

THE CHIEF OBSTACLE TO THE SINGLE TAX AND HOW TO REMOVE IT.

(For the Review.)

By PETER AITKEN.

In submitting this title for the subject of my essay, I use the term "Single Tax" in what is known as its unlimited sense. I make this distinction because the chief obstacle to the proposal to take only so much of ground rent as may be needed to defray the expenses of an economical government will be quite different from that encountered by the proposal to make land common property.

And however we may disguise it, what we want is simply to impose taxation so as to take land out of the control of private owners and throw it open to whoever will make the best use of it, in the words of Henry George, and make land common property. And we propose to do this without compensation to the present holders, for the benefits which they would receive from the change would be simply their share of the common benefit, and cannot logically be called compensation for the special privilege they now possess. Our attitude on this question of course arouses opposition not only from landlords, but at first from every man of *common* honesty, and this opposition is what I conceive to be the chief obstacle to the success of our cause.

The statement that our proposal arouses opposition among men of common honesty may surprise and incense some of my more ardent colleagues, but even at this risk, I repeat it. A distinction should be made, it seems to me, between abstract and practical or common honesty. Right and wrong have been said to be matters of geography, and applied to men's conceptions of morality this is true; though there doubtless is such a thing as abstract right or justice in human relations, quite independent of time or place. That this ideal justice is, and always will be beyond our power to realize in practice, is probable; though this consideration while it may reconcile us to the shortness of our steps, should not prevent us from going as fast as we can in that direction. On the other hand, the consideration that our own imperfect conceptions of justice are not inconsistent with honesty on our part, should prevent us from condemning as dishonest those whose conceptions are still more imperfect. For not only are our doctrines imperfect, measured by the ideal, we are not even the most advanced exponents of practical justice. The Socialist doctrine, "From every man according to his ability to each according to his needs," is a much higher expression of the sense of justice than the doctrine of the equal right to the use of the earth. Nevertheless, we quite honestly reject it because we do not consider it practicable, whereupon the Socialist calls us cowards and dishonest.

Henry George himself has been charged with bending the knee to the money power in his defense of interest, and I confess that I have found it difficult to understand how he could advance the argument he does on this point. But I would not think of charging Henry George with dishonesty. Some of us make the mistake of supposing that it is always easier to be dishonest than mistaken. In other words, that it is always easier to decide what is right to do than to do it, and so we attribute to motives of self interest what is really due to honest doubt. For my own part, I am unwilling to question the honesty of such men as Heber Newton and Dr. Rainsford, even though they draw large salaries which would be endangered by their unqualified endorsement of Henry George; nor do I consider that the purity of my own motives in refusing to condemn these eminent citizens is seriously contamin-

ated by my confessed desire to conciliate, and if possible enlist them in our ranks. Such men, it seems to me, should be much more valuable to our cause as allies than as enemies, or even neutrals, and perhaps the most encouraging disclosure made by the death of Henry George was that of the large number of prominent men whom he has almost persuaded.

Now a very important and timely question, perhaps the most important to our cause at present, is what shall be the attitude of Single Taxers toward these occupants, so to speak, of the anxious seat. Shall we send them away sorrowful because of their great possessions by insisting upon their unconditional surrender, or shall we follow the apostle's example, and be all things to all men if by any means we may win some? And these men are worth winning; not so much by reason of their own numbers, but because of the number of those whose opinions they influence, if not control. These are the religious, or perhaps I should say church-going, people with progressive instincts, who may be said to constitute the working conscience of society, and through whom I believe our reform must come, if it ever comes peaceably. These people not only honestly oppose our proposals, but they oppose them *because* they are honest. Without personal interests to serve, but honestly diffident, and with good reason, of their own power of forming correct judgments in matters of public morality, they accept piously the teachings of those whom they consider authorities. They would no more think of forming an opinion of Henry George without consulting their clergyman or newspaper, than they would think of treating their sick child without consulting their doctor.

