

TAX FACTS

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TOWERS OF BABEL

It is natural that such an unhappy condition as now exists in the world should prompt many people to search for a remedy. Many are the schemes that have already been proposed, and some will receive enough publicity to attract the attention of the general public. How can the average man or woman tell which ones deserve careful study and consideration.

The science of the production and distribution of wealth is based on natural law—or it wouldn't be a science. Whenever men set out to cure economic ills by methods that give no consideration whatever to these laws, we may know that they are not worthy of serious attention.

The public has been asked recently to consider the findings and proposals of a group of men at Columbia University. These men, or some of them at least, are engineers. Their professional work of bridge building or building-construction cannot be performed unless they take into consideration the laws of physics. Their structures would not stand. Have they given the same recognition to the natural laws that govern the body politic, for better or for worse?

These well-intentioned gentlemen have spent ten years accumulating evidence to show that modern machines and inventions have put us on the road to ruin. Why, we can make more bricks in five minutes than the Children of Israel could in five weeks. What in the world are houseless folk to do? If we are not careful, the bakeries will be turning out loaves of bread so fast they'll be running in the gutters—and we'll all starve to death!

It is obvious that these would-be economists have made one mistake in diagnosing our ills. They have fallen into the trap of supposing that men want work. They don't. Nobody wants work. Whenever men work because they "love their work", that expenditure of energy has ceased to be work and has become play. Men don't want work—they want what work produces. They want food and clothes and houses and automobiles and thousands of things that God didn't have time to make and can come into existence only by the exertion of human energy.

Men want these things, but they will always take the shortest cut to get them. They will

never walk a mile to get a stone for the foundation of a house when walking ten feet will take them to one just as good. They will never sit down and laboriously grind corn in a hand mortar when a nearby stream will turn a couple of mill stones and produce corn meal in shorter time and with less energy. Labor saving machinery always has and always will have an important place in our lives because we insist on taking the path of least resistance. Anyone who holds up a picture of a world without drudgery and expects us to cry about it, is going to be disappointed.

If these gentlemen want to blame machinery and invention for our troubles, they must explain the poverty and starvation in China and India where there is almost no labor saving machinery compared with the United States. And if they attempt such an explanation, they will be forced to find a common cause for the poverty here and abroad.

In his book, *The Science of Political Economy*, Henry George says: "The reason of the constantly increasing confusion of the scholastic political economy has lain in the failure of the so-called science to define its subject-matter or subject noun. Statistics cannot aid us in the search for a thing until we know what it is we want to find. It is the Tower of Babel over again. Men who attempt to develop a science of the production and distribution of wealth without first deciding what they mean by wealth cannot understand each other or even understand themselves."

Any scheme that would aid in the production and distribution of wealth must distinguish clearly between the products of labor and the "passive factor" in production, land, and it must not confuse labor and land, nor labor and labor's products. Does technocracy make these distinctions? Does it recognize rent and the law of rent and its significance in the production of wealth? Does technocracy make clear the fact that taxation is not merely a method of raising revenue, but is the great social adjuster, adjusting the affairs of individuals to each other and to the social group as a whole? Does it propose to work toward a condition of economic freedom where a man can choose between working for himself and working for another?

The engineers of Columbia have been attacked by business on the ground that their statistics are inaccurate, the number of bricks that can be made in a day compared with the brick-making fifty years ago isn't quite correct. These engineers might as well take their laboriously collected statistics and dump them in the Hudson River. As a key to the cure for our economic ills, they are worth just nothing at all.

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