

Transcription, June 2015:

Ley, Henry W., 1888. *Land Nationalisation: Who Shows the Way?: Henry George, Thomas Spence, Thomas Paine, or Alfred Russel Wallace?* London: Reeves. 8 pp.

[p. 2]

‘Land Nationalisation Interpreters and Interpretings.’

“Land Nationalisation is but shouting,” was the reply of Mr. Arnold Toynbee to a question put to him when lecturing at Cambridge Hall in 1883, shortly before his death, on Henry George’s *Progress and Poverty*. The reply was a proper reply. As a matter of fact, serious men never have taken up the empty “Land Nationalisation” cry, well knowing that it might be translated in such form that the resulting state of the nation would be worse than at first. Professor Newman, for example, “confesses that for long years he regarded landlords as a deplorable necessity, and thought we had to choose between despotism of the Executive (if not of the Crown, yet of a Bureaucracy), and the despotism of landlords; and, looking to India, and perhaps old Egypt, preferred, on the whole, a thousand petty despots under a Crown to a despotic Crown.” In the present article, I purpose briefly to refer to the teachings of four men of mark in Land Nationalisation history.

An *inter se* examination of Land Nationalisation interpretings addresses itself specially to believers in that gospel: hence the assay principles here laid down have only Nationalisers in view:—

I. The title of mankind to land is title only of use to it. Land is not property, and never can become property.

II. The right to use land is man’s *individual* heritage; in a community the exercise of the right is bounded by the equality of right of all the members of the community.

III. In determining the “landlord” function of the land, equitable existing landlord claims must be respected, judicially appraised, and honourably commuted.

IV. In re-tenuring the land; that is, in tenuring it for national use—

a. Peremptorily, of State management there must be none.

b. In any plot of land, that portion of the value of it which has come of individual holders (*tenant-right*), must be discreted from all other value appertaining to the plot and remain individual property.

Taking up the interpretings, it is convenient first to review that of Mr. Henry George, for here no reference to the principles set forth will be required.

“We must make the land common property,” is the conclusion that Mr. George (*Progress and Poverty*, Book vi.) reaches by a chain of reasoning in which “no link is wanting and no link is weak.” His interpretation, however, does not make land common property at all. (To follow Mr. George, I must here regard land as property). A land is made common property, nationalised, that is, when a nation has it in permanent possession. And in answer to the question—How to Nationalise?—imperatively must two things be explained; first, how to get the land; secondly, how to

[p. 3]

condition it for the permanent possession; the latter consideration indeed being the vitally important one, the very essence of the whole matter. Mr. George neither shows how to get nor how to hold. He puts forth a scheme according to which no owner of land need be dispossessed (in the present article, where not absolutely quoting, I closely follow writers' wordings), but the individuals who now hold possession of what they are pleased to call *their* land may still retain possession of it if they want to, may buy and sell and bequeath and devise it [retain possession of, buy, sell, bequeath, and devise, *common* property!] Abolishing all taxation but that upon land values, Mr. George "appropriates rent" by this taxation, leaving, however, to landlords a percentage of rent [presumably to induce them to retain possession of, and to pay them for the management of, *their* land], so that existing machinery may be made use of and State-agency avoided, for the State must not bother with the letting of lands, because of the favouritism, collusion, and corruption it might involve. Mr. George says this is making the land *really* common property; *really* it is doing nothing of the sort. The scheme may indeed, as he says, take the kernel and leave the shell, but, the shell it *does* leave, and what a shell!

By the existing machinery which is to be made use of, it is, that landlords sublet and rack-rent, that is, take perpetual payment and the highest extortable perpetual payment for, *their* land, making often of their tenants life-long beggars; they inflict all the fearful horrors of distraint and eviction; they exasperate honesty, paralyse men's industries, and destroy men's livelihoods; they vent malice, and give small-souledness in themselves and their agents free play, free play in the thousand ways in which the exercise of it makes a tenant realise as he writhes that he is a vassal merely, not a man but a thing, and that his landlord holds him in the hollow of his hand; they fritter away men's lives by the eternal drain of rent, rent, rent; and, in crippling men's lives, make home joyless,—home, the start-point of civilisation, and deal a death-blow to the training of children,—children, the men and women of the future, thus undermining national morality and bringing about national decay. It is needless to go further. That, to say nothing whatever of its intensification in the highest degree from landlordism on its metal through the "taking the kernel," is the shell that Mr. George leaves to the landlords. With land *thus* common property, how much better off would the nation be? Surely things are quite the other way about to what Mr. George puts them, and for "shell" we should read "kernel," and for "kernel," "shell."

