



Spinoza

—Precursor of George

By OSCAR B. JOHANNSEN

“THE fields, and the whole soil, and, if it can be managed, the houses should be public property, that is, the property of him, who holds the right of the commonwealth: and let him let them at a yearly rent to the citizens, whether townsmen or countrymen, and with this exception let them all be free or exempt from every kind of taxation in time of peace.”³

So wrote Benedict De Spinoza, “the god-intoxicated man” in *Tractatus Politicus* (Political Treatise), the completion of which was cut short by his untimely death in 1677. “Furthermore,” he goes on to say, “in the state of nature, there is nothing which any man can less claim for himself, and make his own, than the soil, and whatever so adheres to the soil, that he cannot hide it anywhere, nor carry it wither he pleases. The soil, therefore, and whatever adheres to it in the way we have mentioned, must be quite common property of the commonwealth.”²

As *Tractatus Politicus* is not well known, it may come as a surprise to many to know that Spinoza anticipated Henry George by some two hundred years. At the same time, it is satisfying to realize that Spinoza—the philosopher’s philosopher—recognized that the earth is common property which should be leased to the citizenry at an annual rent.

True, he made the error of including improvements, such as houses, as common property, but considering the

fact that this was written in the 17th century, when the “dismal science” was in its infancy, it would be a hardy soul, indeed, who could take him to task for that lapse.

While the fact that this intellectual giant is on the side of the angels (Georgist style) is not proof of the truth of George’s thesis, nevertheless Spinoza’s advocacy cannot be lightly dismissed.

One of the paradoxes which now and again play hob with the well ordered beliefs of people is that Spinoza owes his present popularity not to scientists or philosophers but to poets. Though, in the main, his works were cast in the abstract form of geometric propositions, sufficient to frighten away all but the intellectually tough, surprisingly he met his greatest appeal in the great poets and dreamers as Goethe, Coleridge, Shelley and George Elliott. Largely, as the result of their sponsorship Spinoza emerged from the obscurity into which he had fallen after his death. It may well be that he appealed to these great imaginative minds because his works, in one sense, partake of the poetic. His thoughts, just as poets, are compressed into few lines, with the ruthless elimination of all superfluous material, and yet they soar to heights to which only poets dare aspire. That, together with the fact that his calm appraisal of man has within it the divine contemplation, undoubtedly struck a chord in the hearts of these poets. Unknown to most people is the fact

that this chord reverberates over and over again in the works of these poets in one form or another, with Spinoza the intellectual parent.

Spinoza was not just a philosopher. Like George, he was a devoted fighter for freedom. But he had to work in the restricted atmosphere of old world conditions. Thus, the gems and nuggets of his contributions often lie buried in his writings, open to all to see but the true meaning of which is only understood by the intellectually alert. Certainly, in his Political Treatise it is what he says the state cannot do which constitutes his contributions to thought, not what he says the state can do. In the period of absolutism in which he lived, the restrictions which he advocated were important because in many cases they represented daring limitations on accepted powers of government.

What is, of course, of particular interest to Georgists is that Spinoza recognized clearly that a landed gentry is inimical to a free society. That he considered it important to make land common property is evident by his assertion: "There is another accession to the cause of peace and concord, which is also of great weight: I mean, that no citizen can have immovable property."³

Immovable property referred primarily to land. To get a true measure of how important this must have been to him one must realize that the attainment of peace was one of the principal aims of his life. And peace to him did not mean merely the absence of war. Rather, it meant conditions under which men would have the opportunity to develop their potentialities to the highest degree possible.

One interesting point is that he proposed leasing the land as a means of making monarchy work. He was trying to circumscribe the power of a monarch and create a constitutional

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monarchy, something virtually unheard of in his day. Historically, this was actuated by his fear that the House of Orange would overthrow the Republic which ruled the Netherlands in his lifetime. He was preparing for this eventuality. If the republic was overthrown, the form of monarchy he advocated would be the least objectionable.

It is debatable if he understood the economic significance of his proposal. However, there are more roads than one that lead to truth, and the road he took was the one which emphasized freedom. How create individual freedom? Eliminate the landed gentry. How eliminate them? Make land the common property of the commonwealth and lease it to the citizenry. Levy no other taxes, for taxes discourage initiative and inhibit the individual. He arrives at the same result that George reached 200 years later though much simpler and without the economic investigation that George instituted.

In view of the fact that Spinoza is revered by so many, his views on this important question should be better known. After all, you can't dismiss Spinoza with a wave of your hand, as many who should know better so casually dismiss George. You have to prove Spinoza wrong, and proving him wrong will test the mettle of anyone.

¹ Writings on Political Philosophy by Benedict De Spinoza, edited by A. G. A. Balz. Ch. VI, Sec. 12, p. 118
² Ibid. Ch. VII, Sec. 19, p. 137
³ Ibid. Ch. VII, Sec. 8, p. 132