

The United States may be regarded as the ideal Republic. The conditions which dreamers are so fond of picturing exist here as a matter of fact. There are no extensive landed estates. Lands are held in large tracts by speculators and railroads only. But nowhere is the idea of turning them into manors and lordly domains entertained. So long as the assessors are elected by the people there can be no great monopoly of land. The assessor represents the principle of divestiture for the support of the government. There is, as a consequence, a complaint in this country, which is found nowhere else in the world—it is the poverty which is entailed by the ownership of too much land. There is such a thing in the United States as being land poor. Land, as a consequence, is about as free as it could well be made. The proprietors of large tracts are only too ready to sell. The government has always millions for sale. The man or the woman in search of a homestead can get one for nothing. The homestead which can thus be secured is as large as a moderate sized estate in other nations. Except among cattlemen, and with them only temporarily, wide areas are alone held or claimed, and these for grazing purposes only. The result of this general system for over a century is that nothing like European civilization, as respects the ownership of land, has grown up here. There has been, from time to time, the delusion that the European method of becoming great and powerful—that is to say, the acquisition of land in large bodies, was possible in the United States. The fathers were not wholly free from the notion. But most of them who loaded up with real estate found the burthen too heavy for them and were forced to lay it aside with more or less pecuniary loss. Since those days individual efforts of a like nature have frequently been put forth, but generally with the same result. There have been numerous instances of failures in that direction in this state. Land cannot long be held in large bodies, for tenancy does not take root in this soil, and the share method is wasteful and ruinous. No man can profitably handle more land than he is able to manage himself. No fairer or more just methods could be invented. Land has been as free as air and water in the United States. There are millions of acres which are still in the same condition. When these facts are taken into consideration, the claims occasionally advanced by communistic writers in this country assume rather a queer aspect. Land any man can have who is willing to work it. By a few years of labor he can render himself practically independent. But it would appear that what is wanted is not virgin acres, which have to be cleared and reclaimed. It is the comfortable homesteads which other and more vigorous men have created that are regarded with jealousy. This cannot be said to be a wholly new or modern desire. Men in all ages have been covetous of their neighbors' acquisitions. The only thing distinctly modern is the formulation of a theory which is supposed to gild over and render respectable theft and dispossession. It would be impossible for any human society to make a more just disposition of the land than that set up in the United States. After long experience, we find no great inequalities or unequal distribution. The immense majority of the land owners of the United States are farmers, owning moderate tracts in fee simple. The most surprising thing, therefore with which we have to deal, is the introduction and propagation of doctrines as respects land, which are wholly and absolutely without application.

Land in many of the European countries is mostly held by the nobles. There is no way in which it can be acquired by the great body of the people except as tenants. In England lands are entailed and descend from the father to the oldest son. There is no power of alienation. The owner has only a life interest in the estate. All that can be done is to put mortgages on it. In ordinary cases the father cannot create these incumbrances without the consent of his son and heir. In Prussia, for a long time, the country was divided into the lands of the nobles and the lands of the common people. Neither class could acquire lands belonging to the other. In the time of Hardenberg some modifications were introduced, but the aristocratic system is still maintained. In all these countries there are strong grounds for a movement for the liberalization of the land system. Not only justice demands it, but the tendency of civilization is forcing it. Modern society has brought about a reversal in the matter of property not often noticed. For a long way down the past real estate was the only property that was considered to be valuable or to need the protection of the law. A tedious ceremony had to be gone through before it could be transferred. In old Rome the official weigher of money and a cloud of witnesses had to attend. The object was to fix the memory of the transaction in as many minds as possible, so that thereafter there should be no dispute. All this time personal property passed freely from hand to hand. It was thought to be a kind of property too mean to be surrounded with legal safeguards. It first began to assert its importance in the case of the Licinii, the great Roman contractors. Since then what is generally regarded as personal property has gone on increasing in importance. Nearly all the wealthy men of the world are the owners of personal, rather than real property. There are some exceptions, such as the Astors in New York, and the Grosvenors, or the Dukes of Westminster in London. Personal property is supposed to be more valuable than real property for a number of reasons. It is, in the first place, more easily handled; and in the second, can more readily elude the assessor, who is the foe of all large landed possessions. This circumstance, in conjunction with our system, has loosened the grip on land completely in the United States, and is gradually loosening it in the old world. It is clear from what is above advanced that communism is an exotic in the United States. There is no place for it here. All that could be done to secure the free distribution of land has been done. The presence of theorists of the class to which reference is made, is explained only by the fact that they know no civilization but that of the great cities. They have no knowledge whatever of the country, its social forces or the lines of its development. On the face, perhaps, the form of society in our great cities is not dissimilar from that of Europe. There are rich and poor in strong contrast. There are palaces and hovels. There are great landlords and poor tenants. These conditions appear to be inseparable from the crowding together of large masses of people. But they are not nearly so absolute and unchangeable with us as they are abroad. The law of distribution is as actively at work in our cities as elsewhere. But the form of society in them is as different from that of the country at large as if the two did not belong to the same political system.

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