

**THE  
NATIONALISATION OF  
THE LAND, PP. 3- 46**

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The Nationalisation of the Land, pp. 3- 46 by Samuel Smith

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BY

SAMUEL SMITH, M.P.

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1884.

## PREFACE.

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THE pamphlet which follows is a reprint of an Article which appeared in the *Contemporary Review* of December last, with the addition of some Notes, and a considerable Appendix, in the shape of a Letter from Mr. Alfred R. Wallace, the President of the English Land Nationalisation Society, and my Reply thereto. I thought it right to give this additional matter, as my article was mainly intended as a reply to the view put forward by Mr. Henry George in his book entitled *Progress and Poverty*. I may add that the utmost care has been taken to get accurate and reliable data; my only object being to set forth a true and dispassionate statement of the case.

SAMUEL SMITH.

Liverpool, January, 1884.

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## THE NATIONALISATION OF THE LAND.

[Reprinted, by permission, from the *Contemporary Review*.]

Up till recent years no such phrase as the Nationalisation of the Land was heard in England. It is doubtful if the idea it conveys was even intelligible to the mass of the people. In other countries it may possibly have been used as a symbol of extreme socialistic theories, but to all intents and purposes it is only within the last three or four years that the group of ideas indicated by this novel term has taken any hold of the average British mind.

It can, however, no longer be said that those ideas lie outside the scope of public discussion: though it is true that very few of our leading statesmen have deigned to notice them, and, though few publicists of any weight have lent their advocacy to the cause, it cannot be denied that they are making way among considerable classes of the community, especially the artisans of our great towns. This rapid progress is no doubt owing very much to the wide circulation of that remarkable book by Henry George, of America, entitled "Progress and Poverty," a book which I shall treat in this paper as the chief exponent of those views. It appears to me that our leading statesmen must no longer keep silence on this subject. Though it may appear to them too visionary to admit of serious

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discussion, it is being diffused so widely among the masses as to forebode trouble in the future unless met by rational argument.

So far as I understand this novel doctrine, it is that the State ought to own the entire land of the country on the ground that it is the legitimate property of the whole community—that it ought never to have been alienated to private owners—that their rights are usurped, and must be brought to an end either by compulsory purchase, or by simple confiscation. Mr. George goes so far as to advocate the latter method, on the ground that private property in land is as immoral as slavery, and he extends his anathema not only to agricultural land, but to building-land in towns, and argues that even a freehold on which the owner has built a house is as much a robbery of the public domain as the largest estate of a Highland Laird. He condemns not only the great estates of our aristocracy, but the small properties of the French peasantry and the homestead farms of the American yeomen. In his eyes the possession of any portion of the earth's surface by a private owner is theft, and the stolen goods ought to be restored to the public that has been defrauded.\*

I am not aware that any body of British opinion has endorsed these extreme views. When the Trades' Congress last year advocated the Nationalisation of the Land, I don't suppose they meant confiscation, and I question if they extended the term to property in towns. Probably their leading idea was the improvement of British agriculture; and I much doubt if they, or any of their sympathisers in

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\* *From Henry George.*

"Though his titles have been acquiesced in by generation after generation, to the landed estates of the Duke of Westminster the poorest child that is born in London to-day has as much right as his eldest son. Though the sovereign people of the State of New York consent to the landed possessions of the Astors, the puniest infant that comes wailing into the world in the squalidest room of the most miserable tenement house, becomes at that moment seized of an equal right with the millionaires. And it is robbed if the right is denied."



this country, have clearly thought out the subject, or perfected any plan for the acquisition of the soil or its cultivation after it was acquired. This phrase has a fine grandiose sound about it, like other well known catch words, which take captive minds that have not analyzed the question or grappled with the real difficulties of the case. It has a delightful vagueness, which covers many shades of meaning, and makes it no easy task to analyze or refute it.

