

Chapter III— Letter To The Times

No one can boldly utter a great truth, and then, when the times have become ripe for it, and his utterance voices what is burning in hearts and consciences, whisper it away. So despite his apology to landlords in the *St. James's Gazette*, and the pains he had taken to make his peace with them in *The Man versus the State*, what he had said on the land question in *Social Statics* came up again to trouble Mr. Spencer.

But for a long time his position on the land question was almost as dual as that of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. In his personal circle it was doubtless assumed that he was a staunch supporter of private property in land, and if his earlier opinions were known there it was understood that he was sorry for them. And he had become, if not an active member, at least a valued ally of the Liberty and Property Defence League. But in a wider circle what he had written against private property in land was telling with increasing force. For to this wider circle his *St. James's* apology had hardly reached, and even when known was not deemed a recantation of the opinions deliberately expressed in *Social Statics*, which he still, through D. Appleton & Co., continued to publish, without any modification whatever. The steady growth of the movement that began with the publication of *Progress and Poverty* everywhere enlisted active men in the propagation of the idea of the equality of rights to land and called wide attention to what he had said on that subject. They naturally seized on the argument against the justice of private property in land in Chapter IX of *Social Statics*, and spread it broadcast, as the utterance of one now widely esteemed the greatest of philosophers. Of all else that Mr. Spencer has written, there is nothing that has had such a circulation as has thus been given to this chapter. It was printed and is still being printed by many American newspapers⁸, and was issued in tract form for free distribution in the United States, Canada and Australia; edi-

⁸ Even as I write I am constantly receiving, especially from the West, copies of papers which contain Chapter IX of *Social Statics*, and which in ignorance of all he has since said, continue to speak of Mr. Spencer as an advocate of equal rights to land.

tions of hundreds of thousands being issued at a time⁹, many of which must have reached Great Britain, even if it was not reprinted there.

This wide circulation of his condemnation of private property in land did not, it is probable, much trouble Mr. Spencer, since it did not reach his London circle. But in November, 1889—six years after his letter to the *St. James's Gazette*—some echoes of it made their way into *The Times*, the very journalistic center of high English respectability.

The matter thus got into the *Times*: Mr. John Morley, Member of Parliament for Newcastle, being in that city, was interviewed by some of his constituents, representing a labor organization. Among other questions land nationalization was brought up; Mr. John Laidler, a bricklayer, speaking for it. Mr. Morley expressing dissent, Mr. Laidler cited the authority of Mr. Spencer in support of the ideas that land had been made private property by force and fraud, and should be appropriated by the community for the benefit of all. The *Times* of November 5, contained a report of this interview.

This report in the *Times* aroused Mr. Spencer at once. For although he had no objection to the circulation of his radical utterances in America, where through D. Appleton & Co. he was still publishing and advertising *Social Statics*, it was evidently quite a different matter to him that they should be known in the pleasant circle wherein with Sir John and his Grace and the peers and judges of the Liberty and Property Defence League he was personally dwelling. He promptly sent this letter to the *Times*. It appeared on the 7th.

To the Editor of The Times.

Sir: During the interview between Mr. Morley and some of his constituents, reported in your issue of the 5th inst., I was referred to as having set forth certain opinions respecting landownership. Fearing that, if I remain silent, many will suppose I have said things which I have not said, I find it needful to say something in explanation.

Already within these few years I have twice pointed out that these opinions (made to appear by those who have circulated them widely different from what they really are, by the omission of accompanying opinions) were

⁹ About the time I ran for Mayor of New York (1886) on a platform which attracted great attention to the idea of equal rights to land, one enthusiastic advocate of the idea, Mr. W. J. Atkinson, himself printed some 500,000 copies.

set forth in my first work, published forty years ago; and that, for the last twelve or fifteen years, I have refrained from issuing new editions of that work and have interdicted translations, because, though I still adhere to its general principles, I dissent from some of the deductions.

The work referred to—*Social Statics*—was intended to be a system of political ethics—absolute political ethics, or that which ought to be, as distinguished from relative political ethics, or that which is at present the nearest practicable approach to it. The conclusion reached concerning land-ownership was reached while seeking a valid basis for the right of property, the basis assigned by Locke appearing to me invalid. It was argued that a satisfactory ethical warrant for private ownership could arise only by contract between the community, as original owner of the inhabited area, and individual members, who became tenants, agreeing to pay certain portions of the produce, or its equivalent in money, in consideration of recognized claims to the rest. And in the course of the argument it was pointed out that such a view of landownership is congruous with existing legal theory and practice; since in law every landowner is held to be a tenant of the Crown—that is, of the community, and since, in practice, the supreme right of the community is asserted by every Act of Parliament which, with a view to public advantage, directly or by proxy takes possession of land after making due compensation.

