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The land question in 19th century radical politics

Keith Flett

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The question of the land still has a resonance in contemporary politics. Arguments about subjects as apparently diverse as housing policy and hunting often have distant echoes of the land question. Occasional Editorials in the *Daily Mirror* and the views of Tony Benn and the *New Left Review* can be more specific. The continuing existence of an English Monarchy and Aristocracy suggests, from their viewpoint, a continuing set of relations on the land which date back to pre-industrial times.

One does not have to take this analysis too seriously, (it is often used by the Labour Party as an excuse for supporting industrialists) to understand that the land was a question of central political importance in the century.

There are two dimensions to the land question in the nineteenth century. First, that of the agricultural labourers themselves who from the last armed rebellion on English soil at Bessenden Wood in Kent in 1838 to Joseph Arch's Agricultural Workers Union tried to control the means of their existence. Second, that of the urban proletariat, many of whom in the Victorian era were first generation factory workers from the

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land. They saw a return to the land or control of it as a key political demand.

The key problematic in this article however, is how the land question moved from one of being a backward looking Utopia to one of the most progressive and radical demands on the political agenda. This is one of the most important and most unasked questions of nineteenth century radical history.

The central focus for the question comes in the late 1860s and early 1870s around two organisations: the Land Tenure Reform Association and Labour League. The first sought to reform the legal situation on land ownership; the second called for nationalisation of land. The first as Royden Harrison makes clear in one of the few books to touch on the question¹, wanted to change the position of rural labourers. The League meanwhile focused on the position of urban workers. This split focus was the dividing line between old and new radical values and views of the land. Yet, as Harrison emphasises, the division was by no means as clear cut to the participants at the time.

It is not the purpose here to consider the land question in the nineteenth century in general. This would be a valuable project indeed, and one which, it might be hoped, would be taken up, over time, by the recently published *Rural History Journal*. The existing texts are comparatively sparse, with only two books, both published in the last five years by Malcolm Chase², and Alun Howkins³, attempting any significant overview of the question, (Chase for the first half of the century and Howkins for the second). The land has been and remains an unfashionable neglected topic in left and socialist historical endeavour. Social historians have done somewhat better but, perhaps by the very nature of the genre, have not focused on the key political elements of the land question.

¹ Royden Harrison, *Before the Socialists*, London, 1965.

² Malcolm Chase, *The People's Farm*, Oxford, 1988.

³ Alun Howkins, *Reshaping Rural England*, London, 1991.

tainly not what Marx had in mind for the development of the Land and Labour League.

The political context of the Land Question as it developed in the 1870s and afterwards is also worthy of further investigation. The Land and Labour League although it had an advanced radical programme was linked most particularly with republican political principles. By the time the SDF took up the issue of the land, republicanism was very much in the background as a political idea in favour of an overtly socialist economic and social analysis. Even here, however, the emphasis could be very different depending on who was developing the policy. William Morris's *News from Nowhere* can be seen as a backward looking attempt to fix a socialist utopia on the land to an echo of the old Chartist Land schemes. But for every industrial worker who looked to the land as a retreat from the rigours and exploitation of the factory, there were many others who saw the land and control of it as the key to a socialist future where city and country lived in harmony.

the blossoming of the land question of the 1880s is still very much under-researched in terms of the role it played in the development of socialist and anarchist ideas at that time. More particularly, perhaps the key to the late nineteenth century land debate, the argument between individualists and collectivists, is still very much under-explored. With recent developments in Eastern Europe it has, of course, a strong contemporary echo. There are however no simple political lessons to be learnt and statements made. The dispute on the question of the inheritance of the land as the Basle Congress of the First International in 1869 may be seen as a straightforward dispute between the individualistic anarchism of Bakunin⁽¹⁾ and the collectivist ideas of Marx. But in British terms most of those sympathetic to anarchism, followers of Bronterre O'Brien like Harris, supported the Land and Labour League and were far away from the individualistic position struck by John Stuart Mill. Harris certainly did argue, in general, for individualism against collectivism, as Stan Shipley notes, but by the later 1870s even he was supporting nationalisation.¹⁰

A good deal may have been lost in the development of this position though. The focus on the State and the reforms and changes which could be had through it, avoided entirely the question of who had real power in society to really alter things. An organised radical minority of urban proletarians had supported moves to take the land and run it co-operatively from below. Now they were being offered the possibility of being given it from above. This was not the same thing at all and cer-

¹⁰ Stan Shipley, *Club Life and Socialism in Mid Victorian London*, London, 1971, p.7.

⁽¹⁾ Editorial note: Bakunin was no individualist. Malatesta wrote of him "Bakunin was an anarchist, and he was a collectivist, an outspoken enemy of communism because he saw in it the negation of freedom and therefore, of human dignity". (*Malatesta, Life and Ideas* Freedom Press p.31)

The central focus has been on the work of the early radical Thomas Spence and the period after 1880 when the land became, perhaps up to 1914, and possibly afterwards as well, a central political issue. Spence may be characterised as the original land nationaliser, albeit in a rather different, (pre-working class), context to that considered here. As or more important for our argument was the continued influence that Spencean ideas had in radical circles in different periods and contexts throughout the nineteenth century.

