

## Voltaire and The Physiocrats

YOU ask in a note in the May-June issue for information concerning a change of heart by Voltaire in regard to the impot unique. You published an article by me more than a year ago on this subject. Here are some references:

"The more advanced philosophers had no sympathy with the physiocrats. But Voltaire, whose dislike of everything pedantic and obscure led him to ridicule Quesnay's abstruse dogmatism, welcomed the ministry of the greatest and the most practical of the school. There may have been some affectation in the emotion he showed when he met Turgot during his triumphal visit to Paris in 1781, but the words he wrote on hearing of the great minister's fall ring true: 'I have nothing but death to look forward to since M. Turgot is out of office. The thunderbolt has blasted my brain and my heart.'" Cambridge Modern History: Vol. 8, page 25.

"The Parlement of Paris ordered the suppression of a pamphlet by Voltaire in favor of Turgot and free trade in grain."—*Ibid.*, page 87.

"He (Voltaire) wished to kiss the hand of Turgot, that hand which had, he said, set its signature to the people's happiness."—*Historians' History of the World*, Vol. 12, page 136.

"On hearing the news of the dismissal of Turgot the bishops ordered prayers of thanksgiving. Voltaire, on the other hand, would not be comforted. 'It is a disaster. . . . I see nothing but death ahead of me. . . . This thunderbolt has stunned me in heart and head. I shall never be consoled for having witnessed the birth and death of the golden age which Turgot was preparing for us.'"—*The French Revolution*, by Charles Downer Hazen, Prof. of History in Columbia University, Vol. 1, page 130.

"The accession of Turgot to power in 1774 stirred an ardent sympathy in Voltaire. Like the rest of the school he looked upon this as the advent of the political messiah and he shared the extreme hopes of that great and virtuous man's most sanguine lieutenants. He declared that a new heaven and a new earth had opened to him. His sallies against the economists were forgotten and he now entered into the famous controversy of the free trade in grain with all his usual fire. His fervor went too far for the sage minister, who prayed him to be somewhat less eager in alarming uninformed prejudice. Still he insisted on hoping all things."—*Voltaire by Viscount Morley*, page 362.

Morley gives references to original French sources. He also reproduces a passage from "Ode sur le Passe et le Present." Although I have less than a smattering of French I can see that it indulges in extravagant praise, speaking of the "glowing dawn which precedes the beautiful day."

In none of these is anything said about a "recantation," but a change of heart is unquestionably implied even though no formal statement to that effect is made.

As a matter of fact his "Man of Forty Crowns," is in no way a reflection on the Single Tax though it no doubt burlesques the views of the physiocrats. A peasant who manages by hard labor to produce forty crowns a year from his land is found by the tax-gatherer to be able to eke out a bare existence on twenty crowns. Therefore he is taxed twenty crowns. In other words he is not taxed on his land or land value, but on his industry. He meets an old acquaintance who has become rich, having an income of 400,000 crowns and assumes that he is being taxed to the amount of half of his income also. He is informed

that his wealthy acquaintance is not taxed at all since he owns no land and, since everything comes from the land, all that he has must have been taxed before he got it.

Here we have the modern argument of the millionaire who owns no land anticipated except that the treatment given the Man of Forty Crowns would have made a millionaire impossible unless he stole from the public treasury or were a pensioner. If workers were left only a bare living and everything above went into the treasury then the only alternative to a bare living would be taking money from the treasury. Voltaire, as a satirist, may be excused for presenting in mock seriousness such a paradoxical situation. Bernard Shaw, perhaps, as another satirist, may be excused for pretending to take Voltaire seriously, but Prof. Seligman, presenting himself as an economist and expert on taxation, seriously offering Voltaire's satire as a refutation of the Single Tax is in an entirely different class. He can not justly complain if his doing this leads to questioning of his sincerity, knowledge or ability to reason. It is easy to prove that he is not lacking in knowledge and, when certain interests are not concerned, his ability to reason appears sound enough.

The physiocratic idea, though not the Single Tax, may be understood in the legislation enacted by Joseph II of Austria. In almost the last article of mine in that mis-treated magazine, *The Public*, I told of the doings of that monarch as narrated in Meyer's *Geschichte Oesterreichs*. He decreed that the tenant should retain seventy per cent of his product, the landlord should get a fraction over seventeen per cent and the rest, a fraction over twelve per cent, should be taken in taxation. The vacant land holder seems to have been forgotten. Even as stated however, it was very different from the conditions in "The Man of Forty Crowns." Probably the croppers of the South and other American agricultural tenants would consider such legislation a boom, while the unencumbered working owner, if any, would be delighted if the tax gatherer left eighty-seven per cent to be split between himself as tenant and as landlord.

Perhaps some French Single Taxers could find more information concerning Voltaire.—SAMUEL DANZIGER.

IF the new Secretary of Labor, Miss Frances Perkins wants to make her department a real benefit to labor let her take up again the plan for dealing with unemployment originated by Assistant Secretary Louis F. Post in 1913, urged on Congress two years later by Secretary William B. Wilson and recommended a year later by President Wilson. There would have been no period of unemployment had Congress responded.

A PRESIDENT who owes his election to lack of confidence in his predecessor should be the last to attribute the nation's troubles to lack of confidence.