

Omission Plus Insinuation = Logic

By Harry Tideman

One of the most cunning examinations of the Single Tax to be found in economic textbooks is that in "Elementary Principles of Economics," by Ely and Wicker, the MacMillan Company, 1920.

We quote from it:

".... we can do no better, therefore, than to explain the proposed system in Mr. George's own words, as printed in his paper, *The Standard*:—

"The *Standard* advocates the abolition of all taxes upon industry and the products of industry, and the taking, by taxation upon land values, irrespective of improvements, of the annual rental value of all those various forms of natural opportunities embraced under the general term, Land.

"We hold that to tax labor or its products is to discourage industry. We hold that to tax land values to their full amount will render it impossible for any man to exact from others a price for the privilege of using those bounties of nature in which all living men have an equal right of use; that it will compel every individual controlling natural opportunities to utilize them by employment of labor or abandon them to others; that it will thus provide opportunities of work for all men, and secure to each the full reward of his labor; and that as a result involuntary poverty will be abolished, and the greed, intemperance, and vice that spring from poverty and the dread of poverty will be swept away."

There follows this analysis by Ely and Wicker:

"The proposition is here definitely made that the state should take all of the pure or economic rent of land, and the claim is made in explanation and jus-

tification of the policy that it will abolish poverty. Such a policy might, indeed, prevent landowners who do not care to use their land from keeping it out of the hands of those who would use it; but how it would effect all the other predicted blessings is difficult for most people to comprehend. In the first place, there are, no doubt, administrative difficulties in the way of separating the pure economic rent of land from the annual value of the separable improvements on the land. But apart from this difficulty, the appropriation of economic rent by the public without compensation to the owners does not appeal to the conscience of the American public as a just thing to do. No abstract reasoning, based on 'natural rights,' will persuade a modern nation to so radical a step. This honestly and earnestly advocated policy is only one more illustration of the danger of basing social reasoning on any theory of 'natural rights.'"

This examination runs very smoothly and with the firm voice of authority, does it not? Yet read it carefully. It does not say what the casual reader thinks it does.

Suppose we go over it, sentence by sentence.

"The proposition is here definitely made that the state should take all of the pure or economic rent of land, and the claim is made in explanation and justification of the policy that it will abolish poverty." True enough;

War

Destroy

Democracy

though to imply that George can thoroughly state his case in 128 words is hardly reasonable. Nor have the authors taken the trouble to explain George's thesis of the effect of land speculation on wages; an important omission.

"Such a policy might, indeed, prevent landowners who do not care to use their land from keeping it out of the hands of those who would use it; but how it would effect all the other predicted blessings is difficult for most people to comprehend." The authors concede that it would put land into use, while covering a possible future retreat with the word *might*. A really delectable bit, however, follows. They do not say it would not accomplish all that George says it would; they do not say that they do not think it would do so; they merely say that the fact is "difficult for most people to comprehend." They are on firm ground. This is true. It is also true of calculus; and yet a calculus textbook, instead of saying that calculus is difficult to comprehend, and stopping there, goes on to teach calculus. The more difficult it is to comprehend, the more care should be devoted to helping people to comprehend it.

"In the first place, there are, no doubt, administrative difficulties in the way of separating the pure economic rent of land from the annual value of the separable improvements on the land." No doubt. There are also "administrative difficulties" in everything the government does, in the operation of every business, in the playing of a ball game on a vacant lot, in such a simple thing as the selling and buying of a pair of pants. In spite of administrative difficulties, I somehow buy and wear pants. This is another sentence that, while absolutely true, is hardly a gold mine of information.

"But apart from this difficulty, the appropriation of economic rent by the public without compensation to the owners does not appeal to the conscience of the American public as just a thing to do." Marvellous!

Scarcely to be surpassed for sheer truth. It is also true that at one time the burning of a number of very wicked witches appealed to the conscience of a section of the American public as a just thing to do. The authors do not say whether George's proposal actually is or is not just; they do not say that they think it just or not; they merely make the observation that it does not now appeal to the American public as a just thing to do. It is interesting to remember that there was a time when the authors could have said that the freeing of human beings from slavery did not appeal to the conscience of the American public as a just thing to do. Besides, is it the business of a text book to record the author's opinion of public opinion?

Upon this base, buttressed with

these irrevocable truths, our authors then set their thoroughly undemonstrated conclusion, which has nothing to do with the desirability of George's proposal. "No abstract reasoning, based on 'natural rights,' will persuade a modern nation to so radical a step. This honestly and earnestly advocated policy is only one more illustration of the danger of basing social reasoning on any theory of 'natural rights.'"

Notice here that the authors do not say the Single Tax will not come; they merely say that, abstract reasoning, based on 'natural rights,' will not bring it; and they do not offer to prove even this assertion. However, they here undertake to prophesy, and no doubt feel that they could not be considered irrevocably wrong in the eyes of most people until the event had taken place.

This event is still in the future. The Single Tax is denounced and not a fraudulent word is used.

Oddly enough, the authors have not said that George's proposal would not do all that is claimed for it; they have not said that it is not perfectly feasible of operation; they have not said that it is not just; they have not said it will not come. They have actually said only that some people think some of these things, an innocent enough statement of an opinion which, when not refuted by the authors, takes on an implied endorsement not actually specifically given, which can easily be disowned on convenient occasions.

One might fairly expect more than this perpetuation of existing ignorance from a book which claims to educate.