

CHAPTER XV

THE LAND QUESTION

The land question is the most fundamental and far reaching privilege, and while most of its beneficiaries are not yet organized to corrupt and control the government, the understanding of it is essential to a proper appreciation of the baleful effects of the other forms of privilege.

In formulating any fundamental political program the ultimate object to be obtained should be first clearly defined and always kept in mind. With that established, statesmanship requires that a comparatively short step in the direction of the ultimate object aimed at should be first undertaken. The historic precedent is that of Lincoln and the other Republican leaders on the question of slavery. Lincoln had no doubt and frankly stated that in the end slavery must be abolished, but he and the Republican party disclaimed any intention of bringing in measures for the abolition of slavery if their party was installed in power. They however declared that they would carry through measures to prevent slavery from being introduced into the territories or in any free state. This was the thin end of the wedge, and was a shrewd program because it involved the position that slavery was wrong, and

educated the public to that idea.

Applying this principle, let us first consider the ultimate solution and then develop a first step as a practical political program.

Land Question Vital, but Ignored

In all the multitude of confused counsels which clamor for our attention in the discussion of our social and industrial problems, there is no discussion of the land question from any responsible or influential sources. It is ignored by college professors and authorities, by public men of every party, and in all political platforms and in all newspaper and magazine discussions. Any investigations which leave out of account this fundamental element are plainly unscientific. If Einstein and his fellow scientists were to discover that the elements composing the myriad forms of this universe were only three, and they confined themselves to an investigation and discussion of only two of these elements, and resolutely refused even to consider the third element, we would marvel at their stupidity. The failure of our public men and intellectual leaders to discuss the land question is not only unscientific, but outrageously absurd and unreasonable.

All economists agree that there are only two primary factors in the production of wealth, land and labor. We have a third element in common discussion which we call capital, but capital is the product of labor applied to the land, and is, accurately speaking, that portion of the product of labor applied to land which is withheld from immediate consumption, and is devoted to enlarging the facilities for the production of

further wealth. In the discussion therefore it is well to keep in mind the definition of capital as here made, and the remainder of the product of labor applied to land may be termed wealth, or described by any other terms, so long as the definition is kept in mind.

Difference Between Land Values and Other Forms of Wealth

A casual consideration of land discloses at once that it has marked characteristics entirely absent from forms of wealth which are produced by labor and capital. Every service which is intangible passes with its performance. Every physical thing created by the application of labor aided by capital to land never increases in value, but on the contrary starts to deteriorate and to decrease in value from the moment of its completion, and at the longest its life is comparatively brief. There is no fixed limit to the capacity of labor, aided by capital, applied to lands to produce material wealth. Invention is continually increasing the capacity of man to produce wealth and to render services. Land has entirely different characteristics. It is in the first place not the creation of labor applied to land, but is the creation of God, and is indispensable not only to production of wealth but even to human existence. It is strictly limited in quantity. No man can add a cubit to it. It is in the economic sense not only imperishable but has a tendency to greatly increase in value with the growth of population, the production of wealth and the achievements of invention. With these characteristics so essentially and vitally different from those of human service, capital and wealth, is it not marvel-

ous that no responsible public man or influential newspapers or authorities of our colleges can be induced to discuss this major and primary factor of production? It is truly amazing. Why is it?

The Right to Use Our Land

Although the right of each individual to the land has been more or less clearly perceived by thinkers and philosophers in all the civilizations of recorded history, the best statement both of the elementary principle involved and the best method of putting it into effect is set forth by Henry George in his "Progress and Poverty," which for fifty years has remained unanswered by any recognized authority. In substance he puts it this way.

Every child born into the world has an equal right with every other child so born, and with every other person already in existence, to life, a child of the peasant equally with the child of the noble.

As life can not continue or be maintained even for a limited time without access to certain natural elements, it follows that the right to life entitles each child so born to an equal right in these natural elements which are absolutely indispensable to life, such as land, water and air. To say that a child of the peasant has an equal right to life with the child of the noble, or with others who are alive upon the earth, and to deny to such child the equal right to those natural elements without which life can not be maintained even for a moment, while allowing to the child of the noble or to the people in existence upon the earth or a part of them, this right, is to deny the equal right to life to

each child born into the world. Nobody has ever undertaken to justify this proposition, and it can not be justified.

