

# An Early Land Reformer

By FRANZ OPPENHEIMER

In 1805 Charles Hall, a London physician, published a pamphlet on "The Effects of Civilisation on the Masses in European States." Hall revealed himself to be "a true phenomenon in the history of economic thought," as Karl Marx said of him; he was the first scientific land reformer, and certainly the most interesting precursor of Henry George. He knew that progress and poverty are head and tail of the same coin: "Adam Smith little thought that increase of poverty was the consequence of the increase of wealth."\*

Like George, Hall was not deceived by the pseudo-scientific assertion "that the state and condition of the poor is necessarily such as it is." He branded it as undiluted class-science: "This is an opinion which the wealthy are very much inclined to entertain and cherish, since it gives them the quiet possession of all their assumed advantages over their fellow creatures" (105). It is in the same spirit that George, following Macaulay, remarks that if any large pecuniary interest were concerned in disputing the attraction of gravitation, that most obvious of all facts would not yet be accepted.

Herbert Spencer introduced the concept of the "personal equation" into sociology, but Hall, half a century earlier, wrote unmistakably: "In case our interest is against a discovery, if any thoughts arise in the mind concerning it, they are unattended to, or are soon suppressed, as useless or disadvantageous; and this often passes in the minds of people unobserved and without their being conscious of this their seemingly unfair and uncandid mode of proceeding" (183).

Hall, again like George, instead of dropping into the pitfall of class-science, is seeking the cause of the social disease in order to detect its "Remedy": "For when the true cause of a disease is discovered, we

are seldom at a loss for a cure" (172). On the ultimate cause of the disease, Hall arrived at exactly the same diagnosis as George. It is the monopoly of the soil. He did not employ the terminology, but his statement of the situation is unmistakable.

He described, just as Adam Smith had done before him, the unilateral urgency—which is the condition of every monopoly—on the part of the laborer to exchange his toil for mere sustenance, a disadvantage increased further by the State usually taking the part of the master against the worker. The power of the ruling class rests "on the seizure or assumption (by one or a few persons) of all the land and other things arising from it, in which the necessities of life are included, and of which, in order to obtain sufficient quantity to sustain their existence, the people must submit to such services and labor as those who are in possession of them require" (148).

This monopoly is unfair and unjust. "It is evident that the Creator intended the land for the use of the creatures he put on it. Consequently, that no creature ought to be cut off from the possession of some part or other of the earth, and that in such quantity as to furnish him with the necessities of life" (87).

Possibly Hall found the first germ of his leading idea, the cause of the pathological state of society, in Rousseau's essay "On Inequality Among Men," where the Geneva philosopher expounds his notion that "inequality cannot arise till the holdings, all of them touching one another, cover the entire country." This truth, being self-evident, went over into the doctrine of Adam Smith and

his successors. Hall, however, was the first economist to ask how this "complete occupation of the entire land" was brought about.

He answered with a simple fraction, the dividend being the arable land of England, the divisor being the number of English families at his time. The result is that each of the two million families could be provided with 36 acres of land, "enough to enable every family to live in such a manner, as one having 150 or 200 pounds a year now does" (220). And he made up a very detailed and substantiated calculation in order to show that a family living on the tenth part of this area, 3½ acres of average land, could be "comfortably supported" by spade cultivation (239). (The typical area cultivated by the Japanese, Chinese and Egyptian farmers is less than 2½ acres.)

The inference is unavoidable. The complete occupation of the entire land had not been brought about by pacific means, one small or medium peasant settling beside the others "until the holdings, touching one another, covered the whole country," but by violence and fraud, "long before the tendency of civil society could be supposed to have given rise to it" (107). "A small number of people in these states have first gotten possession of the land and everything it produces; and then, by the means of these, have obtained the command of the labor of the people ... (and) the right of making laws, exclusively of the people, but which shall bind the whole people" (Section XXIX).

Hall, in these words, had anticipated the "sociological idea of the State," which, somewhat later, Count St. Simon developed as the foundation of his and all following work on the true science of the State, and which likewise is the foundation of scientific economics. Hall was fully conscious of the importance of his doctrine. He was the first scholar to detect the extremely simple, even



\*Edition of 1849, p. 81. The figures in brackets in this essay refer to pages of the same book.

self-evident solution of the problem of distribution, the crux of official economics; it consists in taking account of the so-called "distribution of the factors of production" by the non-economic forces of violence and fraud. Obviously he who possesses the property reaps the benefit of the income it yields, a truth which, nevertheless, official science stubbornly refuses to acknowledge.