Still, one of the most cheering signs of the times is the growing preference of this large class for new and advanced ideas. I think we should cultivate a little more respect for this class, if only for its size, or at least try to disguise our contempt for its judgment. One of our own number, who by reason of his lineage ought to know better than to put himself so perilously near being in danger of Hell fire, has recently expressed the opinion that any one who confesses himself a disciple of Henry George, and at the same time a believer in compensation, confesses himself a fool.

Well, Carlyle said the British were mostly fools (meaning, doubtless, all but himself); and the universal expression of sympathy in this country at Henry George's death, coupled with an almost equally universal condemnation of his confiscation doctrine, indicates that our censorious brother has a similar opinion of his countrymen. But we are all fools—fools of nature, Hamlet calls us—and I don't know but the kind of fool who fails to welcome the co-operation of another fool in the work of liberating humanity, simply because the other fool believes in compensation, is one of the worst. For Henry George's arguments for the beneficence of his panacea are just as strong with compensation as without it, and if the argument for the advantages of the Single Tax were no more convincing to the average mind than the argument for its justice without compensation, I should be much less sanguine than I am of its ultimate adoption. We may as well confess the fact, that incontestable as Henry George's arguments for the justice of his remedy seem to us, they do not appear conclusive to many even honest and disinterested people. We should remember that we are cranks with abnormally tender consciences, at least in public matters, while the average citizen has a conscience suited to the state of society in which he lives. His interpretations of the moral law are furnished him by the decrees of legislatures and the decisions of courts, not by the arguments of a set of cranks, who must always, in the nature of things, be in a contemptible minority. *And while as a sincere and consistent crank I give my full adhesion to the no compensation position, I propose to take the liberty, with kind permission of the REVIEW, of presenting the other side.*

To begin with, I wish to observe that the analogy between the system of private land ownership and that of slavery, which in this controversy we so invariably and persistently seek to establish, while close enough to be perceived by one who desires to do so, is at the same time sufficiently incomplete to justify the blindness of one who does not want to see. For example, while it is true that in some countries titles to land can be as clearly traced to force or fraud as the title to any slave ever dragged or lured from his native wilds, the possession of the suffrage by the masses of the American people from the inception of our government, places the responsibility for the system in this country quite as much upon those who have suffered as upon those who have profited by it. If this is slavery, it is willing slavery, and it seems to me that a willing slave is hardly fit for freedom. It may be replied that many of the black slaves in the South preferred their slavery to freedom, yet that made it none the less our duty to free those who wanted freedom. But this argument would lose much of its force if the slaves had originally agreed to enter that condition, and subsequently changed their minds. Remember, I do not say it would lose all its force, for even the ordinary conscience recognizes the necessity for some qualifications besides freedom in the making of a valid contract; but in this case of the community versus the landlords, one party is as much entitled to plead the baby act as the other, for both were ignorant of what was involved in the contract. I am not seeking now to deny the analogy between ownership of slaves and the ownership of land, which undeniably exists, but only to draw attention to its incompleteness which, as I said before, justifies the blindness of one who does not want to see it, and that is the one we must reach, if we are to be successful in our attempt to accomplish this change peaceably. The existing public conscience fails to recognize immorality in the private ownership of land, and a new conscience is not born in a people without more bitter pangs than the American Nation has felt since it was inseminated by the genius of Henry George. Moreover, in appealing to the war created conscience of the American people to justify our proposed land emancipation act, we are taking an advantage which is much more likely to produce resentment than conviction in our opponents. A judgment wrung from a people by a cruel war, is not one they feel bound to square their actions by under all circumstances. The proper question to determine the dictates of the popular conscience on the land question is not, Was the emancipation of slaves without compensation just? But would it have been just to so emancipate them before the war? And I doubt very much that the majority of the American people would even now answer that question affirmatively, while Abraham Lincoln's long hesitation before issuing his proclamation near the close of the war, shows what the popular opinion must have been at its commencement.