I shall, in the first instance, deal with the form it assumes in Mr. George's book, where he boldly recommends confiscation on the ground of the immorality of private ownership. I do so because it is quite obvious that the State cannot acquire possession of the soil at full market value without to a certainty making a loss on the transaction, as was well shown by Professor Fawcett in his Liverpool address some two years ago. It is plain to me that as this agitation proceeds, it will develop more and more into Communistic lines, and tend to assume the form of naked spoliation.

Now the main ground on which Mr. George makes this startling proposal is, that the land originally belonged to the state or community, and that it was wrongfully granted away to favoured individuals, and he compiles a brief history of ancient civilization to prove his point. I will go with him so far as to allow that before the earth was peopled land was not appropriated, and while population was very sparse it was not worth the while of individuals to claim special plots of land. The origin of all communities that we know anything of was the tribal state, when a clan or tribe, under a chieftain of their choice, roamed over a wide tract of country, supported by the produce of the chase or by their flocks and herds. Agriculture, in our sense of the word, did not exist in the infancy of the race. Our ancestors

lived, as savage tribes now do, by hunting and fishing, and afterwards by pastoral pursuits; and so there was no motive for the private appropriation of land. But the point I wish to bring out is that usually private ownership of land arose when agriculture commenced, for the simple reason that no one would toil to raise crops which he could not enjoy. Indeed, so invariable has been the rule, that we may almost say that civilization has never made a commencement, or at least has never advanced beyond a rudimentary stage, till private ownership in land, or at least individual occupancy, was recognized by the law of the State. The necessary stimulus for cultivating and improving the soil was wanting, till security was given that he who laboured should enjoy the fruits of his labour.

But without going back to the dim and dusty records of antiquity, we have only to take a survey of the condition of the globe to-day to prove the truth of my assertion. We still have in active existence every form of human society, from the most barbarous to the most refined. We still see a large part of the earth tenanted by races as primitive in their habits as our forefathers were when they were clothed with skins of beasts, and possessed the soil of this island in common. Nearly all Africa, considerable portions of North and South America, a large portion of Central Asia, the interior of Australia, New Guinea, and many other islands of Polynesia are all in that state of primitive simplicity. In these regions the land is not appropriated, it is either the common possession of the tribe or the battle ground of contending tribes. Now, Mr. George gravely assumes that all our modern poverty and degradation are the result of private land ownership, that all would disappear if we reverted to the happy Arcadian times when land communism prevailed; and it is natural for us to ask if we find an absence of poverty and degradation among

those portions of mankind who have preserved the primitive tradition unimpaired.

Let us travel through Africa with Stanley or Livingstone, let us accompany our expeditions to Ashantee, or Abyssinia, or Zululand, in quest of the golden age of plenty—do we find anywhere even a trace of such social well-being as to be worthy of comparison with the worst governed country in Europe. Do we not find slavery, polygamy, the most horrid oppression and barbarous cruelty, the invariable accompaniments of this primitive state of existence. Do not famines and pestilences periodically desolate those tribes, while human life is scarcely valued more than that of the brutes. The Red Indians who once roamed over the North American Continent, and still hold large reserves in the far West, were all Land Communists; there was never private appropriation, nor, as a necessary consequence, was there any Agriculture worthy of the name. These rude tribes lived by the chase, and a province that will now support, in plenty, a million of Anglo-Saxons, could scarcely sustain a thousand of these roaming savages. Wherever we find the land unappropriated, whether among Zulus, or Red Indians, or Maoris, or roving Tartars in Central Asia, we find a savage and degraded state of mankind, and we find almost invariably that the first step in civilisation is coincident with the private appropriation and careful cultivation of the soil.

So far from the sweeping generalisation of Mr. George being true, that human misery and degradation have sprung from private ownership of land, we find from actual survey of the earth at the present time that precisely the opposite is true—that human misery is deepest where the land is not appropriated, and human happiness and civilisation most advanced where the land is held by private owners.

I am aware that it will be objected that other things