



**Jefferson
and the Land Question**

by Henry George, Jr.

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JEFFERSON AND THE LAND QUESTION.

Jefferson is a pole star among political philosophers because he based his politics on the eternal, self-evident, fundamental truths that all men are created free and equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inherent and unalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. How are the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness primarily to be exercised? Not in the political field, but in the underlying social field. How shall a man get an independent living precedes how shall he participate in general government. He cannot exercise, or fully exercise, his political faculties until, without let or hindrance, he can get sustenance.

Hence Jefferson's political axiom involves as a prerequisite a social or economic axiom, without observance of which political institutions can be only as a house built upon the sand. This economic axiom is that men have equal rights to natural opportunities, to land. On land mankind must have its habitation and from it it must draw subsistence. Nowhere else, from no other source, can it live. Therefore, the rights of life, liberty and the

independent pioneer and settler. He was a graduate of the oldest, and, at that time, richest institution of learning in America, the College of William and Mary, near Williamsburg, Virginia. By inheritance he was for that day a well-to-do man. By this and marriage and social connections he belonged to the wealthy planter class, which, relieved from toil for subsistence, could yield itself to the ease, graces and refinements of life. Jefferson's alert, powerful, acquisitive, analytical mind found this a most suitable soil for its development.

An environment so stimulating to intellectual growth might also be expected to take a subtle, invisible hold on the mind and make of its beneficiary its votary and creature. But while fully conscious of the charms of its warm and tranquil atmosphere, Jefferson was early aware that the wealthy planter class was the bulwark in Virginia and the South of the British Crown tyranny and the buttress there of the Established Church, which falsely gave the sanction of religion to such tyranny and preached submission to the rulers God had raised over the people.

The resistance that early germinated in the free, bold mind against the usurpations and abuses of the British Crown thus came at length to include as a whole the planter class and their established priesthood. As Moses, adopted Prince in the house of Pharaoh, next in blood to Royalty, struck dead the Egyptian taskmaster, and, turning his back

upon pride and circumstance of power, led forth the Hebrew slaves into the desert toward the Promised Land, so Jefferson, moved by anger and scorn against the planter class for its fellowship and partnership in the tyranny of the Crown, threw off its allurements, so congenial to his tastes and habits, and allied himself absolutely, unreservedly, actively, permanently with the wronged masses. In the struggle in that agricultural community between the "planters," or large landowners, and the "settlers," or small landowners, Jefferson's heart was always with the latter.

It was the old fight in a new form—the antagonism between the silk stockings and the wool hats, between the red heels and the sabots. Jefferson, by fortune and culture, of the silk stockings and red heels, consciously, deliberately, with definite and fixed purpose, sided with the wool hats and sabots. It was in some degree as if a French seigneur under the ancient régime had rejected place and power to preach the destruction of privilege on the one side and the upraising of the trampled and despised on the other.

But this comparison of Jefferson with the French noble can be only in degree, and in slight degree. The social disparity, so extreme in the old world, was but faintly marked in the new. The rich men of America were of but moderate means beside the rich of Europe, while the poor were greatly better off here than there. "From Savannah [Georgia]

to Portsmouth [Maine]," said Jefferson in his "Notes on Virginia," "you will seldom meet a beggar. In the large towns, indeed, they sometimes present themselves. These are usually foreigners who have never obtained a settlement in any parish. I never yet saw a native American begging in the streets and highways. A subsistence is easily gained here." To Claviere he wrote: "I attended the bar of the Supreme Court of Virginia ten years as a student and practitioner. There never was during that time a trial for robbery on the highroad, nor do I remember ever to have heard of one in that or any other of the States, except in the cities of New York and Philadelphia immediately after the departure of the British army. Some deserters from that army infested those cities for awhile." In the "Notes on Virginia," Jefferson compared social conditions. "So desirous are the poor of Europe to get to America, where they may better their condition," he said, "that, being unable to pay their passage, they will agree to serve two or three years on their arrival there, rather than not go. During that time they are better fed, better clothed, and have lighter labor than while in Europe. Continuing to work for hire, a few years longer, they buy a farm, marry and enjoy all the sweets of a domestic society of their own."

The fact that Jefferson always kept clearly in mind was that "a subsistence is easily gained here." He explained this by the first principles of political

economy, namely, that men had easy access to natural opportunities. To John Jay he wrote: "We have now lands enough to employ an infinite number of people in their cultivation. Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country and wedded to its liberty by the most lasting bonds." In the "Notes" he said: "In Europe the lands are either cultivated or locked up against the cultivator. Manufacture must, therefore, be resorted to, of necessity, not of choice, to support the surplus of their people. But we have an immensity of land courting the industry of husbandmen. * * * Those who labor the earth are the chosen people of God if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue. It is the focus in which he keeps alive that sacred fire, which otherwise might escape from the face of the earth. Corruption of morals in the mass of cultivators is a phenomenon of which no age nor nation has furnished an example."

