

Land Monopoly in the Roman Empire

(Address of B. Sleicher, reported in the Sydney Standard.)

IT seems probable that at Rome in the earliest times land was not private property, but was held in common by the clan. But by the time of which we have any definite records private ownership of land had become the rule, and there was considerable inequality in the size of holdings. Moreover the constant wars with their near neighbors often compelled the smaller holders to mortgage their farms to make good their losses, and thus under the harsh law of the time many not only lost their land but even became slaves of their creditors. Thus between about 500 and 400 B. C. there was much strife between the rich and the poor, especially as the latter, being plebeians, were at the time excluded from all political power. But soon after the latter date conditions improved. Rome now began rapidly to extend her power over Italy, and large areas of conquered territory became available. A policy was adopted of settling military colonies at all places of strategic importance, the colonists receiving allotments of the conquered land. In this way landless citizens were provided for and discontent was allayed, especially as about this time the plebeians were admitted to an equal share of political privileges. But large areas of conquered territory also passed into the possession of the rich class under the tenure known as "occupatio." Under this the land remained legally public property and could be resumed at any moment by the State without compensation; the occupier was supposed to pay a small rent. But as the Senate and the magistrates who administered the law themselves belonged to the richer class and held large amounts of land under "occupatio" they took great care that the land never was resumed or the rent demanded. At the time, as there was enough land for everyone, this practice did not cause much trouble, but, as we shall see, it led to serious consequences later on.

THE EFFECT OF THE PUNIC AND OTHER WARS

The real trouble began after the war with Carthage, generally known as the Second Punic War, which devastated Italy for 16 years from 218 to 202 B. C. From this date the changes that led to the destruction of the class of small farmers, who had been the backbone of the Roman republic. Several causes combined to produce this result. Most of the farmers had served for years in the army and had lost the taste for the hard and monotonous life of a small farmer and craved for more excitement and variety. Many of them were not anxious to resume work on their old land, especially as most of the farms had been devastated in the war or had gone to ruin during their owners' absence. Many of the small holders therefore were ready to sell their land and drift to the city, and at the same time a demand for land on the part of a small body of wealthy men arose, also caused by the war. For, as a

result of the Punic war and the other wars with Macedonia, Syria, etc., that followed, in all of which Rome was victorious, enormous sums in the form of indemnities, plunder and so on, poured into Rome, and most of this seems to have found its way into the private pockets of members of the governing class.

LARGE ESTATES AND GANGS OF SLAVES

It naturally occurred to the new capitalists that it would be a good investment for their money to buy up the derelict small farms, throw them into large estates, and work them with gangs of slaves. All the circumstances of the time therefore combined to substitute huge slave-worked estates owned by rich absentee landlords for small farms worked by the owner and his family. This change took place at varying rates and to different extents in different parts of Italy, but by 140 B. C. it had gone so far that patriotic men began to be seriously alarmed, for the source from which the State had drawn its best soldiers seemed to be in danger of drying up and city loafers would make a poor substitute in the armies for the yeoman farmers with whom Rome had won all her great victories. Yet for a long time men were reluctant to propose any reform, for the wealthy landowners were so firmly entrenched in the Senate that it seemed impossible to do anything against them without overthrowing that body entirely, which men were reluctant to do, for they could see no other body that could replace it as the governing power in the State. The Senate was composed of all who had held the lowest grade of magistracy (that of quaestor), and its members held their positions for life. It therefore contained all the political experience and skill in the State. Neither the un-coordinated body of magistrates, each of whom was practically a law unto himself, or the assembly of citizens, a huge and unwieldy body, could possibly replace the Senate as administrator of the great empire that Rome had acquired.

TIBERIUS GRACCHUS

However, at length in 133 B. C., a reformer with sufficient courage appeared in the person of Tiberius Gracchus, a young man of the nobility, who, while travelling through Italy on his way to military service in Spain, had been so alarmed at the condition of the districts through which he passed that he determined to do something to effect a reform. In 133 he was elected tribune of the people, an office which conferred the right of submitting bills to the assembly of the people for passage into law. The bill which he introduced is interesting, as being the only really determined attack on land monopoly in Roman history. It provided:

(1) That all land under "occupatio" should be resumed by the State without compensation, except 500 jugera for each occupier and 250 extra for each of his sons up to two, which would be granted to him as freehold. (A jugerum was about two-thirds of an acre.)

