to poverty. So far, so good; and when he is asked "'Ow's it goin' to be altered?", one waits expectantly for the Georgist solution. But no! He is off on the subject of contracts among employers, and works his way back to the question of money.

It already seems probable that Owen is liable to some confusion in his economic thought; and Chapter XIV, "The Great Money Trick," confirms this impression. Called upon to prove that money is the cause of poverty, he embarks on lesson number two, an ingenious role-play exercise. Owen himself takes the part of the "Landlord and Capitalist Class", in virtue of which he owns, not only a number of slices of bread that stand for "all raw materials" (i.e., land), but also three knives that represent "all the machinery of production." In addition, three halfpennies are his "money capital." Three of the other men, Easton, Harlow and Philpot, are the "Working Class", and own nothing. Their labour consists of cutting the bread into little cubes, which are then

"the necessaries of life." Earning one halfpenny for each three cubes produced, they are then obliged to buy them back at the rate of a halfpenny for each single cube, which is very much what happens in reality. In the end, Owen is much better off, while Easton and Co. have what they had at the beginning, namely nothing. As the culminating blow, they are informed that, owing to over-production and foreign competition, there is no more work for them to do, and that the police and the army will deal with any disaffection. If only Tressall were still here to be told that Owen's advantage lies, not in his possession of the halfpennies, nor even in that of the knives, which he must have gained by means of exchange for former cubes of bread, but in his initial possession of the bread itself! The great money trick is in reality the great land trick.

"A contemptible tax on land"

Owen's last effort in Chapter XXIII, "The Great Oration," makes depressing reading. "It is childish to imagine," he says, "that any measure of political reform... or a contemptible tax on land can deal with the abject condition of millions of Englishmen, their wives and children." With benefit of hindsight we now know that wherever land value taxation has been applied, even tentatively and partially, it has improved people's economic condition, and would almost certainly do so much more if fully applied. Similarly, we know that all the machinery of state regulation of industry and trade, as expounded by Owen and soon afterwards put into operation in Russia, has proved itself to be as inadequate in the body politic as any attempt of conscious regulation of the heart and lungs would prove itself to be in the body biological. Here, as elsewhere, Henry George has shown himself to be a true prophet; but we cannot blame Tressall for not having survived to see his own theories fail the test of experience. It is less easy, however, to make allowances for the methods he proposed for dealing with the question of the private ownership of land. As we have seen, he recognised the evils of this practice, which he included in his list of the causes of poverty. Land, says Owen, must be brought into public ownership together with all the other "means of production," but only by the State's assumption of proprietary rights in land left uncultivated or otherwise unused, and even then only on payment of fair compensation. Why, for heaven's sake, should Tressall, after having denounced the landowning class, among others, as robbers of the poor, consider any compensation at all to be "fair"?

Since the publication of Tressall's book in 1914, things have happened that he could not have dreamt of, including five terms of office for Labour ministries. Much has been done in the way of "nationalising the means of production"; but private ownership of land has on the whole not been disturbed, either with or without compensation. The results have been foreseeable. State-owned industries, saddled from the outset with a burden of debt incurred from buying up shares whose price included a large element of land value, instead of buying the capital equipment alone for an independently assessed figure, have behaved like any other large employer, and enforced wage restraints whenever they could. Now, under a Conservative regime, even nationalisation is being undone, and "social benefits", developed by Labour as a substitute for the only reform that is capable of securing permanent improvement in the lot of the working population, are being steadily eroded. Simultaneously, the legality of workers' combinations to withdraw their labour, as the land has been withdrawn from them, is being whittled away.. All is set for a slow return to the conditions so brilliantly brought to life for us by Tressall, under which a man earned a bare living at the best of times, and at others fought a battle, often a losing battle, with starvation.

Now or never must the Labour Party, if it is to carry out the purpose for which it was formed, realise that reform directed only at the effects of the fundamental injustice, namely land monopoly, is worse than useless. The injustice itself must be tackled, and the land restored to the people, its true owners, by means of taking of rent for public revenue. When the effects of this have been observed, then will be the time to decide what further measures of reform are necessary.