

The Ethics of the Land Question

BY HENRY GEORGE

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That private property in the products of labor is from nature is clear, for nature gives such things to labor and to labor alone Thus there inheres in such things a right of private property, which originates from and goes back to the source of ownership, the maker of the thing

But who will dare trace the individual ownership of land to any grant from the Maker of the land? What does nature give to such ownership? How does she in any way recognize it? That which derives its existence from man and passes away like him, which is indeed but the evanescent expression of his labor, man may hold and transfer as the exclusive property of the individual; but how can such individual ownership attach to land, which existed before man was, and which continues to exist while the generations of men come and go . . . ?

Clearly, the private ownership of land is from the state, not from nature. Thus, not merely can no objection be made on the score of morals when it is proposed that the state shall abolish it altogether, but insomuch as it is a violation of natural right, its existence involving a gross injustice on the part of the state, an "impious violation of the benevolent intention of the Creator," it is a moral duty that the state so abolish it.

So far from there being anything unjust in taking the full value of landownership for the use of the community, the real injustice is in leaving it in private hands—an injustice that amounts to robbery and murder . . .

We propose to let those who by the past appropriation of land values have taken the fruits of labor to retain what they have thus got. We merely propose that for the future such robbery of labor shall cease—that for the future, not for the past, landholders shall pay to the community the rent that to the community is justly due.

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I have said enough to show your Holiness the injustice into which you fall in classing us, who [seek] virtually to abolish private property in land . . . , with those whom you speak of as socialists . . . [We differ from socialists, communists, violent anarchists, protectionists, and unionists.]

Differing from all these are those for whom I would speak. Believing that the rights of true property are sacred, we would regard forcible communism as robbery that would bring destruction But it seems to us the vice of socialism in all its degrees is its want of radicalism, of going to the root

We who call ourselves single-tax[ers], a name which expresses our practical propositions, . . . see in the natural social and industrial laws such harmony as we see in the adjustments of the human body, . . . so close a relation to the moral law as must spring from the same Authorship, and that proves to be the sure guide of man where his intelligence would wander and go astray. Thus, to us, all that is needed to remedy the evils of our time is to do justice and give freedom

We differ from the socialists in our diagnosis of the evil, and we differ from them as to remedies. We have no fear of capital, regarding it as the natural handmaiden of labor; we look on interest . . . as natural and just; we would set no limit to accumulation, nor impose on the rich any burden that is not equally placed on the poor; we see no evil in competition, but deem unrestricted competition to be as necessary to the health of the industrial and social organism as the free circulation of the blood is to the health of the bodily organism . . . We would simply take for the community what belongs to the community, the value that attaches to land by the growth of the community; leave sacredly to the individual all that belongs to the individual; and, treating necessary monopolies as functions of the state, abolish all restrictions and prohibitions save those required for public health, safety, morals, and convenience.

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The reform we propose, like all true reforms, has both an ethical and an economic side. By ignoring the ethical side, and pushing our proposal merely as a reform of taxation, we could avoid the objections that arise from confounding ownership with possession and attributing to private property in land that security of use and improvement that can be had even better without it. All that we seek practically is the legal abolition, as fast as possible, of taxes on the products and processes of labor, and the consequent concentration of taxation on land values irrespective of improvements. To put our proposals in this way would be to urge them merely as a matter of wise public expediency.

There are indeed many single-tax[ers] who do put our proposals in this way; who, seeing the beauty of our plan from a fiscal standpoint, do not concern themselves further. But to those who think as I do, the ethical is the more important side. Not only do we not wish to evade the question of private property in land, but to us it seems that the beneficent and far-reaching revolution we aim at is too great a thing to be accomplished by "intelligent self-interest," and can be carried by nothing less than the religious conscience.

Believing that the social question is at bottom a religious question, we deem it of a happy augury to the world that in your Encyclical the most influential of all religious teachers has directed attention to the condition of labor.

But while we appreciate the many wholesome truths you utter, while we feel, as all must feel, that you are animated by a desire to help the suffering and oppressed, . . . yet it is obviously painful to us that one fatal assumption hides from you the cause of the evils you see, and makes it impossible for you to propose any adequate remedy. This assumption is, that private property in land is of the same nature and has the same sanctions as private property in things produced by labor . . . [This] false assumption prevents you from seeing the real cause . . . And it fatally fetters you when you seek a remedy.

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The justice of God laughs at the attempts of men to substitute anything else for it!