

THE SINGLE TAX AS A HAPPY MEDIUM.

IN the rush of events amidst which we live, it is not strange that there should be an almost infinite variety of opinions as to the relative importance of these events, as to their causes and consequences, and also as to the best means to be used to strengthen and perpetuate the good tendencies and to modify or destroy the evil ones.

When the tax lists are prepared, and we learn what we must pay in this way for the advantages of association, we are very apt to feel that the community is encroaching on our rights, and we proclaim the doctrines of Individualism as those which are to bring the millennium through their observance; but when our house burns or is looted by burglars, and the fire department or the police fail to protect us, we become convinced that Socialism, which shall prevent any loss or avoidable discomfort from coming to us, is that of which the prophets and seers have sung in their portrayals of the heavenly estate. This, in brief, suggests the two directions in which the thought and effort of the day are being exerted.

Individualism and Socialism—manifested in many ways and through endless applications—are the two conflicting ideas of the time; and each, or either, if followed to its legitimate end, will win for its votary the name of “crank,” if not of criminal. Each is a name to conjure with, if you would fill with palpitating dread the breast of the well-to-do and the comfortable, or rouse to a frenzy of rage the down-trodden or the impecunious, or would you fire with holy zeal the heart of the humanitarian, burdened with the sense of others’ wrongs and panting with the desire to help and to rescue. For, as Socialism suggests Paris after the close of the Franco-Prussian war, it also speaks of William Morris, John Ruskin, and other benefactors of the race. As Individualism may suggest Bresci, who so recently robbed the Italian people of a beloved king, it also

brings to mind many a martyr to the cause of humanity. If, then, each has much good to its credit, and each has wrought much harm—since either, logically extended, will destroy the other, its good results as its evil—does it not follow that there must be an intermediate ground or base of action, which shall conserve the good of both while avoiding the evils of both? Is there not, in fact, a “happy medium”? That we may, if possible, discover this medium, let us see what, if any, are the points in common between the Individualist and the Socialist.

A little reflection will show, I believe, that each is seeking that “life, liberty, and happiness” of which our fathers thought when they gave us the Declaration of Independence. The Socialist would gain his object by so controlling all that no one shall be able to oppress another; that is, he would take from all the power to injure any one. The Individualist would remove all restrictions directly from each individual, making even the association with others subject only to the will of the one. That is, he would make the individual so strong as to have no fear even of all others. But, seek it as he may, each is striving after liberty. How is it, then, when so many are striving after liberty—so many that the quest may be said to be wellnigh universal—that so few gain even an approximation to what they seek?

It cannot be that liberty is but a name—a condition about which to theorize or dream, but too elusive and unreal to be attained by humanity. It must be, then, either that our conceptions of liberty are false, in part or in whole, or else our methods of striving after it are ill-adapted to its attainment.

Let us first consider, for a moment, what we commonly *mean* by liberty; then, perhaps, what *real* liberty is. In doing this we will find that the idea of liberty held by all some of the time, and I fear held by some of us all of the time, is a state in which we can do as we please absolutely, without let or hindrance, and can have at any moment, and practically without effort, just whatever the whim of the moment leads us to fancy. But we know perfectly well that Nature’s laws, to say nothing of these laws of right and wrong, which we more

commonly call God's laws, will not permit of such a state. "If a man will not work, neither shall he eat." "The effect must be preceded by the adequate cause." These are laws that must be reckoned with.

Again, liberty is the right of all—of each equally with every other, but no further. Clearly, then, it is limited for each just at the point where it would infringe on the liberty of another.

Is not true liberty the absolute and complete ownership of the individual by himself? Let us consider what such ownership means or involves. If I own myself completely, it follows that no one has any claim upon me; and if not upon me, then not upon anything which I may create or produce, save only as I may freely give or barter such a claim. But there is a corollary to this statement of which we must not lose sight; namely, I have no claim upon any other individual, or the productions of any other, save as such claim may be freely bestowed as a gift or as consideration in a voluntary barter.

If you have no claim upon me, and each other individual in the universe has no claim upon me, it follows that no community or assemblage of individuals can have any claim upon me; just as you may string ciphers together until you have encircled the globe, and yet will express no value. But, if I have no claim upon you and you have no claim upon me, there is one direction in which we both have a claim, and that is our claim upon the natural resources, not produced by any individual or body of individuals, but by God, who is the Creator of us all, and who has provided them as a necessary source from which by our own individual efforts we shall each provide for our own life and happiness.