(2) Compensation for improvements on resumed land. This provision seems to show that Gracchus understood the difference between unimproved and improved value.

(3) Allotment of the resumed land to landless citizens in farms of 30 jugera each, which were to be inalienable and subject to payment of a small rent to the State.

(4) Election by the people of a special commission of three to carry out the resumption and distribution.

GRACCHUS APPEALED TO THE PEOPLE

The provisions in (1) and (2) aimed at appeasing the occupiers, who had held the land so long undisturbed that they had come to look on it as their absolute property. (3) was intended to prevent the allotments from being bought up and combined again into big estates. (4) was necessary, as to leave the administration of this law to the ordinary authorities would have stultified it, as they all belonged to the class that was bitterly opposed to it. The landlords were furious and were not in the least mollified by the concessions made to them. When Gracchus, before presenting his bill to the people, submitted it first to the Senate for approval, as was customary, though not required by the strict letter of the law, it was rejected. He therefore reintroduced it with clause (2) omitted and presented it direct to the people, who passed it with enthusiasm. The commission was at once elected and started work. It was composed of Gracchus himself and two of his relatives. But his year of office was now drawing to a close and his enemies intended to have their revenge when he was again a private citizen (for by Roman law a magistrate was immune from prosecution or attack while in office). In self-defence Gracchus decided to stand for re-election (though it is doubtful if this was legal at that time). His enemies determined to prevent this at all costs; they spread the rumor that he was aiming at making himself king, and when it still seemed likely that he would be successful, he was attacked on the election day by a mob of infuriated landlords and capitalists and murdered.

HOW THE BIG ESTATES GREW AGAIN

Though they had thus revenged themselves on its author, the landlords did not dare to interfere with the law, which was too popular with the common people. The commission continued its work and in the next few years distributed all the available public land. But their work was of no lasting benefit, for a few years later the holders of the allotments were relieved of the payment of the rent to the State and at the same time permitted to sell their holdings. Of course, the same causes as before again came into play and most of the small holdings were once more absorbed into big estates. With our present knowledge we can see that the Gracchus reform was on the wrong lines and was doomed to fail. For, as Henry George has pointed out, land monopoly cannot be destroyed by distributing the land in small portions among the citizens, but only by taking the rent as public revenue. Gracchus' fate did

not encourage others to follow in his steps. Subsequent reformers aimed rather at mitigating the effects of land monopoly than at destroying it. The most important measure aiming at this was that which provided cheap corn for the poor of Rome. In 123 B. C. it was enacted that all citizens who applied personally in Rome should be given $1\frac{1}{4}$ bushels of corn per month at about half market price, and later on the corn was given away gratis. As the free corn could only be obtained in Rome, of course this measure only attracted a still greater crowd of destitute citizens to swell the idle mob there, and, of course, the great increase of population thus produced raised land values in the city and enabled higher rents to be charged. So the men who had been driven out of the country by the land monopolists were still compelled to pay tribute to them in the city.

STRANGLER BY LAND MONOPOLY, TAXATION, AND OFFICIALS

After the fall of the Republic the emperors, beginning from Augustus, established an efficient and on the whole honest administration, and gave the Empire a new lease of prosperity. But the government was mechanical and bureaucratic, and nothing was done to curb land monopoly. In the succeeding centuries these evils gradually intensified; the taxation, levied entirely on the fruits of industry, became more crushing, the officials became more numerous and interfering, and land monopoly became stronger. Finally the Empire perished, strangled to death by these three evils. Is not its fate a lesson to us? If allowed to continue, land monopoly will surely destroy our civilization, as it destroyed that of Rome. But we have one great advantage over the Romans. Thanks to Henry George we are in a position to understand clearly the disease from which we are suffering and how it can be cured, while they had no clear understanding of either of these things. Let us see that we do not fail to apply the remedy before it is too late.