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Editorial Offices:

11, TOTHILL STREET, LONDON, S.W.1.

*All communications to be addressed to the Editor.*

Telegrams: "Eulav, Parl. London." Telephone: Victoria 7525.

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## IS OUR CIVILIZATION JUST TO WORKING MEN?

By Henry George

Is our civilization just to working men? It is not. Try it by whatever test you will, it is glaringly, bitterly and increasingly unjust.

If it does not seem so, it is because our moral perceptions are obscured by habit.

The tolerance of wrong dulls our sense of its injustice. Men may become accustomed to theft, murder, even to slavery—that sum of all villainies—so they see no injustice in it, yet that which is unjust is unjust still, and whoever will go back to first principles will see that it is unjust. Work is the producer, the fashioner, the bringer forth; the means whereby intelligence moulds matter to its purpose. The earth and the heavens are they not, as the Scripture tells us, the work of God?

And what kind of a world is that on which we find ourselves? It is a world in which only the raw materials are furnished us—a world in which human life can only be maintained and human wants met and desires gratified by work. Beast, bird and fish take the food they find, and are clothed they know not how. But man must work. Created in the image of the Creator, he, in a lower way, must create in his turn. Food, clothing, shelter—all the things that we call wealth—are brought into being by work. Nature yields to labour, and to labour alone.

These are truisms which everybody knows. The first man knew them.

Yes, the first man knew them; and if we would see how they are ignored in the facts of to-day, imagine that, in the slumber of night, that first man stood by your bedside in one of those great cities that are the flower, crown, and type of our civilization, and asked you to take him through it.

Here you would take him through wide and well kept streets, lined with spacious mansions, replete

with everything that can enhance comfort and gratify taste, adorned with magnificent churches. Again, you would pass into another quarter, where everything is pinched and niggard—where families are packed together tier on tier, sometimes a whole family in a single room, where even such churches as you see are poor and mean, and only the grog-shops are gorgeous. Which quarter do you think Adam would understand you to mean if you spoke of the working man's quarter?

Knowing that wealth comes only by work, would he not necessarily infer that the fine houses were the homes of the working men, and the poor, squalid houses the homes of the people who do no work? You might by ocular demonstration convince the simple old man that the very reverse of this is true, but how would you convince him that it is just?

Here is the eternal law—wealth comes only by work. Here, wherever our civilization extends, is the social fact, those who work hardest and longest, those whom we style the working classes, are the poorest classes. The very word working man is synonymous with poverty. A working man's hotel is everywhere a poor hotel; a working man's restaurant is a mean restaurant. In a working man's store you will find only the cheaper and coarser goods. What physician wants a working man's practice if he can get any other? What minister a working man's church? Who wishes his son to become, or his daughter to wed, a working man? We prate vainly of the dignity of our labour; facts give our words the lie. Labour is everywhere condemned and despised. Everywhere it slinks to a back seat.

It were idle to complain of this. The prettiest theory must bend to the logic of facts. God intended labour to be honourable among men. That is clear, for He made wealth the reward of labour. But somehow or other, as we have managed to fix things in the civilization of which we are so proud, labour has been divorced from its natural reward, and this being the case, the signet of respectability is gone.

But it may be said, in speaking of working men, we mean, for the most part, mere hand-workers. Manual labour is but a low kind of labour. The great agent of production is mind, not muscle.

Granted that the more intelligent work—the work we call brain-work—ought to be paid more than mere manual labour, this does not prove it just that manual labour should get so little. What can the brain produce without the hand? Suppose Adam, when driven from Paradise, had set himself under a tree and resolved to make a living with his brain, what would have become of him? Suppose that the hand-workers of the world were to stop work to-day, what would become of brain-workers? Furthermore, is not all hand-work brain-work, and have not those in the ranks of hand-workers just as much natural intelligence as those in any other walk of life?

But I make no narrow definition of the term working man. Whoever does productive work of any kind is really a working man. But all exertion is not work. The gambler I do not call a working

man, whether he gamble with dice, or cards, or in stocks or produce. The thief I do not call a working man, whether he picks pockets or wrecks railroads. The confidence operator I do not call a working man, whether his gains be dollars or millions; and whether he dwell in an almshouse or in a palace—whether he ride in a prison van or in a coach and pair, I do not call the mere appropriator a working man.

A man may toil from early manhood to hoary age to increase his gains, he may in the struggle for wealth wear out his body, distort his mind, warp his instincts, and lose his soul, and yet be not a working man, if his struggle be merely to take—not to make!

