

FIFTH PRIZE, TEN DOLLARS.

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Among the great reformers of mankind and particularly of the nineteenth century, Henry George, the advocate of the Single Tax, undoubtedly takes a high place. He, really the "Prophet of San Francisco," has seen and felt that humanity has transgressed. Mr. George has been moved by the great evils of society and has prescribed a panacea for them.

Before we touch upon the theory itself, let us get an insight into the problem that confronts humanity, and which our social and political reformer endeavors to solve.

The problem that the human race is confronted with and must solve is: Why does poverty increase as progress and prosperity increase? Why is toil not lessened, why does pecuniary distress and industrial depression afflict humanity, amid such great progress in wealth-producing power, through wonderful inventions and discoveries of labor-saving machinery and facilitation of exchange and production?

This is the problem that social and political reformers have set out to solve and explain. Many of them have taken it as a necessary evil, and have thus attempted to explain the causes of this evil. They have given up all hope of finding any panacea for human distress and poverty.

To Malthus it appeared that "God and nature are at strife," for according to him, population naturally tends to increase faster than subsistence. The Malthusian theory of population and the current doctrine "that wages are fixed by the ratio between the number of laborers seeking employment, and the amount of capital devoted to the employment of labor, and that they constantly tend to the lowest amount on which laborers will consent to live and reproduce, because an increase in the number of laborers tends naturally to follow and overtake any increase in capital, are the two theories which current political economy gives, as an explanation of the problem. It is self-evident that the doctrine of wages follows and bases itself upon the Malthusian theory of population and subsistence.

The doctrine of Malthus states "that the natural tendency of population is to double itself at least every twenty-five years, thus increasing in a geometrical ratio, while the subsistence that can be obtained from land, under circumstances the most favorable to human industry, could not possibly be made to increase faster than in an arithmetical ratio." Thus the human species would increase as the numbers 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256 and subsistence 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9. In two centuries the population would be to the means of subsistence as 256 to 9; and in two thousand years almost incalculable.

We must therefore by some means check this natural tendency of population to increase indefinitely over the means of subsistence. According to this theory, vice, crime, brutality and ignorance are things inevitable and incurable. For no human remedy is possible for an "evil law of nature."

Mr. George disproves the Malthusian theory, by pointing out "that neither do the facts which are marshaled to support this theory prove it, nor do the analogies countenance it; and in the second place, there are facts which conclusively disprove it." This theory shattered, the doctrine of wages falls, losing its hold and basis. But Mr. George further proves that wages, instead of being drawn from capital, are drawn from labor itself. Thus, the fact that, in spite of increase in productive power, wages tend to a minimum which will give a bare living, cannot be explained any more by the current doctrine that wages depend upon capital.

But in disproving these two theories, Mr. George has not solved the problem. It was shown that each laborer produces his own wages, and that an increase in the number of laborers should increase wages, whereas the facts are, that many laborers are out of work and that increase in the number of laborers decreases wages. The problem is yet to be solved. In pointing out the insufficiency and falsity of the current doctrines it was shown, however, that the explanation of the problem is not to be sought in the laws of production, but in the laws that govern distribution.

The author makes a thorough review of the whole subject of the distribution of wealth. The factors of production, land, labor and capital, are each determined and the laws that govern each are found independently. After the laws of each are determined, the factors are found to harmonize and correlate. These three factors divide the products of wealth. If with an increase in production, the laborer and the capitalist get no more, it is self-evident that the landowner reaps the whole gain. Herein lies the solution of the problem. It is to the landowner and his income—rent—that we have to turn for an explanation of the problem of poverty amid great progress in the production of wealth.

Poverty constantly increases as wealth increases, and the laborer's return is forced down because land, the source of all wealth and the field of all labor, is monopolized. "To extirpate poverty, to make wages what justice commands they should be—the full earnings of the laborer—we must substitute for the individual ownership of land a common ownership. We must make land common property." This, Mr. George concludes, is the only and true remedy.

Let us say a word about the justice of this remedy. On what ethical grounds, upon what reason does this principle of making land common property, depend? The answer is short. Truth needs no corroboration or affirmation by many words. "All men are created equal: they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." This earth with all its bounties is and must be the common property of all men. Man's life depends upon the soil. Man's "free" life depends upon the "free" use of the soil. Nature has given this right to man. What power, superior to nature's can take it away?

