
Franz Oppenheimer

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Franz Oppenheimer

By ALVIN JOHNSON

TO APPRAISE ADEQUATELY the work of Franz Oppenheimer would require an extensive monograph. The bibliography published elsewhere in this issue gives some idea of the wide range of his intellectual activities. But to gain a really adequate conception of Oppenheimer one must read widely in his works. Oppenheimer's exuberantly creative mind could never be confined within the outlines of any simple theme. His *System der Soziologie* is much more than a treatise on Sociology. Economics, finance, administration, law, ethics are inextricably interwoven with the sociological principles, or more frequently observations. His *Grundriss der Theoretischen Oekonomik* is baffling to the student accustomed to the heroic simplifications and the rigid logical structure of treatises constructed on the classical pattern.

He was an elusive polemist who could be counted on to change the venue in the course of any argument, to the confusion of his less agile opponents. Like most men of encyclopaedic learning and fertile mind, he cared little for consistency. He was an omnivorous reader, and generous in his attributions of credit to other men. Somewhere in my files I have letters from him crediting me with important contributions to agrarian philosophy, on the strength of articles for which I would never have made a serious claim to any deeper attribute than common sense.

Thus Oppenheimer imputes to Henry George a chief part in his own agrarian doctrine. But the two doctrines stand on quite different planes. Henry George was an uncompromising individualist. Give the common man access to the soil, George argued, and he would be quite capable of

fending for himself. The Single Tax would liberate the land; at the same time it would liberate the toiler from all taxes, direct and indirect. What Henry George inveighed against was "land monopoly," land held out of use for an advance in prices. Oppenheimer hated latifundia, and would have been happy to see a land tax that would break up all the great estates of Europe. But it was not merely against land speculation that Oppenheimer aimed his fire. The typical European landed estate was not a speculative holding, to be disposed of as land prices rose. It represented a feudal privilege that maintained an aristocracy in splendor and ground down the agricultural laborer in virtual serfdom. The breaking up of the large estates was to Oppenheimer an essential part of democratic policy.

Once the peasant came to be repossessed of the soil Oppenheimer anticipated enormous advances in good tillage. But he was too much of a realist to rest his reform on peasant individualism. A sound agrarian policy demanded the organization of the peasants in a tenacious network of co-operative societies that would offer the basis for a wholesome and satisfying peasant life.

Economic science has been built up by scholars of urban experience, or by men from the country over—assimilated to city conceptions. The science is permeated by the unconscious assumption that the natural abode of man is the city street. To be sure, there must be men living in the country, producing food and raw materials. Economic progress could be counted on to reduce the proportion of the population condemned to live in the open country. Recall the so-called agricultural economists, the French Physiocrats. The objective of their policy was maximizing the *produit net*, the surplus above rural consumption available for maintaining urban man. They favored large scale agriculture, as giving oppor-

tunity for labor saving and reducing the agricultural population that was nibbling away at the *produit net*. Adam Smith, equally preoccupied with the problems of urban economics, was less consistent than the Physiocrats in his handling of large scale agriculture. The landlord, like all men, loved to reap where he never sowed—hence the development of rent.

But it was Ricardo, with his almost comic conception of the “original and indestructible properties of the soil,” who fixed the urban economist’s attitude toward country life. John Stuart Mill, in his study of peasant proprietors, represented a reaction that exerted too little influence. Henry George, for all the credit he deserves in his campaign against the speculative holding of agricultural land, was according to his own assertion a Ricardian of the Ricardians, and we may add, an urbanite of the urbanites.

Oppenheimer, though representative of a social group long excluded from rural life, was dominated by a totally different preconception. On one of the rare occasions when I met him I told him I believed that his fundamental economic conception was that all flesh is grass and that the first duty of man is to conserve the grass, including in the term whatever else grows out of the soil. He smiled and said, “Perhaps.”

In Oppenheimer we have, not a city garden economist, but an Old Testament prophet, on the margin between the desert and the sown. He is vividly alive to the imperial ambition of the desert to encroach upon the sown. Nothing but rural manpower can hold it back.

In his capacious mind was all history. He saw the greatness of Babylonia succumbing to the desert, through the silting up of the irrigation canals. Rural manpower had declined too catastrophically to keep the ditches open and therefore

. . . The lion and the lizard keep
The halls where Jamshyd gloried and drank deep.

