

Chapter 32

Securing Equal Rights To Land

WE HAVE WEIGHED every objection and found nothing—in either justice or efficiency—to deter us from making land common property by confiscating rent. But the question of method remains: How shall we do it?

We could simply abolish private titles and declare all land public property. Then, lease lots to the highest bidders, under conditions guaranteeing the right to improvements. This would give a complex society the same equality of rights achieved in simpler communities through equal shares of land. And by leasing land to whoever could obtain the most from it, we would secure the greatest production.

But such a plan, though perfectly feasible, is not the best option. Rather, I propose to accomplish the same results in a simpler, easier, and quieter way.

To formally confiscate all land would involve a needless shock, and would require a needless extension of government. Both can be avoided. Great changes are best brought about under old forms. When nature makes a higher form, it takes a lower one and develops it. This, too, is the law of social growth. Let us work with it.

I do not propose to purchase or confiscate private property in land. Let those who now hold land retain possession, if they want. They may buy and sell or bequeath it.

Let them even continue to call it "their" land. We may safely leave them the shell, if we take the kernel.

It is not necessary to confiscate land—only to confiscate rent.

Taking rent for public use does not require that the state lease land; that would risk favoritism, collusion, and corruption. No new government agency need be created; the machinery already exists. Instead of extending it, all we have to do is to simplify and reduce it.

Government already takes some rent in taxation. With a few changes in our tax laws, we could take almost all. Letting owners keep a small percentage would cost much less than renting through a state agency. Using the existing machinery of government, we may assert the common right to land without any shock.

Therefore, I propose that we appropriate land rent for public use, through taxation.

This simple yet effective solution will raise wages, increase the earnings of capital, eliminate poverty, reduce crime, and provide full employment. It will unleash human power and elevate society. In its form, ownership of land would remain just as it is now. No owner need be dispossessed. No restriction need be placed upon the amount of land any one could hold.

If rent were taken by the state in taxes, then land would really be common property—no matter in whose name or in what parcels it was held. Every member of the community would participate in the advantages of its ownership.

Land values increase as population grows and progress advances. In any civilized country, this is enough to bear all government expenses. In better developed countries, it is much more than enough. In fact, when rent exceeds

current government revenues, it will be necessary to actually increase the land tax to absorb excess rent. Taxation of rent would increase as we abolish other taxes. So, we may put our proposition into practical form by proposing:

To abolish all taxes—except on land values.

This is the first step in the practical struggle. Experience has taught me that wherever this idea is considered, it makes headway. But few who would benefit most from it see its full significance and power. It is difficult for workmen to give up the notion that there is some basic antagonism between capital and labor. It is difficult for small farmers and homesteaders to get over the idea that this plan would unduly tax them. It is difficult for both classes to let go of the idea that exempting capital from taxation would benefit only the rich.

A great wrong always dies hard. These erroneous ideas spring from confused thought. But behind ignorance and prejudice, there is a powerful interest—one that has dominated literature, education, and public opinion. The great wrong that condemns millions to poverty will not die without a bitter struggle.