

Chapter 28

Are Landowners Entitled to Compensation?

THERE CAN BE NO ESCAPE from this truth: There can be no honest title to exclusive possession of the earth. Private property in land is a bold, bare, enormous wrong—like chattel slavery. The majority of people do not recognize this, simply because the majority of people do not think. To them, whatever is, is right. It continues to appear so until its injustice has been pointed out repeatedly. In general, they are ready to crucify whoever first attempts this.

Yet it is impossible to think at all about the production and distribution of wealth, without seeing that property in land is a fundamentally different thing from property in objects of human production. Furthermore, our examination has also shown that private property in land cannot be justified on the grounds of utility. On the contrary, it is the great cause of poverty and misery. Expediency, therefore, joins justice in demanding that we abolish it.

This institution has no stronger ground than a mere municipal regulation. So what reason can there be for hesitation?

One worry—even among those who clearly see that land, by right, is common property—is this: Restoring common rights to land appears to be an injustice to those

who have purchased it with their rightful wealth. Land being treated as private property for so long, they have based their calculations upon its permanence. So, it is said, justice requires that we compensate the owners if we abolish it.

The essential defect in this lies in the impossibility of bridging the radical difference between right and wrong. For the interests of landholders to be conserved, the interests and rights of others must be disregarded. If landholders lose nothing of their special privileges, the people at large can gain nothing.

Buying individual property rights would only give landholders a claim of the same kind and amount that their possession of land now gives them, only in another form. Through taxation, it would give them the same proportion of the earnings of labor and capital that they now appropriate in rent. The unjust advantage of landowners would be preserved, while the unjust disadvantage of others would be continued.

Yet even this discussion is a hopeful sign. Cries for justice are timid and humble when first protesting a time-honored wrong. We have been educated to look upon the "vested rights" of landowners with all the superstitious reverence that ancient Egyptians looked upon the crocodile.

But ideas grow when times are ripe, even though their first appearances are insignificant. The antislavery movement in the United States began with talk of compensating owners. But when four million slaves were emancipated, the owners got no compensation. Nor did they clamor for any. One day, the people of England or the United States will be sufficiently aroused to the injustice and disadvantages of individual ownership of land to reclaim it. And

they will not trouble themselves about compensating landowners.

Nor should there be any concern. How absurd! If the land of any country belongs to the people of that country, what right—in morality or justice—do landowners have to compensation? If the land belongs to the people, why should they pay its value *for their own land*?

Herbert Spencer once wrote,* “Had we to deal with the parties who originally robbed the human race of its heritage, we might make short work of the matter.” Why not make short work of it anyhow?

For this robbery is not like the robbery of a horse or some money. That theft ceases with the act. This is a continuous robbery that goes on every hour of every day. It is a toll levied upon labor constantly and continuously. It is not merely a robbery in the past—it is a robbery in the present. And a robbery that deprives the newborn of their birthright. Why should we hesitate to make short work of such a system?

Just because I was robbed yesterday and the day before and the day before that, must I allow myself to be robbed today and tomorrow as well? Is there any reason to conclude that the robber has acquired a vested right to rob me? If land belongs to the people, why continue to permit landowners to take rent? And why compensate them in

* Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), English philosopher, *Social Statics*, page 142. This reference is from the edition published—with his consent—from 1864 to 1892. Thereafter, he repudiated it, and issued a new edition that eliminated all references declaring property in land to be unjust. Henry George addressed Spencer’s reversal in a later book, *A Perplexed Philosopher*.

any manner for their "loss" of rent?

Consider what rent really is. It represents a value created by the whole community. It does not arise spontaneously from the land. Nor is it due to anything that landowners have done.

Let landowners have, if you please, everything land would give them—in the absence of the rest of the community. But rent is the creation of the whole community. So it necessarily belongs to the whole community.

Suppose we were to try the case using common law—which has been built by and for landowners. What does the law allow someone who innocently buys land later judged to belong to another? Nothing at all.

That fact that one purchased in good faith gives no right or claim whatsoever. The law simply says: "The land belongs to A, let the sheriff put him in possession!" It gives no claim to the innocent purchaser of a wrongful title, and allows no compensation.

Not only this, but it takes all improvements made in good faith. The buyers may have paid a high price, making every effort to see that the title is good. They may have held undisturbed possession for years, without hint of an adverse claimant. They may have even erected buildings more valuable than the land itself.

Yet clever lawyers may find a technical flaw in the papers. Or they may hunt up some forgotten heir who never dreamed of such rights. Then, not only the land, but all the improvements may be taken away.

And there is even more! According to common law, after surrendering the land and giving up the improvements, the buyers may be called upon to account for all the profits derived from use of the land during the time of possession.

These dictates of justice have been formulated into law by landowners themselves. They are applied every day in American and English courts. If we were to apply them to the case of "The People vs. The Landowners," we would not think of giving landholders any compensation. Indeed, we would take all the improvements and whatever else they may have as well.

But I do not propose to go that far. It is sufficient if the people resume ownership of the land. Let the landowners retain their improvements and personal property in secure possession.

By this measure of justice, there would be no oppression and no injury to any class. The great cause of the unequal distribution of wealth would be swept away. And with it, the suffering, degradation, and waste that it entails. All would share in the general prosperity. The gain of small landholders would be enormous; that of large landholders would still be real.

For in welcoming justice, peace and plenty will follow—bringing good not just to some, but to all. For justice itself is the highest and truest expediency. How true this is, we shall shortly see.