

Quesnay, Physician to a Sick Society

By Royal E. S. Hayes (M. D.)

The December number of the New York Medical Times has given the profession a splendid lesson in Political Economy. With credit to Professor Haney of New York University the Medical Times recounts the activities and ideas of Dr. Francois Quesnay, leader of the old French Physiocrats, those forerunners of the "Single Tax" so intimately related to Georgists in spirit if not in time. If the medical profession could have more of this philosophy presented to them and be brought to realize the relation of land monopoly to disease susceptibility, not to mention its relation to professional freedom, it would become a great help to our movement and to the physicians themselves.

Dr. Quesnay, it is recalled, rendered valuable contributions not only to medical usages of his day, but as philosopher and economist. He exerted a radical influence which lives in the soundest economic thought of our time. To Quesnay, if to any one man, rightfully belongs, despite errors, the title of Father of Political Science.

Before Dr. Quesnay began his writings on Political Economy he was employed as physician to King Louis XV. To offset the enervating effects of court life Dr. Quesnay wisely prescribed for the tired King a course in occupational therapy. After a preliminary course in making snuff boxes and such he was put to work on a printing press which had been set up in his private apartments.

Once he had become acquainted with the necessary materials and mechanics the Doctor said to him, "Sire, you have seen when hunting a great deal of lands, farms and laborers. You are going to print an account of how these people produce your wealth." And he was given such epigrams as these; "Poor peasant, poor country; poor country, poor peasant." At which the King was at least thoughtful enough to remark, "It is a pity the Doctor is not in the Government. He knows more about it than any of them."

After Quesnay had written his last notable contribution to medical literature in 1753, he turned specifically to Political Economy. A collection of his works is extant under the title of *Oeuvres economique et philosophique*. He and his school is credited with having influenced such men as Malthus, Benjamin Franklin, Gladstone, Mill, Proudhon, and George. Even today, Walter Lippman in his *An Inquiry Into the Principles of the Good Society* demands a free market. Jefferson with his "That government is best which governs least" but echoes Quesnay. Adam Smith intended to dedicate his *Wealth of Nations* to Quesnay but the latter died about two years before the appearance of that great work. Hendrik Willem van Loon declares "he could have saved France" had his intellectual contribution been accepted and applied.

The Medical Times goes on to say (quoting in essence), "The Physiocracy of Quesnay is defined by Professor Haney as a system of thought based upon a belief in natural laws which must be followed if men are to gain their highest well being. Their object was to ascertain the natural laws, whose observance would restore all France to opulence." (Haney)."

"The Physiocrats emphasized individualism and freedom. Private property is the expression of individuality and the individual must be free to dispose of it. 'A man's private business is no proper concern of the government.' But it is to the self interest of men to cooperate with his fellows. The particular interest of the individual is always that of the community. This seemed to them proved by the benefits arising wherever industry and commerce were free. The abatement of poverty grows out of the application of these principles."



"Laissez faire was a favorite maxim of the school. The only function of government is to protect life, liberty and property. 'Since liberty and property spring from the very nature of man and are necessary to his individualism, human laws should merely recognize, formulate and maintain them.' 'Would that these sentiments might become a consistent and dominating passion in men's lives!'"

"Quesnay's *Tableau Economique* visualized the distribution of wealth and was based on the mechanism of the circulation of the blood." Since every inorganic unit and every organic being in nature is formed and developed on the same plan, we can understand how vital to economic function, how harmonious was his accommodation of economic forces toward human well being; moreover, how necessary it is in our apparently more complex modern life to understand the normal direction of these forces.

"Quesnay applied the facts of animal economy to the economy of society. It was the Bible of the School. It has been named as one of the three great inventions which have contributed to the stability of society, the others being those of writing and money. Quesnay taught that what the economist and statesman should be concerned with is the increase of the net product." Quite the opposite of promoting scarcity so as to raise prices in terms of the numerals stamped on money while munching the rake-off in taxes, in the long eared fashion of our modern politicians!

Quesnay saw such aberrations of common sense as he saw disease, and indeed the similarity and the effects are apparent to all who possess a lively sense of what is natural and what is unnatural. The revolt of the Physiocrats, like the criticism of the Georgists today, was against artificial wealth founded on special privilege whether political, corporate or individual. Their concern was with nature, natural wealth and natural liberty. As the Medical Times writer says, "That nation is best governed

whose laws most nearly express the constitution of the natural order."

Quesnay held that every man has a right to the undisturbed enjoyment of the property which results from the exercise of his faculties in productive labor. "It follows from these rights that the sole function of government is to protect life and property and to administer justice, and no interference by the government is permissible." Free land, free industry, free commerce and free competition can regulate the unjust differentials automatically. The Physiocrats had the social instead of the official point of view. "They saw how interdependent people really were and centered attention on production and circulating the necessities

of life.' (Haney)." Their aim was to promote the vitality of interdependence, not the paralysis of dependence.

I will quote the closing paragraph of the Times article entire; "Quesnay and his group, working with prodigious energy in his apartment in the old palace have been compared to the old painters working under the direction of a master. The atmosphere of that workshop was feverish; there was nothing dull or academic about its curriculum in economics, for around this clinic and laboratory a stupendous drama of greed and exploitation was being played; society was sick unto death; an unofficial 'brain trust' was trying heroically to stem the fearful tide

presaged by Louis XV when he said, 'After us the deluge.' Their failure is history but many of their ideas are incorporated today in our everyday thinking and in the economic principles and practices of our system, for the intellectual vitality that begot Quesnay and his pupils was a formidable one."

Dr. Quesnay lighted an undying flame, the first bright light toward lasting peace and a free society. He sketched the design; our modern dynamical sense can show the way to an even better application.

See: Medical Times, N. Y., December, 1937; "Progress and Poverty," pp. 423, 424, 433; "Science of Political Economy," many references between pp. 57-213; for comparison of Georgist and Physiocratic system see also "Philosophy of Henry George" by G. R. Geiger.