This deep seated prejudice in favor of property of any kind then is what I conceive to be the chief obstacle to the general acceptance of Henry George's teachings. It is not ignorance, for while evidence is sadly too common that ignorance of the question is the rule and knowledge the exception, I am satisfied that there exists among a large number of the more influential and independent public speakers and writers, not only enough knowledge of Henry George's theory, but enough faith in its efficacy as a means of social redemption to dissipate the general ignorance in a short time if this terrible spectre of confiscation were laid to rest. At any rate, one most unfortunate result to our cause of the uncompromising insistence by Single Tax advocates upon confiscation as a necessary part of their reform, is that of keeping it out of public discussion as a practical question. Not only is the landlord instinct too prevalent among farmers to allow them to even consider seriously a measure confessedly designed to rob landlords, but with the more thrifty among city

workers, investments in land are large and constantly growing in popularity, as witness the pages upon pages of advertisements in the Sunday papers.

But it is not the opposition of special interests like these that is most deadly to our cause. The general sense of the community is against it. We may see this more clearly perhaps by observing the way in which socialism is viewed by the American people. We who have considered it dispassionately have other objections, but the prejudice of the people at large is due simply to the division of property which it involves, or which they believe it to involve.

We are sometimes surprised that Henry George should be called a Socialist. Here is the reason. The essential feature of socialism to the popular mind is confiscation of private property, and any scheme which proposes that, no matter on what pretext, is confronted at the outset with a tremendous mountain of prejudice, and this prejudice is quite as insurmountable in the minds of those who have no property to divide, as of those who have. Perhaps more so, for the consciousness of being actuated in their opposition by disinterested motives is with some natures a greater inspiration to perseverance than the possession of threatened material interests.

But I have promised to point out not only what seems to me the chief obstacle to the spread of our ideas, but the easiest way, in my view, of overcoming that obstacle; and as a necessary preliminary to this I wish to suggest that we should recognize and admit the weight of the obstacle. If all we had to do were to prove to our own satisfaction that these people are inconsistent and illogical, our task would be easy, but we must prove it to theirs. We are all apt to judge others by ourselves, instead of trying to see the matter from their standpoint. We must remember the state of the man convinced against his will, and see if we cannot make them willing to see the force of our arguments, and as the first step towards this, I think we should cease insisting upon confiscation as a necessary means to the accomplishment of our end.

If we can agree upon this point we shall be in a better position to meet the compromise proposals which Henry George used to say we should allow to come from the other side. At least hints that such proposals would be acceptable are coming, if not from the landlords, from their spiritual advisers. At present we can only meet them in one of three ways. We may evade them, or reject or accept them. There are several clever methods of doing the first. One is to point out that by our most ingenious and highly approved plan for shifting taxation from the products of labor to land values, there won't be any confiscation in the majority of cases, and in the few cases where there is, the victims having plenty of other property will be well able to stand it. The only trouble with this evasion is that it does not meet the case of the widow and orphan, with all their money invested in vacant land, and one such possible case is sufficient to condemn in the average mind, the whole scheme.

Another favorite reply is to show that after we have kept up our agitation for a few thousand years—which is all that will be necessary at the present rate to convert the majority to our view, the selling value of land will have dwindled to such a point that there won't be anything to confiscate, the great beauty of which contention lies in its absolute immunity from disproof, at least in our day. Such arguments are generally more convincing to those who advance them than to any one else. For my own part I always feel that our opponents look on them as a kind of trick. They really are perfectly fair, as far as they go, and once a man is started in our direction they make excellent cumulative evidence. But the initial prejudice against confiscation is rarely or never overcome by such arguments. A much more effective method is to absolutely reject on high moral grounds any and all proposals to compensate landlords; to insist, though as I have shown the case is not exactly parallel,

that if any one is to be compensated, it should be the slave. But who among us can hope to rival Henry George's final and crushing broadsides on this phase of the question? And if he has not convinced many even of those in sympathy with his aims and character, how can we hope to succeed where he has failed?

Of course, success is not all. It is better to deserve success than to command it, and if I thought that to harbor proposals for compensation meant the sacrifice of a single shred of vital principle, rather than propose it I should welcome the armed strife which now seems to me the only probable alternative.

