
Land

by Eugene V. Debs

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Mr. Henry George is of the opinion that private property in land is the prolific cause of numberless curses to the human family and a ceaseless menace to modern civilization. He says "the great cause of inequality in the distribution of wealth, is inequality in the ownership of land." To remedy the evils which flow from such a cause, "common ownership of land must be substituted for individual ownership." The change proposed is extreme, though within the realm of the possible, and the author of *Progress and Poverty* is of the opinion that "nothing else will go to the cause of the evil;" in nothing else is there the slightest hope. This, then is the remedy. "We must make land common property." Common property is common ownership, public ownership, or, more properly, government ownership.

The history of individual or private ownership of land, as also the Government or national ownership of land is an interesting study, because it serves to show the antiquity of ownership. Accepting the Bible as authentic history, it will be found that the first instance of private or individual ownership in land was a grant made by Jehovah Himself to Abraham, the patriarch, A.M. 2086 and B.C. 1918, as follows:

"And the Lord said unto Abram, lift up now thine eye, and look from the place where thou art, northward and southward, and eastward and westward; for all the land which thou seest to thee will I give it, and to thy seed forever. Arise, walk through the land in the length of it, and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee."¹

There is no mistaking this language. The grant was absolute. It was, as lawyers say, a conveyance, a cession. The title passed from

¹ *Genesis* chapter 13, verses 14-15.

God, the Creator, to Abram the individual and to his seed. "A few years later, the following is recorded: And He (the Lord) said unto him (Abram), I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldus to give thee this land to *inherit* it." Here is another form of title that of inheritance, an unquestionable title — a right, a title descendable by law. But it seems that Abram, had some misgivings after all about the title to the inheritance and he investigated as follows: "And he said, Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?" Abram was finally satisfied and later, in the same day, "the Lord made a covenant with Abram saying: "Unto thy seed have I given this land from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates." This seemed to satisfy the old patriarch. He felt that his title was good as against all other claimants. Time wore on, the name of Abram had been changed to Abraham. Rachel had died, and the husband wanted a sepulcher, a possession, a place to bury his dead wife, and he selected the "cave of Machpetah." He would not accept the land as a gift from the children of Heth nor from Ephron the son of Zobar who owned the cave and after considerable negotiating, Ephron sold Abraham the cave for "four hundred shekels of silver, current money," equal to about \$230. The incident serves to show that in this far away age, thousands of years before the advent of Christ, there was such a thing as the individual ownership of land ; that land was bought and sold and titles given very much as at present, and as to the justice of such proceedings, it will be observed, that Jehovah recognized the propriety of the transaction, and that Abraham, who talked with God, insisted upon paying cash down to make sure of a title to so much land as was required for a "burying place," to the field and the trees that were in the field, and the cave. There is therefore no question about the antiquity of titles to land held by individuals, and Henry George, when he proposes to wipe out individual ownership of land, antagonizes a principle of accepted right and justice, at least 4,000 years old. But it should not be contended that anything in government is right because of its antiquity, and Mr. George has at least some grounds for demanding the common or national ownership of land. Those who take a lively interest in the theories of Mr. George, a sort of a modern Lycurgus, will derive satisfaction, doubtless, in refreshing their minds upon the Spartan land-laws as introduced by Lycurgus. He found Sparta in a sad condition. The few owned all the land, the greater part of the people were poor. Lycurgus believed by destroying private ownership in land he would banish from the coun-

