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The Man at the Margin

By Oliver R. Trowbridge

The idea of the margin is the most fundamental of all economic ideas. The economic margin and the man who works thereon furnish the basis of all true economic discussion. All Single Taxers are familiar with the doctrine of the "margin of cultivation" and its relation to the problem of ground rent; but this is only one of many manifestations of the idea of the margin as it appears in a complete analysis of economic phenomena. And not only is the man at the margin the most important person in the entire realm of economics in any complete theoretical discussion of economic problems, but he also occupies a vital position in the field of politics when we consider the matter of putting Single Tax doctrines into practical operation.

In the open market at any given time there is a group of men supplied with some commodity which they, in competition with one another, offer for sale to the general public. Somewhere among the buying public there is a man who must be reached by these sellers and induced to buy in order that they may dispose of their entire stock of the commodity in question. Such a man becomes the marginal buyer of that commodity in that market and the sellers must cater to him. In some way, by appeals to his needs, or desires, or even whims, and by lowness of price to come within his means, he must be reached as a buyer. In the open market, modern competition among sellers resolves itself into a matter of expertness in reaching the marginal buyer—the most indifferent buyer whose purchase is necessary to exhaust the supply. Just so in the field of practical politics those who desire the public to adopt a new doctrine, such as the Single Tax, must make their appeal not only to those who will most readily accept the doctrine but also to those who are most indifferent to it, but whose votes are necessary to its adoption. The moment this fact is fully recognized, that moment it will appear that if the Single Tax is ever to be adopted, appeals in its favor must be made to all classes of people.

Another thing: Our appeals to various people must be made in the most effective way. And this way is,

whenever possible, to build upon the foundations already laid in men's minds rather than to tear down these foundations and begin anew. If a man is inclined towards socialism, it is better, in my judgment, to show him that the Single Tax working plan contains all the really good features of socialism, than to undertake to combat his socialistic ideas with individualism. If a man is a firm believer in protection, it is easier to show him that the protective idea can be maintained better without a tariff than with it, than it is to try to convince him that he is weak-minded for believing in protection at all. This is not political trimming—it is the exercise of practical common sense. Single Taxers must become expert in reaching not only the favorably inclined, but also the indifferent and even hostile marginal voter. We must attract to our movement the socialistically inclined and the protectionists. The individualists and the free traders to whom we usually appeal would not suffice, if we had them all. The marginal voter lies beyond the reach of our present propaganda.

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