

A First Principle — Still Apt

By KATHERINE ROSS

HENRY GEORGE, like his predecessor Moses, recognized the great need for the establishment of a true first principle, that of the essentially equitable use of the land, the source of our existence. Moses saw, even in his day, the evil results of this lack.

So, through edict and command, he tried to put a principle into effect. But apparently, because of his dependence upon command, he did not discern, as Henry George did later, either the need for, or even the existence of, the natural social law that must collaborate with this true principle and become a necessary part of it, if it was to remain permanently effective.

I am referring to what the more enlightened economists designate as "the natural, social economic law of rent." This natural social law, which has for ages been diverted from its just use, is operative wherever members of society make a demand for the use of land, and where varying values accrue to varied sites. These represent the pressure of population against subsistence, and belong by right to society, not to individuals who do nothing to produce them.

The nationalization of land, to which there is always a drift under unnatural conditions of land tenure (and decisively so in England at present) cannot solve this problem. To permit power in the hands of the state to take land over and control it and the uses to which it must be put, would be to epitomize the final and complete power of the state over society; at least for so long as such an aggressive state could last. The prevention on the part of any government of free and independent access to the use of land would be to render society dependent, helpless and ultimately subject to decadence.

Nationalization of the land is not a new idea. It was carried out long ago, ostensibly for the good of society, but really for the resuscitation of failing governments.

But if governments were made simpler (since complex governments produce only complex results) through the will of their citizens, and confined to their legitimate purpose—that of serving and servicing society—then condition would become reverse, for society could become the arbiter of its own fate. And if such governments were to collect, through the medium of annual rent—due and payable to society—the enormous fund of continually rising site values of land, and use this fund for those needed public services that are properly public in that they would not give advantage to some over others, then extremes in our way

of thinking could meet, for this would do wonderful things for society.

In the first place, it would level all advantages in the use of the earth by opening it up for use upon equal terms. It would thus eliminate all incentive for speculation in land or land monopoly that now makes land artificially scarce and artificially high in value. Furthermore all vicious taxation that has for centuries obstructed progress and retarded production, consumption, distribution and exchange, would become only a memory of that wholesale robbery that has characterized this and past civilizations.

Throughout the more recent centuries there have emerged some discerning minds that have recognized the importance of the basic law of rent. But it has taken thousands of years for Henry George to appear to delineate it, as well the correlating social law of wages, which is always dependent upon and subject to, the primary law of rent. Had it not been for the subversion of rent, labor unions would never have come into existence, for the inadequate defense of the whole of labor; for under the normal application of the law of rent the whole of labor would receive the full return for its services. By "labor" is not meant mere manual labor, the reference is to all effort expended in the production and distribution of wealth, and all energies spent in furtherance of human progress.

Even in Moses' day the guided and protected operation of this law would have kept the true principle intact and would have prevented the aggressive portion of society from encroaching upon and usurping the basic rights of other members of society.

Henry George, in his famous lecture on Moses quotes the great prophet as having said to the children of Israel, "It is not your estate; your property; not the land which you bought or the land which you conquered; it is the land which the Lord Thy God . . . lendeth thee." That was long before the word "capitalism" came to have any meaning—long before that word became a scapegoat for landlordism; for without the power of landlordism, capital itself has no power with which to enslave men.

The fact that Moses knew he had discovered a true first principle and that it would remain undimmed as a beckoning light, was revealed in his farewell speech to his fellow men—"My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distill as the dew; as the small rain upon the tender herb and as the showers upon the grass."

—From an address at the Henry George School, New York, November 6, by Katherine Ross.