

Chapter 10

Quest for the 'green stick'

*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.*

William Butler Yeats.

THERE may be much to cavil at in Tolstoy's analysis, during the years 1881 to 1886, of the reason for the maldistribution of wealth; but there had been a time, on his return from the Crimean War (1854-56), when he had seen the problem in much simpler terms. It is quite understandable that he should have done so; for all his economic experience until then had been of his own extravagant consumption of an unearned rental income, and of his observations of the ill-rewarded agricultural labour of the serfs on his estate. The marvel is not only that he troubled himself to think at all about economic injustice from which he derived material benefit, but also that he tried to take action to improve the serfs' condition at his own expense.

Agriculture is the primary settled industry of mankind, and has been carried on since the 7th millennium B.C. It would therefore be hard to find anybody, except perhaps a habitual and incurious town-dweller, to deny that agricultural wealth, in the form of grain, meat, milk and its derivatives, is the result of labour applied to land. It should furthermore be obvious to any thinking person that the first claim to this wealth is that of the people who have supplied the labour to produce it, and that the second claim is that of those who, in exchange for a share of the labourers' produce, furnish them with a share of their own. Any single third party claim to a share, and a major one at that, on the pretext of having supplied the land, which has been in

existence for billions of years, would be met with ribald laughter if it had not already been established since beyond living memory. That there might, in some circumstances, be a collective claim to such a share was an idea that had not yet been suggested to Tolstoy.

When he arrived back at Yasnaya Polyana in May 1856, he had already made up his mind to a compromise between his feelings of guilt as a battener on the labours of others, and the practical consideration of how he was going to provide for himself, to say nothing of repaying the mortgage he had incurred to settle his gambling debts.

Beyond all doubt, the serfs would have to be freed – this had already been mooted as a political question – but Tolstoy was clear-sighted and generous enough, unlike the legislators of the U.S.A. after 1865, to see that formal freedom without land rights would be tantamount to no freedom at all. What he therefore proposed to his serfs was immediate freedom and thirty years as his tenants, after which the land would belong to them outright.

To his surprise, they demurred. They were astute enough to realise that formal freedom was soon to be granted to them anyway by the State, but innocent enough to assume that Tolstoy's estate would immediately become *de jure* what they had always considered it to be *de facto*, namely theirs. When Tolstoy realised this, he found it very alarming. If these ideas are held generally, he thought, then one day the serfs will rise up in arms against their masters. In a moment of panic, he wrote as follows to a minister called Bludov:

... I confess I have never understood why it could not be established that the land belongs to the landlords, and the peasants be freed without giving them the land. ... Freeing them with the land is not, in my opinion, a solution. Who is to answer these questions that are essential to a solution of the overall problem, namely: how much land shall go to each, or what share of the estate; how is the landlord to receive compensation; over what period of time; who is to pay the compensation?¹

He need not have worried, even momentarily. According to the imperial manifesto of 1861, the serfs were not to be freed immediately, but over a transitional period of two years, during which they were to continue to obey their owner, but the owner was not to dispose of them or their children in any way. Those, such as domestic workers, who were not subject to the *adscriptio glebae* (Ch.5) would not be entitled to receive any land, but might seek employment elsewhere. Many would do so, as Tolstoy was to observe, twenty years later, in the mansions and factories of the towns. For those who were so subject, the official conditions were less generous than the ones they could have secured from Tolstoy; but, as we have seen (Ch.6), he did his best for a while as an 'arbiter of the peace' to see that they were not even less favourable to the peasants in practice than they were in theory. For a more satisfactory 'solution of the overall problem', and a more comprehensive answer to the questions he had put to Bludov, he was to wait another twenty-seven or so years; and then they were to be not at all what he had expected, and a cause of both personal heart-searching and domestic strife.

