

THE LAND QUESTION

David Redfearn

MODERN advocates of land-value taxation begin to be conscious of their difficulties at the point where, because the human capacity to absorb the spoken word is limited, talking must stop and reading must begin. What advice should they give? Let us face it at the outset: it is not everybody who is capable of taking in the full message of *Progress and Poverty* at first reading. Henry George was a genius, and his analysis and treatment of his subject will probably never be bettered; yet his use of the grand style, and the fact of his writing a hundred years ago, are insuperable obstacles for many readers of today. "I can't understand it", they will say, or "How can a book written then have any relevance now?"

To meet these difficulties, the present-day land-value taxer has at his disposal, many excellent short summaries in pamphlet form; but these, in turn, have prompted a different set of reactions. "It seems so simple, it can't be true". "What about money, multi-nationals, etc?" In her recently reprinted pamphlet, Shirley-Anne Hardy has set out to provide, in reasonably compact form, both a clear-cut statement of the theory and a wealth of examples, drawn from the controversies of the day, with which the common reader and watcher of television can be expected to be familiar. In all this she has been brilliantly successful.

I use the word "brilliantly" advisedly; for behind the print one senses the presence both of the eagerly enthusiastic conversationalist and of the poetic imagination that lights up her vision. It is a vision, which she shares with George himself; of the difference between the world as it is and a regime of economic freedom, the like of which the mass of humanity has, as yet, no conception. "We realize", she says, "that an incalculable creative contribution to society in every sphere of

activity has been lost, from so great a body of the people having so long been fastened to the grim treadmill of mere survival".

It must be said, in passing, that "The land question" was originally written for a political party conference. Hence the references to a national incomes policy with which, I dare say, Shirley-Anne Hardy agrees no more than will the majority of her readers. Hence also her demonstration that proper land use, limits to holdings and decentralization of government functions will follow naturally after the abolition of land monopoly – thus refuting those who claim that these things need to be planned for now. This second edition, however, is aimed at the wider audience of all those with a care for liberty, justice, peace and the harmony of Man with Nature. She deserves to reach it.

This edition has also been enlarged with a more detailed treatment of the multi-nationals, a diagram to illustrate the law on rent, some quotations from Gandhi and extracts from "An historian's conclusions" by John Peter. It is to be hoped that a number of distracting typographical errors, caused doubtless by the urgency of the task, will be eliminated from future re-prints, of which there should be many.

Shirley-Anne Hardy. *The land question*, 2nd ed. The author ("The Rocks", Pitlochry, Perthshire, Scotland), 1981. 95 p. plus 18 p. postage and package.

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Patchwork Palliatives

SINCE Labour took control of the Greater London Council in May, planning priorities have changed. In the future, policies will be based on the principles outlined in *The GLC's Approach to Planning*, a report written by the new Chairman of the Planning Committee, Ed Gouge. There are five main points: "(1) the needs of people come first. The whims of multi-national corporations and the 'laissez-faire' lobby will not be followed; (2) elected representatives must have real control over planning policies; (3) homes must come before roads; (4) speculative building has no place in a socialist London; (5) pollution and destruction of the environment, suffered by all but caused by a few, will not be tolerated."

The GLC intends to set up "Community Areas", parts of inner and outer London with a predominantly working class population, where development sites are needed for new housing, community facilities and local industry. Planning powers will be used to resist commercial development in these Community Areas to protect local needs against excessive hotel and office building.

Pressures

What is this likely to mean in practice? An emphasis on jobs for local working-class people rather than offices for commuters, does not recognise that many of the traditional crafts have vanished for ever. The policy of office restraint also ignores the fact that office work itself depends on an army of manual workers to support it – janitors and cleaners, storekeepers and messengers, to name a few.

The electrical and mechanical services in a modern air-conditioned office block are about as complex as those in an ocean liner, and since these buildings are refurbished, on average, every seven years, offices actually create a large and steady flow of work for just the class of blue-collar workers that the GLC is most concerned about.

Nor is there much necessity for new industry very close to Central London; there is ample vacant land for factories a couple of miles away in places like Bermondsey, Wandsworth and the Isle of Dogs.

Counter productive

If it succeeds, the GLC's new planning policy will produce exactly the opposite effect to that intended; office rents will spiral and firms will not be able to afford to be in the places that would most suit them. The economy will be depressed, and it will prevent the growth of precisely the kind of employment the GLC would like to see. However, the chances are that the GLC will obtain neither the finance nor the powers for its plans. The land will stand idle and blighted for a few more years, whilst speculators buy it up and wait for County Hall to change hands. What a different story it would be if the politicians came to terms with market forces and sought ways of enabling the community to share in the enormous rental values of land in Central London.

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