But our principles are not involved. Rather are they sacrificed if by any mistaken devotion to them we retard their practical application. It is a matter of policy purely. Shall we say that Henry George sacrificed his principles by advocating their gradual application? To abolish one after another all other taxes, substituting for them a gradually increasing tax on land values till these are entirely absorbed, is his formula almost in his own words. No doubt he would have preferred to stop the robbery with one full stroke, but he was too practical a man to propose it. His object was to minimise opposition and disturbance, as far as was consistent with the principle. And that this gradual application of the principle is a form of compensation, can be easily seen if we suppose it applied to slavery, as it actually was in the scheme to compensate the slave holders in the British Colonies by apprenticing the slaves for several years to their former owners in addition to paying the owners one hundred million dollars. Imagine Wendell Phillips' indignation at a proposal to gradually abolish slavery! Even in the case I have mentioned, it aroused such opposition on moral grounds that it was soon abandoned, though the money payment was made in full, showing that paying price for instant freedom was less repugnant to the sense of justice than prolonging the slavery even temporarily and in a modified form. So it seems to me, that if the principles of freedom and justice, which we all prize so highly, could survive the gradual application of the single tax, we need not fear for their destruction by the preaching, or even the practice of compensation.

Some of us seem to think that the conscience of the people will be debauched by the proposition, and that even though we get the single tax by such nefarious means, it would do us no good. They say that for any reform to be effectual, the people must first be educated up to it; must see the justice as well as the desirability of it, and I have heard it said that the anti-slavery war, terrible as it was, was not too dear a price to pay for the national conscience bought by it.

Well, I am inclined to think that if the American people had had to pay as much for the freedom of the slaves as they had for the war, they would have been quite as firmly convinced as they are now of the injustice of compensation, and I am quite sure that a direct tax levied for that express purpose would have been infinitely less injurious to the public conscience, as well as less expensive to the public purse than those fruitful parents of trusts and perjurers, the tariff and the Pension Bureau.

And I see no reason why in accepting a compensation amendment we need abandon Henry George's impregnable position, as to the justice of the Single Tax without it. The fact that others are unable to see it is due to their blindness, and not to its absence. The question is, how can we most easily open their eyes, not only to the immense advantages of the change, but ultimately to its justice as well? At present the apparent injustice of our plan debars them from the consideration of its merits, which a sympathetic examination would quickly disclose, and who shall say that in many cases the same examination would not also disclose its justice? I for one think it would, and this consideration suggests the reply to what is

perhaps one of the strongest practical objections to our acceptance and advocacy of the principle of compensation, namely, that it would tend to strengthen the monopoly of land and raise its price by encouraging land holders to expect, in the event of our success, to receive the proverbially high price which the State pays for such property. It is pointed out, too, that this would be a double loss, for with the advance of our proposals in their present form, the price of land is bound to decline. Well, in regard to this latter, if the advance of our cause during the past ten years is to be measured by the contemporary decline in the price of land, I fear we can hardly congratulate ourselves very warmly, whereas, if our advocacy of compensation should lead landlords to look upon the accomplishment of our reform as profitable to them, thereby transforming their enmity into aid, I for one would not only welcome their assistance with a clear conscience, but I would be quite willing, when the matter of price became a practical question, to trust the American people to make a fair bargain, more especially when as the result of investigation thus stimulated, it became clear to millions now blind to it, that the people themselves have created the very value for which they are proposing to pay.

But it is also said that the true landlord values his privilege chiefly for the control of his fellow men which it gives him, and that the prospect of certain destruction to this control, involved in free opportunities, would lead him to oppose our plan whether accompanied by compensation or not. This is not without force, but apart from the consideration that all landlords are not landlords in this sense, we must remember that a vast majority of the people are not landlords at all, and while there can be little doubt that a compensation attachment to our scheme would make it acceptable and even attractive to many landlords who are now opposed to it, my chief reason for advocating this new departure is not the hope of conciliating them, but the firm belief that in no other way can the disinterested masses be induced to give our proposals a sympathetic hearing.

