

The Common Wealth

By CAROLINE G. NATIONS

[The present article is from a paper written by Miss Nations for the Philosophy Section of the Missouri Academy of Science and presented by her at a panel discussion held by that body in Kansas City, April 18. Miss Nations, in submitting the paper to us, wrote that it was very well received and that the three professors composing the panel—Francis C. Bayley of Stephens College, George A. Deglman of Rockhurst College, and Cecil H. Miller of the University of Missouri—seemed much interested and were quite fair in their observations. The panel discussions at which Miss Nations spoke bore on the subject of "The Philosophical Foundations of Democracy."—ED.]

NOTHING is easier than to miss the point in Henry George's land theory. The very simplicity of his thinking, the very soundness of his logic, the boldness of his analysis, the radical nature of his solution, all alike seem to cause many to feel there is something wrong with his theory, even though they cannot discover just what it is. There seems to be a mind-set characteristic of our times that is hostile to a simple solution of any problem. And there is still another mind-set deliberately fostered by those who are decidedly hostile to the *right solution* of the land question. And so there are a number of factors which connive to make it uncommonly easy to miss the point in "Progress and Poverty." It will be my purpose, therefore, to endeavor to emphasize what I consider to be the main point in George's theory of the land question.

The point in George's theory which is most important, or, which at least impresses me as being so, is the concept of the *common wealth* or the social wealth. It would be interesting to ask some one what meaning he would associate with the term, "common wealth." I dare say that if he thought of the common wealth at all in terms of *wealth*, it would be as the actual wealth of a nation. He would likely not hesitate to call this total wealth, the common wealth or the Nation's wealth, but if its value is estimated in money, he would think it should be apportioned to those individuals with private claims upon it and with title to it, and that society as such has no just claim to this money, except to that portion which the government appropriates for public use by means of taxation. It would be highly unlikely for him to think of the common wealth as a fund created *by and for society as such*, as a sum which is drawn from neither wages nor capital, and which cannot justly be converted into either, which can be quite accurately estimated and collected in the form of money, and which is a sum so vast as to be more than adequate to meet all normal government expenses.

The general concensus of opinion is that there is no form of wealth created by society as such, a sum which can be measured quite accurately and collected as money, and which

exists over and above the just returns to labor and capital. How few think of the mal-distribution of wealth as arising chiefly from the appropriation of the common wealth of society as such, by private individuals! All current efforts to solve the problem of the mal-distribution of wealth are addressed to trying to make private wealth flow more justly into public channels, or at least to give it much wider distribution. But, should there be such a common wealth, neither the labor movement, nor socialism, nor the New Deal, nor any of the usual ways for social betterment, can solve the problem of the mal-distribution of wealth. It is thus seen that should there indeed be such a common wealth, it behooves us to recognize the fact and to direct our chief attention to having it placed at the disposal of the public as such.

Is there such a common wealth? If so, how is this wealth created? What measures it? Who appropriates it? In my opinion, no questions are more important than these.

Is there not in truth a wealth created by society as such? Look about you. Do you not find that you owe debts in all directions? And when you receive your wage or salary, does it not represent the good seed you have sown rather than the full fruit of your service and labor? Are not wages generally paid at the time of sowing rather than at harvest? And is not one harvest but the sowing of another? In 1821, Michael Faraday, experimenting with a magnetic needle, some mercury, and a charged wire in a cup, discovered the interchangeability of electrical and mechanical powers. Says Stuart Chase, "In that little cup the electrical industry was born." How could a Faraday, a Galileo, a Columbus be compensated for the full fruit of their labor? Can you pay the artist for the enjoyment you get from his painting? Beneath the title of Markham's famous poem, "The Man with a Hoe," are these significant words: "Written after seeing Millet's world-famous painting of a brutalized toiler." It is in this way that genius pays its debt to genius. And this is how the individual enriches society beyond its capacity to pay him as an individual. How can labor pay its debt to labor? How can the present pay its debt to the past? Emerson says, "Has anything grand and lasting been done? Who did it? Plainly not any man, but all men. . . ." Who won the victory? Not this soldier, not that soldier, not the general—but the whole army. Who built Rome? Who built America? Look at Robinson Crusoe, and you can see that labor can do very little alone. As Henry George has made clear in his famous example of the settler who lives alone with his family on a fertile, unbounded savannah, "Under such circumstances, though nature is prolific, the man is poor." Man working alone and single-handed is but a disconnected link, but man