The nationalisation of "Another Henry George," as Thomas Spence is styled by Mr. Morrison Davidson, is of very different character. Spence's proposal was that, on a day appointed, each parish should form itself into a corporation, of which all the inhabitants would be members, and should make the land, with all that appertains to it, corporation property, each parish thus being sovereign landlord of its own territories, power of alienating the least morsel of land being peremptorily denied; tenure of land to be leasehold, rent to be paid into the parish treasuries, and laid out by each parish as may be necessary, and as the people of it may think proper (*Lecture at Newcastle Philosophical Society, 1775*); surplus "to be returned to the people in dividends according to the number of their respective households, and to single claimants." (*The Constitution of Spensonea, 1803.*)

This proposal of Mr. Spence's I should not have needed to either recount or examine, but for the very distinct approval accorded to it both by Mr. Morrison Davidson and Mr. Hyndman. Mr. Hyndman considers it "definite, practical, and thoroughly English." Mr. Davidson holds that Mr. Spence completely solved the land question, that his penny pamphlet contains the Alpha and Omega of the whole matter, more being supererogation; that he rehabilitated the primitive commune, every

departure from which Mr. Davidson believes to have been a disaster, and adjusted it to the conditions of modern commercialism.

Examining Spence's plan, I first apply above Principle III. How he would make the land corporation property is shown *very* clearly in another pamphlet of his, *The End of Oppression*, This is what he says: Suppose a whole nation fully convinced of the excellence of the system and universally wishing its establishment, the most easy method of doing it and with least bloodshed is to get a few thousands of hearty determined fellows, well armed and appointed with officers, and having a committee of honest, firm, and intelligent men to direct their actions to the proper object, and for this committee to publish a manifesto or proclamation, directing the people in every parish to take on receipt thereof immediate possession of the whole landed property within their district, appointing a committee to take charge of the same in the name and for the use of the inhabitants; and that every landholder should immediately, on pain of confiscation and imprisonment, deliver to the said parochial committee all writings and documents relating to their estates that they might immediately be burnt; and that they should likewise disgorge at the same time into the hands of the said committee, the last payments received from their tenants, in order to create a parochial fund for immediate use without calling upon the exhausted people, and if the aristocracy arose to contend the matter, *let the people be firm and desperate, destroying them root and branch.*

This is Spence's plan from the point of view of Principle III., and thus, in the name of justice, does he take counsel of brigandage. He does not trouble whether there is even a widow's mite of equitable landlord claim. What the claims recognised by the above principle would sift down to is not now the question; but, much or little, the landlords must have all that is theirs; democracy cannot sully itself by depriving any man, peer or pauper, of his just due. In appraising landlord claims, no hard and fast rule can be followed; landlords are not of one genus, and each case must stand on its own merits. General rules, however, can be laid down, to be binding in the Courts, in which, "under the sacred engagements of justice" (to employ words of Professor Newman), the claims made would have to be pronounced upon.

Now to note Spence's mode of tenuring the land for the nation's all-time possession of it. Without going into further detail of his scheme than already given, it is plain that the management of the land is parish management, in other words State management, (what is a parish but a small State?) which Principle IV., *a*, proscribes. Mr. Spence tries to minimise the objections to State management, and says that "the judgment of a parish may be as much depended upon as that of a House of Lords," to which the obvious reply is, yes, and just as little. But this is a point that may well be settled by authority, and, against State management the testimony of authority is overwhelming.

A word before bringing to bear the *b* clause of Principle IV. It is a most signal clause; because, not until, the other day, so to speak, the little discovery was made of the proper application of the little principle of discreting there spoken of, did land nationalisation receive the breath of life. It was in respect of "the danger of jobbery, favouritism, nay, of despotism, if the land were made the nation's property," that Professor Newman for long years looked on landlords as a deplorable necessity. And it was in respect of the proper application of this discreting, that he was "surprised at the simple, natural, and (one might have thought) obvious suggestion which dissipated all his fears." To this suggestion we shall come again and particularly, later on. All that immediately concerns us is that this discreting was clearly absent from Spence's mind and is clearly absent from Spence's scheme. How far absent may be seen from this; that his lease-

