

Count Leo Tolstoi's Letter of 1894

On The Single-Tax and His
 Estimate of Henry George

Moscow, Russia, April 27, 1894.

B. Eulenstein, Berlin, Germany:

Respected Sir: In answer to your letter of the 23d of March, I hasten, with peculiar pleasure, to inform you as follows:

I have known Henry George since the appearance of his "Social Problems." I read it, and was struck with the correctness of its fundamental thought, its extraordinary clearness, which is lacking so much in scientific literature, its common sense, its power of analysis, and, particularly for scientific literature, the exceptional Christian spirit with which the whole book is permeated. When I had finished this book, I then read his earlier work, "Progress and Poverty," and learned to appreciate still more what Henry George has accomplished.

You ask my opinion about what Henry George has accomplished with reference to the question of landed property and his system of the single-tax. My opinion is as follows:

Humanity is constantly progressing in the knowledge of social laws and the establishment of conditions of living which correspond with this increased learning. And, therefore, in every period in the life of humanity there takes place on the one hand a clearing of conceptions, and on the other hand a realization in life of that which has become clear to us through enlightenment.

Towards the end of the last and in the beginning of the present century there occurred throughout Christendom the

unreasonableness and immorality of private property in land. Henry George was also the first who showed the possibility of solving this question. He was the first who gave a clear and straight answer to the common objections which are brought forward by the enemies of all progress, and which culminate in the assertion that the demands of progress are chimerical, impractical, and wild phantoms which one can and may answer with silence. The plan of Henry George silences these objections and puts the question in such a shape that even tomorrow committees could be appointed for the examination and trial of the plan and its crystallization into law.

In Russia, for instance, we could commence tomorrow to examine the question of buying out the land, or its expropriation without compensation for the purpose of nationalization, and it could be adjusted after various changes in the same way as, 33 years ago, the question of freeing the serfs was decided.

The necessity for a change in their condition has been made clear to the people, and also its possibility, (changes and improvements may be made in the details of the single-tax system, but the fundamental idea is certainly feasible) they cannot, therefore, refrain from acting accordingly.

It is only necessary that the fundamental idea of the nationalization of land shall become public opinion.

As I see, from your letter and your books you sent me, your efforts are in this direction. I sympathize with you with all my heart, and wish you the best of success; for my life is devoted to the same work, which I consider my most sacred duty.

Very respectfully,
 LEO TOLSTOI

they want proven, they insist that the expropriation of land would be useless, hurtful, nay, even impossible.

The very same thing now occurs which occurred when slavery was in question. The people have long felt that this condition cannot last long; that slavery is an awful, soul-harassing anachronism; but nevertheless a quasi-religion proved that either slavery was necessary, or that the time had not come yet to abolish it. Now the same thing occurs with reference to the land question, only with this difference, that political economy takes the place of religion.

One would have thought that, to every intelligent man, it must be as clear as day that possession of land by people who do not use it, who refuse hundreds, ay, thousands of starving families the occupation of this land, is as immoral as it is infamous—just like the possession of slaves. Nevertheless, we see cultivated, refined, English, Austrian, Prussian, and Russian aristocrats enjoy this cruel, abominable privilege, and, supported by the ready sophistries which a politico-economic science furnishes them for their excuse, they are not only not ashamed of it, but pride themselves on their possessions.

Now the great merit of Henry George consists in this, that he dissolves into nothingness all these sophistries, which are produced in defence of private property in land, so that the defenders of it do not dare to debate any more, but carefully evade this question, and purposely ignore it with silence. But Henry George has also driven them from this attitude of evasion. And in this, again, lies his great merit. Henry George did not content himself with making this question perfectly clear, so that only those with closed eyes can fail to see the

process of clearing the minds with reference to the working class who lived in various forms of slavery, and the process of establishing new forms, corresponding with the enlightened spirit of the age; the abolishing of slavery and the replacing of the same by the wage system. At the present time the clearing of ideas is in process, with reference to the use of land, and soon, it seems to me, must begin the process of realization of the clarified conceptions. In these processes, which in our time are the main tasks in social economy, Henry George was, and is, pioneer and leader of the movement. It is this which gives him his great eminence. He has, through his most excellent works, materially contributed to the clearing of the conceptions of men with reference to this question, as also to a practical solution of the same.

It is remarkable that in raising this question of the abolition of private property in land, the same thing is repeated which, if I remember rightly, occurred when the abolition of slavery in Russia and in America, was in question. The governments, and the leading classes, realizing in the very depth of their souls that the solving of the land question means the solving of all social questions, which would deprive them at once of all their special privileges, and that this question is the question of the day, make it appear as if they were greatly disturbed over the welfare of the people, and while they introduce savings banks, inspection of factories, income tax, and even the eight hour working day, they ignore very carefully the land question; and with the aid of a politico-economic science which is devoted to their interest, and will prove anything