

Chapter 12

Tolstoy on Henry George

Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope ... and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

Robert F. Kennedy.

POSSIBLY somewhere in the Tolstoy archives there exists some clue as to when he revised his first unfavourable opinion of the doctrines of Henry George. It may be that, when he re-read *Social Problems*, and discovered the following disarming statement, he realised after all that state violence was the last thing George had in mind for the application of his single tax:

Social reform is not to be secured by noise and shouting; by complaints and denunciation; by the formation of parties, or the making of revolutions; but by the awakening of thought and the progress of ideas. Until there be correct thought, there cannot be right action; and when there is correct thought, right action *will* follow. Power is always in the hands of the masses of men. What oppresses the masses is their own ignorance, their own short-sighted selfishness.¹

George did not include a working knowledge of French among his accomplishments, and knew, for example, what he knew of the Physiocrats of the 18th century through commentaries written in English. It is therefore extremely unlikely that he had the slightest inkling of the parallel

sentiments, already quoted as being familiar to Tolstoy, of the 16th century writer Etienne de la Boétie (Ch. 6). There is a strong probability that all three men were right in thinking that popular awareness of the machinery of oppression is all that is required for its removal.

What is certain about Tolstoy's change of front, easily understandable in the light of his already observed general volatility, is that, on the 24th November 1894, he wrote a letter to a certain Ernest Crosby in very different terms from those of 1886:

If the new Tsar were to ask me what I would advise him to do, I would say to him: use your autocratic power to abolish the land property in Russia and to introduce the single tax system; and then give up your power and (give) the people a liberal constitution.²

His new opinion of the single tax was evidently so high that he was ready to condone just one more act of violence in order to see it put into operation. What more could an advocate of non-violence say?

On the 9th August of the same year, he had already written in his private diary:

During this time MacGahan [the Russian-born widow of an American journalist] and her son visited me and brought some books from Henry George. Read *A perplexed philosopher* again. Excellent. Became very vividly aware again of the sin of owning land. It's astonishing that people don't see it. How necessary to write a book about this – to write a new *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Yesterday I received an article from Sergeyev and an article from *Gegen den Strom*. How much truth is spoken on all sides, and how little of it is heard by people. Something else is needed.³

A Perplexed Philosopher (1892)⁴ was Henry George's reaction to Herbert Spencer's abandonment of a doctrine, defined in his *Social Statics* (1850), whereby ownership of land would be resumed by the State, which would then let it out in

parcels to all desiring to become state tenants. Whereas, however, Spencer's plan would require the setting up of a special department of the bureaucracy, George's would merely require existing departments for valuation and revenue raising to demand the bulk of the rent, leaving just enough of it to those holding land beyond their own requirements to make it worth their while to act as the State's agents for collection.⁵ *A Perplexed Philosopher* is an exemplary polemic, increasing gradually in heat, against an undoubted defection from the cause of natural justice.

In 1897, Tolstoy was to write to T.M. Bondarev:

When all the land in the country has been valued in this way, Henry George proposes that a law should be made by which, after a certain date in a certain year, the land should no longer belong to any one individual, but to the whole nation – the whole people; and that everyone holding land should therefore pay to the nation, (that is, to the whole people) the yearly value at which it has been assessed. This payment should be used to meet all public or national expenses, and should replace all other rates, taxes, or customs dues.

The result of this would be that a landed proprietor who now holds, say, 2,000 desyatins, might continue to hold them if he liked, but he would have to pay to the treasury – here in the Tula Government for instance (as his holding would include both meadow-land and homestead) – 12,000 or 15,000 rubles a year; and, as no large landowners could stand such a payment, they would all abandon their land. But it would mean that a Tula peasant in the same district would pay a couple of rubles per desyatin less than he pays now, and could have plenty of available land near by which he could take up at 5 or 6 rubles per desyatin. Besides this, he would have no other rates or taxes to pay, and would be able to buy all the things he requires, foreign or Russian, free of duty. In towns, the owners of houses and factories might continue to own them, but would have to pay to the public treasury the amount of the assessment on their land.