[p. 5]

holders at the expiration of their leases, in exact correspondence with the now-existing land system, *forfeit all they have done to the land*, for they “must leave their buildings, fixtures, fences, &c., in good tenable repair and condition, and their lands in good tilth” (*Constitution*, before quoted). This is how Spence meets Principle IV. As to Principle I., the land is to be corporation “property,” and as to Principle II., no effect at all is given by him to individual right to use land. And thus, weighed in the balance, does Mr. Spence’s scheme prove wanting. Despite Mr. Hyndman, it is *not* practical; despite Mr. Davidson, by it the land question is *not* “completely solved.”

My third man of mark is one whose name is never heard. At the very same time that Thomas Spence, grand enthusiast (“poor deluded fellow,” a contemporary designates him in a MS. note to the British Museum copy of *The End of Oppression*), was interpreting land-common-property, another Thomas, a greater than he, was signing, in permanent ink, the roll of human history, and pioneering variously, was pioneering on “the land;” that Thomas was Thomas Paine. It is curious, even painful to observe, how those who write of Spence know nothing of Paine, though Spence himself, as we shall see, by no manner of means ignored him, and Paine himself did not hide his light under a bushel. Even Mr. Hyndman, in his introduction to his reprint of Spence’s Newcastle Lecture, makes no mention of Paine, though he does of Feargus O’Connor, Ernest Jones, Bronterre O’Brien, and others. That, in land, there are two distinct values (Principle IV., *b*), was taught by Paine in unmistakable terms, and he, in graphic style, discretizes tenant-right from other value. In 1797 he published a very small pamphlet, *Agrarian Justice*, written “in the winter of 1795 and 1796,” in reply to a sermon by Bishop Watson, entitled, *The Wisdom and Goodness of God in having made both Rich and Poor*, “the error being to say that God made rich and poor, when he made only male and female.” From this pamphlet I quote—

“Though every man as an inhabitant of the earth is a joint proprietor of it in its natural state, it does not follow that he is a joint proprietor of cultivated earth. The additional value made by cultivation, after the system was admitted, became the property of those who did it or who inherited from them or who purchased it. It had originally an owner. Whilst, therefore, I advocate the right, and interest myself in the hard case of all those who have been thrown out of their natural inheritance by the introduction of the system of landed property, I equally defend the right of the possessor to the part which is his.”

“The value of the improvement so far exceeded the value of the natural earth at that time [when cultivation began], as to absorb it; till, in the end, the common right of all became confounded into the cultivated right of the individual. But they are, nevertheless, distinct species of rights, and will continue to be so as long as the earth endures.”

“And as it is impossible to separate the improvement made by cultivation from the earth itself upon which that improvement is made, the idea of landed property arose from that inseparable connection; but it is nevertheless true, that it is the value of the improvement only, and not the earth itself, that is individual property. Every proprietor therefore of cultivated land owes to the community a ground rent.”

Such is Mr. Paine’s preface to his scheme, and the quotations amply show his clearness of vision in respect of where individual property in land begins and ends. Continuing, he says—

“The life of an Indian is a continual holiday compared with the poor of Europe,” and he goes on (I employ almost his exact words),

Taking it then for granted that no person ought to be in a worse condition when born under what is called a state of civilisation than he would have

[p. 6]

been had he been born in a state of nature, and that civilisation ought to have made, and ought still to make, provision for that purpose, it can only be done by subtracting from property a portion equal in value to the natural inheritance it has absorbed. The best time to make the subtraction is at the moment that property is passing by the death of one person to the possession of another. And the value of the inheritance absorbed, in fair justice, cannot be taken at less, and ought not to be taken at more, than a tenth part of the national capital annually revolving. And where there are no direct heirs, society shall be heir to a part over and above the tenth part *due* to society.

The use to be made of the “subtracted property” was, to give £15 to every person on reaching 21, and an annuity of £10 to every person from 50 years of age.

