

Letters on Henry George

Tolstoy on Georgism

Leo Tolstoy

Contents

Letter 1	3
Letter 2	4

Letter 1

In reply to your letter I send you the enclosed with special pleasure.¹

I have been acquainted with Henry George since the appearance of his *Social Problems*. I read that book, and was struck by the correctness of his main idea, and by the unique clearness and power of his argument, which is unlike anything in scientific literature, and especially by the Christian spirit which pervades the book, making it also stand alone in the literature of science. After reading it I turned to his previous work, *Progress and Poverty*, and with a heightened appreciation of its author's activity.

You ask my opinion of Henry George's work, and of his single tax system. My opinion is the following :

Humanity advances continually toward the enlightenment of its consciousness, and to the institution of modes of life corresponding to this consciousness, which is in process of enlightenment. Hence in every period of life and humanity there is, on the one hand, a progressive enlightenment of consciousness, and on the other a realization in life of what is enlightened by the consciousness. At the close of the last century and the beginning of this, a progressive enlightenment of consciousness occurred in Christianized humanity with respect to the working-classes, who were previously in various phases of slavery ; and a progressive realization of new forms of life the abolition of slavery and the substitution of free hired labor. At the present day a progressive enlightenment of human consciousness is taking place with reference to the use of land, and soon, it seems to me, a progressive realization in life of this consciousness must follow. And in this progressive enlightenment of consciousness with reference to the use of land, and in the realization of this consciousness, which constitutes one of the chief problems of our time, the fore-man, the leader of the movement, was and is Henry George. In this lies his immense and predominant importance. He has contributed by his excellent books both to the enlightenment of the consciousness of mankind with reference to this question, and to placing it on a practical footing.²

But with the abolition of the revolting right of ownership in land, the same thing is being repeated which took place, as we can still remember, when slavery was abolished. The government and ruling classes, knowing that the advantages and authority of their position among men are bound up in the land question, while pretending that they are preoccupied with the welfare of the people, organizing working-men's banks, inspection of labor, income taxes, and even an eight hours' day, studiously ignore the land question, and even, with the aid of an obliging and easily corrupted science, assert that the expropriation of land is useless, harmful, impossible.

The same thing is happening now as in the days of the slave trade. Mankind, at the beginning of the present and at the end of the last century, had long felt that slavery was an awful, soul-nauseating anachronism; but sham religion and sham science proved that there was nothing wrong in it, that it was indispensable, or, at least, that its abolition would be premature.

To-day something similar is taking place with reference to property in land. In the same way sham religion and sham science are proving that there is nothing wrong in landed property, and no need to abolish it. One might think it would be palpable to every educated man of our time

¹ Written in answer to a German, occupied in spreading the ideas and system of Henry George in his own country, who wrote to ask Tolstoy what views he held concerning such an activity.

² The Russian word *soznaniye* signifies both "consciousness" and "conscience," and as in these paragraphs seems to vibrate between the two concepts. ED.

that the exclusive control of land by people who do not work upon it, and who prevent hundreds and thousands of distressed families making use of it, is an action every whit as wicked and base as the possession of slaves; yet we see aristocrats, supposed to be educated and refined, English, Austrian, Prussian, Russian, who profit by this base and cruel right, and who are not only not ashamed, but proud of it. Religion blesses such possession, and the science of political economy proves that it must exist for the greatest welfare of mankind.

It is Henry George's merit that he not only exploded all the sophism whereby religion and science justify landed property, and pressed the question to the furthest proof, which forced all who had not stopped their ears to acknowledge the unlawfulness of ownership in land, but also that he was the first to indicate a possible solution to the question. He was the first to give a simple, straightforward answer to the usual excuses made by the enemies of all progress, which affirm that the demands of progress are illusions, impracticable, inapplicable. The method of Henry George destroys this excuse by so putting the question that to-morrow committees might be appointed to examine and deliberate on his scheme and its transformation into law.

In Russia, for instance, the inquiry as to the means for the ransom of land, or its gratuitous confiscation for nationalization, might be begun tomorrow, and solved, with certain restrictions, as thirty-three years ago the question of liberating the peasants was solved.

To humanity the indispensableness of this reform is demonstrated, and its feasibility is proved (emendations, alterations in the single tax system may be required, but the fundamental idea is a possibility); and therefore humanity cannot but do that which reason demands.

For this idea to become public opinion it is only necessary that it should be spread and explained precisely as you are doing, in which work I sympathize with you with all my heart, and wish you success.

Letter 2

The scheme of Henry George is as follows³: The advantage and profit from the use of land is not everywhere the same ; since the more fertile, convenient portions, adjoining populous districts, will always attract many who wish to possess them ; and in proportion as these portions are better and more suitable they ought to be appraised more highly : the better, dearer ; the worse, cheaper ; the worst, cheapest of all. So that the land which attracts but few should not be appraised at all, but left without payment to those who are willing to cultivate it by their own manual labor.

According to such a valuation, good plowland in the government of Tula, for example, would be valued at about five or six rubles the desyatin⁴; market garden land near villages at ten rubles ; the same, but watered by spring floods, fifteen rubles, and so on. In towns the valuation would be from one hundred to five hundred rubles the desyatin; and in Moscow and Petersburg, in go-ahead places, and about the harbors of navigable rivers, several thousands or tens of thousands of rubles the desyatin.

When all the land in the country has been thus appraised, Henry George proposes to pass a law declaring that all the land, from such a year and date, shall belong no longer to any separate individual, but to the whole country, to the whole nation ; and that thereafter every one who

³ Written to a Russian peasant living in Siberia.

⁴ A desyatin is 2.7 acres.

possesses land must pay to the State, that is, to the whole nation, the rent at which it has been appraised.

This payment must be expended on all the public needs of the State, so that it will take the place of every kind of monetary imposition, both interior and exterior the custom-house.

According to this scheme it would follow that a landowner, who was at present in possession of two thousand desyatins, would continue to own them, but would have to pay for them into the treasury, here in Tula, between twelve and fifteen thousand rubles a year, because hereabouts the best land for agricultural and building purposes would be included ; and as no large landowner would be able to bear the strain of such a payment, he would be obliged to give up the land. Whereas our Tula peasant would have to pay about two rubles less for each desyatin of the same ground than he does at present, would always have available land around him which he could hire for five or six rubles, and in addition, would not only have no other taxes to pay, but would get untaxed all Russian and foreign articles which he needs.

In towns the owners of houses and manufactories can continue to possess their property, but will have to pay into the common treasury for the land they occupy, according to its valuation.

The advantage of such a system will be :

1. That no one will be unable to obtain land for use.
2. That there will cease to be idle men possessing land, and forcing others to work for them, in return for the use of the land.
3. That the land will be in the hands of those who work it, and not of those who do not.
4. That the people, being able to work on the land, will cease to enthralled themselves as laborers in factories, and manufactories, and as servants in towns ; and will be scattered about the country.
5. That there will be no longer any overseers and tax-collectors in factories, manufactories, stores, and custom-houses, but only collectors of payment for the land, which it is impossible to steal, and from which taxes may be most easily collected.
6. (and chiefly) That those who do not labor will be freed from the sin of profiting by the labors of others (in doing which they are often not to blame, being from childhood educated in idleness, and not knowing how to work), and from the still greater sin of every kind of falsehood and excuse to shift the blame from themselves ; and that those who do labor will be delivered from the temptation and sin of envy, condemnation of others, and exasperation against those who do not work ; and thus one of the causes of dissension between man and man will disappear.

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