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## **JUSTICE OF THE SINGLE TAX**

**By WILLIAM LLOYD GARRISON.**

My theme is the justice of the single tax. Unless a reform is based on solid ethical foundations, it has no claim to the consideration of mankind. Demonstrate that it cannot be sustained in the court of morals, and there is no need of adducing material evidence against it. It is sufficient to say to it, as Newman said to Charles Kingsley, "Away with you into space!" The lawyer had forty reasons why his witness did not appear. After hearing his first reason, — that the witness was dead, — the judge wisely decided to waive the other thirty-nine. The opponents of the single tax have only to show that the scheme is tinctured with injustice, and they may save themselves the trouble of proving that a land tax would not bring enough revenue to support government, or that poverty does not keep pace with progress. The surprising thing is that people write books and magazine articles chiefly devoted to the question of expediency. Establish the fact that the principle is wrong, and why waste time on the details of its working?

As justice is the cardinal point of the single tax, the bed-rock upon which it plants itself and appeals to "the consideration of mankind and the gracious favor of Almighty God," the singularity of the assaults upon it consists in their general avoidance of this primal consideration. In the few minutes at my command, I propose to discuss nothing else, believing justice the paramount and all-important interest.

His Grace, the Duke of Argyll, in his famous attack upon "the Prophet of San Francisco," met the question squarely at the beginning by denouncing the "immoral doctrines" and "profligate conclusions" of "Progress and Poverty," "the unutterable meanness of the gigantic villany," and by stigmatizing its author as "such a Preacher of Unrighteousness as the world has never seen." In the masterly and elevated rejoinder of Mr. George, he says: "I admit, even more unreservedly than the Duke, the competence of the tribunal before which he cites me. I am willing to submit every question of political economy to the test of ethics. So far as I can see, there is no social law which does not conform to moral law, and no social question which cannot be determined more quickly and certainly by appeal to moral perceptions than by appeal to intellectual perceptions. Nor can there be any dispute between us as to the issue to be joined. He charges me with advocating violation of the moral law in proposing robbery. I agree that robbery is a violation of the moral law, and is therefore, without further inquiry, to be condemned."

In this lofty spirit let us consider the "robber theory." The substance of the charge of injustice preferred against the single tax is that its operation would despoil certain land-owners of their vested property. It is conceded that not all would suffer, — nay, it is admitted that those who properly use their possessions would be benefited; but it is undoubted that speculators and monopolists, who neither use the natural opportunity held by them nor permit others to use it, will be losers. No matter how much deprivation to others this locking up of natural resources may be, our sympathy is asked not for the despoiled, but for the despoiler; and in his behalf great moral indignation is expended.

We repudiate the charge that we are the deniers of the rights of property. To quote Mr. George again: "We are the upholders and defenders of the rights of property. We say that the great French Convention was right when it asserted the sacred right of property. That there is a right of property, that comes from no human law, which antedates all human enactments, — that is a clear genesis. That which man produces, that which by his exertion he brings from the reservoir of nature and adapts to forms suited to gratify the wants of man, — that is his, — his as against all the world. If I by my labor catch a fish, that fish is and ought to be mine; if I make a machine, that machine belongs to me, — that is the sacred right of property. There is a clear title from the producer, resting upon the right of the individual to himself, to the use of his own powers, to his rights, and to the enjoyments of the results of his exertion, — the right that he may give, that he may sell, that he may bequeath."

Under this definition of property land cannot come. It is a bounty of nature, existing before man and necessary to his existence and prosperity. No title to its possession can be valid in the same sense that a title to the product of labor is valid and indefeasible. As Herbert Spencer puts it, "It can never be pretended that the existing titles to such property are legitimate. Violence, fraud, the prerogative of force, the claims of superior cunning, — those are the sources to which those titles may be traced. The original deeds were written with the sword rather than with the pen; not lawyers, but soldiers, were the conveyancers; blows were the current coin given in payment; and, for seals, blood was used in preference to wax. Could valid claims be thus constituted?" And he insists that "either men have a right to make the soil private property or they have not. There is no medium. We must choose one of the two positions. There can be no half-and-half opinion. In the nature of things the fact must be either one way or the other. If men have not such a right, we are at once delivered from the several predicaments already pointed out. If they have such a right, then is that right absolutely sacred, not on any pretence to be violated: If they have such a right, then is his grace of Leeds justified in warning off tourists from Ben Mac Dui, the Duke of Atholl in closing Glen Tilt, the Duke of Buccleugh in denying sites to the

Free Church, and the Duke of Sutherland in banishing the Highlanders to make room for sheep-walks. If they have such a right, then it would be proper for the sole proprietor of any kingdom — a Jersey or Guernsey, for example — to impose just what regulations he might choose on its inhabitants, — to tell them that they should not live on his property unless they professed a certain religion, spoke a particular language, paid him a specified reverence, adopted an authorized dress, and conformed to all other conditions he might see fit to make. If they have such a right, then is there truth in that tenet of the ultra-Tory school, that the land-owners are the only legitimate rulers of a country, — that the people at large remain in it only by the land-owners' permission, and ought consequently to submit to the land-owners' rule, and respect whatever institution the land-owners set up. There is no escape from these inferences. They are necessary corollaries to the theory that the earth can become individual property. And they can only be repudiated by denying that theory."

What does the single tax contemplate? Taking from a man that which is his own? On the contrary, it insists on absolute respect for such possession, which, under our customs and laws, is so ruthlessly disregarded. It proposes to disturb no title and to bring no confusion by its beneficent arrangement. It simply means to take, in the way of taxes, for the benefit of the whole community, that annual rental value given to land, because of its situation, by the community itself. Where is the injustice in this? The creator of the value is entitled to that value; and for individuals to appropriate what in truth belongs to the community, as under the present system, is not justice but its reverse. Because a wrong method obtains, whereby the individual is able by legal assistance to exact an unjust tribute from his fellow-citizens, why is it dishonest to try, by appealing to men's reason, to have the law changed?