When the dawn of enlightenment came, some time between 1883 and 1886, with his first taste of the economic philosophy of Henry George,² he was caught in two minds, and, for the time being, his personal view of the secret of the green stick that was to do away with human ills was the one that was uppermost. If the social problems he had observed were caused by the activities of financiers, industrialists, mine owners, officials, traders, policemen, teachers, clerks, servants and cabmen, then the new society of which he would be the prophet would be one in which these occupations no longer existed:

Just what to do? – everyone asks, and I, too, asked it as long as, under the influence of a high opinion of my vocation, I did not see that my first and unquestionable business was to procure my own food, clothing, heating, and dwelling, and in doing this to serve others, because since the beginning of the world that has been the first and surest obligation of every man.³

He would 'serve others' in this way, he thought, because, by providing for his own basic needs, he would no longer be requisitioning their labour, and consequently exploiting them. Self-sufficiency was to be his first aim in life; and this was the beginning of determined efforts to hold his own with peasants in the performance of field-work, and to make his own footwear, not particularly well if his friends are to be believed.

It was not only the matter of self-sufficiency that preyed on Tolstoy's mind, but the very concept of property. Where we have hitherto come across it, in association with his well-grounded ideas on the origin of wars, it has had a clear reference to land; but personal property also, as the following extract clearly shows, caused him some twinges of conscience:

We know, or if we do not know it is easy to perceive, that property is clearly a means of appropriating other men's work. And the work of others can certainly not be my own. It has even nothing in common with the conception of property (that which is one's own) – a conception which is very exact and definite. Man always has called, and always will call, 'his own' that which is subject to his will and attached to his consciousness, namely, his own body. As soon as a man calls something his 'property' that is not his own body but something that he wishes to make subject to his will as his body is – he makes a mistake, acquires for himself disillusionment and suffering, and finds himself obliged to cause others to suffer.⁴

'Property' is therefore, in his view, not only the thing appropriated, but also the means of appropriating. This poses a dilemma that can be satisfactorily resolved only when the term itself has been resolved into its component elements of 'land' and 'wealth'.

So, despite his normally successful efforts to be a 'free-thinker', Tolstoy had not yet learned to follow a line of economic reasoning to its logical end, but had allowed his enthusiasm to carry him somewhat beyond it. What he was advocating, whether he knew it or not, was a return to a much earlier stage of human development. As Henry George was later to put it:

In the primitive stage of human life the readiest way of satisfying desires is by adapting to human use what is found in existence. In a later and more settled stage it is discovered that certain desires can be more easily and more fully satisfied by utilising the principle of growth and reproduction, as by cultivating vegetables and breeding animals. And in a still later period of development, it becomes obvious that certain desires can be better and more easily satisfied by exchange, which brings out the principle of co-operation more fully and powerfully than could obtain among unexchanging economic units.⁵

An outstanding example of this principle of cooperation by exchange was flourishing in the Russia of Tolstoy's own time, and in a way that could not possibly justify the slur of exploitation, at least before the 'semi-factories' arose. Here is a contemporary account of it by Prince P.A. Kropotkin and J.T. Bealby.

The peculiar feature of Russian industry is the development out of the domestic petty handicrafts of central Russia of a semi-factory on a large scale. Owing to the forced abstention from agricultural labour in the winter months the peasants of central Russia, more especially those of the governments (i.e. administrative areas) of Moscow, Vladimir, Yaroslavl, Kostroma, Tver, Smolensk and Ryazan, have for centuries carried on a variety of domestic handicrafts during the period of compulsory leisure. The usual practice was for the whole of the people in one village to devote themselves to one special occupation. Thus, while one village would produce nothing but felt shoes, another would carve sacred images (*ikons*), and a third spin flax only, a fourth make wooden spoons, a fifth nails, a sixth iron chains, and so on. ... A good deal of the internal trade is carried on by travelling merchants.⁶

In preaching self-sufficiency, despite all such activities, Tolstoy was reaching back to Henry George's stage two, but at the same time, inconsistently no doubt, being unable to ignore the welfare of his wife and children, he retained his rents, the reward, as he

himself had admitted, of the non-producer.

As for his 'high opinion of his vocation', presumably as the author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, each of which has been acclaimed as the finest novel in the world, and perhaps also as the seeker of the green stick, Tolstoy was really being too modest. Would he not have recognised himself, on both counts, in the following definition by Henry George?

