

1899-03-06 The Single-Tax Theory.

To the Editor of The New York Times:

If the columns of your paper are still open to the people for the discussion of one of the most difficult of all questions, viz., just taxation, I should like to ask for light upon just one point in the single tax theory. It is a point of vital interest to all landholders, whether farmers or others, and seems to have been usually overlooked. In land we hear of values which have been created in some parts of the State by the presence of an increasing community and its industries, and not by anything that the owner or prior owner has done to produce such an increase. The single taxers are very fond of calling this the "unearned increment," and think that it ought to go to the Government. In other parts of the State they refer to farms not now worth the cost of the improvements upon them, farms which have gone down in value from no fault of the farmers themselves. Here they appear to halt.

Following in the wake of their great leader, Henry George, they have applied no catching phrase to this condition to which they point and which undoubtedly exists. The rise in property they see and gladly give it a name. The fall they see more dimly and give it no name. But if one is to be called the "unearned increment," why should not the other be called the "unearned decrement?" and the question is what do the single taxers propose to do about it? When they appropriate the surplus of the unearned increment do they propose to make good the deficiency of the equally unearned decrement? If so, they have kept this purpose in the background. If not so, then the farmer and the Government are to enter into a kind of partnership in which if there is a gain it is to go to the Government, and if there is a loss it is to go to the farmer. Can you wonder if the farmer is suspicious? Why, in the celebrated case where the white man and the Indian started to divide the turkey and the buzzard between them, even the Indian grew suspicious when he found that the white man "never said turkey to him once." It would be interesting to know what really adequate measure the single taxers propose in regard to the unearned decrement. The subject of taxation being such an exceedingly difficult one, it is no disrespect to the single taxers to call attention to the fact that their theory is still so crude that they have not yet invented a term for a condition which as surely exists and should be adequately provided for in any just scheme of taxation as does that opposite condition which has given rise to the term "unearned increment"

H. S.

New York, March 2, 1899.

"Single Tax"-ism

To the Editor of The New York Times:

Your correspondent "H. S." wonders why the so-called "single tax" advocates are so solicitous for the appropriation of what they call the "unearned increment" in land, and yet feel so astonished and dumb over its more frequent decrease in value.

About twelve years ago I wrote for The Popular Science Monthly an article which I think was the first attempt made to treat this point, under the title of "The Earned Decrease vs. the Unearned Increment." I believe I was the first person, too, to give this dismissed condition a name, and to make it apparent that it should be taken into account by these schemers on behalf of land spoliation.

Two other remarks are pertinent in reference to this crude and noisy philosophy. The first is, that "unearned increment" is not peculiar to land. It concerns nearly all deals in what are known as "futures." The produce man who lays down 10,000 dozen eggs in May and June, when the fates are propitious, to sell in December and January when the hens and egg eaters stand in different relations to each other, is profiting by an "unearned increment" — a benefit which he no more created than did the beneficiary of increased land values. It is the enhanced public necessity that puts this profit in his pocket, and, of course, under "single-tax" philosophy, it should be wrested from him and given equally to all those who love eggs. He, however, who saved the eggs, may retain the shells, after the "ground rent," or full value of them, has been extracted.

My second remark is made to call attention to the adroit euphemism by which the wholesale appropriation of all realty — the truest, most just, and most real property an individual can possess — is described as a "single tax." I am sure that any convicted Montana "road-agent" who has held up a stage or a transportation of gold must feel the feebleness of his wit in not urging his attorney to say for him in court that he was merely, in another way, applying the doctrine of the "single tax."

JOEL BENTON.

Poughkeepsie, N. Y., March 7, 1809.

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