

## CHAPTER XXV.

### THE NEWSPAPERS, THE PUBLIC AND THE SINGLE TAX.

The progress of any reform is echoed in the utterances of the daily press of the world. As a rule, newspapers are established for the purpose of making an income on the capital invested. As business enterprises, subsisting on public approval, they are always ready to print the sentiments the public favor. Readers of newspapers patronize those publications that in a measure echo their own opinions, hence the variety of journals to suit the multitudinous tastes of society.

A paper established, and on a paying basis, at once becomes a conservative organ, with its utterances well guarded, and editors and reporters are allowed to boom fads that happen to spring into prominence, only so far as there may be public approval. There is good reason, therefore, for established papers being conservative, carefully guarding their editorial columns and keeping them free from anything that might disturb the public faith in their infallibility, or the public belief that the course suggested or advocated is the best for the community. This is why the old newspaper is seldom the great leader of thought into new channels; it is but the reflection of what is going on in the public mind.

It was to be expected, therefore, that, when Henry George's "Progress and Poverty" first appeared, the newspapers should look upon it with disapproval as to its "wild theories," as stated by The Churchman, while remarking its "wonderful interest and power," as acknowledged by the San Francisco Examiner. It was a pretty good book to read, but a pretty poor book

to believe in. Hovering around the single tax, like guardian angels, were good devils and bad devils, but the good ones were weak little fellows, connected and concerned with minor points, while the bad ones looked after those chapters that disrupted "the very foundations of society"—vested interests and private property in land.

"We have to consider Mr. George's position as essentially unsound," said the New York Nation, in the early '80s, "although we find many admirable passages, and a notable spirit of candor pervading his work."

In the opinion of the New York Examiner and Chronicle, an influential national organ of the Baptists, "Progress and Poverty" was "the most pernicious treatise on political economy that has been published for many a day." And the Chicago Advance made the sage statement that "the author appears to be a kind of communist, yet he means well, and means it earnestly, and says much that it worth thinking about."

Equally forcible was the criticism of the Alta-Californian. "Its premises are false, and its reasoning fallacious," it said, "while its conclusions would put an end to progress and subvert civilization."

The English papers were chary in their remarks, as befitted their conservatism, but the Statist found room to say that "since Proudhon enunciated to the world the famous proposition, 'property is robbery,' no writer of any pretensions to cultivation of mind, or even education, except, perhaps, Karl Marx, has put forth such an astonishing proposal as that of the author of 'Progress and Poverty.' If he is able to convince many of his countrymen of the practicability, to say nothing of the expediency, and less than nothing of the justice, of such a mad doctrine as this, the United States will sooner or later be torn by a civil war."

These extracts could be extended indefinitely, but a sufficient number have been given to show how the newspapers of 1880 and 1881 stood in regard to the theories so clearly stated in "Progress and Poverty."

And doubtless in the main they correctly reflected public opinion. While people were grappling with the problem of poverty, yet until the secret of wealth accompanied with want had been clearly revealed by Mr. George in language within the understanding of the masses, there was lacking that essential thing to unite thinking minds on a program having justice and equity for its base, and, leaving the wrongs of the past to take care of themselves, begin a new era of civilization, based on equal and exact justice to all in the economic world.

Passing over a decade of mental clashing, a change is observed in the attitude of the newspapers toward the single tax. These great vehicles of intelligence and news were still reflecting public opinion. What the public desired, they advocated; what the public abhorred, they treated with disgust and distrust. Their aim was to please, but how could they please if not treating with respect those theories the public were beginning to consider not entirely wrong? With their hands on the public pulse, the managing editors watch the trend of events. And thus it came about in the early '90s that such a powerful and conservative paper as the New York Times remarked editorially: "We have no hesitation in declaring our belief that the ideal taxation lies in the single tax laid exclusively on the rental value of land, independent of improvements."

It was somewhere about the same time that the New York Tribune severely criticised the taxing of personal property. "If the whole system was swept away and the needed revenue derived from real estate alone," it said, "there would be a great equalization of burdens, and a general relief for capital employed in productive industries and the operations of business." And the New York Sun of August 26, 1891, said: "The best and surest subject of taxation is the thing that perforce stays in one place; that is the land."

As far back as 1893, the Detroit Evening News, in criticising the remarks of Prof. R. A. Seligman in the

Political Science Quarterly, on the science of taxation, remarked:

There is a science of taxation and only one. \* \* \* The free gifts of nature belong to all mankind, to all men alike, to no one class any more than to another. The surface of the earth is the free gift of nature, as much as the light of heaven, or the surface of the waters, or the air we breathe. \* \* \* The land belongs to all the people. \* \* \* They and not the landlords are entitled to all the rents. If the state would assume its own it would not need to tax. It would have enough and to spare without taxation. It would be able and willing to confer its benefits as divine providence confers its blessings, without money and without price. This is the only science of taxation there is.

In the same year B. O. Flower, then editor of the *Arena*, wrote:

The land, which by a just and equitable system of taxation on rental values would become a beneficent source of wealth and happiness to all the people, has fallen very largely into the clutches of landlords and speculators, and thus again the few fatten on unearned increment, while the many suffer. \* \* \* I believe that taxation on land values is fundamentally right; that it is perfectly consistent with the highest justice and the law of freedom.