as a link in a chain is as strong as the whole chain. What it does, he does. Man's powers are doubled and trebled through team work. In this connection George has observed: "The labor of 100 men, other things being equal, will produce more than one hundred times as much as the labor of one man, and the labor of 1,000 men much more than ten times as much as the labor of 100 men; and so with every additional pair of hands which increasing population brings, there is a more than proportional addition to the productive power of labor." Think what this cumulative increase means, when a single man through the aid of machinery can do the work of a hundred, a thousand, or of ten thousand men! Where does the machine leave off and man begin? The machine gives man the powers, not of a giant merely, but of a colossus.

In corporate business the needs and activities of people are woven together into the closest mesh, yet the vast size of these organizations, the complex and extensive division of labor they require, and the general mechanical and impersonal nature of the whole enterprise, serve to mask this interdependence, and the whole seems to be a vast mechanical and soulless machine. In such organizations, labor and capital, man and machine, brain and brawn, means and ends, are all so inextricably fused that justice itself could not justly distribute the entire fruits of labor to the respective individuals who had created it. One might as well try to divide the credit for an apple between the sun, earth and air.

And what is society but a highly complex and highly interdependent kind of corporate business? In society the contributions of separate individuals are fused and lost as rivers and brooks lose themselves in the ocean. Robinson Crusoe would be about the only fellow in a position to discern and claim the entire fruit of his toil. It was the difficulty of determining the exact contribution of each worker that caused George Bernard Shaw to conclude that all should share in the wealth equally. He had not discovered that there was a *common wealth* which drew off the social wealth, as it were, and quite accurately separated it from the returns of labor and capital. *Society as such is the chief creator of wealth.* Just as language is the creation of a people, and not of a single man, or a few men, so is the wealth in the world today the creation of the people. The common wealth is an entirely legitimate form of wealth, and quite as necessary for the promotion of the common welfare as wages are for the good of the individual. No one would deny that our total wealth has great social value apart from its returns to labor and capital—but few have seen that this social wealth which existed *over and above the returns to labor and capital* could be measured and appropriated in the form of money. It is generally thought of as something far too incommensurable for any kind of definite evaluation—as something for men to enjoy, and for the poets to sing of perhaps, but certainly not something to be measured in dollars and cents. If we had a criterion for determining the value of the common wealth, it should have to be applied

at the very heart of society, where all the veins and arteries of production center. *This criterion would have to take the measure of progress.* Have we such a measure?

Certainly we have this measure of progress, for what, pray, does the return to the one *passive* factor in production, the *rent* on land, represent if not social progress—the *common wealth*? Where do we find the rent greatest? Is it not at the very center of population and production? It is because increasing population and production creates rent value that it increases with such momentum. Since the land is an entirely passive factor, we might suppose rent would be a constant factor, and that wages and interest would increase out of all proportion to it. It scarcely seems reasonable that "the fixed and steadfast earth" would roll up the wealth far in excess of the returns to the active factors in production. The land is but a passive storehouse of potential wealth, and as such, its intrinsic value was just as great in the time of Adam and Eve as it is in the year 1942, but as production increases, the value of land grows by leaps and bounds. Naturally the passive land cannot appropriate this wealth, or make the slightest use of it. Who, then, is entitled to this wealth? The rent on land is the *common wealth*. It is the product of society as such, and hence it is justly the *property* of society as such. Can it be argued that society should turn over this great common wealth—an adequate means of providing for the common welfare—to private individuals for some "superior advantage" which they pretend to offer? What eloquence can sophistry borrow to make it seem fair and just that private ownership should attach itself to the common wealth? Is it necessary that "equality of opportunity" be entrusted to the ownership and control of a few, in order that the many may the more freely enjoy it? Is it for the purpose of increasing the common wealth for the common welfare, that landlords have the habit of *withholding land from use*, in order to increase rent artificially?

