

## CHAPTER VI

### EPILOGUE

Two further points may be offered in this final postscript. One is a mention of ethics. This study of the land question has been an attempt to analyze a possible cause of our economic difficulties. But economic difficulties are not simply puzzles to keep economists employed. Economic difficulties mean unemployment, insecurity, poverty. And they, in turn, can mean only moral collapse. Philosophers should never forget this. For, whereas it may seem evidence of myopia for the economist to discuss his problems without any consideration of their moral implications, what should be said of the moralist who forgets the economic background of ethics? Is there anything more futile than the exhortations and preachments of teachers of ethics, as well as of the clergy, who, paying no attention to the economic struggle for existence, inveigh against the selfishness and materialism of man? Moralizing of this sort is the opium that has always deadened sensitivity to social injustice. It is the ethics of the upper dog. An ethics that makes any claim to

operational significance cannot ignore the conditioning factors that have made man the creature that so many moralists deplore. One cannot tire of quoting John Dewey when he insists that "it is hopeless to look for mental [and moral] stability when the economic bases of life are unsettled." And so a concern with the land question must be ethical as well as economic. It has a place in the dimension of morals because it handles an answer for the continual economic insecurity that man has always faced. This is what Cardinal Manning showed when he said: "The land question—it means hunger, degradation, vice."

The second reason for adding an epilogue is to make a direct appeal to the leaders of liberal and radical opinion, an appeal that asks them to direct their attention, without antecedent prejudice, to a consideration of the land question. This request is peculiarly necessary in the case of the "sophisticated" leader, the one who has broken with classical economic theory, and whose tincture of socialism is too faint to make him an orthodox collectivist. (To be specific, shall we name Professor Tugwell and the editors of the *Nation* and *New Republic* as examples of the class intended?) The sly contempt and patronizing dismissal that any reference, for example, to single tax or Henry George receives from these emancipated economists are doubly irritating. They are doubly irritating because, instead of being an illustration of economic naïveté, an interest in the land question is really indicative

of a quite subtle approach. Now, this is not meant to be a self-congratulatory gesture, nor is it an affected striving for paradox. It is, on the contrary, a sincere conviction (1) that the tepid acceptance of an emasculated socialist theory—that is to say, an acceptance that waives the analysis and the resulting indorsement or rejection of an integrated philosophy such as Marxism—is no more profound than the reasoning of a disgruntled laborer: capital employs labor, labor is oppressed; therefore, capital is the oppressor. It is the conviction (2) that the theory of the land question, whatever else it may be, is not this over-simple relation between capital-has-and-labor-has-not.

Alleged struggles between labor and capital are ones that can be popularly understood. All elementary economic criticism will naturally discover in the apparent exploiter of labor, the employer, the indisputable cause of all oppression. It is easy to direct attention to the vast inequalities in wealth, but it is not so easy to make a theoretical distinction within the category of wealth. A protest aimed against the brute size of wealth is far simpler than an analysis of earned and unearned income. To the average mind it seems illogical to argue against the private exploitation of only one form of economic power, particularly when that power is not obviously in the hands of the economically strong.<sup>1</sup> It is commonplace to have spectacular dislocations

<sup>1</sup> Bertrand Russell's acute observations that were noted before should be referred to here. (*Supra*, pp. 95-96.)

in industry and employment and finance divert attention from a silent and constant causal factor. But whatever accusations may be brought against land reform, and however pedestrian it may seem to some of its critics, it does not lash out at the most obvious thing in front of it.

The devastating investigations of the workings of the capitalist system—found each week in the liberal-radical periodicals—are to be enthusiastically welcomed for lowering our threshold of sensitivity to the noisome spectacle presented by great sections of the present-day social order. But when the only positive reaction aroused in these journals is an inarticulated and hybrid “planning” that accepts tacitly, unphilosophically, but not explicitly the motto of down-with-capitalism, then that same welcome must be withdrawn. Is it possible that these sophisticated and emancipated leaders really crave the mob acclaim that must follow any expression of a see-a-head-and-hit-it economics? Perhaps an *ultra*-sophisticated approach is needed—that, for example, of the late and much-lamented *Freeman* and *New Freeman*.

These paragraphs are not intended to be an attack on socialism. They are rather an attack on undigested economic theory, or, what is possibly more exact, on an absence of theory. With a firmly knit and tightly constructed philosophy of socialism, there are, to be sure, many difficulties, but those difficulties may be found in the whole post-Marxian literature; this is not the place to enter into that

large discussion.<sup>2</sup> The quarrel here is with the retention simply of a socialistic ideology, and with the use of that ideology to pooh-pooh any proposal that does not concentrate upon a non-profit economy. If only for the sake of novelty, of varying the vocabulary, there might be vouchsafed some interest in land theory. Not that the study of the land question is to bring about Utopia, nor even that such a study is to resurrect an "out-moded" classic individualism (nearly every land reformer has included a demand for the socialization of some or all public utilities); but rather for its stimulus to investigate economic theory sincerely, should the land question merit attention. Even though it may seem blasphemous, the writer feels that our economic sophisticates have not always taken the trouble to analyze either the quasi-socialistic philosophy they seem to favor, or the land problem that they surely deprecate. The very least one can ask for the theory of the land question is argument, not unanswerable neglect or disparagement.

The appeal of these pages is concentrating upon our literary radicals not because of any Olympian position they may hold, but because their reaction is so typical of the general temper of mind that confronts any presentation of land theory. It is indifference, not refutation, that offers the highest hurdle. This does not imply the belief that there are no plausible arguments against a proposal such

<sup>2</sup> A sample of that type of discussion may be found in Chapter V of the author's *Philosophy of Henry George*.

as rent socialization; but it is the insistence that a mention of the phrase "land question" ordinarily does not register. It too often connotes the mistaken and limited impressions that were referred to in the opening chapter. And it is this misrepresentation plus a familiar unconcern that are so mischievous. If there is any single purpose that this book can be said to strive for, it is that of increasing awareness to the implications of the land question. It is an attempt to achieve at least a recognition of what is meant by the economics and the theory of land reform. It is a cry for "more light." Perhaps, then, no better passage can close such an attempt than those eloquent words of Henry George, at the end of the Fifth Book of *Progress and Poverty*, in which he elevates land to its rightful place of prominence.

The ownership of land is the great fundamental fact which ultimately determines the social, the political, and consequently the intellectual and moral conditions of a people. And it must be so. For land is the habitation of man, the storehouse upon which he must draw for all his needs, the material to which his labor must be applied for the supply of all his desires. . . . On the land we are born, from it we live, to it we return again—children of the soil as truly as is the blade of grass or the flower of the field. Take away from man all that belongs to land, and he is but a disembodied spirit. Material progress cannot rid us of our dependence upon land. . . . It can but add to the value of land and the power which its possession gives. Everywhere, in all times, among all peoples, the possession of land is

the base of aristocracy, the foundation of great fortunes, the source of power. As said the Brahmins, ages ago—  
"To whomsoever the soil at any time belongs, to him belong the fruits of it. White parasols and elephants mad with pride are the flowers of a grant of land."

J.N.M.  
Feb 1937