And because manufacturing called for condensed population and seemingly more or less dependence for employment, and since "dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition," manufacturing was to be avoided. But as he explained later to J. Lithgow, concerning a revised edition of the "Notes," he did not

intend an indiscriminate denunciation of manufacturing but had in mind the possible future repetition in this country of the conditions he beheld in Europe, where "the manufactures of the great cities * * * have begotten a depravity of morals, a dependence and corruption, which renders them an undesirable accession to a country whose morals are sound." "But," continued the philosopher, "as yet our manufactures are as much at their ease, independent and moral, as our agricultural habits, and they will continue so as long as there are vacant lands for them to resort to; because whenever it shall be attempted by the other classes to reduce them to the minimum of subsistence they will quit their trade and go to laboring the earth." And to James Madison, his closest friend, he wrote from Paris in this same line: "I think our governments [Federal and State] will remain virtuous for many centuries—as long as they are chiefly agricultural; and this will be as long as there are vacant [unappropriated] lands in any part of America. When they [our people] get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, they will become corrupt, as in Europe."

These were not accidental remarks or passing views of the great American. They were the conclusions of observation and thought—thought that was extraordinarily far reaching in its consequences. Writing to Madison from Paris, where, he said, they were immersed in a course of reflection "on elemen-

tary principles of society," he remarked that he was led to a consideration of the question "Whether one generation of men has a right to bind another,"—a question "that seems never to have been started either on this or on our side of the water." "I set out on this ground which I suppose to be self-evident," observes Jefferson, "that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living, that the dead have neither powers nor rights over it. * * * On similar ground it may be proved that no society can make a perpetual constitution or even a perpetual law. * * * Every constitution, then, and every law, naturally expires at the end of nineteen years. If it be enforced longer, it is an act of force and not of right. * * * This principle that the earth belongs to the living and not to the dead is of very extensive application and consequences in every country, and most especially in France. It enters into the resolution of the questions: Whether the nation may change the descent of land holden in tail? Whether they may change the appropriation of lands given anciently to the church, colleges, orders of chivalry and otherwise in perpetuity? Whether they may abolish the charges and privileges attached on lands, including the whole catalogue ecclesiastical and feudal? It goes to hereditary offices, authorities and jurisdictions; to hereditary orders, distinctions and appellations; to perpetual monopolies in commerce, the arts and sciences; and a long train of *et ceteras*; and it renders the question of

reimbursement a question of generosity and not of right."

This argues that one generation has no right to make land laws, or any other kind of laws, for another generation. Far in advance of general thought as this was, Jefferson did not stop here, but pointed out the fundamental right to land of individuals composing any generation. This he wrote, also from Paris, to the father of Madison, the Rev. James Madison: "The property of this country [France] is absolutely concentrated in a very few hands, having revenues of from half a million guineas a year downward. These employ the flower of the country as servants, some of them having as many as two hundred domestics, not laboring. They employ also a great number of manufacturers and tradesmen, and lastly the class of laboring husbandmen. But after all there comes the most numerous of all the classes, that is, the poor who cannot find work. I asked myself what could be the reason that so many should be permitted to beg who are willing to work, in a country where there is a very considerable proportion of uncultivated lands? These lands are undisturbed only for the sake of game. * * * Whenever there is in any country uncultivated lands and unemployed poor it is clear that the laws of property have been so far extended as to violate natural rights. The earth is given as a common stock for man to labor and live on. If for the encouragement of

industry we allow it to be appropriated we must take care that other employment be provided to those excluded from the appropriation. If we do not, the fundamental right to labor the earth returns to the unemployed."

Could language be plainer or meaning clearer? "It is too soon yet," continued Jefferson, "in our country to say that every man who cannot find employment, but who can find uncultivated land shall be at liberty to cultivate it, paying a moderate rent. But it is not too soon to provide by every possible means that as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land. The landowners are the most precious part of a state."