The period after 1880 when the land question opened out into general political debate may be seen as a result of the pressure which had been agitated on the issue in the previous two decades. A considerable amount of this had to do with the Irish dimension to the Land Question which is another under researched and neglected area. The great fear was that the Irish and English Land Questions would become linked and it was one which, from time to time was partially realised. The sheer scale of political agitation on the Land Question after 1880 prevents consideration in a brief article. As important, however, we are concerned here with how the land moved from being a backward looking radical demand of the 1830s to the ultra progressive radical issue of the 1880s. It is the process rather than its conclusion which focuses our concern here.

It may be taken from the above that it is often forgotten how central the land was in mid nineteenth century radical politics and, to take matters further, in the lives of ordinary people at this time. Malcolm Chase has argued that "The tendency among English social historians until recently has been to concentrate upon those reactions to industrialisation which most evidently prefigured concerns of the present... From this perspective the land question can seem irrelevant, and working class absorption in it even mildly embarrassing".⁴ Yet in 1851 8,936,800 people were defined as living in rural areas as

⁴ Chase, *op. cit.*, p.4.

against 8,990,809 in urban areas.⁵ — In the same year 21.5% of the employed population were shown as working in agriculture. While not wishing to deny the centrality of the switch to industrial factory production and the rise of a working class that this entailed in nineteenth century class relations, there is a tendency to foreshorten the timescale over which this switch took place. It was quite possible for large factory units to be decisive in the economy without the economy itself becoming fully industrialised overnight.

This meant that even for the most urban and proletarian of factory workers the land still had a real significance. Equally, as the formation of the Agricultural Workers Union indicated the position of agricultural labourers was itself becoming proletarianised. By the mid 1850s Marx was arguing that the significance of the ballot in England was quite different to that in France, as the proportion of two thirds of the population who were peasants was reversed in Britain in favour of the proletarian. Of necessity this balance of class forces began to place the land question in a very different context from that which it had had even twenty years before.

Chase indicates how central a role the land could play even against the background of people who had now become firmly integrated factory workers. He argues that the land was “as logical and integral a part of popular politics as machine breaking, trade unionism or the demand for universal suffrage”⁶. Agrarian ideas were, in this sense, central to the development of the industrial working class, forming part of the backdrop against which they defined their new existence.

This, however, is a contentious argument. Gareth Stedman Jones in his essay ‘Rethinking Chartism’ suggests a continuity of radical demands on the land question from Spence through to those followers of the theories of the old Chartist leader

of land by the State; the acquisition of land on a similar basis to let to small holders; plans to bring waste land under cultivation and a ban on any land currently held by the State or Crown passing into private hands.

Each point of the programme no doubt attracted support from a radical constituency. But as the supporters of Marx had argued at the Basle Congress of the First International in October 1869 to focus on the question of inheritance or who held the land was to miss the point. That point was that the system which created private property in land was what needed to be opposed rather than piecemeal reforms carried out through that very system.

To conclude: what has been argued here is essentially a theoretical position which suggests further directions for research and discussion. The position which we have been most concerned to oppose is that of Gareth Stedman Jones. He argues⁹ on the land question in the nineteenth century that “before anything further could be conceived, the whole labour theory based on natural right would have to be jettisoned”. As we have shown the reality was that by the end of the 1880s, the political context in which the land was seen in radical circles had changed. The process of change had been underway from the period of re-examination of radical ideas which took place after the defeats of 1848. It concluded in the 1880s with the land question firmly in place as part of the advanced Marxist programme of the SDF. Merely because the land question is a constant feature of nineteenth century radical politics does not mean that its content remained the same.

But aside from this a considerable number of questions remain open, some, perhaps, of particular interest to readers of *The Raven*. For example a balanced assessment of the Chartist Land Plan and its role in Chartist politics, which Malcolm Chase has underlined the need for, is still awaited. Equally

⁵ Howkins, *op. cit.*, p.7.

⁶ Chase, *op. cit.*, p.6.

⁹ Stedman Jones, *op. cit.*, p.157.

Marx wrote to Engels about the formation of the League on October 30th 1869 in the following terms:

The creation of the Land and Labour League, [incidentally directly inspired by the General Council], should be regarded as an outcome of the Basle Congress; here, the workers' party makes a clean break with bourgeoisie, *nationalisation of the land* [being] the *starting point*. Eccarius has been appointed active secretary [in addition to Boon as *honorary one*] and is being paid for it.

Marx was careful to stress the significance of the demand for Nationalisation of the Land as a specifically proletarian demand which broke completely from radical thought. Quite what the significance of this break was can be seen by the hard work which other radicals did to oppose it.

On the face of it the Land and Labour League and the Land Tenure Reform Association were saying very similar things and contained amongst their supporters a number of radicals who were quite happy to co-operate on many issues such as educational reform or the ballot.

