

Chapter 14

Critics of Tolstoy's Georgism

Whatever tends to preserve the wealth of the wealthy is called conservatism, and whatever favors anything else, no matter what, they call socialism.

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AT no time but during the present century has the world been more in need of prophets to point the way to a saner and more stable organisation of its affairs. But a prophet relies on more than his own powers. He needs facilities to disseminate his teachings, and the services of critics to direct public attention to them, and, where necessary, by elucidating them, to make them more available for popular understanding.

It is also the critics' task to warn the people against false prophets, those whose teachings, if followed, would lead to a worsening of the state of the world, or even to a major catastrophe. In this matter they need to take more than usual care lest they mistake the true for the false, and deprive their readers, and perhaps eventually the world, of a golden opportunity. It should therefore be obvious that they themselves should read what they are setting out to judge, that skipping to get the general drift will just not do, and that they should approach their task with a completely open mind. They need, in fact, to be 'freethinkers' in Tolstoy's sense of the word.

They need also to bear in mind the regrettable tendency in university arts courses to overload the syllabus to such an extent that students are effectively encouraged to trust to the views of the critics, and to refrain from reading the works criticised. Once accustomed to this practice, they will carry it into later life, and may reject unseen at somebody else's behest a work

that, if read, would become a valuable part of their way of thinking. So the best critic is the one who not only formulates a right judgment, but encourages his reader to experience personally what he himself has experienced, and to formulate a judgment of his own.

In considering criticisms of Tolstoy's writings on rational Christianity, divorced from the problematic traditional accompaniment of supernatural events, we have encountered a whole range of reactions, from wholehearted acceptance to out and out instinctive rejection. There is little to be done to reconcile these opposing factions, except to hope that one day Christian unity may be founded on an agreement to give priority to Christ's teachings and 'sweet reasonableness', and to differ on the rest. What would help towards such unity is disestablishment, or, in other words, disengagement from the influence of States, and more concentration on the general welfare of mankind.

Tolstoy's strong views on States, based on their propensity to rob, persecute and murder, have always prompted a violent response. This is only to be expected; for the idea of the modern European Nation/State, beginning with the Reformation, and consummated in the unions of both Italy and Germany in the course of the 19th century, is still firmly established in the minds of the majority of people as an acceptable model, despite the evidence of two world wars and continuing political crises. Perhaps, however, it is a hopeful sign that some of his critics felt obliged to resort to such a device as stating or assuming a case that was not Tolstoy's, before commenting sarcastically on it. Other equally dishonest tricks took the form, it will be remembered, of accusing him of failing to prove what he expressly admitted to be unprovable, and of attempting to appeal to the animal instinct of self-defence in a particular situation, whereas what Tolstoy deplored was the general situation that made the question of the need for collective defence even conceivable.

It remains to be seen whether the critics' performance is in any way improved when they come to deal with Tolstoy's final answer, as taken over from Henry George, to the universal

question of economic reform. An outstanding example of the depths to which they can descend is furnished by Maude in the shape of comments appearing in *Literature* for the 30th July 1898 on Tolstoy's views about art in general as summed up in his own definition:

Art is a human activity, consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them.¹

Here is how Maude presents the article from *Literature*:

For example, a leading article in *Literature* (30th July 1898) accorded to the author of such 'clotted nonsense' 'distinction among aesthetic circle-squarers'. After stating that 'there never was any reason for inferring ... that Count Tolstoi's opinions on the philosophy of art would be worth the paper on which they are written'; and that the expounder of these 'fantastic doctrines surpasses all other advocates of this same theory in perverse unreason', the writer proceeds with an examination of 'the melancholy case of the eminent Russian novelist', and tells us that:

'The notion of turning for guidance to a Russian man of letters of whom all we know, outside his literary record, *is that he has embraced Socialism* on much the same grounds of conviction as a Sunday afternoon listener to a Hyde Park orator, and "found religion" in much the same spirit as one of the "Hallelujah lasses" of the Salvation Army, is on the face of it absurd. Nobody, however eminent as a novelist ... has any business to invite his fellow-men to step with him outside the region of sanity ... and sit down beside him like Alice beside the Hatter or the March Hare for the solemn examination of so lunatic a thesis as this'.²

The thesis appears sensible enough; but, that apart, what possible reason could the writer have had for thinking that Tolstoy had 'embraced Socialism' on any 'grounds of conviction' whatever, let alone 'found religion' after the fashion of the

Salvation Army? Both statements are palpably untrue; and the only remaining subject for speculation is whether the writer made them out of his own state of abysmal ignorance, or in comfortable certainty about the reader's.

