

1881-03-28 COMMUNISM VS. INDIVIDUALISM.

To the Editor of the New-York Times / By Charles Francis Adams:

Two books which your columns have already reviewed with very intelligent and broad-minded sympathy — Henry George's famous writings on the land question — seem to me to afford very abundant proof of the following propositions:

*First*—That if, on the one hand, "Communism" — i. e., the common ownership of all property — is the fatal Scylla of economic organization, no less, upon the other, is the opposite extreme of Individualism — the common ownership of no property — its equally fatal Charybdis; for, if the former would be industrially demoralizing by securing to the indolent and inefficient precisely the same share of the total produce as to the industrious and efficient, the other system, (as we too plainly see in actual experience,) rapidly becomes equally disastrous in its effects, by allowing, not simply advantage proportioned to superiority, but, from the first, wholly disproportionate advantage, and at last even the direct reversal of the true rule, so that there come to be whole classes who live idle, useless, and even vicious and wasteful lives, who yet are able to secure far larger shares of the total produce than can by any possibility be obtained by the bulk of the people, their superiors in every sense, but not favored by the same lucky accidents or unscrupulous deeds. To have no common property is to make not intrinsic but comparative merit, (or even the merest luck,) the basis of prosperity, just as in a race even a good runner, whose achievement is admittedly admirable, does yet, if some other runs just a little better, wholly lose the prize, instead of simply receiving proportionately less than his rival. For though at first men may be able to secure about what they have earned, yet afterward those who in the beginning, through merit or accident, did proportionately better than their fellows are thereby advantaged in subsequent competition, and, becoming the owners of the land and the capital, without which no one can either work or live, are able to impose their own terms upon all others, and extort from the majority all but the pittance which will just keep that majority in existence and working condition. As this condition of things emerges we see the revolting spectacle of many worthless persons living in luxury upon the product of the labor of others who toil long and hard, and even at dangerous occupations, for bare living wages and have neither the leisure nor the material conditions essential to a healthful life, physical, moral or intellectual. Thus tho industry of even the unborn generations is, as it were,

mortgaged in advance, and once for all, and Esau's descendants are the predestined slaves of the sons of Jacob, because Jacob purchased Esau's birthright for a mess of pottage. But if, on the other hand, there were to be, besides individual effort in the pursuit of wealth, joint action also, and none, even the least, were to be wholly dependent either upon being more efficient than their fellows — and it is plain that all cannot be among the "superior" class — or upon the mercy of the winners, then, there can be no doubt, rewards would permanently continue to be far more closely proportioned to desert than they now commonly are; by his share of the common wealth each would be saved from that utter poverty which compels submission to heartless extortion, such as makes the worker pay tribute of nearly all the product of his labor for the poor privilege (dear only to inherited instincts) of living a little longer his miserable life; on the other hand, superior energy or ability could have ample reward and inducement still in that excess of wealth over this common share, which it would still be at liberty to accumulate by individual effort. "Competition," if you will, by all means, but let it be fair; don't handicap the field to help the favorite, from the start, or — height of injustice and absurdity — entitle the winner of the first quarter to ride after that, instead of running, and be pushed by the others to the goal where he, and he alone, is to receive the prize. Is it said that some would be content to live on their share of the common wealth, and would refrain from working? I answer, e What of that? If their share were large enough to satisfy them, and if they took no more than that share, who could object? The matter would regulate itself, for in proportion as labor ceased to be exerted the shares of the common income would diminish in amount, and those depending on it would find out it would not do to be idle. And then, too, is there no idle class under the present system? Were it not better that some of the unambitious should live on their shares of a common income than that, as now, whole classes should inherit the monopoly of much more than an equal share of a vast income — rent — which neither they nor their ancestors have done more than any others to create?

*Secondly*—Even apart from the doctrine just enunciated, of the necessity of a common wealth by the side of that obtainable by individuals, to prevent a morbid and distorted development of economic society through the abuse and exaggeration of frequently accidental and always simply relative superiorities — apart from this. I say, it is now the accepted view of the most eminent economists that the nature and incidents of the ownership of land in particular are in themselves such as make its monopolization by any class less than the whole people a constantly accumulating

menace and injury to society. For land, while on the one hand it is an absolutely essential condition of all existence, is, at the same time, upon the other practically fixed and limited in amount. The consequence is that the owners of it are enabled to exact for its use from the community as "rent" all the excess of the total product over that minimum share which is the lowest upon which people will consent to live and rear families. Under these circumstances the benefit of all improvements in production is, in the long run, absorbed by that income, which, in the words of Prof. Cairnes, "grows even while its owners sleep — the rent-roll of the owners of the soil." These considerations — and if more are needed, I shall only refer the reader to Henry George. Mill, Laveleye, Wallace, Newcomb, Leslie, and other such authorities — seem to me amply to support the proposition that it is eminently important and desirable that rent be brought into common ownership.