

THE LAND QUESTION: A WOMAN'S SYMPOSIUM.

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III. THE SOLUTION OF THE LABOR QUESTION. Sarah Mifflin Gay

In determining our duty as members of society it is not necessary to speculate on the destiny of man either here or hereafter. Where and how individual and social perfection may be attained are questions, however important and absorbing, which may be set aside in trying to solve the pressing problems of the hour. Those remain unchanged from age to age. These change with every generation, and demand immediate answers.

What is the great question of our generation? With one voice the civilized nations cry, "The labor question." Our Sphinx asks us how to secure the economic freedom of mankind. Not to answer is to be destroyed.

The land question and the labor question are the same. On the union of land and labor the life of man depends. Divorce them and man perishes. Labor wastes away without material on which to work; land lies useless till labor scratches its surface, burrows in its depths and dips in its waters. Every restriction upon this union is disastrous in proportion to its degree. Is it perfect now? Let the striking miners, mortgaged farmers, bankrupts, unemployed artisans and laborers, the clerks out of a place and professional men waiting for clients, bear witness that it is not.

But how, it will be asked, will the untrammelled union of land and labor solve the "labor problem"? Before trying to show this let us present two definitions: —

1. Land, in political economy, means all natural resources.
2. Labor means all human effort.

It has been said that man comes into the world with a mouth and a pair of hands to fill it. He goes to nature's storehouse, the land, and helps himself. The same may be said of all other animals. But there is a difference; man is the only unsatisfied animal. When he has food enough, he wants shelter, then clothes. He is not long satisfied with raw meat, a cave and a skin round his loins. In time he wears silk, lives in a palace and eats peacocks'tongues. And where does he go to get these things? To the same old storehouse, ever overflowing, inexhaustible. Men no longer go directly to the storehouse each for himself; the raw material of one set of men is the finished product of those one degree nearer the primal industries; all bear the same relation to the earth; all depend upon it for life; all have equal right; to it.

We see, then, that as man's desires increase, his hands and brain are still able to gratify them. Nor does nature refuse the material on which to work. How comes it, then, that with increase of productive power, with transportation so perfected that famine from scarcity is unknown, the mass of civilized men live as the savage lives, from hand to mouth always, and die, often, as the savage never dies, from starvation, with plenty round the corner?

It is because man himself has made laws which prevent labor, which creates all wealth, from reaching land, the material from which all wealth is created. Not that all men would, under conditions which ensure perfect union of land and labor, become farmers or miners, fishers or lumbermen; but enough would do so to give employment to those who prefer to work in what we may call the secondary industries. For society is a seamless network of demand and supply. Every man in working to satisfy his own desires, sets others to work, and the prosperity of each ensures the well-being of all.

In political economy wealth means the whole product of labor; that is, everything we use after labor has removed it from its natural state, from a pail of water to a book. What is poverty? The absence of wealth. And since all wealth is created by the application of labor to land, it follows that all adults who are not sick or idiotic may get it if they have access to land.

In primitive communities access to land is easy. The land is free to all in nomadic tribes. When men begin to cultivate the soil there is enough for all; each may have a piece without infringing upon the right of his neighbor. The Jews tried to establish an equitable land tenure by the institution of the jubilee. The Teutonic *mark*, Swiss *allmend*, Servian and Russian village communities, the commons of England and the doctrine of eminent domain embodied in our law, all are imperfect recognitions of the principle that the earth belongs to the race. But in a civilization where the pressure of population and the increased power of production are as great, and exchange as easy as in ours, a more perfect recognition is necessary if we would advance, nay, if we would not retrograde — a recognition in law of the right of all to the earth, which shall also secure to each the permanent possession which the stability of our improvements makes necessary.

Nature herself has provided the means by which we can establish this principle, namely, economic rent. Economic rent is the value which attaches to land by reason of the pressure of population, and exactly measures the demand for land of varying quality and situation, being great in cities and small in rural communities. It is, in fact, a site value, and if it were treated in law as a common fund, which in fact it is, and were made to bear the common expenses of the people, not only would the right of all to the earth be secured, but all unused land would be opened to settlement, the owners of occupied land would be forced to put it to its best use, and taxation could be abolished. This would enormously increase wealth and would justly distribute it, since he who made it would keep it. And this change could be brought about with very little friction, by simply abolishing all other taxes gradually and increasing that on land values till the whole of the annual rental value was taken.

This is what is known as the single tax, and it is the practical solution of the land question. Therefore the land question means to me the single tax, and the single tax is, in my opinion, the longest step we can take toward social and individual perfection here and now.

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