Most slurs on Tolstoy and his thought in the realm of political economy are cast in the first instance, however, on Henry George and his single tax, and then, by implication, on Tolstoy for his belief in them. The chief exponent of this kind of attack is Henri Troyat, who writes as follows:

Nekhlyudov had tried to carry out a bloodless revolution among the peasants on his own estate. Thus, after lending his agricultural theories of one period to Levin in *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy now bestows his latest views on the subject upon the hero of *Resurrection*. Inspired by the the American socialist Henry George, Nekhlyudov favours a single land tax, high enough to compel the large owners to cede their land to the State. The tax would abolish private property and the State would redistribute the nationalized land among all the peasants who cultivated it. It is odd that Neklyudov (alias Tolstoy) should have been so hypnotized by this pseudo-communistic utopia that he failed to realize that in order to carry out such a redistribution it would first be necessary to change the government, or in other words, to make a radical and presumably bloody political reform.³

And again:

'... He was full of plans: articles on the religious question, a message to the young, a commentary on Henry George's theories of agricultural reform.'⁴

These passages call for a few comments. Henry George was not a socialist. There is no question in his books of ceding land to the State, let alone of the State's redistribution of it. 'Pseudo-communistic utopia' is a cheap and meaningless sneer. George, as we have seen (Ch.12), specifically denied that his measure could be implemented by means of revolution, 'bloody' or not. He did not write about the reform of agriculture, but about

redistributing taxation so that it should fall only on the value of land, all land. In a nutshell, Troyat did not understand Henry George's philosophy, and is therefore ill-equipped to criticise it.

A.N. Wilson does not become so excited about Tolstoy's economic views as he used to about his religious ones, but he too shows a lack of understanding when he deals with them:

... The majority of the population of the Empire were peasant farmers, who merely wanted to farm their land in peace, owning their own property and harbouring their own profits. Tolstoy could not approve of them because he regarded it as an *a priori* truth, culled from the writings of Henry George, that land should be in public ownership. But public ownership implies an all-powerful state, and Tolstoy did not want that either.⁵

And again:

... But Tolstoy's later diaries are stupendously tedious full of the usual old reflections about Henry George's land tax, the moral beauties of Chertkov, the love of God and the hell of family life.⁶

Henry George wrote: '*We must make land common property*'.⁷ He proposed to achieve this solely by using its rent for public revenue, and envisaged as a result of this purely fiscal reform a situation in which the State would be less powerful, not more, as Wilson seems to think. It is not hard to imagine the progression of events. With the introduction of the single tax, land-holding in itself would become unprofitable, and land would gravitate into the hands of those who proposed to use it most efficiently. There would then be no further reason why the demand for goods of all kinds should not stimulate their supply. Unemployment, together with the low wages induced by competition for jobs, would become phenomena of purely historical interest. With unemployment and poverty there would also diminish poverty-related domestic unrest and crime, and with them any excuse for the existence of the police and the army as instruments of internal coercion.

Assuming for the moment the hypothesis of a simultaneous

world-wide application of Georgist principles, we can also be reasonably certain that fighting for land would come to an end, together with fighting for foreign markets in which to sell goods unsaleable at home. Thus would vanish the second excuse for the existence of national armies. On the more likely hypothesis of the adoption of Georgist principles by one country alone, it is possible, even probable if the histories of the French and Russian revolutions are anything to go by, that it would have to face attack from the rest, and would need to retain its armed forces. They would at least be fighting for a common interest, instead of for concealed special ones, and should prove hard to beat. They would also be associations of free men, like the Roman armies of the early republic or even more so, but certainly not instruments in the hands of 'an all-powerful state'. Tolstoy's initial hesitations about the single tax were based mainly on the grounds of its requiring even a single measure of state action. It would appear that none of these things is of much concern to Wilson, whose level of comprehension outside the realm of pure literature, if there is such a thing, is adequately revealed by his prep school use of the word 'old' in 'the usual old reflections'.

Finally, the expression 'a priori truth' is grossly misleading. Wilson is evidently not aware that George reached his conclusions about private property in land as the result of careful and logical arguments. He too is insufficiently familiar with George's works to be entitled to criticise them.

