

SLAVERY AND SLAVERY

Slavery is one of the most taboo subjects today. It is a terrible transgression against our fellow man and is historically viewed with great embarrassment as the product of a racist western society that exploited millions of Africans over several centuries. This was an evil we hope will never be repeated in our contemporary enlightened society. In 'Slavery and Slavery' George writes:

The essence of slavery is the robbery of labor. It consists in compelling men to work, yet taking from them all the produce of their labor except what suffices for a bare living. (Social Problems p.131)

But for how many of the world's free and equal citizens does this still seem the case? In this radical chapter George claims that slavery was never really abolished but simply changed form. I agree with this claim and will argue that it still exists today. It exists in the stark division of wealth between rich and poor. Currently there is a social backlash against the failure of the banking system to invest wisely and essentially gamble away money it never had. Various descriptions are used to highlight the vast scale of the problem such as the '1%' versus the '99%' - implying the rich versus the vast majority. And it is this vast majority who are the current slaves. The poor, or at least those who would not claim to be rich, are protesting at what they recognise to be a tangible social wrong. And yet no one seems to clearly articulate how things could change or what the fundamental problem is that causes this inequality.

Readers of *Land&Liberty*, of course, will be aware of Henry George's central concern - that land should not be privately owned - though it is not my intention to examine this again here. Rather I wish to look at the resulting social problems it causes.

George writes, 'At the root of every social problem lies a social wrong' (p.127). He says that no complex answer is required to resolve this social wrong but simply the recognition that man cannot live or work without land. While we are denied access to land we remain the virtual slaves of those who do own land. We are not slaves in an obvious sense. We are not found blatantly chained to a workstation, although many feel this is in effect the case. We are slaves with subtle chains, so subtle that we almost don't notice we are bound. It was George who put forth the idea that we are all slaves while we are denied access to freedom. Freedom in this case is access to land itself. He makes a wonderfully illuminating analogy:

Robinson Crusoe, as we all know, took Friday as his slave. Suppose, however, that instead of taking Friday as his slave, Robinson Crusoe had welcomed him as a man and a brother; had read him a Declaration of Independence, an Emancipation Proclamation and a Fifteenth Amendment, and informed him that he was a free and independent citizen, entitled to vote and hold office; but had at the same time also informed him that that particular island was his

(Robinson Crusoe's) private and exclusive property. What would have been the difference? Since Friday could not fly up into the air nor swim off through the sea, since if he lived at all he must live on the island, he would have been in one case as much a slave as in the other. Crusoe's ownership of the island would be the equivalent to his ownership of Friday. (p.127)

George then makes a careful distinction between the two different forms of slavery that this chapter is concerned with; chattel slavery and praedial slavery. Chattel slaves, like cattle, are prevented from leaving an area by physical restraint either by ball and chain for humans, or fences and gates for cattle. Praedial slavery is a subtly different form of chattel slavery where slaves are not physically restrained but rather, like Robinson Crusoe's Friday, geographically limited. Since land is required to live and work and the only land available is owned by another, then the praedial slaves are forced to accept the landowner's terms. Essentially they must work for him while scraping together whatever they can for themselves and their family. The connection between the availability of land and this form of slavery is explained: 'praedial slavery - the attachments of serfs to the soil - the form of chattel slavery which existed longest in Europe, it is only of use to the proprietor where there is little competition for land,' (p.128).

The trouble with slavery for the landowner, for example in England, in previous centuries was not that the social wrong of slavery itself was recognised. It was, rather shockingly, that slaves were too costly and inefficient. After common land began to be enclosed in England from the 16th century onwards it was far easier and cheaper to employ local labour, or to hold land out of use from the indigenous population, than to import slaves from Africa. By contrast, around this time, land was freely available in America but labour was expensive. The reasons for this were, of course, because people could support themselves on the land and had no need to work for someone else. This produced the perfect economic conditions to make the vast importation of African slaves profitable.