Take another step of ten years forward, with the twentieth century gazing on in open-mouthed wonder, as befits an infant. How is the single tax in the public mind and conscience today? It is no longer a "pernicious theory," but some of the most profound minds of the old and new century openly advocate it. Fewer men have lived that were mentally brighter than Thos. G. Shearman; still he devoted his wealth to propagating the doctrine of the one tax. One of the foremost political philosophers of Massachusetts is Charles Francis Adams, yet his letter in 1901 on the justice and feasibility of the single tax was published in every influential journal in that commonwealth. And paper after paper now has no hesitancy in boldly advocating this great fiscal reform that holds within its womb so much happiness for the human race.

Would legislative bodies ever pass laws looking to the eventual dropping of all other systems of taxation but the single tax, if the theories of Henry George had not become a part of the public thought of the day? Australia has started the movement, and Colorado has taken it up. The people of that state are to be given the opportunity to try it if they so desire, and having once gained a foothold on this continent, nothing can stay its progress. It will establish conditions that will lead to justice without the necessity of leaguering all the machinery of government to production—a coupling that will be dangerous, and ineffective to prevent injustice.

The newspapers of today are hardly yet aware that the United States is no longer a country where land-owners are in the majority. Many do not realize the stupendous fact that the tenant class is now the prevailing class, and that consequently in defending the interests of the tenants they are inviting the patronage of the majority of the community. But it so happens that the landlord class is able to invest dollars in defending their interests, while the tenant class have hard work to provide pennies.

Because newspapers do not take up at once reforms that are self-evident to the thinking mind, it must not be inferred that newspapers and newspaper publishers are without principle. Such an idea is far from the truth. Many a paper has refused to bow its head to some wave of public folly that has suddenly swept over the country; and this at great pecuniary loss. Not a few publishers have advocated great moral principles at a sacrifice. Many an editor has stood manfully by his ideas of right and expediency, and has by sheer will power forced his employers to allow the advocacy of things that for the time being brought pecuniary loss. But no paper can, as a business proposition, indefinitely run counter to public opinion. Its very existence depends on having a self-sustaining constituency.

As the number of people believing in the single tax has increased, more and more room has been given, in the public press, to its airing; sometimes to its advocacy. No economic discussion can now be carried on without its champions being heard, and they are so thoroughly grounded in the truth of the doctrine that those values created by the community are the proper sources from which to draw the expenses—the taxes, necessitated by community life—and are withal so enthusiastic and so earnest, that it is little wonder the press has caught some of the afflatus and is anxious to show its good will.

The time is fast approaching when the justice and equity of the single tax will be no more disputed than is the justice of the abolition of human slavery, or the correctness of the multiplication table. And as generally acknowledged will be the truth of the assertion that the taxation of land values equal to the values created by the community is amply sufficient to meet all the demands of a government economically administered. There is a close relation between taxation, prosperity and happiness, and the time is coming when it will be seen that a simple fiscal reform will give to wealth producers the power to keep their own and take away from the non-producing classes the privilege of keeping that which they have had no hand in creating.

The aim of existence is happiness. This is true of the devout believer in the hereafter, and of the pronounced agnostic. Some confine their efforts to this world; others seek to penetrate to the land beyond the silent sea and lay up riches in good deeds for the hereafter. There is happiness in suffering, if with the suffering is the belief that out of it will come good. Since the world began, down through the ages is seen a heroic line of courageous men and women who have braved death for their opinions, and from whose sufferings have sprung a rich heritage of happiness for their posterity. And should not the newspaper proprietor who takes up a reform when it is unpopular,

because of public ignorance, and sticks to it and carries it through its infancy, and at last sees it able to walk alone while growing lusty and strong, be entitled to the gratitude of the public? Every paper on whose editorial staff there have been brains enough to grasp the great truth promulgated by "Progress and Poverty," and whose proprietors were brave enough to allow the exploitation of the doctrine of the single tax, has done the world incalculable good, helping to sow the seed that will in due time bring forth a harvest rich in human happiness.

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#### THE LAW OF PRICES.

Now while all prices are at all times as high as the traffic will bear, competition tends to hold prices of commodities down to the cost of production, and if competition could do its work, then the prices of all commodities would be determined by the wages of those engaged in their production, and would result in a wondrous voluntary system of universal industrial cooperation on an individualistic basis, as superior to the devices of men as the kingdom of God is superior to a Spanish-American revolution.

Competition cannot permanently reduce prices below the sum of wages, rent, interest and taxes; these are the elements of price and must be recovered from the consumer. Thus we see that the consumer should be given credit for bearing on his back the tax burden of the world.

This explains the labor statistics, why wages are only one-fifth of the retail price of commodities, and the futility of attempting to establish industrial equity without first appropriating ground rent by the single tax on land value.—*Charles Moeller.*

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#### AS TO PROPERTY.

The institution of property, when limited to its essential elements, consists in the recognition, in each person, of a right to the exclusive disposal of what they have produced by their own exertions, or received either by gift or by fair agreement, without force or fraud, from those who produced it. The foundation of the whole is, the right of producers to what they themselves have produced.—*John Stuart Mill's "Principals of Political Economy."*