

TOLSTOY ON LAND OWNERSHIP.

Copyright. 1905, The Evening Bulletin, of Philadelphia. Reprinted In The Public, August 12, 1905, by courteous permission from The Bulletin.

A number of suggestions have been made as to how to divide, in the most just manner, all land among the workers, but of all these only the one made by the late Henry George appears to me to be practicable.

The property right, Henry George wrote in his book about the single tax, is founded not. on human laws, but on the laws of God. It is undeniable and absolute, and every one who violates it. be it an individual or a nation, commits a theft.

A man who catches a fish, who plants a tree, builds a house, constructs a machine, sews a dress or paints a picture, thereby becomes the owner of the results of his own efforts—he has the right to give them away, to sell them or to leave them to his heirs. As the land has not been created by us, and only serves as the temporary residence of changing generations of human beings, it is clear that nobody can own the exclusive right to possess land, and that the rights of all men to it are equal and inalienable.

The right to own land is limited by the equal rights of all others, and this imposes upon the temporary possessor of land the duty to remunerate society for the valuable privilege given him to use the land in his possession.

When we impose a tax upon houses, crops, or money in any form, we take from members of society something which by right belongs to them, we violate the property right and commit a theft in the name of the law; while when we impose a tax upon land we take from members of society something which does not belong to them, but to society, and which cannot be given to them except at a detriment to others. We thus violate the laws of justice when we place a tax on labor or the results of labor, and we also violate them if we do not

levy a tax on land.

Let us, therefore, decide to stop levying all taxes except the tax on the value of land, regardless of the buildings erected or the improvements made on it, but only on the value which natural or social conditions give to it.

If we place this single tax on land the results will be these:

1. The tax will relieve us of the whole army of officials necessary to collect the present taxes, which will diminish the cost of government, while at the same time making it more honest. It will rid us of all the taxes which lead to lying, to perjury, to frauds of all kinds. All land is visible, and cannot be hidden, and its value is fixed easier than that of any other property, and the single tax can be determined at less expense and less danger to public morals.
2. It will to a great extent increase the production of wealth, doing away with the discouraging tax upon labor and thrift, and it will make the land more accessible to those who want to work or improve, as the proprietors, who do not work themselves, but speculate in its increasing value, will find it difficult to keep such expensive property. The tax on labor, on the other hand, leads to the accumulation of immense fortunes in a few hands, and the increasing poverty of the masses. This unjust division of wealth on one side leads to the creation of one class of people who are idle and corrupt, because they are too rich, and the creation of another class of people who are too poor, and thus doubly delays the production of wealth. This unjust division of wealth creates on one side terrible millionaires, and on the other side vagrants, beggars, thieves, gamblers and social parasites of various kinds, and necessitates an enormous expense for officials to watch these—policemen. Judges, prisons and other means which society uses in self-defense:

The single tax is a remedy for all these evils.

I do not mean to say that this tax will transform human nature, for that

is not within the power of man. but it will create conditions under which human nature will grow better instead of worse, as under the present conditions. It will make possible an Increase of wealth, of which it is hardly possible to form an idea. It will make undeserved poverty impossible. It will do away with the demoralizing struggle for a living. It will make it possible for men to be honest, just, reasonable and noble, if they desire to be so. It will prepare the soil for the coming of the epoch of justice, abundance, peace and happiness, which Christ told His disciples of.

Let us suppose that in a certain place all land belongs to two owners—one very rich, who lives far away, and another, not rich, living and working at home—and to a hundred of small peasants owning a few acres each. Besides these there live in that place some scores of people who own no land—mechanics, merchants, and officials.

Now let us suppose that the people of that community, having arrived at the conclusion that the land is common property, decide to dispose of the land according to their new conviction.

What would they do? Take all the land away from those who own it and give everybody the right to take the land he desires? That could not be done, because there would be several people who would want the same ground, and this would lead to endless quarrels. To form one society and work all things in common would be difficult, because some have carts, wagons, horses and cattle, while others have none. and, besides, some people do not know how to till the soil, or are not strong enough.

To divide all the land in equal parts, according to its value, and allow one part to each is very difficult, and this would, besides, be impracticable, because the lazy and poor would lease their property to the rich for money, and these would soon again be in possession of it all.

The inhabitants of the community, therefore, decide to leave the land in the possession of those who owned it, and to order each owner to

pay into the common treasury money representing the revenue which had been decided on after appraising the value of the land, not according to the work or the improvements made on it, but to its quality and situation, and this money was to be divided equally among all.

But as it was difficult first to take this money from all those who held the land, and then divide it equally among all the members of the community, and as these members, besides, paid money toward the public needs— schools, fire departments, roads, etc.— and as this money was always needed, they decided to use all the money derived from those who had the use of land, for public needs.

Having made this arrangement, the members of the community levied the tax for the use of land on the two large owners, and also from the small peasants, but no tax at all was imposed on those who held no land.

This caused the one landowner who lived far away, and who derived little income from his property, to realize that it did not pay to hold on to land thus taxed, and he gave it up. The other large owner gave up part of his land, and kept only that part which produced more than the amount of the tax.

Those of the peasants who held small properties, and who had plenty of men, and not enough land, as well as some of those who held no land at all, but who desired to make a living by working the land, took up the land surrendered by its former owners.

After that all the members of the community could live on the land and make a living from it, and all land passed into the hands of or remained with those who loved to work it, and who made it produce the most. The public institutions flourished and the wealth of the community increased, for there was more money than before for public needs; and the most important fact was that this change in the ownership of land took place without any discussions, quarrels or discord, by the voluntary surrender of the land by those who did not

derive any profit from it.

This is the project of Henry George, which, if tried here, would make Russia wealthy and happy, and which is practicable all over the world.