Approaches to the land

Tom Jones

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HOW ARE WE TO APPROACH THE QUESTION OF THE LAND? We could attempt to treat the subject globally, and without even trying to define the precise proportion of the world's population which is actually starving or in a condition of continual under-nourishment, we could emphasise the fact that agricultural production is far from keeping pace with the increase in population, so that the world food situation worsens all the while. Or we could approach the question locally and seek to formulate from our own special point of view, a "policy for British agriculture"—though how it would be implemented and who would support it is difficult to say, (for the special reason given below). Or again we could approach the subject from the point of view of land use; the problem of the competing claims on the limited land of this island, the problem of urban growth and the drift of population to the South-East, and the consequent depopulation of other areas. Or we could seek, from an anarchist point of view, to formulate what we would consider to be the appropriate form of land tenure, and mode of production, in the kind of society we would like to see.

But what is an anarchist approach? Anarchism, viewed historically as a political movement, is that wing of the socialist movement which is at the opposite extreme from both Marxism and the ordinary British variety of state socialism, in that it wants to dispense with the state as an institution, and with centralised authority. It is opposed to the social and economic injustices implicit in capitalism and landlordism, but it is equally mistrustful of the state control which is the standard socialist remedy. But in practice, and regardless of the political complexion of governments, in every developed country the state is deeply enmeshed in the agricultural industry. Peter Self and Herbert Storing open their book The State and the Farmer with the words "In Britain, since 1945, the state has assumed an unprecedented degree of responsibility for the functioning and welfare of agriculture. It has done so at the behest of agricultural interests with which it has closely cooperated in devising and administering programmes of support, advice and control." And they show later in their book that "Government support to agriculture in the period since rationing ended has been equivalent to over two-thirds of the total net income received by farmers during this period."

Whatever else we might conclude from this, we can be sure that a call for farmers and farm workers to "break lose from the trammels of the state" would be met with derisive laughter: if taken seriously as a guide to immediate action it would imply a return to a situation of dereliction and poverty on the land, as well as a sharp fall in this country's agricultural output. There is, in

fact, no conceivable anarchist approach to the question of the land within the framework of our economic system. For a market economy, even when its effect is cushioned by subsidies at one end and by welfare benefits at the other, does not deliver the goods to the people in most need of them.

Within this country, as a study published a couple of months ago (Nutrition in Britain 1950–1960 by Royston Lambert) demonstrated, the diet of certain groups, for instance, wage-earning families with three or more children, actually deteriorated during the last decade: "The indications are that at least a quarter, and probably a third, of the people of Britain live in households which fail to attain all the desirable levels of dietary intake" by the standards defined by the British Medical Association. In the world as a whole, the proportion of the world's population living on 2,220 or less calories a day was 49 per cent in 1939; in the post-war period it has increased to 66 per cent. The developed countries all have actual or potential food surpluses, some of them have to subsidise farmers not to produce food, but if in some sudden growth of a global sense of social responsibility, whether through prudence, military strategy, altruism or long-term interest, these surpluses were diverted on a really effective scale to the under-developed countries, they would produce new and enormous economic problems. Already, when the American government made a token gesture of making a gift of surplus grain to India, Australian producers protested at the potential threat to their markets. And as Lord de la Warr once said, "When the crumbs cease to fall from the rich man's table, the beneficiaries are not only as hungry but as helpless as they were before." Neither a market economy nor charity will solve the world's food problems.

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The one thing that most people know about the 19th century French anarchist Proudhon is that he coined the slogan "Property is Theft" and later in life modified this to "Property is Freedom." This always raises a laugh, but Proudhon was in fact talking about two different kinds of property. The property of the man who draws an income from thousands of acres, or from the ownership of an oilwell or a factory, or from speculation, is obviously different from the property of the peasant cultivator. There is a difference between owning your means of livelihood and owning ICI.

Proudhon's sympathy for the peasant was something rather rare in socialist thought. Indeed, as David Mitrany put it in his book Marx Against the Peasant, "while many reformers had shown an interest in the land and some in agriculture, none had taken an interest in the peasant as such—with one exception, Proudhon. His sympathy for the peasant was something unique in the history of Socialism, but it is an exception which strikingly proves the rule. Proudhon, who in general suspected the constricting effects of large economic units, had economic and philosophical reasons for wishing to see each peasant owner of his farm. But when he speaks of this as the means of "consummating the marriage of man with nature", his very language reveals how much he was moved by the innate attachment of the country man born and bred to the soil and to those who tilled it."

At this point, of course, in an English context, we have to reject the spurious romanticism that besets English discussion of rural life. Although this is one of the most highly urbanised nations in the world, and although agriculture employs about 4 per cent of the working population and produces about 4 per cent of the national output (smaller figures than those of any other country in the world), our fellow countrymen are always claiming to be countrymen at heart. As the critics of suburban living claim, one result of this is that we fail to make the most of town life: the town becomes a place to flee from instead of to enjoy—even though the flight consists in

picnicking by the roadside near a motorway, scattering litter over the land. Another result is that people assume that there was once a rural golden age of simple bucolic bliss. But when was this golden age? It certainly wasn't the early part of this century, as readers of J. W. Robertson-Scott's England's Green and Pleasant Land will realise, nor was it any other century of which we have reliable histories (see for example E. W. Martin's *The Secret People*, Mr. and Mrs. Hammond's *The Village Labourer*, or G. E. Fussell's *The English Rural Labourer*. For the people at the bottom, in other words the majority, life was always hard, and hunger close at hand, and the dream of peasant contentment has probably always been a myth. The only people who deserve a hearing when they disparage modern labour-saving techniques in agriculture or in any occupation, are those who themselves do habitual arduous labour. Let no man praise poverty, said St. Bernard, unless he be poor.