To the English proprietor, the ownership of slaves would be only a burden and a loss, when he can get laborer's for less than it would cost to maintain them as slaves, and when they are (become) ill or infirm can turn them on the parish... The competition with each other of so-called freemen, who are denied all right to the soil of what is called their country, brings him labor cheaper and more conveniently than would chattel slavery.

That a people can be enslaved just as effectually by making property of their lands as by making property of their bodies, is a truth that conquerors in all ages have recognized, and that, as society developed, the labor of others, have been prompt to see... by making property of the land instead of the person, much care, supervision and expense are saved the proprietors; and though no particular slave is owned by a particular master, yet the one class still appropriates the labor of the other class as before. (p.128-9)

We may illustrate this notion by using some extreme examples. The 'nominally-free people' as George calls them, are no longer chattel slaves but do not have free access to land, cannot employ themselves and are thus forced to compete with each other to secure employment with a landowner. Therefore, as work is scarce, the situation becomes what we would call today 'an employers' market' with the employer driving wages as low as the worker will accept. Competition is high between workers for employment. Competition is also high between landowners themselves to extract as much profit from any workplace - that occupies any particular piece of land - by reducing overheads. Overheads, from the landowner's point of view, include workers' wages, because wages are now regarded as a cost of production instead of the fruit of production. However, wages are actually *created* by production and are not a cost of production. Wages are pitched as low as possible but will still usually attract more willing applicants than actual vacancies.

The same situation occurs on the land used for residential purposes. Since the workers cannot have a home without access to land they must either buy land or pay rent to another landowner. Land and housing are also scarce and this scarcity drives the price of rent as high as a worker is prepared to pay. All that remains from the worker's meagre salary is only enough to survive modestly. Even in prosperous times, many people are prepared to work for wages that will merely board and clothe them - gladly accepting effectively the wages of slaves.

Let us now consider the former chattel slaveholders who as a praedial slave masters without direct control of the people but, with private ownership of land, maintain a passive control. Those who were slaveholders but who now operate as landowners are able to appropriate a financial gain from the 'nominally free' that they once appropriated from slaves, but without the responsibilities of being a slaveholder. The justification for this is that they provide the area of land (or buildings) within which the work can take place. This is the great social wrong. The skewed view of society today is that the employer as landowner is a contributing member of the community in allowing people to work on his land, when, as Georgists would say, the land should not have been held out of use in the first place.

I have met businessmen who own vast property empires who will not allow any of their industrial or residential property to be used by keeping rents at a high level. They do not suffer any hardship since they are already receiving elevated rental incomes from their other properties. Those who wish to find a home or start a business and work are unable to find property which is reasonably affordable since all landlords are aware of what they perceive to be 'the going rate' for property and so they would rather take no income from tenants than potentially devalue this perceived 'going rate'. To lower this 'going rate' would be detrimental to their long-term profits. This attitude of the landowner prevents work and stifles production. It also leaves little left over, after rent is paid for living accommodation. This stifles commerce. The solution is not as simple as to make facile financial changes but to change the inequitable distribution of wealth.

But it must be said that the analogy between our industrial system and chattel slavery is only supported by the consideration of extremes. Between those who get but a bare living and those who live luxuriously on the earnings of others, are many gradations...



the millionaire's grandchildren may be tramps, while even the poor man who has lost hope for himself may cherish it for his son. Moreover, it is not true that all the difference between what labor fairly earns and what labor really gets goes to the owners of land... many of the owners of land are small owners – men who own the homesteads in which they live or the soil which they till, and who combine the characters of laborer and landowner. (p.131-2)

George then asks us to imagine chattel slavery existing in a modern society, independent of race. This would necessitate more than just two classes of people – masters and slaves – but intermediaries, supervisors, specialist in sales (to deal with the products the slaves produce) and many other middle men who would also retain a proportion of the wealth themselves and they may become rich themselves. The fluctuations of wealth and fortune would result in some slaveholders falling down a class to work as a middle man, perhaps even become a slave himself. Conversely, individual slaves could rise up the ranks within this system.

