

The gift of reason

AN EXTRACT FROM *PROTECTION OR FREE TRADE*
BY HENRY GEORGE, PUBLISHED 1886

Near the window by which I write a great bull is tethered by a ring in his nose. Grazing round and round, he has wound his rope about the stake until now he stands a close prisoner, tantalised by rich grass he cannot reach, unable even to toss his head to rid him of the flies that cluster on his shoulders. Now and again he struggles vainly, and then, after pitiful bellowings, relapses into silent misery.

This bull, a very type of massive strength, who, because he has not wit enough to see how he might be free, suffers want in sight of plenty, and is helplessly preyed upon by weaker creatures, seems to me no unfit emblem of the working masses.

In all lands, men and women whose toil creates abounding wealth are pinched with poverty, and, while advancing civilisation opens wider vistas and awakens new desires, are held down to brutish levels by animal needs. Bitterly conscious of injustice, feeling in their inmost souls that they were made for more than so narrow a life, they, too, spasmodically struggle and cry out. But until they trace effect to cause, until they see how they are fettered and how they may be freed, their struggles and outcries are as vain as those of the bull. Nay, they are vainer. I shall go out and drive the bull in a way that will untwist his rope. But who shall drive humanity to freedom? Till they use the reason with which they have been gifted, nothing can avail. For them there is no special providence.

Under all forms of government the ultimate power lies with the masses. It is not kings nor aristocracies, nor landowners nor capitalists, that anywhere near enslave the people — it is their own ignorance. Most clear is this where governments rest on universal suffrage. Working people may mould to their will legislatures, courts, and constitutions. Politicians strive for favour and political parties bid against one another for their vote. But what avails this? The little finger of aggregated capital must be thicker than the loins of the working masses so long as they do not know how to use their power.