Yet another of the myths we should be suspicious of is that of the traditional farming wisdom handed down through the generations from father to son. In some parts of the world it is true of course; peasant wisdom has kept the land fertile for countless generations while commercial exploitation has ruined virgin land in a few years. But it is doubtful whether a very large proportion of the land in this country for example has been cultivated by generations of the same family, and it is doubtful whether there really has been a continuity of agricultural knowledge. In the wartime plough-up, the Agricultural Executive Committees in some English counties had to import ploughmen from East Anglia to teach their craft to farmers who had become mere graziers during long years of agricultural decline. In some countries again the traditional wisdom has been manifestly unwise, and those who would improve agriculture have had an uphill task trying to win the confidence of farmers in order to persuade them to adopt better cropping systems and methods of husbandry.

All the same, the question of the peasant is at the heart of any consideration of the land and its problems and prospects. In every continent except North America the peasants form the majority of the population: the peasants who have borne the burden of exploitation for centuries. The idea of continuity, whether or not it has a foundation in fact, is the key to good husbandry. For from it springs the concern for conservation and improvement of the soil, which is certainly weakened by impermanence of tenure. This is the basis of the "land problem" in many parts of the world. If a man improves his land and only his landlord benefits, why should he bother?

Professor Mitrany remarks:

> There is a strong element of ideal truth in the old Socialist argument that, being God-given, and needed by all, the land should be no man's private property. Yet the land as such would be of little worth unless its bearing powers are perpetuated. It is the function of the land, not its raw substance, that society must possess for well-being and survival, and in that sense the claim to individual ownership may be logically rooted in the nature of agricultural production itself. With the factory worker, even the artisan, the quality of his product depends on the quality of the material and on his own skill. Whatever tools or machinery he uses are a passive factor, taken over as they stand from the previous user and passed on to the next, but little affected by their temporary use, or easily replaced. All the variable factors of production, materials and skill, are wholly absorbed in each unit, in each object produced, while machines and tools are transient. With farmer or peasant the matter is very different. His chief tool is the soil itself, or rather it is partly tool, partly raw

> material, a unique combination in the whole scheme of production. It is unique in that it is both a variable factor, affected by each period of use, and at the same time a constant factor, which cannot be replaced. What the farmer can get out of it depends greatly on the state in which the soil was passed on to him by the previous user, and his own way of treating it will affect the results obtained by the next user. Neglect of the soil by one may make it of little use for many. Quite apart from immediate benefits, therefore, the very nature and spirit of "cultivation" seems to require that the man who tills the land should have constant use of the same piece of the same instrument.

But does this imply that the most desirable kind of farmer is the peasant proprietor? Certainly, as our contributor Tim Meadows points out, every employed farm worker dreams of having a place of his own, even though this would mean longer hours and a smaller income. The agricultural revolution in this country dispossessed, through the enclosure movement, large numbers of yeoman and peasant proprietors. (It was manifestly unjust, and it was also the price of our subsequent standard of living.) In France the agricultural revolution took a different form and resulted in a great increase of peasant proprietors, with a low standard of living. More recent changes in Britain have reduced the powers and responsibilities of landlords and have increased the proportion of farms which are owned by their occupiers from 11 per cent in 1913 to 40 per cent in 1960.

Peasant agriculture in the world today has other characteristics beside those which its admirers stress. Self and Storming remark that "It results in holdings which cannot provide a satisfactory living for their occupants, and on which … self-reliant thrift … gives way to poverty, backwardness, and excessive dependence upon public charity. The French policy of deliberately nourishing a large peasantry has produced merely a large group of poor and dependent persons. The Jeffersonian theory of the existence of some peculiar connection between farm ownership and political sanity has also fared very badly by practical tests. As A. Whitney Griswold has demonstrated, the several million small farmers who still exist in the United States of America cannot possibly be regarded as the heirs of American political wisdom and democratic virtues. The question, as he rightly concludes, is not whether the family farm will save American democracy, but whether American democracy is prepared to save the family farm."

Are there ways of maintaining the virtues which are attributed to peasant agriculture without its manifest defects? One way is through schemes of community farming. In this country experiments of this kind have usually ended in miserable failure from both an economic and a social point of view. (For some account of them see Professor Armytage's book *Heavens Below*.) In America a few, but especially those based on certain protestant sects like the "Pennsylvania Dutch" have been remarkably successful. In Russia the enforced collectivisation of agriculture resulted in famine, misery and death on a frightful scale and in a decline in productivity which is still one of the regime's problems. Our attitude to the "communes" in China depends entirely on whose propaganda impresses us most. The "kibbutzim" and other forms of agricultural co-operation in Israel are probably the most successful communal farming ventures in the modern world.

The other approach is by way of combining or "integrating" agriculture and industry, persuasively advocated by another anarchist thinker Peter Kropotkin, whose ideas, and their present relevance, are discussed in this issue of ANARCHY.

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