What Mr. Spence, who several times in his writings exhibits jealousy of Paine, thought of Paine’s proposal appears very distinctly in a tract by him, *Rights of Infants*, 1797. After somewhat spitefully setting forth that “at last Mr. Paine has thought fit to own with the Psalmist, and with Mr. Locke, that God hath given the earth to the children of men, given it to mankind in common,” and that he is “glad that Mr. Paine, even though late, made his acknowledgement, because his celebrity will procure him many readers,” Spence, continuing, calls Paine’s plan “an execrable fabric of compromissory expediency,” and designates “the poor, beggarly stipends which he (Paine) would have us to accept of in lieu of our lordly and just pretensions to the soil of our birth,” as “so contemptible and insulting that he shall leave them to the scorn of every person conscious of the dignity of his nature.” He then fully compares Paine’s plan with his own “nationalisation,” and has very much the better of the comparison. It is, however, to be averred with all certainty, that Paine would never have dreamed of setting up such a nationalisation shadow had he lived in these latter days. The proposal requires no further examination or special testing by the principles laid down.

As I shall not now be again mentioning Mr. Spence’s name, it will be interesting and but little out of place to reprint here the “true copy” of a letter to him, published in his tract *Fragment of an Ancient Prophecy*. The letter runs:

“Mr. Spence,—I bought at your shop a few days back a book entitled *The End of Oppression*, which I conceive to be the basest book that ever was printed, and, as a fellow-citizen, I advise you to stop the sale of it, or otherwise I hope your book will be publicly burnt, and yourself hanged, for you richly deserve it. [Signed,] A Democrat.”

The fourth and last interpretation I have to deal with is that of Mr. Alfred Russel Wallace, and a most important interpretation it is. Studying the land nationalisation problem for eighteen years, Mr. Wallace recognises just as exactly as did Mr. Paine some eighty years before, the two values in land, but there resemblance ends. Of Mr. Wallace’s scheme, when in 1881 the Land Nationalisation Society (of which more presently), was in course of formation, Mr. Wallace “claimed as a specialty, that no previous one distinguished as did his between the land *per se* and what man placed in and upon it.” For the moment, in presence of Paine’s very clear dividing line, this claim would seem to be a mistaken one. It is, however, perfectly valid. Paine’s exposition was a mountain in labour bringing forth nothing. Between the premises

he lays down and their practical issue there is no necessary connection, and his plan might easily be the outcome of entirely different considerations. He does not even attempt to give embodiment to the distinction which he so emphatically lays down “will continue as long as the earth endures.” To Mr. Wallace’s scheme, however, the distinction is absolutely vital. And to such purpose does

[p. 7]

Mr. Wallace turn it that State management of the land, the dread of the thinkers, becomes an absolute impossibility. In a plot of land, that value which is private property (the *tenant-right* of it; see Principle IV., *b*), remains private property; but it has, imperatively, to be acquired by the holder of the plot, no matter how many owners claim in to begin with; and the possession of this tenant-right entitles its owner *of right* to occupy (not *own*) the plot of land to which the tenant-right appertains, subject only to the payment of a State-rent, which would take the place of all taxation. Thus did Mr. Wallace follow up his discovery to logical issue; here was the “suggestion” that dissipated all Professor Newman’s fears, and that would have, he thinks, made convert of John Stuart Mill, if he had been alive. Thomas Paine would positively have jumped at the suggestion; and surely, too, it should satisfy Mr. Henry George, who says that “What is necessary for the use of land is not its private ownership but the security of improvements. The ownership of land has nothing to do with it.”

Such is Mr. Wallace’s scheme so far as conditioning the land for the nation’s all-time use of it is concerned; and, as will be seen, a consequence of it is, that land sub-letting disappears; this indeed being “the very essence of his proposed system, because sub-letting brings about subjection to prohibitory stipulations and gives a command over others which in a free country no class of citizens ought to possess.” The finishing stroke of sub-letting is in this, that as the possessor only, and none other, of the tenant-right of a plot of land would be responsible for the State-rent, there would be no legal recognition of a sub-holder, and no legal recovery against him by the tenant-right owner.

Looked at in connection with Principle IV., how does Mr. Wallace’s above “suggestion” stand? Why it fully complies with it in both of its clauses. It could not indeed do otherwise, seeing that the Principle came of the suggestion. And I most gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness to Mr. Wallace; it is by the light that he has set up that I have found my way through the darkness that previously had ever baffled me.