try envy, fraud, luxury, extreme poverty, and excessive wealth. But he did not tax land to bring about his sweeping reform, he persuaded land owners to give up their possessions to the commonwealth that a new division might be made, and all the people live together in a perfect equality. After this Lycurgus divided all the movables, goods and chattels of the people. He then cried down all gold and silver money and introduced iron; the coins being so heavy that it required two oxen to haul \$100. Lycurgus swept along in his pathway of reform like a Kansas cyclone. He required all the people to eat at public tables. The home was banished from Sparta. He believed that children belonged more to the state than to their parents; as a result, as soon as a boy was born the elders of each tribe visited him; if strong, well made, he was ordered to be brought up by the state, otherwise his doom was to perish. All of these things were in the line of reforms and the Delphian god informed Lycurgus, that as long as Sparta observed his laws she would be a glorious and happy city. That Mr. George has the same ideas that influenced Lycurgus, is shown, when he says, as the result of destroying private ownership in land, by taxation, that "there would be a great and increasing surplus revenue from the taxation of land values, for material progress, which would go on with greatly accelerated rapidity, would tend constantly to increase rent. This revenue arising from the common property could be applied to the common benefit, as were the revenues of Sparta. He could establish public baths, museums, libraries, gardens, lecture-rooms, music and dancing halls, theaters, universities, technical schools, shooting galleries, playgrounds, gymnasiums, etc." Isn't that a beautiful picture? a sort of a heaven on earth. Lycurgus thought he had done that for Sparta and was anxious to die when the priestess told him nothing more could be done, to make his countrymen happy and prosperous. But Mr. George sees still more good to be derived from destroying private ownership in land, giving it to the government to be exclusively taxed. He says, contemplating the vast surplus revenues to be derived from land, "heat, light, and motive power, as well as water, might be conducted through our streets at public expense, our roads lined with fruit trees, discoverers and inventors rewarded, scientific investigations supported, and in a thousand ways the public revenues made to foster efforts for the public benefit;" and better still, "thieves, swindlers and other classes of criminals" would soon be eliminated from society.

Manifestly, Mr. George would be a modern Lycurgus, and would make the United States another Sparta. Is he visionary? Can anyone read such fanciful, fantastic, utopian, and shadowy notions, without realizing that their author is a dreamer, a castle builder in an age of practical ideas?

But we have, in history, another instance of the overthrow of individual ownership in land — that of Egypt, during the seven years' famine. Pharaoh did not tax the land to obtain possession of it, but he got possession of it all except that portion which belonged to the priests. When the years of famine began, the King was ready for business. First, he obtained all the money of his subjects, then all the cattle was transferred to Pharaoh, and finally, all their lands. This done, Joseph, the agent of the King in this business, informed the Egyptians, "Behold I have *bought you this day and your land for Pharaoh.*" Poor, famine cursed creatures, they gave first their money, then their cattle and finally themselves and their lands to the King, and private ownership in land in Egypt ceased, and forever afterwards the King in the way of revenue received "one-fifth" of the product of the land. Mr. George, as a panacea for a thousand or more ills which afflict society. and as a preliminary movement to the advent of the millennium, proposes to make the United States of America like Sparta under Lycurgus, or Egypt, under Pharaoh, and by taxation utterly uproot all individual ownership in land, and so profoundly impressed is Mr. George in the righteousness of his reform ideas that he says

"By the time the people of the United States are sufficiently aroused to the *injustice* and *disadvantages* of individual ownership of land, to induce them to attempt its nationalization, they will be sufficiently aroused to nationalize it in a much more direct way than by purchase. They will not trouble themselves about compensating the proprietors of land."

If the policy of Lycurgus is adopted, individual land owners will be persuaded to give up their titles. Pharaoh obtained possession of all the land by purchasing it with bread when a seven year famine raged, but Mr. George anticipates when the people are "sufficiently aroused" to do away with "individual ownership, they will adopt a different method, which is neither persuasion nor purchase, and this done, all the revenues are to be derived from land, and the surplus is to be of such boundless proportions that the government will be able to adorn the earth until it shall become a paradise. There is to be neither wil-

derness nor waste places, even deserts will bloom like Edens. The government will be the *landlord* and the people, all tenants. Deeds and mortgages will be things of the past. The government will be parental, and as all will be tenants, an officeholder will claim, with some show of propriety, that he has a sort of a divine right to rule, because there is something that smacks of the divine, when a government assumes to take care of the people and direct all their ways, as it could do when once the owner of all the land. With an ever increasing revenue, “public baths, museums, libraries, gardens, lecture-rooms, music and dancing halls, theaters, universities, technical schools, shooting-galleries, playgrounds, gymnasiums, etc.” would abound, free to all. Then we should have parks, fountains, race courses, shaded avenues, baseball grounds and games without charge. Land would pay all with one tax, the land tax. Mr. George believes crime and criminals would disappear, and that prisons would no more be required. Necessarily, the land tax and the destruction of “individual ownership of land” would reconstruct human nature, and men and women, under the influence of the new regime, would become sublimated creatures and the songs of the “better land” would no longer excite a desire to possess it, for the earth would be good enough. The subject is inviting and we may write of it again in the near future.

Edited by Tim Davenport

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