The advantages of such an arrangement would be:

1. That no one would be unable to get land for use.

2. That there would be no idle people owning land and making others work for them in return for permission to use that land.
3. That the land would be in the possession of those who use it, and not of those who do not use it.
4. That as the land would be available for people who wished to work on it, they would cease to enslave themselves as hands in factories and workshops, or as servants in towns, and would settle in the country districts.
5. That there would be no more inspectors and collectors of taxes in mills, factories, refineries, and workshops, but there would only be collectors of the tax on land, which cannot be stolen, and from which a tax can be most easily collected.
- 6 . (and most important). That the non-workers would be saved from the sin of exploiting other people's labour (in doing which they are often not the guilty parties, for they have from childhood been educated in idleness and do not know how to work), and from the still greater sin of all kinds of shuffling and lying to justify themselves in committing that sin; and the workers would be saved from the temptation and sin of envying, condemning, and being exasperated with the non-workers, so that one cause of separation among men would be destroyed.⁶

Some of this is not quite according to Henry George, who proposed no change to titles of ownership, let alone a specified date for it. Nor is there any reason to believe that he expected 'all' holders of titles to large estates to 'abandon their land'. Indeed, as we have seen, he expected them to stay to act as revenue-collectors, even if they did not strictly speaking use the land themselves. They would, of course, be anxious to dispose of land not currently in productive use and for which they could find no tenants. Despite these inaccuracies of detail, Tolstoy has here produced an excellent summary of the advantages of the single tax; and his passionate use, in the last paragraph, of the language of religion provided precisely the emphasis needed to carry conviction with a devout reader.

In 1899, there came to fruition a plan, first hinted at in the diary entry for the 9th August 1894, and expanded in the one for the 26th May 1895, where he wrote: 'Nekhlyudov must be a

follower of Henry George, and must bring this in ...',⁷ to write a book about the 'sin of owning land'. This was the novel *Resurrection*,⁸ usually discussed as the story of the hero's atonement for his casual seduction of a girl, which led in the end to her being sentenced to exile for a murder she did not commit. There is what looks like a conspiracy to play down the fact that it is equally the story of how Nekhlyudov did what Tolstoy would dearly have loved to do, namely apply Henry George's principle to his own estates by devoting their rents to the peasants' welfare. In this instance, Tolstoy's conscience pulled him in two different directions. On the one hand, he was deeply committed to opposing the unconditional private ownership of land. On the other, his loyalty to his family precluded him from forcing them to live in accordance with his personal principles. Another reason for paying insufficient attention to the social criticisms in *Resurrection* is that among them are also attacks on the Orthodox Church, the legal system, and, in general, rule by violence in the interests of a minority of the population. It is, in fact, a handbook in fictional form of Tolstoy's philosophy.

It would come as something of a shock after all this, to a student unaware of Tolstoy's tendency to change his mind on important subjects, to learn that, on one occasion subsequently, in 1900, he gave way to his misgivings about the force that he thought would be necessary to put the single tax into operation:

Those who, like Henry George and his partisans, would abolish the laws making private property of land, propose new laws imposing an obligatory rent on the land. And this obligatory land rent will necessarily create a new form of slavery; because a man compelled to pay rent or single-tax may, at any failure of the crops or other misfortune, have to borrow money from a man who has some to lend, and he will again lapse into slavery.⁹

Lest people should think that they must have misunderstood this statement, he states quite clearly in the preface to the essay:

But, as I think that during these fifteen years I have reflected on the questions discussed in 'What must we do then?' more quietly

and minutely, in relation to the teachings at present existing and diffused among us, I now offer the reader new considerations leading to the same replies as before.¹⁰

What he seems here to fail to understand is that there is no question of 'imposing an obligatory rent on the land'. It exists already, by virtue of Ricardo's law (Ch.11), in the shape of the differential between the annual value of any given piece of land and that of a piece of the least productive land in use, whose economic value is nil. All that remains to be decided is whether this value belongs to some individual or to the general public. What to do in the event of a 'failure of the crops or other misfortune' is a problem that arises for tenant farmers whichever way the decision goes; but such a failure would, in any case, bring rents down.

Whatever it was that was on his mind to cause this reversion had evidently ceased to trouble him by 1902; for it was in the January of that year that he finally carried out the project mentioned in the letter of 1894 to Ernest Crosby, namely that of writing to the Tsar Nicholas II on the subject of land reform and its crucial importance if the social stresses of the time were to be peacefully relieved (see Appendix 1). In order to make sure that the Tsar received it, he sent it in the first instance to another member of the royal family, the Grand Duke Nikolay Mikhaylovich, who had taken the initiative in making Tolstoy's acquaintance in the Crimea the year before.