I have already tried, and I hope not without success, to dispose of the moral objections to compensation, and some of the practical ones. But I realize that on the fiscal side of the question lie what have hitherto been believed to be insurmountable difficulties, and this belief has been responsible to even perhaps a greater degree than conscientious scruples, for our persistent refusal to entertain the idea of compensation. It has been pointed out that the interest on a sum equal to the aggregate land values of the country, would amount to as much as the rent now paid, while under the influence of an appreciating dollar, the principal measured in products would grow as rapidly or more so than the land values, so we would be no better, if as well off as at present; whereas if we offered less than the market value for the land, the conscientious objections would be as great as now, and the opposition of vested interests little less.

In reply to these apparently conclusive objections, I wish to say in the first place, that even if they were final, they need not prevent us from accepting the overtures and assistance of compensationists, if only for the encouragement of discussion, throwing upon them the onus of formulating some feasible plan of compensation. In the second place, I do not believe for a moment that more than a very small percentage of the advocates of compensation would favor allowing the landlords to name their own price, and I am inclined to think that the result of the discussion on the question of price would be a decision to pay, if anything, the amount at which the land is assessed for taxation, which as we know, averages less than fifty per cent. of its selling value, and which compromise might be strongly defended on the generally accepted ground that sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander.

Taking this then, as a basis for calculation, and accepting Mr. Shearman's

estimate that fifty per cent. of the ground rents of the country would defray the expenses of government, we would have left over every year one-half of these rentals with which to pay interest on the purchase price. Now the rent of land being four per cent. of its full market value, one-half of the rent would suffice to pay four per cent. on one-half of that value, which is the amount of debt supposed to be incurred. But two per cent. being a fair interest on Government bonds, the other two per cent. could be devoted to paying the principal, which it would do in fifty years.

Some of our friends believe that the ground rents under the Single Tax would increase enormously, in which case the principal could be paid so much sooner. And while I am not so sanguine on that score as many, there is one fund I am quite sure *would* increase enormously, namely, the wages fund. It is when we come to consider this phase of the question that the fiscal difficulties of compensation dissolve. The increase of wages under free opportunities is the corner stone of the Single Tax edifice. Henry George says it would be enormous, and Mr. Shearman reckons it conservatively at one hundred per cent. Let us suppose then that wages will be doubled. Sixteen million wage earners averaging one dollar a day each, which I should call a reasonable estimate for this country, give annually the sum of five billion dollars. This then is the increase over their present income which producers would receive in case wages were doubled by the Single Tax. Mr. Shearman estimates the land values of the entire country at some twenty-seven billions. Now, if we suppose that by a special tax levied in such a way as to fall on wages, fifty per cent. of this increase were taken by the State and devoted to paying the twenty-seven billions, it would not only pay two and one-half per cent. interest yearly, but in fifteen years would pay off the entire principal. Is it not evident from this that it would be greatly to our advantage to buy out the land owners, even at their own price. A sure fifty per cent. increase in wages at once, and the equally sure prospect of having them doubled fifteen years later.

It may be said that it would be pretty hard on the wage earners to take twenty-five per cent. of their hard earnings to support the landlords while they looked for another job, especially in view of the present custom of landlords allowing those whom they throw out of work to shift for themselves; and perhaps when the workers are actually confronted with the situation, they also will see it in this light and act accordingly. That, however, is their own affair. I simply point out that if they will insist upon paying for their own property this is the best and easiest way to do it.

NOTE.—Replies to Mr. Aitken's article by Edward D. Burleigh and Samuel Milliken which we designed printing in this number, are unavoidably crowded out. They will be published in our next issue.—THE EDITOR.



FAIRHOPE CRITICISED.

Editor *Single Tax Review*:

I have read with much interest Mr. T. F. Gaynor's article in the Autumn number of the REVIEW. He says, "The Fairhope colonists are the Pilgrim Fathers of the twentieth century as the practical representatives of the cause of economic liberty." Will you kindly allow me space in your columns to call the attention of your readers to a difference between the Plymouth pilgrims and those of Fairhope that is of vital importance.

The first act of the Plymouth pilgrims upon their arrival on these shores was the signing of that famous document known as the Compact. Two hundred