

THE FUNDAMENTAL LAW OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

From "*The Science of Political Economy*" by Henry George

The only way man has of satisfying his desires is by action.

Now action, if continued long enough in one line to become really exertion, a conscious putting forth of effort, produces in the consciousness a feeling of reluctance or weariness. This comes from something deeper than the exhaustion of energy in what we call physical labour; for whoever has tried it knows that one may lie on his back in the most comfortable position and by mere dint of sustained thinking, without consciously moving a muscle, tire himself as truly as by sawing wood; and that the mere clash and conflict of involuntary or undirected thought or feeling, or its continuance in one direction, will soon bring extreme weariness.

But whatever be its ultimate cause, the fact is that labour, the attempt of the conscious will to realize its material desire, is always, when continued for a little while, in itself hard and irksome. And whether from this fact alone, or from this fact, conjoined with or based upon something intuitive to our perceptions, the further fact, testified to both by observation of our own feelings and actions and by observation of the acts of others, is that men always seek to gratify their desires with the least exertion.

This, of course, does not mean that they always succeed in doing so, any more than the physical law that motion tends to persist in a straight line means that moving bodies always take that line. But it does mean the mental analogue of the physical law that motion seeks the line of least resistance – that in seeking to gratify their desires men will always seek the way which under existing physical, social and personal conditions seems to them to involve the least expenditure of exertion.

Whoever would see this disposition of human nature exemplified in trivial things has only to watch the passers-by in a crowded street, or those who enter or depart from a frequented house. He will be instructed and perhaps not a little amused to note how slight the obstruction or semblance of obstruction that will divert their steps; and will see the principle observed by saint and sinner – by "wicked man on evil errand bent," and "Good Samaritan intent on works of mercy."

Whether it proceed from experience of the irksomeness of labour and the

desire to avoid it, or further back than that, have its source in some innate principle of the human constitution, this disposition of men to seek the satisfaction of their desires with the minimum of exertion is so universal and unailing that it constitutes one of those invariable sequences that we denominate laws of nature, and from which we may safely reason. It is this law of nature that is the fundamental law of political economy – the central law from which its deductions and explanations may with certainty be drawn, and, indeed, by which alone they become possible. It holds the same place in the sphere of political economy that the law of gravitation does in physics. Without it there could be no recognition of order, and all would be chaos.

Yet the failure clearly to apprehend this as the fundamental law of political economy has led to very serious and widespread mistakes as to the nature of the science; and has indeed, in spite of the vigorous assertions and assumptions of its accredited professors, prevented it from truly taking in popular esteem the place of a real science.