The Duke of Argyll, and the other gentlemen who oppose Mr. George's theory on the ground that it is "robbery," "unutterable meanness," and "gigantic villany," consider man's power superior to that of the Creator and Benefactor of Mankind. They forget that land is a bounty of nature, existing before man and necessary to his existence and prosperity. No man can justly lay claim to any title to land.

But, it will be asked, is private ownership unjust? Not at all, provided it can truly be called "private" property. Mr. George is the upholder and defender of the right of private ownership. But what constitutes the rightful basis of private property? "Is it not, primarily, the right of a man to himself, to the use of his own powers, to the enjoyment of the fruits of his own exertion? Nature acknowledges no ownership or control, save as the result of labor." Under this definition of private property, land cannot come. Land cannot be created or produced by man. All have an equal right to it. We see, then, that private ownership of land is entirely unjust.

Furthermore, the results of private property in land are unjust and most degenerating, demoralizing and destructive to humanity. Ownership of land means ownership of men. Man becomes a slave to the landlord. After having emerged from the state of feudalism, we have again merged into this present state of society, in some respects worse than feudalism.

Then, too, the present system does not make the best use of the soil, and large tracts of land are not used at all. This is caused by land speculation. But when land would become common property, speculation in land would be impossible, and all the land needed would be used and given to its best use.

After pointing out the justice of the remedy and the injustice of private property in land, and its deteriorating effects on society, we have next to consider the method of carrying out the remedy. Mr. George believes that it is not necessary to abolish all private titles by declaring land public property. Such a plan, with the exception that he suggests compensation to present land owners, was advocated by the great thinker and scientist, Herbert Spenser. Henry George does not propose either to purchase the land or to confiscate it. "The first would be unjust; the second, needless. Let the individuals who now hold it, still retain, if they wish, possession of what they call 'their' land. We may safely leave them the shell, and take the kernel. It is not necessary to confiscate land, it is only necessary to confiscate rent."

The State already receives some rent in taxation. Let the State appropriate all the rent by taxation. The State would really own the land by owning its value and land would be common property. All taxation would be abolished, except that upon land property having money value only. This tax assumes the name, Single Tax. It is an ad valorem tax upon land, substituted for the present taxes. The Single Tax is not a tax upon the improvements of land, such as buildings, fences, wells, etc., but on the land itself—on its value.

Let us now see the expediency of such a tax upon land. First, its effect upon the production of wealth would be entirely wholesome, since it would not discourage production, as other taxes levied on the products of labor do. Taxes on the products of labor lessen the incentive to production, as well as check all industries and fall as a heavy burden upon the people. The Single Tax on land will not discourage production, but increase it, by destroying speculative rent.

In the second place, this tax can be more easily and cheaply collected than any other tax, since land cannot be concealed, and its value can be readily ascertained. Such a tax cannot in turn be imposed upon the tenant, neither would prices go up, since land is not a thing of human production. The Single Tax would give to the government the largest net revenue, and would lessen the expenses of government.

Then again all the present modes of taxation are uncertain and demoralizing in their effects upon society. There is a great deal of unfaithfulness and corruption, bribery and grafting on the part of the collectors and tax payers. The tax on land, however, which is the least arbitrary of taxes, is also the most certain.

Finally, let us consider the equality of such a tax. The objection has been raised that the Single Tax would not fall upon all the people and thus would not only be unequal, but what is a more important principle in taxation, the responsibility of contributing toward the support of the government, would only fall upon one class of the population, the landlord class.

Let it be understood that each person should be taxed according to his means. Would it be just to tax a laborer the same as a landlord? Furthermore, it has been proved that rent does not belong to the landlord and is not earned by him. It is the community and its growth that determine rent and the increasing value of land. Therefore a tax on land is a tax on all the people, not on the landowner alone. We have therefore seen that the Single Tax is the most just and expedient of all modes of taxation.

It is not necessary to dwell much upon the social, intellectual and moral amelioration that this panacea would bring about. To conclude, this "simple yet sovereign remedy, will raise wages, increase the earnings of the capitalists, extirpate pauperism, afford free scope to human powers, lessen crime, elevate morals, taste, intelligence and purity of government and carry civilization to yet nobler heights."

To deny that there are natural rights is to deny that in associated life there are natural laws.