E.J. Simmons' judgment is equally dubious:

... First attracted by *Progress and Poverty*, Tolstoy read other works of George, began to comment on him in his writings as early as 1884, and devoted articles to his ideas. He also advocated his plan for the abolition of private property in land and the single tax to all who would listen and corresponded with George whose visit to Yasnaya Polyana was prevented only by the American's death. There were weaknesses in his theorizing, which Tolstoy felt did not go far enough, but he regarded the plan as a practical answer to the festering sore in the economic body of Russia – the land hunger of the peasantry. Though he thought of George's

nostrum as at best a compromise and regretted that the tax would be collected by a government based on violence, he was willing to accept these disadvantages because the greater good of the greater number would be served.⁸

Tolstoy was first attracted by *Social problems, not Progress and poverty*. What were the weaknesses in George's theorising? When George himself found weaknesses in other people's theorising, he took the trouble to quote the relevant passages, and to point out exactly what he considered to be wrong. This is the only satisfactory procedure. In what respect did Tolstoy think that George's theorising did not go far enough? Surely we are entitled to know. Or is this just another method of 'rubbishing' Henry George? The use of the word 'nostrum', defined in *Chambers's Twentieth Century Dictionary* as 'any secret, quack or patent medicine', certainly is. The most likely effect of all this is to instil prejudice into the uninstructed reader, and dissuade him from reading Henry George's works for himself.

Theodore Redpath also is an expert in the use of the pejorative term. He writes:

... The book *Resurrection* advocates nationalization of the land and the imposition of a single tax, according to the system of Henry George. That would have caused a drift back to the land.⁹

'Nationalization of the land' is an utterly misleading description of what George proposed. As generally understood, it implies some scheme of compensation, to which George, for adequately explained reasons, was totally opposed. It would also involve an extension of the bureaucracy, whereas he considered that the allocative function would better be left to the operations of the free market. It is true that his single tax would have the effect of bringing on to the market at a lowered price rural land unused, or inadequately used, by its existing titular owners, thus offering opportunities for engaging in agriculture to those who would otherwise be prevented from so doing. It is hardly fair to describe such a purposeful process as a 'drift'.

After such loaded and prejudiced accounts of Tolstoy's conversion to the idea of Henry George's single tax, it comes as a relief to read some that are at least neutral in tone. Perhaps their very neutrality may be interpreted as tacit acceptance. Here is Victor Shklovsky, who, as a citizen of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, might be expected to approve of a doctrine that had appeared in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1847. The first four words refer to Tolstoy's anarchism:

No government was needed, and yet it appeared that the liberation of land which must take place could be best accomplished by order of the Tsar. Though the Tsar was young, muddled, and afraid of his relatives, he still might issue a decree on the liberation of land, This decree supported by the introduction of a single land tax which would make the private ownership of large acreages unprofitable.

There was an error in the logic here: a government was not needed' but an act of government was; there would be opposition to the land reform, and the opposition would have to be combated, but not by force. Persuasion was the only acceptable means of struggle.¹⁰

And further on:

His project of land reform after Henry George was not accepted. It was of no use to the peasants now that they had nearly redeemed their allotments. Exorbitant though the price was, they had paid it out.¹¹

This is a perceptive comment. The peasants who had 'nearly redeemed their allotments' as a result of the settlement of 1861 were in effect about to join the ranks of the landowning class, privileged to receive rent as well as wages. They would certainly be opposed to George's reform, regardless of the cost to the future generations of people who were to be denied access to land. For the condition of these unfortunates would not only never be improved by such a half-measure as that of 1861, it

could even be worsened. Here is Henry George on the subject, discussing the situation in France and Belgium, where similar redistributions of land had taken place during the French Revolution:

Just what may be accomplished by the greater division of land may be seen in those districts of France and Belgium where minute division prevails. That such a division of land is on the whole much better, and that it gives a far more stable basis to the state than that which prevails in England, there can be no doubt. But that it does not make wages any higher or improve the condition of the class who have only their labour, is equally clear. These French and Belgian peasants practise a rigid economy unknown to any of the English-speaking peoples. And if such striking symptoms of the poverty and distress of the lowest class are not apparent as on the other side of the channel, it must, I think, be attributed, not only to this fact, but to another fact, which accounts for the continuance of the minute division of the land – that material progress has not been so rapid.

Neither has population increased with the same rapidity (on the contrary it has been nearly stationary), nor have improvements in the modes of production been so great. Nevertheless, M. de Laveleye, all of whose prepossessions are in favour of small holdings, and whose testimony will therefore carry more weight than that of English observers, who may be supposed to harbour a prejudice for the system of their own country, states in his paper on the Land Systems of Belgium and Holland printed by the Cobden Club, that the condition of the labourer is worse under this system of the minute division of land than it is in England; while the tenant farmers – for tenancy largely prevails even where the *morcellement* is greatest – are rack-rented with a mercilessness unknown in England, and even in Ireland, and the franchise 'so far from raising them in the social scale, is but a source of mortification and humiliation to them, for they are forced to vote according to the dictates of the landlord instead of following the dictates of their own inclinations and convictions'.¹²