There are some naive souls who say, "Why make such a to do over the land; it is but one factor in production; surely private ownership of land can't be the only culprit?" It happens to be the *only* "culprit" which appropriates *the entire common wealth of the nation and of the world*. The common wealth is the ripest fruit, the richest harvest of social progress. All the geniuses of the past and present, and all the workers and achievements of the past and present, play a part in the progress of today. All the ages of the past add hugely to the wealth of today; individuals as such have small title to the wealth created by past generations, but society today has full claim to it. As modern industry increases in scope and complexity, as it becomes increasingly more mechanized and automatic, its character becomes more and more impersonal. The worker tends to become a constantly weaker link in a constantly growing chain. This situation is ominous in its portent—unless the common wealth thus increased at the expense of the returns to the individual is returned to society in full measure. The great

problem of our time is: *how make the common wealth flow into public channels?* There is no solution to this problem short of abolishing the private ownership in land. The vast social wealth of progress is returned to the land in the form of rent. There is no escaping this conclusion. And once this all-important fact is recognized, there is no way of escaping the further conclusion that *property in land is property in man*. Since private owners of land appropriate the entire common wealth, if it finds its way back to the people, it must be through their hands and at their direction. Verily, a camel can pass through the eye of a needle as readily as the common wealth can find its way back to society through this narrow channel. The Master Fraud which hides behind and shelters all others is but a disguised form of feudalism, which by freeing man and appropriating land secures all the advantages of chattel slavery without its disadvantages, and under the highly respected title of the *private ownership of land*.

The private owners of land who appropriate the common wealth render no service in return for it, and could not, for it is a thing that cannot be bought or sold. If the land were owned by the Man on the Moon, the rent would increase just as rapidly as it does, for it increases irrespective of ownership. He who owns the land reaps without sowing, while society, which creates this wealth, sows without reaping. Those who take the land which nature gives freely to all, and in addition also the richest harvest of social progress, the common wealth—are these God's Middle Men? Is it that their office is so august it entitles them to the luxury of becoming enriched by a life of unproductiveness? These men enjoy supreme Special Privilege. It is in this special privilege, monopoly in land, that all monopoly is grounded. To break the power of monopoly, which is now engaged in breaking the world, we have to abolish the private ownership of land. If we do this, we can achieve at one stroke the death of monopoly of all kinds, the freedom of land, the freedom of man, and the common wealth for the common welfare. We are now engaged in a desperate life-and-death struggle against the rotten ripe fruit of injustice, brute force, and barbarism. A tenth of this energy and determination directed at the root of injustice, land monopoly, would have saved the world long before the maggots of decay had eaten out its heart.

As Henry George has said, "Since the distribution of wealth is an assignment of ownership, the laws of distribution must be the laws which determine property in the thing produced. Or, to put it another way, the principle which gives ownership must be the principle which determines the distribution of wealth" ("The Science of Political Economy"). If this is true, then surely in a just principle of ownership we can find the solution to the problem of the mal-distribution of wealth.

Does it not seem both logical and just that title to property should observe, in George's words, "the real and natural distinction between things which are the products of labor and things which are the gratuitous offering of nature"? If we rec-

ognize that man has just title to nothing except to the fruit of his own toil or exertion, we at a stroke dispose of the right to personal property in land. In doing this, we give man free access to the soil and at the same time return to society the common wealth in full. We found the common wealth to exist because no man could appropriate or lay claim to the entire fruit of his toil. But that he cannot claim it *in toto*, does not in the least preclude his claiming a part of it. Since every man is deeply indebted to society for goods and values he could not create himself, he should not be averse to adding to the common storehouse of wealth while he busies himself with his own affairs. Once the common wealth is set free, then a man cannot increase his personal wealth without at the same time increasing the common wealth. Then will personal gain and the common gain move together hand in hand; but the common gain will always be greater than personal gain, which is fair and just since it is the most important form of wealth.

The present world chaos has an important, though grim, lesson for us. It is this: Freedom, justice, the good, the beautiful, and truth itself—all these must be rooted in economic justice, or be uprooted by economic injustice. The choice lies before us.