Land Titles a Special Privilege

It is admitted that land is the creation of God, and is the gift of God to somebody. There is no pretext that anybody holding title to land can trace his title to the Creator. All title to land is made by law, that is, by the state. If on investigation we discover that certain characteristics of the private ownership of land are anti-social, contrary to the public interest, and productive of undeserved misery and poverty, it is not denied that those alive have the power, the moral right, and the duty to change the law by limiting or if necessary abolishing the title protected by law.

If this were not so then no title to any form of property could ever be changed by law. Slavery could never have been abolished and zoning laws would be impossible. In fact for more than a generation the answer to the abolitionists was that the changing of the law involving the abolition of slavery would mean the destruction of millions of property in slaves, and that such destruction would undermine the security of all property.

The Earth Belongs to the Living

Out of this experience we gather the first law, which is that whenever any form of property is found to be contrary to the public interest, the living have a right to modify or repeal the law made by those who have passed away, and to enact a new law in accordance

with the sense of justice of those who are alive. This when analyzed simply means that every form of property when re-examined periodically must conform to the moral law as established by the consensus of the opinion of the citizens of the State. This doctrine has been affirmed by the United States Supreme Court. The moral foundation to the title of things produced by man, or to the reward of services rendered by man, is in the fact that the thing produced or the service rendered is the product of the person rendering the service or creating the commodity, and the moral law as established by the consensus of opinion always is that a man is entitled to the product of his own labor. As Lincoln said in his reply to Judge Douglas' question as to whether he believed that the Negro was the equal of the white man. "The Negro may not be the equal of the white' man in mental capacity, but in his right to eat the bread which he has earned by the sweat of his brow he is the equal of Judge Douglas or of myself, or any other white man." The moral title to the reward for services rendered or to the ownership of things produced by labor is therefore justified, but when we examine the title to land, to the extent at least of certain characteristics of this title, this moral law does not apply. If the land was created by God it was given by God to somebody. To whom was it thus given? Jefferson's definition is the best answer to this question: "The land belongs in usufruct to the living, and the dead have no interest in it or right of control over it." The logic of this position is that no man who under the law has acquired title to land has a moral right to do with it as he pleases irrespective of the effect of his action upon

society, to misuse it, to hold it idle, to devote it to an inadequate or anti-social use, or to convert to his own use the rent which somebody will pay him for the privilege of producing wealth upon it, but his title is charged morally and even under the law with certain obligations, and is subject to certain limitations. The logic of the contrary of this position is that those of us who are alive today and who possess the land are entitled to say to those who come into the world tomorrow, as well as to those who are alive today and possess no land, "You pay us for the right to live upon the land which is God's gift to his children, or you get off the land." No responsible person dares to take that position. The immorality of it is apparent.

Land Values Created by the Whole Community

When we examine into the case further we discover that the value of the land, that is the site value, or location value, is created not by the owners but by the community by the increase of population, and the consequent increase of wealth continually aided and enlarged by invention and discoveries.

The first thing therefore that appears is that the value of the land, being created by the community, and not by the owner of the land, or by any of his predecessors in title, belongs to the people who created it, to wit, the public. Every person who dies loses his right, title and interest in this common heritage, and every person born into the world enters upon his share of this common heritage. This is the moral law which ultimately must find universal acceptance if we are ever to solve our problem in this country and every other civilized country. The

disobedience of this law is the primary cause of the inequitable distribution of wealth, not only in this country but in every other country, and also of the human misery which has ensued from our permitting what is created by the community to go without reward to those who happen to possess the ultimate legal title to land.

If there is no flaw in this reasoning then certain results logically follow. Those who derive a revenue from leasing the land to tenants who produce wealth upon it, or who appropriate that part of the wealth produced upon the land which is attributable to the superiority of location without rendering any service, are appropriating to their own private use that which belongs in morals to the public. Few people realize the enormous quantity of this publicly created value thus diverted from the public into private hands of people who have rendered no service whatever, but who by virtue of the mere ownership of the land are able to say in Lincoln's phrase, "You work and earn bread and we will eat it." The amount of wealth thus extracted immorally from the producers in every country is almost incalculable, and restored to its rightful owners by proper legislation would go far to abolish poverty and unemployment in every country of the world. The ground rent paid by tenants in London to owners, mostly the nobility, according to the best information I have obtained, is about four hundred million pounds or two billion dollars a year. This is the one fundamental truth which must be comprehended by any man who wishes to master our social and industrial problems.