Shklovsky hints at the existence of the same state of affairs in Russia, caused by the same mistaken reform:

... there was a community with re-allotments of land, but within the community itself there were peasants who owned no land at all, peasants with miserable allotments, and kulaks who hired labour and rented land.¹³

Another neutral commentator is Henry Gifford:

... He became an ardent advocate of the contemporary American economist and reformer Henry George's Single Tax on land, which Nekhlyudov in *Resurrection* expounds to his peasants (II ix): 'He had a head on him, that Zhorzha', says one. But again, when pressed on this by Aylmer Maude, he was forced to admit that the system required a government to administer it, and ideally he stood against all governments. The need to be consistent caused him much anxiety. However, the Sermon on the Mount is nothing but a series of hard choices, and its recommendations are drastic.¹⁴

Is this tacit acceptance? Or can we take Gifford's choice of quotation from *Resurrection* as being more than this? In either case, it has to be admitted that neither he nor Shklovsky has performed for the reader the basic task of giving an adequate explanation of what it was that Henry George was advocating, or of why it was that Tolstoy was so attracted to it.

The same has to be said, unfortunately, about Aylmer Maude, the Boswell to Tolstoy's Johnson. In *Talks with Tolstoy*,¹⁵ he is concerned to reconcile with Tolstoy's anarchism the need for government of some sort to implement the single tax. If there must be laws, then let them be good ones, is the view he attributes to his friend. He also takes pains to describe Tolstoy's reaction to the initial slow progress of the single tax in England. Further than this he does not go. In the biography, he has a curiously ambiguous statement to make:

... George's *Social Problems* and *Progress and Poverty*, with their

deep feeling, lucid statement, broad outlook, indignation at existing inequalities, and absence of practical administrative detail, were books just calculated to secure his warm sympathy.¹⁶

This is true enough in the main; but the hint that neither Tolstoy nor George was a practical man could be damaging. And, after all, would one have expected George to produce a blueprint that would be universally applicable? What he does have to say on the subject of practicalities is as follows:

Nor to take rent for public uses is it necessary that the State should bother with the letting of lands, and assume the chances of the favouritism, collusion, and corruption this might involve. It is not necessary that any new machinery should be created. The machinery already exists. Instead of extending it, all we have to do is to simplify and reduce it. By leaving to land owners a percentage of rent which would probably be much less than the cost and loss involved in attempting to rent lands through State agency, and by making use of this existing machinery, we may, without jar or shock, assert the common right to land by taking rent for public uses.¹⁷

In the face of this, what is one to make of such assertions as Troyat's '... the State would redistribute the nationalized land ...'? Are they examples of ignorance or of intentional misrepresentation? We may say nowadays that George's scheme would do well enough for a first tentative step, but that it might eventually lead to some system of public auctions with rents being bid instead of prices. Nevertheless, this is no excuse for attributing to George ideas that he never contemplated.

In extenuation of Maude, however, it must be said that he does his best by Tolstoy in quoting an account by the peasant/author Semëmov of a conversation he had had with Tolstoy on the subject of landholding. Unfortunately, it would seem that Semëmov had not perfectly understood what the Master was talking about:

'But would such a tax not be too heavy for those who work the land'?

'Not at all! *The tax would be as much as the land would yield without labour by its fertility and nearness to a market. If it would yield pasture for three rubles, that would be the tax.* If a market was near at hand so that one could get a good revenue from having a market-garden, one would have to pay more, and if the land was in the chief street in Moscow one would have to pay a great deal for it, but it would be quite fair, for it is not the owner who gives land its value but the whole community, and the community would only take back what is rightly its own!'¹⁸

It is of course a mistake to say that the 'fertility and nearness to a market' of a piece of land would yield anything at all without labour. What would have been true to say is that the tax would represent the advantage attributable to exceptional fertility and nearness to a market. It is to be feared that Maude's uncritical repetition of this lapse shows that his own grasp of the subject was on the weak side.

On the whole, we have to acknowledge that the message of this particular sample of opinions is that Tolstoy was not well served by his critics in the matter of his contribution to political economy. Although it is only a small sample, it is probably representative enough; for writers on literary topics are not noted for their familiarity with the works of Henry George.

Victor Shklovsky finishes his book with a moving tribute. After telling the story of Samson and the Philistines, he concludes as follows:

The grief, the wrath, and the awakening of the people have all found their expression in the great creations of Lev Tolstoy.

All his life, the people he lived among urged him to be sensible, but he was one of those who shook the pillars of their temples.¹⁹

The temples fell in Russia and elsewhere, only to be replaced by others, which have now been shaken in their turn. The present generation bears the responsibility of rebuilding them so that

they will last.