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THE PERSISTENCE OF POVERTY: HAVE THINGS CHANGED?

When Henry George visited New York in 1869 he saw things he had not seen in a visit just thirteen years before. He described New York as being the “conjunction of wealth and want”. Ten years later he replaced the phrase ‘wealth and want’ by *Progress and Poverty*.

Now, exactly 140 years later, has the situation changed? A report written from New York by Anne Summers on the 13th of this month shows that nothing has changed. Let me read some extracts from it.

“The recession has hit the Big Apple very hard and it is impossible for a visitor to not see its impact.

A few anecdotes from the past few days illustrate just how bad things are... A friend took her eight-year-old daughter to enjoy the glorious sunshine in Central Park last Sunday. The girl took off her shoes in the children’s playground. When she turned around they were gone, and her mother had to piggyback her home on the subway.

Another friend was lunching at a diner on Sixth Avenue in the West Village on Monday when the woman at the counter next to him tried to pay for her meal with a credit card. When told the place accepted only cash, the woman asked where the nearest ATM was. Fifteen minutes later she had not returned. ‘It happens all the time’ said the woman serving the meals.

And I could not help but notice when I walked through midtown on Tuesday the number of people, most of them women, standing on street corners holding small cardboard signs that said 'Homeless'. These were not New York's legendary bag ladies who trundle their possessions around in shopping trolleys. These were well-dressed, obviously middle-class, people who were displaying their distress with abject shame."

In her article Ms Summers revealed observations similar to Henry George: that is, she lived in New York during the recession of the early '90s but, compared to the present financial crisis, it was nothing like now.

The New York Henry George saw in 1856 was a decent place in which to live, neat and lovely. The visit to New York that Henry George undertook in 1869 on business sent his life in an entirely new direction. In 1869 he was thinking of entering politics but when he witnessed New York's shocking contrast between monstrous wealth and debasing want, he changed direction with the intent of discovering how such change could occur. The experience struck him so deeply in fact that he fully revealed it only once in his life, in a private letter written some fourteen years later. He wrote to Father Thomas Dawson in 1883:-

"I shall say something I don't like to speak of – that I never before told anyone. Once in daylight, and in a city street, there came to me a thought, a vision, a call – give it what name you please. But every nerve quivered. And there and then I made a vow. Through evil and through good, whatever I have done, and whatever I have left undone, to that have I been true."

We now know that he discovered principles which, if followed, allow the world community to work in harmony with natural law. The price of ignoring these principles means that social justice amongst men diminishes and what follows, is a breakdown not only in standards conducive to happy and healthy living, but also care for the environment.

His rationale goes well beyond a so-called 'single tax' to the doctrine of equality framed upon natural rights, the Golden Rule in action if you like.

Now 140 years later many movements have blossomed and died. Lately we have had feminism, environmentalism, economic rationalism, even animal rights but, strangely, not social justice framed from George's teaching.

Leo Tolstoy said in “The Great Iniquity” that we have chosen instead to “ignore” this teaching while “occupying ourselves with other absorbing affairs”. It is our task to re-present this teaching.