

Transcription, September 2020:

*The Radical* (London) 1(5) (1 Jan. 1881): 7b-7c.

[p. 7]

### ‘Are Landlords Necessary?’

The question of Land Reform has received an extraordinary and all-pervading impulse from the successful action of the National Land League of Ireland. A glance at the Publisher’s column in any of the daily or weekly journals will show that the subject is engrossing the attention of the better-educated portion of the community at the present moment, to a degree that has had no parallel since the introduction of printing. Politically, it is the most urgent; socially, it is the most “burning” question of the day. For this we have, undoubtedly, to thank the Irish Land League; and this is, perhaps, the best and the most important, as well as the most promising result that has yet accrued from the agitation in which that organisation is engaged. But it is somewhat remarkable that, although the “Land” occupies a prominent position in the title of that body, and its policy has direct reference to the relations between tenant and landlord, there is nothing that can be described even as an approximation to a definite land reform principle either in its programme or in the speeches of any of its most prominent members. “Down with landlordism!” “Up with the peasant proprietor!” are cries that are obviously addressed directly, if not exclusively, to the tenant-farmers of an agricultural community, and the same remark applies equally to “Griffith’s valuation” and the “Government valuation.” To be sure, the Irish Land League have gained the sympathy and support of the farm labourers, the shopkeepers, and the tradesmen, who have combined with the tenants forming the bulk of the organisation, in energetically applying the Social ban, which is known as “Boycotting,” to those who dare to contravene their decrees. But up to the present moment, no consideration has been given to the right and interest of the general community in the soil of the country. The contest that has been going on has, up to this point, been strictly confined to the tenants and the landowners. The consumer, who is neither, has been treated as a mere spectator of the struggle, and is apparently thought to have no legitimate concern with its issue, apart from the sympathy he may feel for the poor and the oppressed. “Down with landlordism!” “Up with the peasant proprietor!” are, from a logical point of view, plainly contradictory cries. No man can be a “proprietor” or landlord either on a small or a large scale, and a “peasant” at the same time. “Landlordism” cannot evidently be put down by an enormous increase in the number of landlords, although it must be held to imply a decrease in the size of the estates owned by individuals. Landlordism, in some shape or form, is sure to exist, so long as landlords or owners of land exist. But are landlords a necessity? That is the question of questions which the land reformer has to answer, and we regret to say that very few of even the more advanced land reformers of the present day have shown themselves either prepared or disposed to answer that question.

There are, however, one or two exceptions, and chief amongst these is Mr. Alfred Wallace, the distinguished naturalist. This gentleman apparently holds the doctrine promulgated by certain horribly reviled “Socialist” and “Communists,” that the land is a natural agent, designed for and necessary to the support and welfare of the living human beings that occupy it, and that it is not the creation of human labour, and consequently is not, or rather ought not to be, and cannot legitimately and rightly be, the subject of private property, any more than the atmosphere we breathe. Once this principle is clearly and firmly grasped, the nationalisation of the land becomes the one great object that the patriot seeks to achieve. The scheme by which Mr. Wallace would seek to accomplish this grand result may be briefly stated. In the first place, he proposes that the real or landed property of intestates (or people who leave no

wills behind them) should, under certain circumstances, revert to the State; and, in the second, that at the end of the fourth generation, after the passing of the Act, all land should revert to (*i.e.*, become again the property of) the State. This is a proposal that has much to recommend it, and one that will, undoubtedly, be received in certain quarters with ridicule, if it does not attain to the dignity of being heartily execrated. Exception may be taken to it, however, in some respects. Four generations of landowners is not, perhaps, too long a term to wait for the attainment of so great and practical a reform as Mr. Wallace aims at, and we should be glad if we were able to feel certain that it would be accomplished at that date. For with the abolition of private property in land, many of the greatest political and social reforms which Radical philosophers and patriots have conceived and laboured for would be accomplished facts. Take away the territorial basis from the House of Peers, and what would become of the edifice that harbours hereditary and irresponsible legislators? When the land becomes public property, the Republic—which is only another word for public property, or public things, *Res* being the Latin for thing—would be established; and established, too, on the firmest foundation that ever any form of Government rested upon in this world. But, perhaps, we have said enough upon this subject just now. We shall return to it, shortly, from a different point of view, and, meanwhile, we shall close by expressing a regret that Mr. Wallace mars his project to a considerable extent by proposing to allow owners of land and their heirs to continue to occupy and enjoy their estates as long as they continue to pay their rents to the State. It is to be feared that this would practically defeat the great object that the nationalisation of the land would otherwise attain. The heirs of the owners would, it is true, be burdened by a rent or land-tax, which would probably be heavy compared with that now levied on the land, but the advantage they would possess would nevertheless render them liable to assume the airs of the landocracy, and constitute themselves into a specially privileged caste.

W. Webster.

*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2020.