

THE SINGLE TAX AMENDMENT

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## THE SINGLE TAX AMENDMENT

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The prophet of the "single tax" was and is Henry George, a Californian who sprang to world-wide fame. Henry George published his book, "Progress and Poverty," in 1880. It was a most fascinatingly-written book and soon found a multitude of readers.

In 1905, Henry George, Jr., said of his father's works: "Embracing all forms and languages, more than two million copies of 'Progress and Poverty' have been printed to date; and that, including with these the other books that have followed from Henry George's pen and which might be called 'The Progress and Poverty Literature,' perhaps five million copies have been given to the world."

Henry George has had many disciples. Among them were and are men of high class—idealists, devoted to a "cause" for which they have not hesitated to make great personal sacrifices. Of them President Wheeler is quoted as having said:

"From the teachings of Henry George there flows a stream of idealism that has seldom been equaled. Whenever you find single-taxers, you find men and women who are interested in what is going on in the world for reasons other than personal reward. They are earnestly seeking the good for its own sake and for what they believe to be the good of the country."

Yet what has come of it all? Nowhere in the world is the single tax in full operation. Here and there it has been tried in partial and modified forms, "the single tax limited," as it has been called, but most of these trials have been or are being abandoned. Here and there, there are more taxes on land than on other subjects of taxation, but nowhere are *all* the taxes on land alone. Dr. Young (Single Tax Movement in the United States, page 324) has listed the results of the votes in the United States on twenty-three measures involving the single tax in some form. Of these only three carried. Of the three, two were in city elections involving only the partial exemption of buildings from taxation. The

other one was the Oregon provision for "local option in taxation," adopted in 1910 and repealed in 1912, in the same election at which four other single-tax measures were defeated. Two "home rule in taxation" amendments have been defeated in California, one in 1912 and the other in 1914. These were supposed to be the "thin edge of the wedge" for the single tax. Thus, after thirty-six years of ardent discussion, the single tax has been universally rejected by the hard common-sense of the American people. It seems possible, therefore, that there is some mistake in the doctrines upon which the single tax rests.

The single-tax amendment which comes up by initiative petition in November frankly states its revolutionary purpose to be "to take for public use the rental and site value of land." This is to be accomplished by abolishing all taxes except those on land. There is an exception, and that is that income and inheritance taxes may be used for certain limited purposes.

The issue is thus squarely joined between those who believe with Henry George that "private property in land is a bold, bare, enormous wrong, like that of chattel slavery" (see Progress and Poverty, book 7, chapter 3), and those who, like myself, believe that on the whole the institution of private property of land is, and has proven itself to be, a very wholesome institution, stimulating industry and thrift as no other one human institution, with the exception of personal freedom, has done, and giving to the great mass of the people and to industry and commerce generally that safety and security which is essential to the pursuit and achievement of the highest general welfare.

To my mind the bare statement of Henry George's doctrine in his own words (or for that matter the statement in the amendment as quoted above) carries its refutation and condemnation. Lest I should misinterpret him I shall use his own words. The main issue is the rightfulness of private property in land. On this he says first:

"What constitutes the rightful basis of property? . . . Is it not, primarily, the right of a man to himself, to the use of his own powers, to the enjoyment of the fruits of his own exertions? . . . As a man belongs to himself, so his labor when put in concrete form belongs to him." (Progress and Poverty, book 7, chapter 1.)

But private property in land, he holds, has no such foundation in the "natural rights" of man. So he says, second:

"Let the parchments be ever so many, or possession ever so long, natural justice can recognize no right in one man to the possession and enjoyment of land that is not equally the right of all his fellows." (Progress and Poverty, book 7, chapter 1.)

What, then, is a "natural right"? If there be natural rights so clear as Henry George thinks, it would seem "natural" that we should all recognize them instinctively and that there could be no difference of opinion about them. Yet this "natural rights" question has been debated for centuries and there is no consensus of opinion yet. Professor Ely, in his recently published work on "Property and Contract," puts the matter as follows:

"Generally the term natural rights simply carries with it what Jeremy Bentham calls dogmatism in disguise. . . . It presents no argument for the position taken, but sets up the position taken as its own reason. You say, this appeals to you on the ground of natural rights; I say, this does not appeal to me; you have simply your position over against my position."

The "natural rights" argument, or dogma, has sometimes been applied, and sincerely, too, in ways that now seem curious. Thus the Kentucky Constitution of 1850 incorporated the following in the Bill of Rights:

"The right of property is before and higher than any constitutional sanctions, and the right of the owner of a slave to such slave, and its increase, is the same and as inviolable as the right of the owner of any property whatever."

"By their fruits ye shall know them" is an excellent rule to apply to institutions and laws. Does private property in land promote the general welfare?

