

My Conversion To Georgism

Translated for LAND AND FREEDOM from *Revista del Impuesto Unico*.

TODAY the Georgists are forming in legions; the conversion is going forward. But when in our press there appeared some biographical data about our friend, Antonio M. Molina, among his meritorious labors for the cause the conversion of Dr. Felix Vitale of Montevideo to the Single Tax stood out as a conspicuous achievement.]

AMONG English speaking Georgists there still persists a curiosity to know how a Latin became converted to Georgism. The step from the current ideas to the knowledge and conviction of the doctrine called Single Tax is an event very similar to a change of religion. In Italy the works of Henry George are unknown. Even to this day there is no movement known for promulgating them. From London I asked of a learned professor, translator of "Social Problems," if the theory of the North American reformer were mentioned in the University. He replied to me that only two works translated into Italian form part of the library of any scholar. Considerable was the astonishment and delight on knowing that I was an Italian by birth, and by education, with many years residence in a South American republic. In reality, a Georgist who is convinced and enthusiastic even to the martyrdom imposed on those who create new ideas, new at least in form, must saturate himself profoundly with democratic sentiments such as George conceives them and inspires us with. Such as they are conceived by those who have received their education in societies really marching toward liberty and justice and which fear for the collapse for their rising democracy. In an Italian educated in monarchial and caste traditions, in these false South American democracies, the discovery of a Georgist appeared some years ago as a miracle of providence. The miracle of providence which longed to receive at last spread abroad such a glorious truth. Socialism which appears so much to stir the masses and some intellectuals was presented and is today presented to a formidable majority of English and American as a bureaucratic organization which would complicate social functions, greatly interfering with that individual liberty for which the Englishman professes a traditional devotion from the time of Magna Charta down to that pacific revolution which, though by a great war, is being realized throughout the whole British Empire.

I have often had to tell the brief story of my conversion.

Generally, when a radical change takes place in our ideas, we ask ourselves why so simple a truth does not progress more rapidly. The theories of George are more than theories deduced from experience; they are irrefutable facts. Is the increment of land values through the increase of population and social progress a theory? Is the fact that this value, instead of benefitting those who

create it, goes into the hands of the land owner, a theory? Is it a theory that, in large cities where land values are highest, the most humiliating poverty, the deepest moral degradation and the utmost corruption exist? Many of these theories could be cited which are facts. Tradition, nevertheless, produces a moral anasthesia in communities and gives to the simplest ideas the appearance of being utopian and impracticable. And the public? The public is its own worst enemy. The people that most needs redemption are precisely those that stone their redeemers. All for the people, nothing for the people, said Napoleon; and I was wont to repeat this to my friend as we walked up and down the avenues while he strove to convert me.

I had lived for ten years in a turbulent country where civil wars, called revolutions, followed one another at brief intervals. The presidents were elected by the armies, as the last Roman emperors were by the pretorians. An industrial crisis had followed an epoch of great speculations in land (a fact which no one recognized or denounced.) The consequent economic depression, which was so deplorable as to make us despair of the future of the country, was attributed to political uneasiness. The gold in the banks did not come out except to take advantage of the drop in values. A countless number of houses remained without tenants. The farms were bare of cattle and men. Discouragement invaded even the homes of the nabobs. Not one of the statisticians and professors of political economy mentioned an economic cause.

At this moment arrived two new works: "Young Europe" and "Militarism" by Guillermo Ferrero,—a great admirer of North American democracy and of its magnates, whom he praises for their generosity. Why not attribute this tangle of social misfortunes to the spirit of militarism which had invaded the whole environment, the education, the culture of the South American republics, when Ferrero had shown it as a fact in France, Germany and Italy?

Satisfied with having at last found an explanation of all the ills that afflicted these republics, I set out for England and then New York with the new ideas added to all that I had learned from Darwin, Spencer, Huxley, Lombroso, Ferri, etc.

I carried with me an introduction to Munn & Co., owners of an important review, *The Scientific American*; and there I was presented to the head of the Spanish edition, Antonio Molina, of Puerto Rico.

He was a man of 50 years of age, of Spanish type, penetrating eyes. Educated in Paris and New York, he was master of two languages. I soon learned that he had been a friend of Henry George; and his family, intimate friends of that of George. Gifted with great versatility of talent, he possessed the power of true eloquence. As enthusiastic as an Italian, as tenacious as an Englishman, no one could come near him without in one way or another absorbing the theories of our economic creed.

