

Bertrand Russell on Land Value

PPRIVATE property in land has no justification except historically through the power of the sword. In the beginning of feudal times, certain men had enough military strength to be able to force those whom they disliked not to live in a certain area. Those whom they chose to leave on the land became their serfs, and were forced to work for them in return for the gracious permission to stay. In order to establish law in place of private force, it was necessary, in the main, to leave undisturbed the rights which had been acquired by the sword. The land became the property of those who had conquered it, and the serfs were allowed to give rent instead of service. There is no justification for private property in land, except the historical necessity to conciliate turbulent robbers who would not otherwise have obeyed the law. This necessity arose in Europe many centuries ago, but in Africa the whole process is often quite recent. It is by this process, slightly disguised, that the Kimberly diamond mines and the Rand gold mines were acquired in spite of prior native rights. It is a singular example of human inertia that man should have continued until now to endure the tyranny and extortion which a small minority are able to inflict by their possession of the land. No good to the community, of any sort or kind, results from the private ownership of land. If men were reasonable they would decree that it would cease tomorrow, with no compensation beyond a moderate life income to the present holders.

"The mere abolition of rent would not remove injustice, since it would confer a capricious advantage upon the occupiers of the best sites and the most fertile land. It is necessary that there should be rent, but it should be paid to the state or to some body which per-

forms public services; or, if the total rental were more than is required for such purposes, it might be paid into a common fund and divided equally among the population. Such a method would be just, and would not only help to relieve poverty, but would prevent wasteful employment of land and the tyranny of local magnates. Much that appears as the power of capital is really the power of the landowner—for example, the power of railway companies and mine owners. The evil and injustice of the present system are glaring, but men's patience of preventable evils to which they are accustomed is so great that it is impossible to guess when they will put an end to this strange absurdity."

These statements by Bertrand Russell were reported in March 1917 by Arthur W. Madsen, editor of *Land & Liberty*. They were republished in the London HGS magazine in April 1970. Mr. Madsen died in 1957. He was succeeded by the present editor, Victor H. Blundell.

Mr. Madsen commented that Mr. Russell was not so convincing in some of his other statements, as, for instance, when he emphasized that mere impulses were the cause of war and strife. Discounting the influence of economic conditions and their distortion of men's minds, he saw the solution not so much in improved social environment as in the diminution of desires that center round possession.

The former editor, long a brilliant exponent of George's work, made it clear that "the earth should be for all, and if each lived in it commanding no service from another unless he gave an equivalent service by his own labor or industry, there would be no occasion for strife and certainly no possible outlet for that brutal passion which Mr. Russell calls the 'possessive impulse.'"