It would appear that neither the Tsar nor the Grand Duke was in favour of Tolstoy's proposal; for, in the Spring of the same year, he wrote a second letter to the Grand Duke (see Appendix 2), embodying a far superior definition of the single tax principle to the ones already quoted:

The essence of the project surely is that land rent, i.e. the excess value of land as compared with land of the lowest yield, and depending not on man's labour but on nature or the whereabouts of the land, is used for taxes, i.e. for common needs; i.e. the common revenue is used for the common cause. The only effect of this project is that if you own a certain amount of land in

Borzhomi and I in the Tula province, *nobody takes that land away from me*, and I am only obliged to pay a rent for it which is always lower than its yield.¹¹

It will be noticed that he has by now both grasped the significance of Ricardo's law and shed the illusion that George's plan involved a mass hand-over of land to the State.

From the rest of the letter, it is evident that the Grand Duke had pleaded that a different Tsar and different ministers would be needed to do what Tolstoy wished, and that therefore administrative reforms would have to have priority. Tolstoy would have none of this, pointing out that such reforms would do nothing but support an obsolete autocracy that existed to further no high ideal, but only to maintain its own power. He was right (Ch.5). The concept of Russia as a private estate owned by its princes and nobles dated from the earliest legendary beginnings, and that of the Tsar as the Lord's Anointed from the coronation of Ivan the Terrible in 1547. Neither concept had the slightest relevance to the emerging industrial Russia of the nineteenth century.

There is one point that we need to be very clear about before going any further. We know from benefit of hindsight that, since the police raid on Yasnaya Polyana of 1862, Tolstoy suffered no practical molestation at the hands of authority; but, so far as he himself knew, he was liable at any time to be marched off to imprisonment or even death. In these circumstances, his persistent, public and vociferous advocacy of causes that he knew to be inimical to the short-term interest of the rulers of the Russian Empire called for courage of the very highest order. Scruples about compelling his family to toe the line may have led to some discrepancy between his public attitudes and private actions; but he never ceased to proclaim his faith in anarchism, rational Christianity and Georgist economics – when once he had been fully convinced of them – regardless of the risk of the most serious consequences.

Three years later, on the 21st April 1905, he wrote in his diary: 'I've begun to write *Defenders of the people*. It's not bad. And *Henry George*.¹² The latter work began as an article about Henry

George, sent in the first instance to *The Times*, but became expanded into *A Great Iniquity*. It is an eloquent denunciation of private property in land, with praise of Henry George, an account of the opposition he had met with (and still does), and extensive quotations from one of his published speeches.¹³ Here is Tolstoy on the subject of the methods of George's enemies:

At Oxford when Henry George was lecturing, the students organized a hostile demonstration, and the Roman Catholic party regarded his teaching as simply sinful, immoral, dangerous, and contrary to Christ's teaching. The orthodox science of political economy rose up against Henry George's teaching in the same way. Learned professors from the height of their superiority refuted it without understanding it, chiefly because it did not recognize the fundamental principles of their pseudo-science. The Socialists were also inimical – considering the most important problem of the period to be not the land question, but the complete abolition of private property. The chief method of opposing Henry George was, however, the method always employed against irrefutable and self-evident truths. This, which is still being applied to Henry George's teaching, was that of ignoring it. This method of hushing up was practised so successfully that Labouchere, a British Member of Parliament, could say publicly and without contradiction that he 'was not such a visionary as Henry George, and did not propose to take the land from the landlords in order afterwards to rent it out again, but that he only demanded the imposition of a tax on the value of the land'. That is, while attributing to Henry George what he could not possibly have said, Labouchere corrected that imaginary fantasy by putting forward Henry George's actual proposal.¹⁴

Such false attributions and corrections, accurately defined and denounced by Tolstoy in 1905, still sully the writings of critics of Henry George nearly a century later.

Diary entries for the remaining years of his life indicate Tolstoy's continuing enthusiasm for the Georgist cause. Here are those from a selection published in English:

2nd April 1906. 'People talk and argue about Henry George's system. It isn't the system which is valuable (although not only do I not know a better one, but I can't imagine one), but what is valuable is the fact that the system establishes an attitude to land which is universal and the same for everybody. Let them find a better one if they can'.¹⁵

6th June 1906. 'A correspondent has been, and I wrote down a few things about Henry George and told him about the Duma and the repressions'.¹⁶

2nd September 1906. 'Then I wrote a bit about Henry George – not well'.¹⁷

(The editor of the collection here informs us that this entry refers to a foreword to the Russian translation of Henry George's 'Social Problems').