Jefferson thought legislators could not "invent too many devices for subdividing" land holdings. Such a device was invented and eloquently advocated by the most learned men of France of that period, headed by Quesney, Turgot, Condorcet, Dupont and Mirabeau, with some of whom Jefferson was on terms of intimate acquaintance. This idea recognized common rights in land by appropriating ground rent through taxation. This rent of land they called the *produit net*—the net, or surplus, product of land. Something of the same meaning the English political economist, John Stuart Mill, later gave to the term "the unearned increment of land." The French economists proposed in place of the many taxes falling upon production and upon wealth, one tax large enough to absorb the whole

value of agricultural land. This tax, which they called the *impot unique*, and which Mirabeau, the elder, accounted a discovery equal in importance to the invention of writing or the displacement of barter by money, the Frenchmen wished to apply to agricultural land, which they regarded as the only productive land. To-day it is called the single tax, and would be applied to all land that has value, regardless of improvements, whether the land be agricultural, mineral, timber, grazing, urban or suburban.

In 1774 Turgot had been appointed Minister of Finance by Louis XVI., and at once commenced to clear the way for application of the *impot unique*, but the privileged nobility was yet dominant and overthrew him. Had he succeeded in applying it he would have shifted taxation from the backs of the impoverished and embroiled masses to the game preserves and other great enclosures, would have forced the nobles to let go and would have opened to users vast quantities of idle land. But the nobles made successful resistance to this policy. Turgot stepped down and the social and political revolution was not long deferred.

In the United States a distant adaptation of this idea occurred under the Articles of Confederation, in the provision to obtain national revenue through a tax on real estate and slaves. Subsequently under the Constitution other sources of taxation were provided, and most of the revenue came to be raised through a tariff, which is a tax upon production.

Thus the idea of recognizing equal rights to land and of penalizing the holding of land out of use, by treating rent as common property and taking it through taxation, was abandoned. The appropriator went ahead of the settler. All of the gigantic area westward from the Atlantic seaboard to the Pacific has long since been appropriated, or at least all of the accessible and valuable land, and millions are deprived of their "fundamental right to labor the earth." Can it now be said that "from Savannah to Portsmouth you will seldom meet a beggar?" Is there any part of the country that does not reveal them? Our farming regions contain thousands of tramps, and what were they originally but laborers searching for work? Do not our cities contain multitudes out of employment or in fear of it, and thereby reduced to that "dependence" which "begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition." Indeed, are not our people "piled upon one another, * * * as in Europe," and have they not as a consequence "become corrupt, as in Europe?" Have we not one city with a larger population than the thirteen States contained at the time the "Notes on Virginia" were written (1781)? And so abjectly poor is a large part of that city's population that one in every ten who die each year in its principal and richest borough (Manhattan) is buried in Potter's Field at public expense!

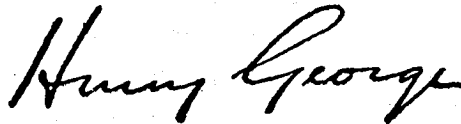
Instead of our government remaining "virtuous

for many centuries," corruption like a worm has eaten its way to the core. Political bosses control wards, districts and States, and exert their baleful influences over national councils, as completely as English politicians in Jefferson's day ruled rotten boroughs and swayed the British Parliament. The mass of the people themselves were in the beginning virtuous. But they were reduced to dependence for subsistence, which corrupted them. They found difficulty in getting a living and sold or became neglectful of those priceless political rights for which the fathers of the republic fought so hard and gloriously, and established with such great labor.

Jefferson said, "Our governments will remain virtuous * * * as long as * * * there are vacant lands in any part of America." There are vacant lands, thousands upon tens and hundreds of thousands of acres, agricultural lands, grazing lands, timber lands, mineral lands, urban and suburban lands. These lands, if thrown open, would not only engage the multitudes of hands now idle or insufficiently occupied, but would support in comfort and luxury many times the eighty millions of population this nation now embraces. There is no difficulty about finding abundance of valuable vacant land; the difficulty is to find it unappropriated. All the great territory that is available for any use has been appropriated and made private property, although vastly the greater part of it lies idle and is held merely for speculation.

Obviously "the laws of property have been so far extended as to violate natural right." And since by reason of this appropriation and non-use of land large numbers of men are prevented from finding their natural employment, and since "other employment" is not provided them, does not "the fundamental right to labor the earth" return to them, as Jefferson said it must under such circumstances?

Yet how effect this fundamental right to-day with our complex civilization? Not by dividing up the land and giving to each his share. The simple, easy, just way would be to divide the rent, or rather to take it for common uses, remitting all taxes that now fall upon production and various forms of wealth, and concentrating taxation on the value of land, regardless of improvements. This single tax would tax out the land grabber. It would tax idle lands into use. Millions upon millions of locked up acres of every kind would be thrown open to the unemployed, there would be a compliance with the "fundamental natural right to labor the earth," and our people would once again become, as Jefferson thought they would for centuries remain, virtuous and happy.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Henry George". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned centrally below the main text.

NEW YORK, May 1, 1904.