In this concept of modern chattel slavery George asks us to consider the effects of taxation, the establishment of monopolies of manufacture, the creation of public debts and the essential similarity between the systems of making people property and making land property.

Different individuals will be affected by this movement in vastly different ways. Those who can afford some of their own freedom, such as smaller landowners, will gradually become completely enslaved as the price of land rises.

The plight of the independent farmer is principally the same now as it was in George's time, and, as correctly predicted, there are fewer of them in existence. Gradually, as the price of land rises, the harder it becomes to make a small amount of land profitable. Thus more and more landowners pass into the praedial slave category. Slavery by the appropriation of land is a gradual process. 'As it becomes more and more difficult to get land, so will the virtual enslavement of the laboring classes go on,' (p.134). And, as it goes on, the distribution of wealth moves towards the richer sections of society and the less well-off become even less so.

I would like to pause here for a moment and reflect on the notion that *the gap between the rich and poor widens as the slave population expands* as George suggests. There is a general and correct feeling today that the balance of the distribution of wealth is obviously moving towards the rich while the rest of society suffers.

Is this assertion correct? Regardless of whether the media claims the economy is doing well or badly, there is a clear contradiction when it is obvious the rich keep getting richer. It is no coincidence, even when there is a severe economic downturn, that luxury goods of the type that only the wealthiest members of society can afford are enjoying great success. For example, Ferrari motor cars had their best year of sales in their sixty five year history in 2011, just after the recession of 2008, when it was evident that the gap between the rich and the poor was expanding further. Since 2011 sales figures have continued to rise. The very rich can still afford expensive luxuries while the rest of society struggle to buy petrol to put in their cars.

Although slavery was abolished, George questions how much benefit the slave actually saw from this. A correspondence between Henry George and G. M. Jackson, a former slave owner's son, relates an amazing admission from a former slave himself in 1883. '[...] you say you set us free; but 'fore God, I'm wus off than when I belonged to your father.' Jackson goes on to relate the story from the other side of the fence with a slave owner: 'How foolish it was in us to go to war for slavery. We get the labor cheaper now than when we owned the slaves.'

They got the labour cheaper in the form of rent and took more of the labour from the worker after he ceased to be a slave. Their responsibility and interest ceased when they had appropriated all the work they could from the 'nominally-free' worker.

Abolishing chattel slavery while appropriating land George likens to the school master who announced he had abandoned the use of the rod and denounced it as a barbaric form of punishment (so that sensitive mothers would bring their children to his school), but after the door had closed, the crafty school master drew out a cane as replacement for the rod. This is very much like the abolition of slavery.

The improvement in the material condition of the slaves in the Southern States of America was acknowledged. George points out that at that time, much of the land in this vast area remained unclaimed and unused – in contrast to the more densely populated Northern States. There was therefore not the fierce competition that is consistent with densely populated areas as there was no surplus of labour seeking employment as there was in the North. So the comparison between North and South for the newly freed slave can only be fairly made when the population density of the south reaches that of the North.

George makes the bold assertion that it is more humane to make property of people than property of the land. His reasoning is that the:

[...] cruelties of which are perpetrated under the system of chattel slavery are more striking and arouse more indignation because they are the conscious acts of individuals. But for the suffering of the poor under the more refined system (of slavery) no one in particular seems responsible... But this very fact permits cruelties that would not be tolerated under the one system to pass almost unnoticed under the other. Human beings are overworked, are starved, are robbed of all the sweetness of life, are condemned to ignorance and brutishness, and to the infection of physical and moral disease; are driven to crime and suicide, not by other individuals but by iron necessities for which it seems no one in particular is responsible.

We have not abolished slavery. We never can abolish slavery, until we honestly accept that the fundamental truth asserted by the Declaration of Independence and secure to all the equal and inalienable rights with which they are endowed by their Creator. (p.137-8)

It is a very radical notion to assert that slavery still exists today.

And George asks:

Supposing we did legalise chattel slavery again, who would buy men when men can be hired so cheaply? (p.138) ■