So far we are clearly Individualist; but let us now see what there is from the Socialist side. As an Individualist, I must, to be consistent, provide entirely for myself—I must be a shoemaker, farmer, weaver, miller, tanner, carpenter, baker, etc., all in one and for one. But we learned long ago that this is an impossibility; that one can bake and another make shoes, and that both, or all, are vastly better served if each does what he can do best and each exchanges products with those who

do other things better. To do this, however, successfully, we must be near one another; and so we gather into communities, and with communities come new requirements.

If I cross a field, even in wet weather, the sod is not injured, and it holds me out of the mud; but if a thousand pass and repass in the same day the path becomes a quagmire, and we must have roads and walks, to say nothing of drains and sewers. We must also have provision in the way of police, etc., to see that all this is kept in repair and that every one gets equal use of these improvements; and so association grows until we have our cities, States, and nations.

Two questions now arise: To whom do these improvements belong? and who is to pay for them? For the first: Did you or I create them? No. Then neither you nor I have title to them. But, as the community created them, title is vested in the community; and in the community will be vested the title to all things and all values created by it. To the second question the answer is easy. Improvements made for the community are to be paid for by the community; improvements made by the community are to be paid for to the community—by those who are benefited thereby.

Here, then, are the occasion and justification for what we commonly call taxes. It is the right of the community to demand pay from its beneficiaries to the amount of their benefits and the necessity for the community to have that wherewith to pay for benefits conferred upon the community. But we saw that the community has no right to your goods or mine, or to any part of them, except in return for services rendered. It follows that the community, like the individual, must take of what it has itself produced to pay for what it received; and, clearly, the value of the land produced by the gathering of the community, which makes land in its vicinity more desirable than that at a distance, is produced by the community and not by the individual. It is, then, the property of the community, not of the individual, and is a source from which to derive the means to pay for the benefits bestowed upon the community—hence for which the community is responsible.

Another value belongs to the community, and is available for the satisfaction of its obligations, and that is the excess in value of one piece of land over another, either because of mineral wealth, fertility, or other features that make one more desirable than another. This is so, because of the equal right of all to all of God's gifts to the race. For, since it is a law of Nature that two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time, it follows that some in seeking their share of the Father's bounty will get more favorable locations than others. But it would be no better, if they were ousted, to give place to others, and rotation in possession would be impracticable and at best a poor corrective. Yet it is still true that all have equal claim; so let the favored one pay to the community—that is, to all—the excess of what his favorable location will enable him to produce over that which his less favored neighbor can produce with equal labor. This is the way, and the only way, to equalize opportunity: that is, to give liberty to all. And this is the Single Tax, the "happy medium" between Individualism and Socialism, which leaves—say, rather, which makes—the individual free, yet which gives to the community all the improvements and advantages that can be conceived of.

It is doubtless true that, under this rule, large fortunes will disappear; but is this not as it should be? Where all are equal in the sight of God, should there be such disparity in the sight of men? And, with greater wealth for the few, bitter, pinching, abject poverty for the many shall also pass away; and with both shall go the peculiar sins alike of the poor and the rich.

It is often said that the great middle class is the bulwark of the nation; but by this plan all will be middle class, all will be bulwarks, while at the same time there will be none left to assail—none to overturn the freedom of all.

That this idea is gaining support cannot be doubted. But let us not forget that Truth and Liberty are of universal application. They are not for the seventy or eighty millions of us in the United States, nor for the greater number of English-speaking people, nor for the still greater number of so-called

Christian people, and not for the millions of Africa, Asia, and the islands of the sea—for all come from the same creative hand. All are dependent on God's bounty. We all are brethren.

Let us, then, be in earnest in our quest for liberty—more earnest than ever before; but, understanding what liberty is, let us cease to seek it each for himself, or for his own immediate family, or even for his own nation—for such seeking must ever fall short of attaining its object. Let us rather, in the light of a fuller, nobler conception, strive to attain liberty for all, guarding even more carefully against acts of oppression and injustice from ourselves and ours than we do against encroachment on our rights; and thus, each individual setting himself right, we shall awake to find all free, all enjoying liberty, absolute and complete—for none will be left to act as oppressors.

This is the end sought by the Single Taxer.

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