

For Brinking and Hell-Raising

By JANE WEISS

In an article that appeared in the April issue of *The Freeman* entitled "Against Brinking and Hell-Warning," Janet Rankin Aiken decried the desire of some Georgists for action as a "hurry-hurry" attitude that was quite incompatible with the teachings and spirit of Henry George. Dr. Aiken defined as "brinkers and hell-warners" all those who tell us that our civilization is turning backward into barbarism and that we had better do some constructive work promptly if we wish to save it and ourselves. Dr. Aiken says that such an attitude is unwarranted.

Perhaps I am a "brinker" but Dr. Aiken's article neither convinced nor soothed me. Let us examine her arguments—not in order to justify "brinking and hell-warning"—but in order to find truth.

First, she says that the "hell-warning" attitude is incompatible with what has been called "our amateur standing," and that "it is bringing us perceptibly closer to a state of demagoguery."

Now an amateur standing, beyond a certain point, may easily deteriorate into a dilettante standing, a sort

of other-worldly academicism that is directly opposed to the philosophy of economic freedom. It is an impossible position for social reformers. It is the position of those who defend the status quo and who cry "Peace, peace" when there is no peace.

Nor is there danger of demagoguery in facing facts. It may take a civilization longer than a man to die, but that civilizations have withered and died in the past is a sad but familiar truth, and that our own civilization is slowing down and in some respects reverting to barbarism is an alarming truth that confronts us today wherever we turn. Constructive tendencies have diminished if not ceased. Private enterprise is dwindling; business is marking time, capital is hiding; labor is begging or is turning highwayman; standards of living have ceased to rise; with mounting poverty, disease, crime, and desperation, fear is mounting, and with it intolerance and a reactionary desire for security above all else. Destructive tendencies are increasing. Bureaucracies are growing; economic wars with their weapons of tariffs and the exploitation of weaker peo-

ples have blazed into total wars with their myriad weapons of physical and moral destruction. Men and nations are seeking refuge in a self-sufficiency that is opposed to the exchange economy of civilization, a self-sufficiency that is in spirit and must eventually be in fact, barbarism.

Can we ignore these signs? And are they demagogues who remind us of them? No one in our movement is asking us to trust him blindly. Our philosophy of freedom excludes "fuhrers." We know what we want, and how we propose to get it. We write our own tickets, figuratively and literally.

Dr. Aiken says the "Georgist principles have plenty of time to grow and spread just because they are true, and the truth is the only thing that can afford to wait . . . the Georgist is occupied in the leisurely task of puncturing illusions."

Perhaps truth can afford to wait, but can we? Can we afford to hold truth back? Are we so satisfied with ourselves and our world that we want nothing more than "peace in our time"? Can we even be sure of that? The destructive forces of monopoly, special privilege, entrenched conservatism, and ruthless power-seeking are working unceasingly, with every weapon at their command, and with the weight of accumulated error on their side.

Every act of our lives, from what we deem the greatest to what we think the least significant, has an effect on ourselves and on the world, an effect for progress or against it. We must be sure we are not holding ourselves back; we must be sure we are not neglecting weapons and opportunities to use them that will genuinely advance the cause of freedom. We must so improve our technique that every action counts for what we want it to. We cannot afford to be fumbling.

This does not mean that we have to hurry, fear, resent, or worry. On the contrary, such feelings are the result of loose thinking, lack of constructive ideas,—in short, bad tech-

nique. But we should not overlook any legitimate means at our command to accomplish our purpose, the removal of all restrictions on production and the collection of community-produced values for community revenues.

Our task is to teach, to show others the way to freedom, to justice, to civilization. The most effective way of teaching is the two-edged method of preaching and example. The best way to puncture illusions is to demonstrate the truth. We may preach the desired end clearly and persuasively, but if, when asked, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" we evade the question or belittle it as a detail to be worked out later, we immediately forfeit all the interest and enthusiasm we have labored to arouse. People feel disappointed and melt away murmuring something about "Utopian schemes." Certainly this is not striking while the iron is hot. Indeed, it leaves the impression that we have no tools with which to strike.

This technique of preaching and practice was the method of Henry George himself. We honor him not only because of what he said, but also because of what he did to back up his words. The French Physiocrats of the eighteenth century in many respects preached the same doctrine that George did. So, in part, did Adam Smith. So, also, did Herbert Spencer. They preceded Henry George. Yet today, it is the name of George, the man of letters and action, that is the standard and symbol of the philosophy of freedom. The tremendous following he gained when he went into action, the carry-over of which is the existence of the Henry George schools throughout the world today, is proof of his own words, ". . . to secure the most general and most effective discussion of a principle it must be embodied in concrete form and presented in practical politics so that men being called to vote on it shall be forced to think and talk about it." *

*Protection or Free Trade p. 319