24th September 1906. 'I've finished all the works I've started and written a foreword to Henry George'.¹⁸

19th May 1909. 'Dear Nikolayev came twice. What a wonderful worker he is in the Henry George sense, and what a good person in general'.¹⁹

2nd June 1909. 'A telegram from Henry George's son, then someone from the *Russian Word* with the proofs of the Mechnikov article. Corrected the proofs and wrote about Henry George and sent it to the *Russian Word*. They probably won't print it'.²⁰

(This article, 'Apropos of the visit of Henry George's son', was not, the editor informs us, accepted by the 'Russian Word', but appeared in the 'Russian Gazette' on the 9th June 1909).

5th June 1909. 'Did nothing today: revised *The One Commandment* and the article on George a little bit. George's son came with a photographer. A pleasant person'.²¹

20th August 1909. 'A conversation with Tenishev about the single tax. Felt peaceful and tender-hearted'.²²

(This shows a truly Christian attitude; for, the editor tells us, Tenishev refused to raise the matter of the single tax in the Duma).

28th August 1909. 'I invited Maklakov in and spoke to him about raising the question in the Duma. He said he knew nothing about Henry George, and that the question would not only not get through, but would not even provoke discussion. He is very clever in a practical sense, but completely deaf to all questions really necessary to people – like very, very many people'.²³

23rd October 1909. 'Went for a walk. Weak. A pain in the small of my back. Came back, didn't feel like it at first, but then wrote down my dream about Henry George. Not entirely good, but not entirely bad either'.²⁴

(*This piece, the editor informs us, forms the final part of the trilogy 'Three Days in the Country'*).

7th November 1909. 'Yesterday morning I received a wonderful letter from Polilov about Henry George and replied to him, and something else that was pleasant too – Tolstoy's pedagogics in Bulgarian'.²⁵

(*The editor's research has revealed that: 'P. Polilov was a pseudonym used by Tolstoy's daughter Tatyana who had written a popular account of Henry George's teaching and wanted to get her father's impartial opinion about it. Tolstoy was taken in and wrote an enthusiastic reply. Tatyana came to Yasnaya Polyana a few days later and revealed "Polilov's" identity'*).

Henry George had died in New York on the 28th October 1897, during the course of an election campaign in support of his candidacy for the position of Mayor; but Tolstoy had

carried on the good work undeterred. He continued to keep the pressure on politicians, writing to the Prime Minister Stolypin himself in January 1908. He used his *Posrednik* ('The Interpreter') series of low-priced booklets to publicise the great American's rousing speeches; and he kept in touch with single taxers in other countries of the world. For example, in September 1908, he wrote a letter to the Australian Georgists, who had sent him their birthday greetings. It included the following:

... This problem, ie., the abolition of property in land, at the present time everywhere demands its solution as insistingly as half a century ago the problem of slavery demanded its solution in Russia and America.

This problem insistingly demands its solution because the supposed right of landed property now lies at the foundation, not only of economic misery, but also of political disorder, and, above all, the depravation [sic] of the people.

The wealthy ruling classes, foreseeing the loss of the advantages of their position inevitable with the solution of the problem, are endeavouring by various false interpretations, justifications and palliatives, with all their power, to postpone as long as possible its solution.²⁶

And to the English ones in the following March:

As in the law of non-resistance to evil by violence, i.e. the prohibition of killing under any circumstances whatever, has been elucidated the injustice and harmfulness of the justification of violence under pretext of defence and common good, so also in Henry George's teaching on the equal rights of all to the land, has been elucidated the injustice and harmfulness of the justification of robbery and theft under the pretext of either the exclusive right of some people to the land, or the depriving of those who labour of the produce of their labour in order to use it for social needs.²⁷

It was only a year later, in the October of 1910 (Ch.1), that he occupied the time during his last railway journey by talking

to his fellow-passengers about those matters that were uppermost in his mind, and especially about Henry George and the single tax.

Crowds gathered at his funeral on the 9th November; and a peasant woman was heard to say to her son:

Remember him – he lived for us.