The institution of private property in land, as we know it to-day in California, is in the main of American origin. There is no title to land anywhere that is any more

complete, full and free than that conveyed by a United States patent. The only limitations to which it is subject are the right of eminent domain, a right exercised sparingly and always with compensation, and the duty to pay taxes, a duty falling on other classes of property and on persons other than landowners in like measure. In other countries historical limitations on the ownership of land have been, during the past one hundred years, slowly swept away, although they are not yet all gone. Among the greatest reforms in European countries have been counted those which changed community lands and the domain of kings and nobles into the private property of the people on the soil. On the other hand we in the United States have had the blessings of private property in land since colonial days. It is only within the present generation that the Irish peasant, for example, has had even a chance to own the land he tills. We are told that this land reform in Ireland has had an almost magical effect on the welfare of that country. Would the Irish peasant be so very much better off paying rent to the tax-gatherer than he was when paying rent to an absentee landlord? The magic lies in the fact that the land and its earnings are now his.

In our own country the possibility of acquiring full property in land has enabled us to summon and assimilate into good American citizens people who have come from the ends of the earth, among them many of those "discontented and down-trodden," because landless at home. These are now among the home-builders, homeowners and land-owners whom we count the "backbone of the nation." Would the freedom of our democratic institutions alone, unaided by the privilege of owning land, have laid as secure a foundation for our boasted prosperity? Have not those documents, known as "United States Land Patents," had something to do with it?

The foregoing would be reasons enough for turning the land, if it were now common property, into private property.

But fortunately land is now private property. Our entire industrial and commercial organization is built around that fact. To change it now and suddenly (the amendment if passed takes effect on January 1, 1917) would work a veritable cataclysm. Thus, for example, our savings-bank investments, which care for the sav-

ings of thousands, rest mainly on landed security. If the amendment passes, then, on January first, that security would be worthless. Men who have invested the savings of a lifetime in land would lose their all. There is to be no compensation, time for adjustment, or any other quality of mercy shown to the 1,200,000 people who now live on their own farms or in their own homes in the cities, or to any other land-owners. The program involves the immediate confiscation by the government of the "rental and site values of land." These are the words of the amendment. What they mean has been forcefully stated by Henry George:

"I do not propose either to purchase or to confiscate private property in land. The first would be unjust; the second, needless. Let the individuals who now hold it still retain, if they want to, possession of what they are pleased to call *their* land. Let them continue to call it *their* land. Let them buy and sell, bequeath and devise it. We may safely leave them the shell, if we take the kernel. *It is not necessary to confiscate land; it is only necessary to confiscate rent.*" The italics are those of Henry George himself. (Progress and Poverty, book 9, chapter 1.)

The shell being of little account, it seems a superfine distinction to draw between confiscating land and confiscating rent. The injustice of all this has been well stated by Professor Ely:

"Our American nation, acting through

both federal and state government, has extended a general invitation to the people to acquire full property in land, and the invitation has been accepted by Americans, while people have come from the ends of the world to acquire property in land, in accordance with our own conditions. . . . Now it is seriously proposed, because of an abstract doctrine of natural right, to deprive the land-owners of their land values. It is not believed . . . that *the American conscience will ever accept this proposition.* If a mistake has been made, it is the mistake of the nation and not of one particular class in it."

Much is said about land speculation, land monopoly and the evils of large landed estates. These may be evils, although something might be said in favor of withholding land, conserving it, from wasteful use. But before we get too much excited over the Astor holdings in New York and the big ranches of California, it might be well to give a thought or two to what is going to happen to Sam, Patrick, Donald and Johnny, Francois, Gustav, Nicolas, Hans and Isaac, who are settled on homes we have sold them, the value of which it is now proposed to confiscate.

Somehow, try as I may to appreciate the views of the single-taxers, I cannot make it seem *wrong* for a man to own a farm and enjoy the fruits thereof, or to own a town lot whether he build thereon or not. Nor can I make it seem *right* to put all the taxes on one class only.

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### THE SINGLE TAX MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

"The Single Tax Movement in the United States," by Arthur Nichols Young, of Princeton University, is the first complete and satisfactory history of the single-tax movement that has been written. The writer has successfully concealed from his readers any opinions he may have for or against the single tax, either as a fiscal or social movement. He has shown, however, very unusual industry and capacity for research and investigation, and has written a very readable and interesting book. His citations of books, pamphlets, articles and addresses are voluminous and valuable.

The book opens with a chapter reviewing the theory of public ownership of

ground rent as glimpsed by numerous writers prior to Henry George. Succeeding chapters paint clearly in terse language the very remarkable career of Henry George, and his very remarkable book, "Progress and Poverty"; his difficulty in finding a publisher; the popularity which it later attained; the antagonism exhibited by the scholastic economists, and their subsequent rather slow modification of views to a more favorable mood.

The early hopes and enthusiasms of the followers of Henry George, and their later disappointments in their efforts to secure favorable legislative action, are well and impartially described. The large influence of George's writings, and of the activity of his disciples in modifying current thought