But him I call a working man, who, with hand or with head, takes the part of a producer in the complex machinery of which human wants are satisfied. Whether his work be physical, or whether it be mental, if he would aid in providing for the needs of the body, of the intellect, for the needs of the soul—him I call a working man! And using the term in the widest sense, I still insist that our civilization is unjust to working men.

Is it not notorious that brain-work is, on the whole, as much underpaid as hand-work? Are there not many brain-workers who, at times, are tempted to envy the hand-worker? How many authors, how many inventors, how many newspaper writers, how many teachers, do you know of who have got rich by work? I do know of some newspaper writers who have got rich, but it has been by being led into "fat things." I do know of some teachers who have made fortunes, but it has been by successful speculation. I do know of one author who by the sheer earnings of his pen has bought himself what most of us would call a fine house, though it is not as good as some millionaire's stable, but he writes detective stories for boys' papers. Even in business, do not statistics show that something like 95 per cent of all that start fail?

Getting rich by hand-work—that is utterly out of the question; and if you have a strong, vigorous brain, and want to get rich, use it not to do productive work, but to appropriate the work of others. That is the way to get rich.

When I was a boy and went to Sunday school, I used to want to be rich. Dollars was the sum I used to dream about, for fortunes were not so large in those days. But since I have seen more of life, since I have seen how great wealth masters the man, I fear the responsibilities. But poverty, in such a civilization as ours, this does not merely mean hard work and poor fare, but weakness and contempt; the dulling of the intellect; the cramping of the soul. The injustice of our civilization to working men is not so much that it deprives them of physical gratifications they ought to have, but that it deprives them of higher things—of leisure and opportunity for mental and moral growth.

But what is the education of the school as compared with the education outside the school? How little will it avail if you teach the child in school that honesty is the best policy, when from the time he can think, the lesson that he everywhere learns

is if you would escape pain and gain pleasure, if you would win respect and consideration, get MONEY. Get it honestly if you can, but at any rate get money. You ministers may preach every Sunday, of hell and of heaven, but the hell that the mass of your congregation most fear is the hell of poverty. The heaven which most attracts them is the heaven of wealth; nor is it strange that it should be so.

This is the necessary result of that fierce struggle for existence, which rages wherever our civilization extends, and becomes fiercer and fiercer as it progresses. But the fierce struggle is not natural; our moral perceptions tell us that. The very construction of man, with his capacity for thought and capacity for feeling, show us that he was intended for better things than to spend nine-tenths of his powers to get an animal existence, as most men have to do.

And when we look into the social laws, which are as truly the laws of the Creator as are the physical or moral laws, we can see that civilization, instead of enriching one class and impoverishing another, ought to make it easier for all to live. My time is too short for argument, but let me try, as well as I can, to show this in a word.

Here, let us say, is a primitive community—one part engaged in fishing, one part in agriculture, one in mechanical operations. Now, if in one of these occupations, either by the increase in productiveness of nature or by invention or discovery, which increases the productiveness of labour, the power of obtaining wealth is increased, the benefit will not be confined to those engaged in that particular occupation, but by virtue of what is known to economists as the law of values, must be shared by all.

This principle that increased efficiency in one department of labour virtually increases the productiveness of all labour—the principle that the growth in wealth of one people is a benefit to all other peoples with whom they exchange—runs through all the social laws, and by virtue of the principle, every invention and every improvement ought to make it easier for those in every department of industry to get a living. By virtue of this principle, the rudest manual labourer ought now to live in affluence as compared with his predecessor in a rude state of society.

What is the fact? The fact is that in the very heart of our civilization there are great masses with whose lot the veriest savage could not afford to exchange—masses, who not only can get a bare living by the hardest toil, but who often cannot get a living at all, and would starve but for charity. Six centuries ago, before any of the great modern inventions had been made, before even our most prolific vegetables and fruits had been introduced, when all the arts were rude beyond comparison with the present state, pauperism was unknown in England; eight hours was the ordinary day's work, and the rudest manual labour, as such investigators as Professor Thorold Rogers tells us, lived in a rude plenty, which is affluence itself, as compared with what they get now, and even in times of actual scarcity were unvexed by the fear of want.

Is our civilization just to working men, when that is the fruit of all this advance?

Is not civilization unjust to working men when want so exists in the midst of plenty? Read the papers to-day. Everywhere you will read of reduction of wages, or of strikes against reduction of wages. What is the reason? Over-production, they say. That is to say, there is such a plethora of food—such a glut of goods—that the working man must stint his family.

From the Esquimaux of the North to the Terra del Fuegan of the South there is not a savage tribe that can comprehend the chronic poverty that exists in the heart of our civilization.

These are the bitter fruits of injustice.

