

THE LAND QUESTION THE BOTTOM QUESTION

(Opening Speech by Henry George at the International Congress for Land and Social Reform, held in Paris, June, 1889.)

The land question, with which we are concerned, is the bottom question. It is the starting point for all reforms.

It is an error to believe that the land question relates only to agriculture. It concerns directly or indirectly all who have to pay rent, all who produce and exchange goods. It concerns the townsman as well as the countryman, industry and trade as much as agriculture.

Everything that man produces comes from the land. It is the site of all production, of all living, of all labour. Without the earth man can do nothing.

He who will build a house must first obtain a site on which to place it. And he who owns this site has the right to impose a tribute for it. This tribute is material. In cities such as New York and Paris the value of the land, that is to say, the tribute imposed by the landowner, is often as much as the value of the building. When rents rise the reason is never an increase in the value of the building—this often declines—but as a rule an increase in the value of the land consequent upon an increase in population.

The land question, therefore, is a matter of lively concern to the inhabitants of towns and of industrial districts. They cannot find any dwelling, any workshop, any storehouse, any establishment of any kind, not even a place of meeting or amusement, without paying their tribute to the land-monopolist. Cases are known in which men could not even meet for worship because the landlords would not give them permission to meet together at any price.

If man will bore into the bowels of the earth, if he will till its surface, if he will live in the upper stories of high buildings he must always make use of the land. The landlord is lord of the air and water, of the rocks and the soil, of the plants and the animals: he is lord over all.

Whence come the necessary materials for building, wood, stone, iron? From the earth. Whence come the raw materials of all our industries, of our furniture, our tools, and our clothing? From the earth. Whence come all the means of our existence? From the earth.

The landlord is lord over the lives of those who are robbed of the land. He is answerable for the deaths of little children and for the premature deaths of men, caused by undue toil and privation. Man without land is as a fish without water, as a bird without air.

From the earth does man come and to the earth must he return again. The earth is the great storehouse of everything that is needed for life.

Land monopoly is the primary cause of poverty. On the other hand, land monopoly is the source of the accumulation of capital in the hands of a few. Through

rents, royalties, tolls and tributes of all kinds which he takes under many different names, through the increases in value and the improvements of which alone he gets the advantage, whether they are the result of the labour of others or the natural effect of increase of population, the landowner acquires capital. This he then invests in the bank or in trade and industry, either in the form of loans, mortgages, stocks and shares, or in Government and municipal bonds. In course of

time he builds up a tremendous financial concentration which presses heavily on the world of labour. It is from landed privilege that the great fortunes have sprung, which have become the means of oppression and exploitation. *The concentration of capital is the child of land monopoly.*

In order to destroy financial concentration one must begin by destroying land monopoly. The one is the mother of the other.

Those who are assembled here may be of different opinions as to the remedy for the sufferings of society, but they are all united upon this point: that the land must not be the unrestricted property of a few privileged people.

The land question is the labour question. In order to secure for the worker the full fruits of his labour we must secure for him his rights to the land. If the land is the property of a few, those who are robbed become the property of the few.

We are convinced of this, that in making the land question the starting point of reforms, we are laying the foundation for the solution of all social problems. We need no elaborate apparatus to raise up labour: the simpler it is the more effective it is. What we have is a fundamental principle, universally applicable, which is valid all over the world and covers every individual case. The land question embraces all social questions.

Everything that the individual makes from the land belongs of right to him without deduction. The buildings, stores, growing things, products, fruits and improvements made to the land belong to him who produces them. They are the fruits of his own diligence. Only the surface, the point of support, belongs to all. The right of the community can extend only to the bare land and not to the improvements on the land. Consequently the rights of the community can be easily secured by a tax proportioned to the value of the bare land.

It is necessary to abolish present taxes, both direct and indirect. It is essential to bring the land into valuation without regard to the buildings and improvements of all kinds or the use to which it is put.

By this simple reform we secure the right of all to the land and the right of each to the complete enjoyment of the produce of his labour, and that without creating a new despotism.

When the right of all the land and the right of each to the product of his own labour has been achieved, then will men recognize that nature is not responsible for the sufferings of human society, but human mis-doing. Public welfare work and private beneficence are not the means of putting an end to poverty. The remedy is to secure land and work to everyone.

The land reform movement is now so widespread that the satisfaction of the rightful demands of the people cannot be prevented. We stand in front of great social changes. Our present position may be compared with that before our civil war for the abolition of slavery. We want to abolish every trace of slavery by making known the right of all to the surface of this planet and the right of each to full freedom, to the full earnings of his labour.

(The Official Report of the Paris Congress in 1889 appeared only in French. No report in English was published

or exists. The version given above of Henry George's speech appears for the first time. It is a translation from the German, printed in the August 1934 quarterly part of the *Jahrbuch der Bodenreform*. An interesting general account of the proceedings at the Congress was written for *The Standard* of New York by Mr W. E. Hicks, who was present as the American secretary. Henry George spoke several times, delivering also his striking address on True Free Trade, which has appeared as a pamphlet in English published by the Joseph Fels Fund of America in 1913.)