

The Single Tax, May, 1902

**PROFESSOR J. E. THOROLD ROGERS ON THE ORTHODOX POLITICAL ECONOMY,
AND THE ORDINARY POLITICAL ECONOMIST.**

"Many years ago I began to suspect that much of the political economy which was currently in authority was a collection of logomachies, which had but little relation to the facts of social life. Accident, and some rare local opportunities, led me to study these facts in the social life of our forefathers. . . By this study I began to discover that much which popular economists believe to be natural is highly artificial; that what they call laws are too often hasty, inconsiderate, and inaccurate inductions; and that much which they consider to be demonstrably irrefutable is demonstrably false. I have often had to conclude that the best intentioned thinkers and writers have been supremely mischievous, and that in attempting to frame a system they have wrecked all system. It must, I think, be admitted that political economy is in a bad way; its authority is repudiated, its conclusions are assailed, its arguments are compared to the dissertations held in Milton's 'Limbo,' its practical suggestions are conceived to be not much better than those of the philosophers in Laputa, and one of its authorities, as I myself heard, was contemptuously advised to betake himself to Saturn. Now, all this is very sad. The books which seemed to be wise are often compared to those curious volumes of which the converts at Ephesus made a holocaust. And the criticism is just.

"The distrust in ordinary political economy has been loudly expressed by working men. And, to speak truth, one need not wonder at it. The labour question has been discussed by many economists with a haughty loftiness which is very irritating. The economist, it is true, informs them that all wealth is the product of labour, that wealth is labour stored in desirable objects, that capital is the result of saved labour, and is being extended and multiplied by the energies of labour. Then he turns round and rates these workmen for their improvidence, their recklessness, their incontinence in foolishly increasing their numbers, and hints that we should all be better off if they left us in their thousands. . . The attempts which workmen have made to better their condition have been traduced, or ignored, or have been made the subject of warnings as to the effect which they

will induce on the wage fund, this wage fund, after all, being a phantasm, a logomachy. . .

"Two things have discredited political economy—the one is its traditional disregard of facts; the other, its strangling itself with definitions. The economist had borrowed his terms from common life. Now, unless the words one uses are strictly limited in meaning, as those which express geometrical forms, or chemical compounds, no word, and "for the matter of that no definition of the word, ordinarily covers what the man who uses the word intends by it. He gives, may be, a definition of the thing or thought, and succeeding writers who inherit his word begin to expand or vary it, not taking counsel with the facts, but only with their own experiences or impressions. Now, word-splitting and definition-extending is a most agreeable occupation. It does not require knowledge. It is sufficient to be acute. Persons can spin out their definitions from their inner consciousness by the dozen—aye, and catch the unwary in the web. . . It is no doubt more profitable to an economist to be an optimist or an alarmist, to dilate on the numbers and wages of the working classes with one, to predict the exhaustion of coal with another, and to dwell on the margin of cultivation with a third. But the progress of the working classes is exceedingly unsatisfactory, and has been enormously exaggerated by those who have written on it. . . In point of fact, these economists have generally been fairly well-to-do people, who have only had a lofty sympathy with those who struggle for a living. And the worst of it is, that they are so profoundly ignorant of the social facts on which they profess to be dogmatic. A man will chatter. . . of the exhaustion of coal deposits when he does not know their extent, and is not aware of the economies of their use ; of the condition of workmen when he is entirely unacquainted with the fact that they were cruelly oppressed up to recent times. For political economy like this I have, and I trust always shall have, the heartiest contempt.

"Of course a resolute determination to look into and substantiate the causes which have so mightily hindered the economic progress of my countrymen is unpopular with the least deserving and least valuable, but often most powerful, classes of the community. . . I have constantly noticed that men who are entirely

devoid of any sense of political or social justice are fond of charging their critics with sinister designs against property and order So I am told that some of the frantic advocates of violent reconstruction allege that I am a Socialist without knowing it. But I know very well what is the issue, the natural, just, and inevitable issue, of all attempts to cure wrong-doing by violence, and to meet the misdeeds of government by a propaganda of anarchy."—The Economic Interpretation of History (Preface).