

The Land Question

By

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Index.

Introduction. P.P. 1-2.

The land question a question of equality of opportunity.
Land ownership by the many practically the same
as if owned by a single individual.

The accepted theory. P.P. 2-3

Whence comes the right to private property in land?

Herbert Spencer's answer, P. 4.

Mr. Thomas Davidson's answer, P. 4.

Cardinal points, P. 5.

The best for the State, P.P. 5-6

Natural value and produced value, P. 7-8.

What should be done, P.P. 8-11.

Conclusion, P.P. 11-12.

The Land Question.

266

The land question is essentially a question of the equality of opportunity. Men to possess equality of opportunity must have equal rights to the materials and forces of nature. Land includes all the natural materials and forces of the universe outside of man. Without land men can make nothing and trade nothing, neither artificial materials and appliances nor the finished objects to be consumed. It is his standing place, his natural workshop, the storehouse from which he draws everything required for ministering to the satisfaction of his material wants. To invest one person, therefore, with exclusive ownership of the land, or to recognize and enforce the claims of one man to such ownership — whether his claims originate in force, fraud or contract — would be equivalent to conferring upon him absolute power over other men.

In respect to this power, it would make no difference whether exclusive ownership of all land were vested in one man or in many, provided the owners were few enough to combine and agree among themselves, and should actually do so. It is not until the number of land owners becomes so large as to make unity of decision and action impracticable, or until for any other reason they cease to act together as one man, that a difference may be

distinguished; and then the difference is one of degree and not of principle. The same virtual ownership of man by man is involved, though the power can no longer be arbitrarily wielded to the extreme.

But it is maintained by a large class that all possess an equality of opportunity inasmuch as we all possess the right to own land. Land ownership is denied no one, and all that is required is the thrift necessary for procuring it in case one is not so fortunate as to inherit land. Accustomed as we are to private property in land we do not question any man's right to acquire all the land he can get and to do as he pleases with it; hold it out of use for speculative purposes, rent it to tenants, or work it himself. He may own a square mile, ten miles square, a county or the whole Mississippi Valley. He may colonize it with tenants or turn it into a wilderness and there is no authority to restrain him. He may erect a high fence around it and keep an armed patrol to prevent trespass. He may be an actual occupier of the land, or he may be an absentee landlord, an infant or an idiot. If by inheritance he came into possession of the land, he may live luxuriously off the rent collected through agents without any effort whatever on his part. He is only a parasite living off the wealth produced by the workers. So

long as men are allowed to monopolize the material and forces of nature they will do so, and in so far as they are allowed to monopolize them they deprive others of their use. It is man's nature to grasp all he can, and in so doing he holds large tracts of land out of use for speculative purposes and is able to demand an exorbitant rent for such land as he permits to be used. To tell the landless man that he possesses an equality of opportunity, under these conditions, with other men is as bitter iron as to toss him into the middle of the Atlantic and inform him that he has an equality of opportunity with the sharks.

Whence comes this right to private property in land? What authority possesses the right to grant to any man private property in the natural resources of the universe? The air and the water, the sunshine and the rain belong to all men alike. Nature is absolutely impartial. She showers her smiles just as bounteously and as sweetly on the dissolute tramp resting by the roadside as on the highest official in the land. The sun shines and the rain falls just the same on the poor man's acre as on the rich man's estate. Then whence came the right to private property in land, the bounty of nature, existing before man and necessary to his existence? No title to its possession can be valid in the same sense that a

title to the product of labor is valid and indefeasible, for land can not be produced. It is an absolute factor in production. Herbert Spencer answers the question in this manner. "It can never be pretended that the existing titles to such property are legitimate. Violence, fraud, the prerogative of force, the claims of superior cunning, — these are the sources to which these titles may be traced. The original deeds were written with the sword rather than with the pen; not lawyers, but soldiers were the conveyancers; blows were the current coin given in payment; and for seals, blood was used in preference to wax".* Could valid claims be thus constituted?

Mr. Thomas Davidson says, "The same reason which induces the state to grant to individuals property in what they produce induces it to grant them property in what they do not produce, — because it is best for the ends of the State that it should do so." This is a simple statement without a particle of sustaining evidence. — "Because it is best for the ends of the State that it should do so." It is right here that the single tax men and those who advocate land nationalization take issue with Mr. Davidson.

Upon certain cardinal points, we must all agree else argument amounts to naught. One of these is

*(Social Statics, Old Edition. Chapter IX.)

that what is best for the people constituting the State is analogous to what is best for the State. Second, that that is best for the people which by securing equality of opportunity reduces poverty to a minimum, allows the greatest freedom and secures to all the greatest number of conveniences and comforts. Also every man has certain natural rights the first of which is the right to life, which includes the right to himself, to the use of his own powers and the results of his own exertions. He has no right to compel others to work exclusively for his benefit; nor have others a right to demand that he shall work solely for their benefit. In order to possess these rights he must have free access to the materials and forces of nature. Land, as used in the economic sense, is absolutely essential to the use of these materials and forces, consequently he must have free access to land. Under private ownership of land this can only be so when there is a superabundance of land, as was the case in the United States a half century or more ago. As soon as it becomes possible for land owners to possess all the desirable land it will be taken up and those who come afterward must agree to their terms; for, owning the land, they practically own all who do not, whether they are employed in mill or factory, or apply their labor directly to the soil. Just so long as they

are denied free access to land, whether they improve that opportunity or not, they are in the power of those who own the land. This system inevitably produces a class of landed proprietors and a class of tenants: landlords and serfs, millionaires and paupers.

