

A S O C I A L D E M O C R A T S T R I B U T E
T O H E N R Y G E O R G E

By The Hon. K.K. Steincke

Chairman of the Danish Upper House of Parliament

(A translation of the Message sent by the Hon. K.K. Steincke to the Danish Henry George Union for conveyance to the present International Conference. Mr. Steincke, before he occupied his present high place in Parliament, was for a long period Minister of Justice and is a former Minister of Social Affairs).

Ever since I was a young student I have been a Social Democrat - which fortunately is not synonymous with being a Marxist in the orthodox meaning of that term or a believer in a materialist philosophy - but I can remember no book which made a deeper impression on me as a young "idealist" than Henry George's famous "Progress and Poverty".

He was moved with such burning zeal; there was such vigour in his presentation; he showed such knowledge of the social state and its evolution. Of course Henry George was not the first to perceive the evils attendant upon privileged property in land, how it gave unearned wealth to the fortuitous owners and their heirs, especially in the great cities and above all in a new and expanding country like America. A century before, the French Physiocrats had maintained that the land was the source of all wealth and had striven for the Import Unique or Single Tax. About the same time Rousseau (in his Essay on the Origin of Inequality Among Men) wrote: "The first man who, having enclosed a tract of ground, bethought himself of saying, 'This is mine', and found people silly enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. What crimes, wars and murders, what miseries and horrors, would have been spared the human race, if some one had thrown down the fence and filled in the ditch and cried out to his fellows, 'Do not listen to this impostor; you are lost if you forget that the fruits of the earth are for all, and that the earth belongs to no one'". And following a similar train of thought, Grundtvig, Carlyle, Spencer and others have made utterance.

But what especially brought conviction in reading Henry George was the mass of evidence he produced and his proof of the persistence of poverty despite constant technical progress and steadily increasing

production; as well as his insistence that political freedom was of no consequence so long as the economic foundation remained unchanged: "To educate men who must be condemned to poverty; to base on a state of most glaring social inequality political institutions under which men are theoretically equal is to stand a pyramid on its apex". It is a condition, George says, obtaining all over the world that where the value of land is highest, civilisation displays the greatest luxury side by side with the most extreme poverty because the rent of land swallows the whole gain and pauperism accompanies progress.

There was nothing particularly new in that, but its newness lay in showing that all would be set right if only the state collected the whole rent of land - of course without compensation. Herbert Spencer wrote: "Had we to deal with the parties who originally robbed the human race of its heritage, we might make short work of the matter". Henry George's retort was: "Why not make short work of the matter anyhow? For this robbery is not like the robbery of a horse or a sum of money that ceases with the act. It is a fresh and continuous robbery that goes on every day and every hour". (and adding: "It is not from the produce of the past that rent is drawn; it is from the produce of the present. It is a toll levied upon labour constantly and continuously").

This land reform will not, after all, make any one poorer excepting those who without any injury to themselves could well do with being a good deal less rich. Nor would our working small-peasant proprietors suffer loss (and here is cited Henry George's reference to a broadside of the then existing Free Trade League of New York - translator) - for when "the farmer rises in the morning he draws on his pantaloons taxed 40 per cent and his boots taxed 30 per cent, striking a light with a match taxed 200 per cent" and so on through the day and through life, until, killed by taxation, he is lowered into the grave with a rope taxed 45 per cent.

(But stop the private appropriation of the rent of land?). That is monstrous, say the bondholders, the ground landlords and the large estate owners. Yet it is for them no worse than to have Gladstone himself in effect saying that he did not regard (real) property as a given and unchangeable thing; it was a product of civilian society; the lawgivers had granted it and the lawgivers could take it away again.

As will perhaps be understood, I have no quarrel with the arguments behind these ideas. Therefore I have used time and opportunity to urge that the Social Democrats should take far more interest in the practical politics of the land-rent question than the majority of them do. Workers in the towns so easily regard the industrial capitalist as their exploiter and it is so difficult to make them see that the worst exploiter is the private ownership of land-values ("grundkapital") with respect to the community.

In my opinion no one, whether from an idealist or a purely practical point of view, can be a sworn advocate of a stiffly graduated tax on incomes and possessions. That form of taxation can only be justified so long as and because it has hitherto not been possible to get a majority in Parliament to appreciate the socially beneficial effects of collecting the rent of land into the public treasuries, together with the gains from other monopolies; and (for what other revenue is required) to levy the rest of the taxation upon inheritance and large accumulations of wealth. Meanwhile it is not Social Democracy which is opposed to taking that road. No, the real or the furtive opposition comes from all those who have "liberalism in their heads and nationalism in their bones", to cite H.G.Wells.

The whole unhappy state in which the world finds itself is due to the separation of morals from politics. It is this which has taken possession of the citadels of monopoly capitalism ("privatkapitalismus") and rules the modern dictatorships - contemptuous of human beings, spokesmen of political violence and collective crimes. But who has more strongly and earnestly urged the necessity of combining morals with politics, than in fact - Henry George.

With whom would equally be,

Yours respectfully,

K.K. STEINCKE