

## THE LAND QUESTION IN AFRICA

In a review of a book, *Africa View*, by Professor Julian Huxley, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 19th February, makes the following interesting comment:—

"The problem of Africa is how to reconcile the process of economic development by the white race with the proper discharge of our resulting responsibility as trustee for the welfare of the native. That responsibility arises because the quickened moral sense of the world will no longer tolerate the operation of economic forces uncontrolled by any consideration beyond that of the profitable exploitation of African resources and labour, involving the disintegration of the social organism and the conversion of the native from a free communal landowner into a tenant-at-will compelled by taxation or other form of veiled coercion to become a wage-earner. A Cameroons newspaper in May, 1914, asked:—

"What would become of this Colony if the natives were not compelled to do any work? . . . What use is the native to us if he does not want to work? . . ."

"A leader of the settlers' party in East Africa is recorded as stating before a Native Labour Commission that

"if the policy was to be continued that every native was to be a landholder of a sufficient area on which to establish himself, then the question of obtaining a satisfactory labour supply would never be settled."

"In other words, deprive the native of his land and the livelihood he gained from it and you force him to earn a living as a hired labourer for the European. There is no difference between the speakers except that the German editor is the more honest and plain-speaking of the two.

"Repugnant to every idea of fair dealing, the policy which they advocate is no less opposed to commonsense. No society can exist, let alone progress, where the interests of the whole are subordinated to those of the part, and Professor Huxley's conclusion that 'Increased native prosperity is the only permanent way to increased all-round prosperity in a country like Kenya'—or for the matter of that in any other African territory—will be endorsed by every just mind. He realizes what so many will not, that in Africa the land is the mother-of-all. A landless community is a contradiction in terms. Such a phenomenon was unknown until British courts of justice affirmed that the native had no landed rights. Lord Balfour's description of the age of man as a discreditable episode in the life of a minor planet has found not a little justification in Africa."

The case for the rights of man to the land could not be put in more cogent terms. If the land in Africa is the "mother of all," and if "a landless community is a contradiction in terms," is it not equally true of this country and every other country? Civilized society anywhere cannot exist nor is progress possible "where the interests of the whole are subordinated to those of the part." In other words, where the interests of the landless are subordinated to those of the landowners. The free citizen of the civilized state, like the African

native, "has been deprived of his interest in the land and the livelihood he gained from it." He has been forced to earn a living as a hired labourer; and as history has it, the phenomenon was not known until the law made a chattel of his inheritance.

It is a fundamental wrong and we cannot do better than give Herbert Spencer's reasoning on it, taken from the 9th chapter of his famous *Social Statics*, entitled "The Right to the Use of the Earth":—

"Passing from the consideration of the possible to that of the actual, we find yet further reason to deny the rectitude of property in land. It can never be pretended that the existing titles to such property are legitimate. Should anyone think so, let him look in the chronicles. Violence, fraud, the prerogative of force, the claims of superior cunning—these are the sources to which those titles may be traced. The original deeds were written with the sword, rather than with the pen: not lawyers, but soldiers, were the conveyancers: blows were the current coin given in payment; and for seals, blood was used in preference to wax. Could valid claims be thus constituted? Hardly. And if not, what becomes of the pretensions of all subsequent holders of estates so obtained? Does sale or bequest generate a right where it did not previously exist? Would the original claimants be consueted at the bar of reason, because the thing stolen from them had changed hands? Certainly not. And if one act of transfer can give no title, can many? No: though *nothing* be multiplied forever, it will not produce *one*. Even the law recognizes this principle. An existing holder must, if called upon, substantiate the claims of those from whom he purchased or inherited his property; and any flaw in the original parchment, even though the property should have had a score intermediate owners, quashes his right.

"'But Time,' say some, 'is a great legalizer. Immemorial possession must be taken to constitute a legitimate claim. That which has been held from age to age as private property, and has been bought and sold as such, must now be considered as irrevocably belonging to individuals.' To which proposition a willing assent shall be given when its propounders can assign it a definite meaning. To do this, however, they must find satisfactory answers to such questions as, How long does it take for what was originally a *wrong* to grow into a *right*? At what rate per annum do invalid claims become valid? If a title gets perfect in a thousand years, how much more than perfect will it be in two thousand years?—and so forth. For the solution of which they will require a new calculus."

If it be said, and it can be, that Herbert Spencer recanted these radical views the answer is, let Herbert Spencer reply to Herbert Spencer. The "Recantation" has been faithfully dealt with by Henry George in his book entitled *A Perplexed Philosopher*.

In all ages, as *The Times Literary Supplement* puts it, the land remains the mother of us all; and it is just because this abiding truth with its vital human relationships has been ignored that our civilization is not slowly being brought to a halt.

What is the unemployed problem but a land question? It is never the scarcity of capital nor the absence of labour, skilled and unskilled, that brings industrial depression. The root cause of the trouble is the artificial scarcity of land, and until it is remedied there can, in the nature of the case, be no new prosperity.

There is hope for the unemployed and for the oppressed everywhere in a Budget tax on land values.

J.P.

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