

**THE COMMUNITY OF
PROPERTY:
NATIONALIZATION OF
LAND**

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The Community of Property: Nationalization of Land by James Hutchison Stirling

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BY

JAMES HUTCHISON STIRLING, LL.D. EDIN.,

FOREIGN MEMBER OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL SOCIETY OF BERLIN.

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PREFATORY NOTE.

It is right shortly to explain the occasion and nature of the following essay. It fell to me, as Honorary President of the Glasgow University Independent Club, to give the toast of the evening at the dinner of the Club, on the 4th of March 1884; and certain members of committee had expressed a wish that I should combine with the toast a word or two on the Land Question. On the Thursday preceding the Tuesday of the dinner, I read, in the Edinburgh papers, a report of a speech by Mr Henry George on the preceding evening. The time that intervened did not allow much; but I prepared a few relative remarks, that divided themselves into two parts: the first part having to do with general principles, and the second more particularly with the mentioned deliverances of Mr George. Anything that could be said, in such circumstances, and on such a subject, was necessarily summary.

But it so happened that, in order not to intrude upon, or exclude, the other speakers, I saw it to be my duty wholly to withhold, in what I said, all that concerned the Land Question. That is what is now offered here; and not to interfere with the possible facility of a spoken discourse, it remains, but for a phrase or two, quite unaltered. It is to be hoped that a light touch on the general principles of a subject in the air at present will prove not unwelcome.

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I THINK a few considerations may be not out of place at present, on that scheme of the hour which, in laudable aspiration for the extinction of all human want, would propose to realize at last the equality of mankind through that community of property that Plato fabled. It is a big subject, and I do not propose now to do more than break ground on it, with a few remarks as well on general principles as on what the newspapers make salient at present. In these, for example, I read three or four days ago the report of a speech by Mr Henry George.

Mr George is, for the most part, occupied there with the evils of poverty. And it is a fact that there is very great poverty on the part of large numbers of the population all over the world at present. This,

in truth, involves the burning question of the day; and one cannot take it ill of any man who comes forward with generous feelings to point it out to us, to call for a remedy, and even propose one. I am not so sure, however, of the efficacy of the remedy proposed, as I am of the existence of the appalling malady. In said speech, at all events, I find all that represents this remedy, or that calls for any remark of mine, to be contained in the few words that I shall now, just as they come, quote:—

“It is just as land becomes taken up that wages fall and poverty and pauperism arise. The man who owns the land of the country virtually owns the people of that country. He (Mr George) would give everybody equal rights of land. Proprietorship is not necessary to the best use of and improvement of land. What is necessary is a full security to the labourer or the investor that he should reap the natural rewards of his investment or his labour. In the United States there are at present millions of acres that would be cultivated but for the fact that they are held by dogs in the manger, who will neither cultivate the land themselves, nor allow any one else to cultivate it; unless they get a higher price. Vast tracts of land in this country (Scotland) that used to breed men, now breed sheep; miles of land, from which even the sheep have been driven, are occupied by deer. The reason for the nationalization of land is, that it is not the product of human labour. It is not just to nationalize capital, machinery, and the like.”

I put these words together as containing all—absolutely all in the report—that demands one word

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Nationalization of Land.

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of comment or counter-argumentation; and I mean that we shall see each of them again as my course of treating the general theme proceeds.

That general theme is the community of property. There are no *ambages* with Mr George, so far, at least, as the land is concerned. He would have the state simply assume it, and without a farthing of compensation to the landlords. Taking the report of last Wednesday's lecture as given in the Edinburgh papers of the Thursday,—and I have fairly and literally quoted from them,—Mr George, it would appear, answers *in the negative* the direct question, "Was it also just to nationalize capital, machinery, and the like?" But surely this negative is a particularly blind, contradictory, inconsistent, and unreasoned one—surely we must see that no scheme that would nationalize land *could* escape in the end from going to the extreme and nationalizing all and sundry. It is quite evident, in fact, that the nationalization of the land would not only be unjust, but it would be incomplete and ineffectual; it would be a simple failure unless it were followed up by the thorough-going nationalization of everything whatever. Mr George, indeed, is almost unjust to himself in bringing himself to concede, to some mere individual prejudice, the exception of capital, etc. For he thus leaves room to the enemy