All this was said in the belief that the questions raised were not likely to come to the front in our time or for many generations; but, assuming that they would sometime come to the front, it was said that, supposing the community should assert overtly the supreme right which is now tacitly asserted, the business of compensation of landowners would be a complicated one—

"One that perhaps cannot be settled in a strictly equitable manner. ... Most of our present landowners are men who have, either mediately or immediately, either by their own acts or by the acts of their ancestors, given for their estates equivalents of honestly earned wealth, believing that they were investing their savings in a legitimate manner. To justly estimate and liquidate the claims of such is one of the most intricate problems society will one day have to solve."

To make the position I then took quite clear, it is needful to add that, as shown in a succeeding chapter, the insistence on this doctrine, in virtue of which "the right of property obtains a legitimate foundation," had for one of its motives the exclusion of Socialism and Communism, to which I was then as profoundly averse as I am now.

Investigations made during recent years into the various forms of social organization, while writing the *Principles of Sociology*, have in part confirmed and in part changed the views published in 1850. Perhaps I may be

allowed space for quoting from *Political Institutions* a paragraph showing the revised conclusions arrived at:

"At first sight it seems fairly inferable that the absolute ownership of land by private persons must be the ultimate state which industrialism brings about. But though industrialism has thus far tended to individualise possession of land while individualising all other possession, it may be doubted whether the final stage is at present reached. Ownership established by force does not stand on the same footing as ownership established by contract; and though multiplied sales and purchases, treating the two ownerships in the same way, have tacitly assimilated them, the assimilation may eventually be denied. The analogy furnished by assumed rights of possession over human beings helps us to recognize this possibility. For, while prisoners of war, taken by force and held as property in a vague way (being at first much on a footing with other members of a household), were reduced more definitely to the form of property when the buying and selling of slaves became general; and, while it might centuries ago have been thence inferred that the ownership of man by man was an ownership in course of being permanently established, yet we see that a later stage of civilization, reversing this process, has destroyed ownership of man by man. Similarly, at a stage still more advanced, it may be that private ownership of land will disappear. As that primitive freedom of the individual which existed before war established coercive institutions and personal slavery comes to be reestablished as militancy declines, so it seems possible that the primitive ownership of land by the community, which, with the development of coercive institutions, lapsed in large measure or wholly into private ownership. will be revived as industrialism further develops. The regime of contract, at present so far extended that the right of property in movables is recognized only as having arisen by exchange of services or products under agreements, or by gift from those who had acquired it under such agreements, may be further extended so far that the products of the soil will be recognized as property only by virtue of agreements between individuals as tenants and the community as landowner. Even now, among ourselves, private ownership of land is not absolute. In legal theory landowners are directly or indirectly tenants of the Crown (which in our day is equivalent to the state, or, in other words, the community); and the community from time to time resumes possession after making due compensation. Perhaps the right of the community to the land, thus tacitly asserted, will in time to come be overtly asserted and acted upon after making full allowance for the accumulated value artificially given. ... There is reason to suspect that, while private possession of things produced by labor will grow even more definite and sacred than at present, the inhabited area, which cannot be produced by labor, will eventually be distinguished as something which may not be privately possessed. As the individ-

ual, primitively owner of himself, partially or wholly loses ownership of himself during the militant regime, but gradually resumes it as the industrial regime develops, so possibly the communal proprietorship of land, partially or wholly merged in the ownership of dominant men during evolution of the militant type, will be resumed as the industrial type becomes fully evolved" (pp. 643-646).

The use of the words "possible ... possibly," and "perhaps," in the above extracts shows that I have no positive opinion as to what may hereafter take place. The reason for this state of hesitancy is that I cannot see my way toward reconciliation of the ethical requirements with the politico-economical requirements. On the one hand, a condition of things under which the owner of, say, the Scilly Isles might make tenancy of his land conditional upon professing a certain creed or adopting prescribed habits of life, giving notice to quit to any who did not submit, is ethically indefensible. On the other hand, "nationalization of the land," effected after compensation for the artificial value given by cultivation, amounting to the greater part of its value, would entail, in the shape of interest on the required purchase money, as great a sum as is now paid in rent, and indeed a greater, considering the respective rates of interest on landed property and other property. Add to which, there is no reason to think that the substituted form of administration would be better than the existing form of administration. The belief that land would be better managed by public officials than it is by private owners is a very wild belief.

What the remote future may bring forth there is no saying; but with a humanity anything like that we now know, the implied reorganization would be disastrous.

I am, etc.

HERBERT SPENCER.

ATHENÆUM CLUB, Nov. 6.