He who by any exertion of mind or body adds to the aggregate of enjoyable wealth, increases the sum of human knowledge or gives to human life higher elevation or greater fulness – he is, in the large meaning of the words, a 'producer', a 'working-man', a 'labourer', and is honestly earning honest wages. But he who without doing ought to make mankind richer, wiser, better, happier, lives on the toil of others – he, no matter by what name of honour he may be called, or how lustily the priests of Mammon may swing their censers before him, is in the last analysis but a beggarman or a thief.⁷

Tolstoy could then with reason have gone on being proud of his achievements as a writer, while being ashamed of his rôle as an absorber of rent; but his subsequent actions in renouncing royalties on his writings, and attempting to evade the guilt of rent-collection by making his land over to his family, are signs of continuing failure to recognise the royalties as 'honest wages', as defined by Henry George, and the rents as the proceeds of robbery, from the responsibility for which he could not absolve himself by passing it on.

There remains his pride in his prowess as a farm-labourer and boot-maker, by which he imagined he was easing the burden on the people who were accustomed to doing these jobs for a livelihood. He had made up his mind, in fact, that there was something wrong with the division of labour, while we, on the other hand, have shown some reason for its being a potent influence for human progress. It is interesting to see how Matthew Arnold also had made up his mind on this subject, somewhat differently but with an equal lack of accurate analytical thought:

... I do not know how it is in Russia, but in an English village the determination of 'our circle' to earn their bread by the work of their hands would produce only dismay, not fraternal joy, amongst that 'majority' who are so earning it already. 'There are plenty of us to compete as things stand', the gardeners, carpenters, and smiths would say; 'pray stick to your articles, your poetry, and nonsense; in manual labour you will interfere with us, and be taking the bread out of our mouths'.⁸

It is to be feared that Arnold, for all his self-imposed obligation⁹ of spreading 'sweetness and light' and making 'the will of God prevail' among the 'Barbarians' [the English landed gentry], the 'Philistines' [the English middle class] and the 'Populace', and his readiness, with Tolstoy, to strip the accretions of the later Church from the pure doctrines and example of Christ, was a high Tory in his economics. He took it for granted that there must be competition for work among those people who regard literature as 'nonsense', and that any attempt to join them in the struggle is decidedly unkind.

Henry George maintained, on the contrary, that, in an undistorted economy, which his remedy of the single tax would bring about, any competition that existed would be among prospective employers of labour. It is time, therefore, to note the first impression that he made on the turmoil of Tolstoy's economic ideas between 1883 and 1886:

Where violence is legalized, there slavery exists. ...

A striking illustration of the truth of this conclusion is supplied by Henry George's project for nationalizing the land. George proposes to recognize all land as belonging to the State, and therefore to replace all taxes, both direct and indirect, by a ground rent. That is to say, every one making use of land should pay to the State the rental-value of such land.

What would result? Agricultural slavery would be abolished within the bounds of the State, that is, the land would belong to the State: England would have its own, America its own, and the

slave-dues a man had to pay would be determined by the amount of land he used.

Perhaps the position of some of the workers (agrarian) would be improved, but as long as the forcible collection of a rent tax remained – there would be slavery. An agriculturalist unable after a failure of crops to pay the rent forcibly demanded of him, to retain his land and not lose everything would have to go into bondage to a man who had money.¹⁰

There are clear indications here – ‘the amount of land he used’, ‘the workers (agrarian)’ – that Tolstoy had not yet understood George, and was in a suitable frame of mind anyway to reject his ideas. We must be fair to him though, and emphasise that the first of George’s books that he read was not *Progress and Poverty* (1879), in which George’s economic philosophy is set forth with patient and exhaustive logic, but *Social Problems* (1883), the first thirteen chapters of which had started life as articles in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, and which dwelt on the problems rather than on economic theory. George’s eloquent descriptions of poverty in New York stand comparison with Tolstoy’s of poverty in Moscow; and it was probably these that first attracted him.

What would on the contrary have repelled him initially was George’s simple explanation of poverty as opposed to his own complicated one, and the fact that the single tax, so far as it was possible to foresee, required state action. The State, he claimed with justification, is based on violence, and maintains itself by violence. Therefore, he reasoned with rather less justification, the levying of the single tax would be an act of violence. George, however, did not believe in violence any more than Tolstoy did; so the next step must be to examine George’s philosophy more carefully, and to see how Tolstoy in the end became won over to it.