If, because of time-honored custom, an artificial industry is flourishing under a protective tariff, permitting its owner to draw enforced tribute from consumers, is it a violation of the rights of property to annul that privilege by changing the law and to stop further spoliation? Nay, it is a bounden duty. It makes no difference whether the wrong is of recent birth or hoary with the mould and superstition of centuries. No lapse of time can convert a wrong into a right. And the parallel of the tariff immorality applies with double force to the unjust monopoly of land. Let me illustrate. At Killarney, in Ireland, I was informed, whether correctly or not, that the broad possessions of the Earl of Kenmare were the inheritance from the mistress of a profligate king. It matters not whether the fact is so or not. It is undeniable that the first possessor of this beautiful region became possessor of it by seizure and force. His successors thenceforth have been enabled to thrive by the subjection and contributions of the people who were destined by accident to inhabit that particular territory. By taking that annual value of the land and its appurtenances, by means of rent, the landlord has robbed labor of its fruits and produced a population of beggars, where,

under the rule of justice, thrift and prosperity would naturally exist. Rent, more effectively than protective tariffs, can wring from labor its hard earnings and enrich idlers. The land-owner controls a natural opportunity essential to the existence of human beings, which he can lock up or withhold from them at pleasure, his interest growing with their needs. He may be an infant, an absentee, or an idiot. It is this system against which the single tax wars.

The confusion of thought which does not distinguish between the taking of rent by the individual and its collection by the community, as regards its effect upon the tenant, is astonishing. If a dozen people form a community, it is easy to see that taxes enacted for the equal benefit of the twelve are just, and as manifest that the same amount taken from the twelve for the benefit of one is an outrage on the other eleven. Moreover, ownership in land permits the landlord to take all the earning of labor applied to land, excepting enough for a bare subsistence. The single tax, on the other hand, only asks that each occupant of land shall pay to all the people for the privilege accorded him. Now, the landlord's rent is a direct levy on the fruits of labor, in some cases amounting to practical confiscation. The single tax is powerless to subtract one cent from the earnings of the laborer or the products of his labor. Every improvement would be exempt, and a single tax on land values can never be shifted upon labor. Industry would then reap its true reward, and enforced poverty be an anomaly. Labor could employ itself.

If the single tax were an autocrat with arbitrary power, able immediately to upset the established order of things, there might be reason for dismay and epithets. In truth, it is an *idea*, dependent for its application upon the changed convictions of society through the legitimate instruments of instruction and argument. It detests dynamite, and antagonizes armies and navies, which are the types of force. It comes clean-handed before the tribunal of justice, addressing itself to the religious and moral forces, which are at the root of civilization.

What is legislation but the alteration of written law? Are statutes fixed and imperishable as principles? or are they the imperfect expression of the average sentiment, to be changed, altered, repealed, and amended, as the necessity of growth requires? Why, therefore, when advocates of the single tax express their determination to seek a change in the methods of taxation by legitimate processes, are they assailed in terms befitting marauders and public enemies? The language is as indefensible as the wrong it seeks to obscure. But, inasmuch as the owners of unused lands have invested their earnings therein in good faith, encouraged to do so by the law which recognizes land as individual property, ought they not to be compensated if the single tax destroys its speculative value? The same reply which Emerson gives to a similar question concerning investments in human flesh, which were also protected by law,

applies here : —

"Pay ransom to the owner,  
And fill the bag to the brim.  
Who is the owner? The slave is owner,  
And ever was.. Pay him."

In other words, if compensation is to be made, render it to the sufferers, whose opportunities are curtailed by land monopoly, and not to the speculator, who profits at their expense. Unfortunately, restitution to the wronged is impossible. There is no natural fund from which to draw, and no unnatural surplus like the one now squandered on pensions and personal rewards for party service. So the believers in the single tax, seeing that "indemnity for the past" is impossible, are struggling to assure "security for the future."

Nearly every change of statutes affects vested interests for good or ill. If the unjustifiable McKinley bill shall become a law, who can estimate the disturbance and individual losses in certain lines of business? And who proposes compensation to the injured ones? When legislation is destructive and partial, no such demands are made; but, at the mention of a reform which seeks the uplifting of the masses and the abolition of a system that breeds poverty, its pathway is blocked at once by the cry for compensation. The tender and sensitive consciences that are callous to the widespread degradation resulting from landlordism are shocked inexpressibly at the prospective loss of the landlord's unearned profits.

Tom Hood exclaimed, in reference to the shutting up of the London Zoological Gardens on Sunday, —

"Spirit of Cant! have we not had enough  
To make Religion sad and sour and snubbish,  
But saints zoological must cant their stuff,  
As vessels cant their ballast-rattling rubbish?"

These lines could be admirably paraphrased to describe the condition of mind which affects holy horror at the immorality of the single tax.

I close with an expression of sincere conviction that no other reform in the world's history has been more considerate, more absolutely just, more in the interest and security of property, more scrupulous regarding individual rights, and more truly conservative than this. Its realization can only come through the gradual removal of the present crushing burdens of labor by and with the consent of the majority of the

people. Every forward step can be tested in the light of experience and by the fullest trial. If the result is wrong, it will be the people who punish themselves; and in their hands the remedy always abides.

In the memorable words of Wendell Phillips: "The broadest and most far-sighted intellect is utterly unable to foresee the ultimate consequences of any great social change. Ask yourself, on all such occasions, if there be any element of right and wrong in the question, any principle of clear, natural justice that turns the scale. If so, take your part with the perfect and abstract right, and trust God to see that it shall prove the expedient."