The programme of the LTRA issued on July 8th 1870 under the 'chairmanship' of John Stuart Mill made a number of very radical statements indeed, although unlike that of the Land and Labour League, they all applied specifically to the land question. This was the first important difference. For the League the question of the land was a key to a wider political programme. For the LTRA it was an end in itself.

The first three points in the LTRA programme focused on quite specific reforms around the abolition of the law of Primogeniture and removal of 'legal and fiscal impediments to the transfer of land'. The aim was to strike at land controlled by inheritance and to provide a free market in land. The other six points were of a more general radical, political nature. These included the promotion of Co-operative Agriculture by purchase

Bronterre O'Brien who joined the Social Democratic Federation almost a century later. However Jones's argument on the linear development of the Land Question, as with his analysis of Chartism in general mistakes form for content. Formally, calls for the land to be given to the people, its rightful owners, or for no property in land, may have sounded the same whether they were made in 1790 or 1870. Jones argues that "there was no disagreement between (Feargus) O'Conner and more socialistic Chartists about the identification of the land as the centre point of a Chartist social programme"⁷. He notes that one of the leaders of left Chartism, George Julian Harney, followed Spence in calling the land the 'People's Farm'. He always focused on the aristocracy and land rights rather than on the mill owner. There was, for example, no call for workers' control of the factories. In fact, however, the 1842 General Strike and the 1853/4 Preston Lock Out did focus specifically on the factory owners. Here though the preferred manner of expressing a desire for an alternative mode of production to prevail was the call for co-operative enterprise.

Certainly the Chartist Land Plan may be seen as looking back to a non-existent golden age of land rights. But recent work, again by Malcolm Chase, has shown that it was heavily supported by factory workers who saw self-sufficiency on the land as one way of escaping from their exploited position. In such circumstances the demand and desire for the land while Utopian was grounded in some degree of reality. It was realisable for a minority and the Chartist Land Plan did set up moderately successful colonies around London. The principle at work was closer to Owenite Socialist ideas of cooperation than support for a return to rural idiocy.

Moreover the alternative strategy, that of land nationalisation by the State began to emerge at the same time. It is simply to miss the point to argue, as Stedman Jones does, that demands

⁷ Gareth Stedman Jones, *Language of Class*, Cambridge, 1984, p.155.

for land nationalisation in the 1880s were no different to those made by Thomas Spence. The context in which Ernest Jones called for land nationalisation in the 1851 Chartist Programme was that of providing a blueprint for a social democratic State, of change from above. Equally when the Chartist Charles Murray spoke at the Literary Institute, Doctors Commons in London on September 30th 1855,⁸ on Land Nationalisation it is unlikely that he had Spence particularly in mind. Murray was still raising the same demand 30 years later when he was a well known member of the SDF.

On Saturday April 16th 1870, *The Times* devoted its second leader to a demonstration held the previous day, Good Friday, in Trafalgar Square. The demonstration had been called by an organisation about which no history books have been written and little documentary evidence remains: The Land and Labour League. *The Times*' Editorial concluded:

...we have no desire to charge these Good Friday speakers with anything worse than ignorance, but such ignorance, uncorrected as far as we can see by a single voice at the meeting is lamentable in the extreme and would go far to prove that an Education Bill is really the greatest need of the day.

Yet the Land and Labour League, as it is likely *The Times*' Editorialist knew all too well was neither naive nor ignorant. It was in fact an outcrop of the English section of the First International. Marx claimed paternity but it also had within it a wide variety of opinion from secularist radicals like Charles Bradlaugh to anarchists like Dan Chatterton, who owned the League's journal *The Republican* and many followers of the theories of the old Chartist leader Bronterre O'Brien. It was a potent mix indeed, and as *The Times* recognised a potentially threatening one.

⁸ *The Reasoner*, September 30th, 1855.

The land question had become central to a sea change in far left British politics which was to lead, within 15 years, to the rejection of the radical liberalism taken up 10 years earlier after the final collapse of a national Chartist centre and the birth of Marxist and anarchist currents which have continued in their influence to the present day. It is possible therefore in that demonstration of Good Friday 1870 to see the first stirrings of what is the modern British left.

The League had been established at three meetings held at The Bell, Old Bailey on October 13th, 20th and 27th 1869. According to Royden Harrison the organisational impetus for its formation came from the O'Brienite National Reform League. But the focus was for an organisation which would go much further on Land Nationalisation and Republicanism than existing organisations such as the Labour Representation League would.

The Programme of the League was as follows:

1. Land Nationalisation
2. Home Colonisation
3. National, Secular, Gratuitous and Compulsory Education
4. Suppression of Private Banks of Issue. The State only to issue paper money
5. A direct and progressive property tax in lieu of all other taxes
6. Liquidation of the National Debt
7. Abolition of the standing army
8. Reduction of the number of the hours of labour
9. Equal electoral rights, with payment of Members