Hall, not yet confused by the stratagems of Ricardo, Malthus and others, realized clearly that no class of proletarian wage-earners can exist where free land is accessible, as was the case in the United States at his time, "because there is room backwards for the poor to recede from the wealthy, and by these means to get beyond the lash of their whip, till they arrive at places where they can work for themselves, and receive all the fruits of their labor, which cannot be done where the land is engrossed by the few" (201). Here we have, besides, the term for monopolization usual at the time: "engrossing."

Hall's theory of capital is even superior to that of George, which many of his pupils had to abandon as undoubtedly erroneous. Hall saw clearly that the laborers, dispossessed by the engrossing of the land, are confronted by the same monopoly wherever they offer their services to those who are in possession of instruments of labor, both movable and immovable. They "have no alternative, but to work for him or for another from whom they can have no other terms. There is no voluntary compact equally advantageous to both sides, but an absolute compulsion on the part of the masters, and an absolute necessity on the part of the workmen to accept: and which, therefore, might be considered just as the taking so much from the workman by the master; and, of course, fortunes, amassed in this manner, cannot be just."

We have here the complete explanation of how "surplus-value" arises. And the problem, how capitalism came about, is just as simply answered by the following: "It is easily seen that acquisition of fortunes by tradesmen is in reality nothing but

a participation of landed property, which is the basis, the source and substance of all wealth, and into it all must be resolved." (By "wealth" he means power-giving property.) This passage is truly remarkable, the more so because even Karl Marx ultimately came to the conviction that "in the last instance, capital monopoly is rooted in that of the soil."

Again, like George, Hall was of the opinion that all that is needed is the abolition of the monopoly: "And this would be the whole business of first reducing and then keeping up, the equal state of men; for this alone would keep all other things sufficiently equal to prevent any of the present insufficiencies."

Compared with the great achievements of the diagnosis the "Remedy" leaves much to be desired. It consists, first, in the abolition of entails which Adam Smith already had demanded in order to weaken the monopoly of the soil. Secondly, Hall proposes to "prohibit by law the refined manufactures or to submit them to such heavy taxes as would much lessen the production of them" (174). Obviously the first measure alone would not suffice to annihilate the indicted monopoly; and the second proposal would carry into effect his Rousseauism, his notion that civilization was essentially and incurably evil.

Like George, Hall discarded the "nursery tale," as Marx had dubbed it, by which middle-class-economics has tried to explain the accumulation of big monetary fortunes: "What is said of the difference of bodily and mental abilities of different people, their different degree of industry, etc., these would produce no other effects than that they, who were possessed of them, would be better supplied. It would have no effect in occasioning other men to be worse supplied; it would create . . . no power over other people" (221). This is exhaustive.

The same holds true about what Hall said of accumulation. Evidently in a society without a big basic monopoly "personal goods cannot easily be heaped up to any great degree," since there is no unearned increment, and industry and thrifti-

ness are not inheritable through many generations. "But, if we should even suppose that the chattels made in several generations were accumulated in the hands of certain persons, they would be attended with no great inconvenience. The goods would remain a harmless heap, giving no power to the possessor by which only wealth is hurtful; because, if every person had an allotment of land, the labor of the people would remain free and under their own direction . . . and none of the evils of the present state of property . . . would be experienced" (56).

It would be again as it was "before all property was engrossed by the few; all had to supply their wants; that was the golden age, which is not a fiction of the poets, but a state in which mankind have really lived" (113). In this state "all strife about meum and tuum would nearly be at an end . . . People would be free from temptation to thieving and the grosser excesses, and on the other hand the rich would be exempt from the vices their great wealth exposes them to" (213).

Utopia? It is Henry George's "Utopia" at which the men of the "eternal yesterday" are scoffing. Now, if it is Utopian to believe possible an impossible order, then there is no sillier utopist than the believer in capitalism. Its knell has sounded. Hall predicted the course of its development exactly as it ran:

"As the condition of the poor grows worse, the spirit of resistance . . . will show itself in endeavours to throw off their restraints. . . . Hence, coercive measures will increase . . . a large military force must be kept up, and, in short, a military government established; and, to induce the soldiers to act against their fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters and to forget every natural and moral tie, it will be necessary largely to increase their pay. And then (emphasis mine): will not this same military body, thus feeling no other sentiment in their breast, in respect to the rest of mankind, than the sense of power over them which they see themselves in the possession of, soon be the masters of the rich as well as of the poor?"