The ownership of land must not be confused with the use of land. Land may be owned and not used or it may be used and not owned. Under a system whereby land might be used but not owned, except as owned by the State, no man could hold land out of use for speculative purposes, and the rent, instead of enriching favored individuals, would go to society as a whole. No man would unwillingly be under the power of another. All would possess an equality of opportunity, and if one acquired more wealth than another, it would be because of his superior ability and not because he had a monopoly on the natural resources. There would be no necessity for extreme poverty, and each would possess the fruits of his labor. There would be no very rich class and no very poor. It would, therefore, "be best for the ends of the State" to nationalize land instead of making it private property. This is contrary to Mr. Davidson's statement.

Mr. Davidson further says, "Whatever value land has is communicated to it by human labor, inasmuch as it abolishes the distinction between

natural value and value produced by man."* By natural value Mr. Davidson evidently means the inherent properties of the soil and it is hard to see just how the distinction between inherent properties and value can be abolished. The inherent properties of land is understood to be its producing capacity; its value is the worth attached to it by society on account of its position, the demand for land, and in some cases it is influenced by the amount of labor expended upon it in order to render it useful. For example, a piece of land is capable of producing forty bushels of wheat per acre. This is due to its inherent properties. On the other hand, take the case of a vacant lot in the business part of New York City or Chicago. There never has been one dollar worth of labor put upon it; yet it may be worth several hundred thousand dollars due solely to its position and the demand for land. Take the case of a raw quarter section of land. It may be worth say two thousand dollars and produces nothing but hay. After it is broken up and prepared for cultivation it may sell for three thousand, the extra thousand being due to the labor expended upon it in fitting it for cultivation. However if this chanced to be a worthless piece of land it would sell for no more than before the labor was put upon it. This does not include materials

*(Single Tax Debate, Page 9.)

such as fertilizers carried to the land from other parts, but in such cases a piece of land of little value may be increased greatly both in producing power and in value. On the other hand the labor might be lost in so far as the value of the land is concerned; as would be the case of applying fertilizers to and putting into cultivation a vacant lot in the heart of New York City or Chicago. It would sell for no more after the labor had been expended upon it than it would before though its producing capacity has been increased. Thus we readily discover that it is impossible to abolish the distinction between natural value and produced value.

What should be done may be seen clearly enough, but how best to do it is quite another question. How to transfer the ownership of land from the individual to the State is the problem which confronts us, and to do this with the least injustice to the individual and smallest expense to the State requires careful thought and extreme caution. The best way for the State to get rid of the landlord would seem to be to tax him out of existence as proposed by Henry George: that is ~~make~~ make it very unprofitable to hold desirable land out of use. If the State possesses the power to grant private property in land, it also possesses the power to deny private ownership, but it can not rightfully take

away without just compensation that which it has already given. A system might, however, be established whereby the land would revert to the State on the death of the owner instead of to his heirs; as under the present system. All improvements and the right to occupy and use the land would fall to the heirs as under the present regime.

There are four necessary requirements of a complete solution of the land problem.

- (1) In the first place, it is clear that land ownership must be replaced by a system whereby men may use but not own the land.
- (2) Arrangements must be made by which the tenure of the holder of land will be secure and permanent, and nothing must be permitted to interfere with his free use of the land, or his certainty of reaping all the fruits of any labor or outlay he may bestow upon it.
- (3) The freest sale and transfer of every holder's interest in his land must be secured.
- (4) In order that these conditions be rendered permanent; subletting must be absolutely prohibited, and mortgages strictly limited.

The first of these propositions hardly needs further discussion. It has already been shown that private ownership of land does not offer an equality of opportunity, and that to secure this the State must be

the owner.

As to the second of these propositions I can do no better than quote from Henry George. "What is necessary for the use of land is not its private ownership, but the security of improvements. It is not necessary to say to a man, 'this land is yours', in order to induce him to cultivate or improve it. It is only necessary to say to him, 'whatever your labor or capital produces on this land shall be yours'. Give a man security that he may reap and he will sow; assure him of the possession of the house he wants to build and he will build it. These are the natural rewards of labor. It is for the sake of reaping that men sow; it is for the sake of possessing houses that men build. The ownership of land has nothing to do with it."* The tenure of the holder of land can be as permanent under State ownership as under private ownership, and the freedom of use and certainty of reaping all the fruits of any labor or outlay much more so, for private individuals often confiscate or destroy improvements as did the landlords in Ireland and Scotland.

In order to secure the greatest freedom to move from place to place, and to induce men to improve the land, the utmost freedom of sale and transfer of every holder's interest in his land must be allowed. This

* (Progress and Poverty, Book VIII, Chapter I.)

is perfectly obvious without further elucidation.

There must, however, be one restriction on the use of land, which is, that it must not be sublet. This is absolutely necessary to secure the benefits of nationalization, because, once admit sub-letting and landlordism would again rise under a new name. The State as owner of the land, can prohibit subletting, and the importance of doing so is admitted by all who have studied the subject. It is well known that in Ireland the middlemen are often the hardest landlords, while none "rack-rent" their tenants more than those who have purchased land for the purpose of deriving an income from it. Subletting would defeat the very aims for which nationalization is intended: the use of land by and for those who occupy it.

There are people who are always trying to find some medium between right and wrong. There are the people who, beginning to recognize the importance of the land question propose the reservation to actual settlers of what is left of the public domain, and the limitation of estates. There is no use in talking about restricting the amount of land one may hold. That, even if it were practicable, were idle, and would not meet the difficulty. The whole system of private property in land is wrong and should be abolished. The

equality of opportunity that would result from land nationalization would effect immense economies and greatly add to productive power. The cost of idleness, pauperism and crime that spring from poverty would be saved to the community; the increased mobility of labor, the increased intelligence of the masses, that would result from this equalized opportunity, the greater incentive to invention and to the use of improved processes that would result from the increase in wages, would enormously increase production and the world would enter upon an era of prosperity and happiness unparalleled in its history.