

Transcription, September 2020:

The Radical (London) 1(53) (3 December 1881): 2c.

[p. 2]

‘Land Nationalization.’

Sir,—I am glad to see Professor Wallace’s notice of the two previous letters in your paper which I suppose were only inserted to act as blisters on some one else.

The Radical will have to repeat and reiterate that to “buy” the land from the present holders, is simply to mortgage the future labour of the country—the interest on such purchase money would have to be paid, and it could only be paid by labour—it is true that in that case the “unearned increment” would become the property of the nation, but as far as the present burdens of rents and landholders is concerned, we should be simply paying the same thing in a different way, but we should be no better off.

Now we had better admit at once that with this nationalization of the Land Question we are in what the French call an “Impasse” that is a “fix” in common English or a dilemma, for we cannot settle it without doing an apparent wrong to somebody. People are all afraid seemingly of the word “confiscation,” but if the land is to be transferred back to the nation it can only be done by confiscation, more or less veiled; gradual or abrupt, but still confiscation either as regards the present holders and their supposed rights in the future, or confiscation of the labour of labourers yet unborn.

I pass by for the moment the question whether present holders have any rights, and how far our having allowed the present system of land holding to pass *sub silentio* gives modern purchasers a claim to consideration. What we should look full in the face in this:—Nationalization being a necessity, Who is to suffer the painful operation of confiscation? I say it is infinitely more honourable to confiscate the possession of men who are now alive and amongst us, with whom we can discuss it, to whom we can show the need of it, rather than relieve ourselves in a cowardly manner by throwing the burden on to the shoulders of an unborn posterity who cannot defend themselves, and who are, in a certain sense, helpless before us.

The labourers of England are already working some hours a week to pay for the iniquitous burden of debt which men a hundred years ago, without a shadow of right, incurred for worthless objects, and left us to pay. We cannot imitate that immoral example, but when it is once admitted that the nationalization must be transacted by the present generation and with the present generation, then there are various ways in which the severity of the operation may be mitigated. To cut off a dog’s tail a joint at a time is not a merciful method of amputation, but if the cutting off of an inch, only caused one-twelfth of the pain which cutting off a foot caused him it might be the most agreeable way, even from the dogs point of view, of disfiguring the animal—and so with regard to this matter there are many ways in which the discomfort of the process of resumption may be mitigated. Mr. George proposes that the holders of land should be taxed, with a gradually increasing tax until their estates become not worth keeping. There seems to me to be some objections to this plan; it is hardly straight forward, it means complete confiscation, but does not say so, and as the tax got heavy it would lead to endless difficulty and irritation in the collection, something like the Tithe War in Ireland.

Probably a better plan would be to impose a heavy succession duty of 20 per cent. or so, to be taken whenever possible, not in money, but in land, which the nation would at once take possession of, and thus

this nationalization system would quickly come into a commencement of operation, and the experience gained thereby would enable it to be perfected long before the entire land of the country had returned into the hands of the Government. In this way the present holders would suffer nothing, the next heir would get one-fifth less; that is, he would get four-fifths of a property of which he had earned nothing and so on for five generations, and at the death of the fifth inheritor the Government, that is the people, would take possession of the balance, and the process would be completed. Another plan would be to inscribe the land holder in the public ledger for the amount of his present rent, and pay him one per cent. less every year, thus extinguishing the rent in one hundred years, but this would necessitate the immediate taking possession of the whole land of the country by the Government, and it would create so large and sudden a disturbance of our national economy that I think the gradual process which I have indicated above is preferable.

Plans and ideas, however, you will have in abundance, and we shall, I fear, have an abundance of time to discuss them in. My main purpose now is to urge that no settlement ought to be thought of which simply hands the trouble on to our descendants.

Yours obediently,
Manchester, November 28, 1881.
R.D. Rusden.

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