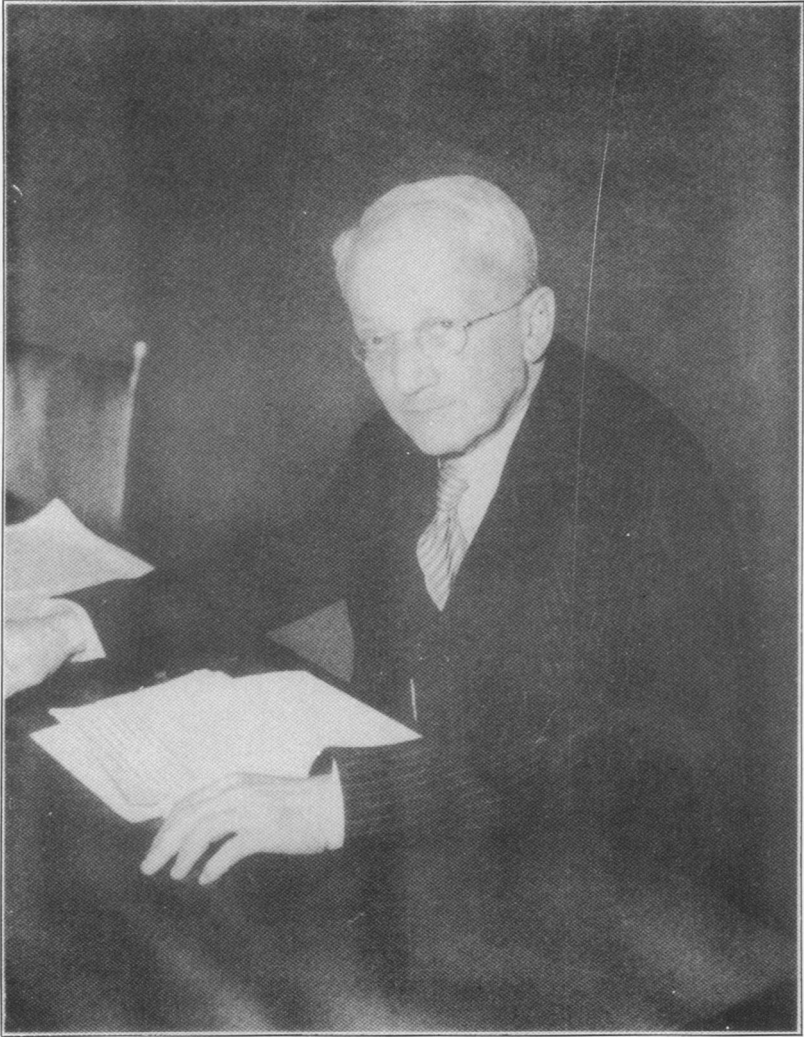
So, Oppenheimer knew, Palestine was transformed from a land of milk and honey, corn and wine, by the succession of conquerors who deported or slew the rural population that had held off the desert by keeping the terraces on the hills under repair and the forests on the steep slopes from conscienceless exploitation. First the Greeks, then the Romans, trod the peasant underfoot, but left him alive. Then came the hordes of Mohammed, and the Crusaders, and finally the Turks. The peasant, who knew the land and loved it, gave way to the Bedouins and the black locusts, their goats, that exterminated every rising shoot in the aging forests, leaving a desolation and a waste, only now being redeemed by the Jews under an unsocial British mandate. Oppenheimer knew that North Africa, flourishing under the Romans, is today half desert, half noisome disease, because the Mohammedans despised and destroyed the tillers of the soil. Under the Turkish hoof, says the proverb, no grass grows, and the Turkish hoof imprinted the land to the Pillars of Hercules.

Where do you find all this in Oppenheimer? You won't find it, in these details, anywhere. But you will find it in other terms.

Oppenheimer was profoundly interested, as I know from personal conversation, in the active movement for soil conservation under the inspiration of Henry Wallace. But he felt that something was lacking. There appeared to him to be too little emphasis on the cultivator.

And this is true. It is well for us to be concerned about the erosion of soils. But prior to the erosion of soils is the erosion of the farm population. We may draw the vigor of the farm population to our city industries. The old people, the lame and the halt and the blind, may remain to scratch a living out of a decaying land. It is still possible to find newer lands, younger peoples, who will feed us. But the desert is encroaching.

Ultimately we shall have an economics of economic realities. It will be an economics that recognizes that all human permanence rests on the soil, and the manpower that utilizes the soil and protects it. And when we arrive at this height of good sense we will restudy the works of Franz Oppenheimer, historian of the past and prophet of the future.



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1864–1943