What is that injustice? Many minor injustices there may be, but the first, the wide-spread, the great injustice—an injustice sufficient to account for all these effects—is so glaring that all who will look may see it.

Is not that truth—is not that truth with which religion has to do? Think of it.

It is the injustice which robs man of his birthright. It is that we have made private property of what the Creator intended for the common heritage of all.

**Unequal Distribution of Wealth.**—It is well known that the majority of the population of this country die possessed of only a few pounds, or nothing at all, and, while alive, have the greatest difficulty in getting enough to exist on. There are others, however, more happily placed, who seem to be able to scrape along in spite of the taxation they complain of. In this connection the following from the *Evening Standard* of 11th October is illuminating:—

“An insurance official tells me that Viscount Hambleden’s example in taking out a life policy of £810,000 for himself and one of £250,000 for his infant son is being followed by a number of other wealthy people who seek the partial relief which insurance affords from income tax and the facilities which it provides for payment of death duties.”

This is the kind of news item that of itself makes for so much discontent. It is a statement that enables the street-corner orator to point to the places money can be got without lowering wages. If proof were wanted that Britain is a country teeming with wealth here it is: £250,000, for one infant; hard times and the dole for the million.

**Another Beauty Spot for Sale.**—According to the *Observer* (London), of the 2nd November, 1930, the National Trust is appealing for £1,300 to complete the purchase for £14,000 of Longshaw Moor, near Sheffield. The area in question is uncultivated, and has no value for any industrial or agricultural purpose. Its only value lies in its natural beauty and in the shooting and fishing that may be had on it. The area which is being bought is 747 acres.

It will be noted that nearly £19 per acre has to be paid to preserve in its natural beauty land which owes none of its value to the hand of man.

We would direct Professor Trevelyan’s attention to this case. Does he think the land value principle applied to a piece of moorland with no value for agriculture or industry would add to its cost as a playground?

In its appeal the National Trust states that “the amount required—£14,000—may seem considerable but

it is certainly not excessive, and it is admitted by all who are in a position to judge that it is not unreasonable.”

If £14,000 for this beauty spot is considered not unreasonable, how would its price be raised were its owner persuaded, by law, to make an annual contribution to the public revenue in respect of its true value? The owner himself is not likely to believe in this method of adding to his credit at the bank.

**A Liberal Declaration.**—The Manifesto on Liberal Policy, as adopted by the Council of the National Liberal Federation at the 47th Annual Meeting at Torquay, October, 1930, states:—

“Existing methods of taxation should be revised, so as to make them as little burdensome to industry as possible; and no tax should be imposed in such a way that the community is forced to pay, for private advantage, more than the Exchequer receives; this is the effect of all protective taxes. The leading part of this revision should be the Taxation of Land Values, which would transfer burdens from industry to monopoly, promote increased production and enterprise, and secure to the community the values created by their own industry and enterprise.”

This statement reaffirms in principle the many declarations on land value policy made by the Liberal Party in the past. If the Government stands by its pledges to maintain Free Trade and tax land values, it should feel every assurance of Liberal support.

**Too High a Standard of Living?**—Mr C. Hewitson Nelson, past President, speaking at the Incorporated Accountants’ Conference at Sheffield on 26th September, 1930, said that one of the difficulties of the hour was that new standards of living created in the boom period were still tenaciously clung to by the people.

It would appear from this that if only the public would wear older clothes, eat plainer or less food, live in smaller houses, spend less on amusement, and in every possible way curtail their expenditure, everyone would be better off. It seems strange to hear exhortations to produce more, and then be told to consume less. If goods are not to be consumed, what is the use of producing them? And how are those who make them to live if the demand is to be still further reduced?

**An Economist and Unemployment.**—It is amazing the difficulty very learned people often have in seeing the wood for the trees. Sir William Beveridge has written a book entitled *Unemployment, a Problem of Industry* (1909 and 1930), from which the following is taken:—

“One part of unemployment is now due to the changes in industrial structure since the war. Another part ‘is almost certainly due to disequilibrium between wages and productivity, following the abnormal rise of real wages since the outbreak of war; by raising costs of production this would have handicapped Britain’s international trade, even if other conditions had remained the same.’”

If there has been a rise in real wages since the war, that simply means that the wage earners have the power to consume more of the goods they produce than formerly. When our “Authority” says there is a disequilibrium between wages and productivity, does he mean that there is not enough produced by labour to pay the wages? He asserts that the choice lies between raising productivity to overtake wages or lowering wages to meet productivity. His definition of productivity would be helpful.

There is still time to renew your donation to the “Land & Liberty” Sustention Fund for 1930.