

HOW TO HELP THE UNEMPLOYED

In the first quarter of this century an educated and thoughtful Englishman, Edward Gibbon Wakefield, visited this country. He saw its great resources, and noted the differences between the English-speaking society growing up here and that to which he had been used. Viewing everything from the standpoint of a class accustomed to look on the rest of mankind as created for their benefit, what he deemed the great social and economic disadvantage of the United States was "the scarcity of labor." It was to this he traced the rudeness of even what he styled the upper class, its want of those refinements, enjoyments, and delicacies of life common to the aristocracy of England.

How could an English gentleman emigrate to a country where labor was so dear that he might actually have to black his own boots; so dear that even the capitalist might have to work, and no one could count on a constant supply ready to accept as a boon any opportunity to perform the most menial, degrading, and repulsive services?


Mr. Wakefield was not a man to note facts without seeking their connection. He saw that this "scarcity of labor" came from the cheapness of land where the vast area of the public domain was open for settlement at nominal prices. A man of his class and time, without the slightest question that land was made to be owned by landlords, and laborers were made to furnish a supply of labor for the upper classes, he was yet a man of imagination. He saw the future before the English-speaking race in building up new nations in what were yet the waste spaces of the earth. But he wished those new nations to be socially, politically, and economically newer Englands; not to be settled as the United States had been, from the "lower classes" alone, but to contain from the first a proper proportion of the "upper classes" as well.

He saw that "scarcity of employment" would in time succeed "scarcity of labor" even in countries like the United States by the growth of speculation in land; but he did not want to wait for that in the newer Britains which his imagination pictured.

He proposed at once to produce such salutary "scarcity of employment" in new colonies as would give cheap and abundant labor, by a governmental refusal to sell public land, save at a price so high as to prevent the poorer from getting land, thus compelling them to offer their labor for hire.

This was the essential part of what was once well known as the Wakefield plan of colonization. It is founded on a correct theory. In any country, however new and vast, it would be possible to change "scarcity of labor" into "scarcity of employment" by increasing the price put on the use of land. If three families settled a virgin continent, one family could command the services of the others as laborers for hire just as fully as though they were its chattel slaves, if it was accorded the ownership of the land and could put its own price on its use.

Wakefield proposed only that land should be held at what he called "a sufficient price" - that is, a price high enough to keep wages in new colonies only a little higher than wages in the mother-country, and to produce not actual inability to get employment on the part of laborers, but only such difficulty as would keep them tractable, and ready to accept what from his standpoint were reasonable wages.

Yet it is evident that it would only require a somewhat greater increase in the price of land to go beyond this point and to bring about in the midst of abundant natural opportunities for the employment of labor, the phenomena of laborers vainly seeking employment. Now, in the United States we have not attempted to create "scarcity of employment" by Wakefield's plan. But we have made haste by sale and gift to put the public domain in the hands of private owners, and thus allowed speculation to bring about more quickly and effectually than he could have anticipated, more than Wakefield aimed at. The public domain is now practically gone; land is rising to European prices, and we are at last face to face with social difficulties which in the youth of men of my time we were wont to associate with "the effete monarchies of the Old World." 

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