He invited me to a lunch; and in order that I should not miss my French cooking, he took me to a Swiss restaurant. I told him about my plans for becoming a millionaire in that country where millionaires were counted by the score. He did not discourage me, but he spoke to me of social ills, of the difficulties of earning a living, of the impossibility almost of making one's way, of bankruptcies, robberies, moral and political corruption, and finally of property in land.

I did not understand one iota of what he was saying to me. I thought that, with my own efforts, my will of iron, in a country described by Ferrero as an Eldorado, I could in a few years succeed in gaining the admiration of that writer as an Italian magnate made in North America. When relating to my wife my encounter, I described Molina as a very intelligent, very kind, very well educated Spaniard, but of very doubtful mental balance. This Spaniard had spoken badly of socialists and badly of anarchists. What political or economic ideas could he believe in?

In spite of my distrust of the man's mentality, I continued to associate with him. I felt the need of hearing him. Although his ideas appeared to me paradoxical, they attracted me.

He presented me with a copy of *Progress and Poverty*. As yet I had not mastered English; and after the first chapters, I stumbled into the law of wages and interest and could not continue. Then he presented me a copy of *Social Problems* and had the patience to translate what I did not understand. I finished the book and began to see something. But, beside the fact that, as a medical man, I did not consider land as my subject, Ferrero still overwhelmed me with his superficialities, which at that time seemed to me original and brilliant.

It is always a problem with English speaking people to select the first book for anyone who wishes to begin the study of economic subjects. The propaganda committees had edited a little work bearing two headings: *Natural Taxation*, by Shearman, and *Open Letter to Pope Leo XIII*. When I had finished reading *Social Problems*, the master handed me the above little work, without ceasing in his attacks on my Lombroso-Ferri logic. My conversion was ripening fast. Finally, after some months residence in New York, my knowledge of English progressed and I was able to approach the reading of *Progress and Poverty*. Who can refute that work? My conversion was now complete. The disciple of Molina became one of the most enthusiastic Georgists.

At once I began my active propaganda. I published in Italian newspapers articles on Housing in New York, the most densely populated city, where lack of air, of light, in spite of other conditions of comfort and a standard of living higher than in all other countries, caused tuberculosis and debilitating diseases to decimate the immigrant poor.

I had the opportunity—which I considered a good fortune—to witness a campaign struggle for the presidency. On the one side McKinley, with his program of Protection and the promise of the Dingley Tariff. On the other side Bryan, for the Democratic Party, with a platform of Free Trade and the free coinage of Silver in the ratio of 1 to 16. I could admire the political education of that people, in spite of the economic ideas of its first citizen not having yet opened a breach in established interests, which there assume monstrously vast proportions. In spite of the aberration in economic ideas, the oratorical struggle revolved exclusively about economic problems: protection or free trade; which of these would be of most benefit to the people? Is silver money advisable? And in this environment my faith and conviction in the sublimity of our doctrine was strengthened.

My poor friend and master died tranquilly over two years ago without a single hour's illness. Before dying, he knew that his disciple had done his utmost to proclaim the idea in the midst of silence, indifference and hostility. What a satisfaction if he could witness the battle of young Argentines, full of enthusiasm and courage, for the cause of the Single Tax.

FELIX VITALE.

History Repeats Itself

THE preamble to an Act in the British Parliament of 1534 was as follows:

"Forasmuch as divers persons, to whom God in his goodness hath disposed great plenty, now of late daily studied and invented ways how they might accumulate into few hands, as well great multitude of farms as great plenty of cattle, and in especial sheep, putting such land to pasture and not tillage; whereby they have not only pulled down churches and towns, and enhanced the rents and fines of land so that no poor man may meddle with it, but also have raised the prices which hath been accustomed, by reason whereof a marvellous number of the people of this realm be not able to provide for themselves, their wives, and children, but be so discouraged with misery and poverty that they fall daily to theft and robbery, or pitifully die of hunger and cold."

—"The Commonwealth," London.

NOBODY, said President Coolidge to an audience of radio men, will be allowed to monopolize the air. Calvin does not seem so greatly worried, however, by the efforts of a few men to monopolize the earth.

—*Cleveland Press*

THE distribution of wealth is a division of wealth. When the part of wealth that goes to rent is ascertained that part that is left goes to labor and capital in wages and interest.—HENRY GEORGE.