But the foregoing is not the whole of Mr. Wallace’s scheme. Landlord compensation is a further particular, a *sine qua non* of it. Principle III. recognises only *equitable* landlord claims, but in the article *How to Nationalise the Land* (*Contemporary Review*, Nov., 1880), in which Mr. Wallace first set forth his views, he does more than recognise *equitable* claims, for, in nationalising, he would secure that, to *all* landlords, without any eclecticism, “the full revenue derived from their lands should legally go down to their descendants for four generations.” This view of Mr. Wallace’s has since been variously modified. What his present position is I do not exactly know; I believe however that he has still no eclecticism, but makes of landlords one class, a view which, to my mind, adapting words of his own, “will certainly excite very strong opposition by large bodies of people who would not otherwise object to”—landlord compensation.

This is Mr. Wallace’s scheme as at first set forth, and it is deficient in respect only of Principle II. But, by and by, addition was made to the scheme, and when in 1882 his work, *Land Nationalisation, its Necessity and its Aims*, appeared, it was laid down as one of the necessary requirements of a complete

solution of the land problem, that arrangements must be made by which every British subject may secure a portion of land for personal occupation, subject only to the equal rights of others. And thus the scheme got its finishing touch, and was brought into perfect harmony with all the principles; and for the first time in history there was given to the land nationalisation idea, an interpretation which means, really means, the land for common use. Indeed it not only means the land (the soil) for common use, though Mr. Wallace himself carries it no further than that, but applied as, emancipating ourselves from words and looking to things,

[p. 8]

(that is, *to what the word land means in everyday life*), it will yet have to be applied, the annihilation of landlordism.

There is other interest in connection with this interpretation. On the rock underlying it the Society was built that I have just above referred to, the Land Nationalisation Society. This Society inaugurated itself in January, 1882, and presented its scheme, as this after much discussion had been “eventually” agreed upon. The scheme was the interpretation now just set forth, with amplifications. And the ring of the trumpets at the inauguration was—*Practical Scheme*. “To only advocate land nationalisation, they would make no progress at all, because practical men would want to know how they were going to do it. The reason previous Land Nationalisation Societies had failed was because they had no definite scheme to put before the world. General principles had utterly failed.” “What can be needed more effective than the scheme of the Society?” wrote the then Hon. Treasurer, and, to all intents and purposes, actual founder of the Society—and so on. When, late at the first of its inauguration meetings, a resolution was proposed that nationalisation of the land “in the manner suggested by the Land Nationalisation Society,” would be an effectual remedy for the evils of the existing land-system, the resolution was energetically attacked, and the meeting was adjourned so as fully to discuss it. At the adjourned meeting there was great opposition to the quoted words, and an amendment was proposed to entirely omit them. But the little band of “crazy enthusiasts” held stoutly by their scheme. “They were going to persevere in it; their principles they did not mean to give up, so important these were; they would not be there but for those special principles, to abandon them was to give up the whole ground upon which they met; if the majority there did not agree with them, it would merely show that they had not got together the supporters they thought they had.” Thus sturdily did the men of old of the Society meet their adversaries, repelling their shafts as should men who set out to preach a gospel. “Whoso setteth up as champion should stand right sturdily his ground and conquer or be conquered.” At length suggestion was made to substitute the words “on the lines” for “in the manner” (the suggestion happened to be the writer’s own), which being done, the amendment was withdrawn, the resolution carried without a dissident, and the proceedings terminated.

Alas, this Society, so resolutely set going, lived some five years only. From its ashes, however, straightway, on the principle of *le roi est mort, vive le roi*, another Society arose, but, what a falling off was there, it had no backbone. In the original Society, concurrence with the main features of its scheme (its “lines” that is; these being, separation of the values in land, and possession of tenant-right the title to occupation; right to a portion of land for personal use; and landlord equitable compensation), was the condition of membership. The existing Society makes its condition, approval of the generalities that “had utterly failed,” namely, “approval of the principle of nationalisation of the land by equitable and constitutional means,” that is, comes back once again to the old “mere shouting,” the “emptiness that feigns solidity.” It certainly keeps amongst its leaflets the programme of the defunct Society, and does not

issue with it a slip making known that, like the Society's other literature, this leaflet is simply a contribution to the land question, but has nothing to do with membership of the Society. This, however, is an omission, and such notice should be issued, for the existing Society has *no* scheme. Whether such a Society, a Society which in past days could not survive can endure in these, time will show. For myself, I believe that the stones which the builders thus have refused, will yet become, are bound to become, the chief stones of the corner.

[\[Return\]](#)

The Alfred Russel Wallace Page, Charles H. Smith, 2015.