

THE AFRICAN LAND PROBLEM

The Position in East Africa

We are indebted to a correspondent for calling our attention to the letter in *East Africa* of 11th December from Mr Ian Q. Orchardson, of Kericho in Kenya, who states his objections to proposals that have been made to subvert tribal land ownership and set up private property in land among the natives in its place. In his clear perception of the relation between access to land on equal terms and the social welfare of a people, Mr Orchardson writes:—

“Under the present system of tribal ownership of land as I have observed it amongst the people where I have lived for many years, there is no real poverty, no distinction of class according to wealth. Every man (or woman), however poor in cattle, however old or ill, may build himself a house where he likes, make his garden or his field, and graze his flock or herd. If unable himself to build, and having no relations to help him, he still has the help of the local social unit at hand. When sons grow up they can find somewhere near their parents to live when they get married. Thus no one can be destitute of home and the means of life. Contrast this with the condition of Europe, where private ownership of land has built up a system of economic servitude which burdens it with terrible poverty, unemployed problems, and even revolutions.

“If one were to divide up the land, allotting each individual his little block, many would be discontented at having to live where they did not wish to, some have good land and some inferior. The problem of grazing the flocks and herds and bringing them home and the fencing would be immensely difficult.

“After the allotment had been made, in a few years there would be the difficulty of inheritance, further subdivision or the introduction of primogeniture, under which the younger sons would be landless. The land would tend to fall into the hands of a few, and a system of landowners and landless, rich and poor, would arise.

“Africa (or parts of it) has evolved a system which avoids some of the worst European evils. Is it right to destroy it for the sake of increased production? The modern world has gone so crazy on production that now there is over-production! People cannot buy any more goods, so that many people remain unemployed and have to be supported by the community. Fortunately, under the present system the African is little affected by fall in prices and decrease in demand for labour, for all have their free homes and the right to cultivate and graze their flocks.

“Under the present system of tribal ownership a man's field—and anything he produces by work—is his own so long as he continues to keep it in cultivation. Only when he ceases to do so does it become public property again. Grazing, on the other hand, not being the production of man, is always common property. Thus a man has perfect security and is really encouraged to keep his land under cultivation if he wants to retain it as his own.

“If we were to do the Native good in a hundred ways, but rob him of his freedom, we should have done him harm in the sum total.

“Individual land tenure amongst people accustomed to tribal ownership of land would tend to form classes of rich and poor and to curtail the freedom of the people as a whole—two major evils besides the lesser difficulties and troubles which would arise over the subdivision of land, partition amongst children and relations and the destruction of the communal system of help.”

Our correspondent who sends this news-cutting from

East Africa commends the letter because it “states a land values view from an unaccustomed angle.” It is to be commended also for its demonstration of the truth that social calamity is the result of dispossessing the people of their equal rights to land. But Mr Orchardson confounds individual tenure with private property in land. Individual tenure is a necessity for any but a pastoral or nomadic community and if the law of rent be observed, the land can be subdivided and settled, at the same time securing common property in the common inheritance. All that is needed is to appropriate for the common good the rent that arises because (in the nature of the case) “some have good land and some inferior.” In other words, one piece of land commands a higher rent than another. The European conditions that Mr Orchardson deplures are brought about because Governments give the landholder the prescriptive right to pocket the rent as his own or withhold the land from use till his claims are met. There is no other explanation of poverty and unemployment. That is the land values view. Under the tribal *ownership of land value*, systems of land tenure would take care of themselves to give “younger sons” a fair deal in Europe or Africa or any part of the world.

The Position in South Africa

We have referred to East Africa. To another correspondent we are indebted for sending us *The Inquirer* of 3rd January (the Unitarian journal), where Mr R. Balmforth reviews Professor MacMillan's new book, *Complex South Africa*, published by Faber & Faber. It is common knowledge, Mr Balmforth writes, that the natives of South Africa, as a whole, were never so disaffected as they are to-day. A living for the native means a sufficiency of land to live on. But as Professor MacMillan points out, owing to the land avarice of the white man, the four and a half millions of natives in the Union are allotted less than one-eighth of the land to cultivate, while the one and a half millions of white people are allotted seven-eighths of the land.

With the natural increase of population the native reserves have become exceedingly overcrowded and their young men are driven to the farms, the mines and the large towns in search of employment. Thus a large proportion of the natives have become de-tribalized. In the towns they enter into competition with the unskilled labourer, chiefly the poor white and the coloured people, and so bring down wages. They crowd into the poorer quarters of the towns and send up rents.

“As to the low standard of living,” Mr Balmforth writes, “which has been forced upon the native by land hunger, relatively high taxation, and Customs duties on the necessaries of life, Professor MacMillan's cold array of facts and figures is enough to rouse the indignation of all who read.”

Here is a practical illustration of the case so well stated by Mr W. R. Lester in his *Unemployment and the Land*. “The denial of the right to land means the denial of the right to work . . . the power of a section of the community to close nature's workshop against labour and capital is everywhere the all-sufficient cause of unemployment.” But neither Professor MacMillan nor Mr Balmforth has indicated a specific cause of the trouble that is at work, apart from the unequal distribution of land between the white people as a whole and the natives as a whole. South African legislation, as instanced by the notorious Glen Grey Act, has been directed towards creating a landed and a landless class among the natives themselves in their own reserves, by giving the freehold to the heads of families and the eldest sons. The private property in land that