

Slavery, land and liberty

Timothy Glazier sees how a society can change its mind about the ownership of nature

"The Truth that I have tried to make clear will not find easy acceptance. If that could be, it would have been accepted long ago. If that could be it would never have been obscured. But it will find friends – those who will toil for it, suffer for it: if need be, die for it. This is the power of the Truth"

Henry George in *Progress and Poverty*

By a strange accident of fate, in February I found myself giving a sermon in the chapel of Christ's College, Cambridge, as one of a series on 'Enslavement and Liberty' to mark the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain in 1807. The invitation had resulted from two articles I wrote last year – 'Slavery Then and Now' and 'The True cost of Owning Nature', posted on the 'Set All Free Campaign' website. They highlighted how, until there was also 'free land', slavery would continue in some form or another. Readers of *L&L* should be taking a close interest in – and perhaps encouragement from – the current celebrations of the ending of the slave trade. Because here was an example of a society changing its mind about the ownership of nature.

This dramatic change in social attitude came about after a long age during which there was acceptance of the trade. The wealth it generated powered the industrial revolution in Britain, leading to huge vested interest in it by powerful individuals – including members of the Royal Family, many of the aristocracy, members of parliament, merchants and major institutions – including the Church. Yet in spite of all this, the decision was ultimately taken that this 'inhuman' trade, in fellow human beings as chattels, had to cease. This was an extraordinary change to come about. The parallel with the struggle to end the economic injustice resulting from land monopoly cannot be lost on those who aspire to that.

Slavery and land monopoly are two sides of a coin. As I said in the sermon, if two people arrive on a deserted island and one

says "this land is mine", then the other would become his or her slave. Because today it is covered over by a veneer of prosperity, society is failing to see that conditions of work for those of us who are employed, are often not dissimilar to the lack of freedom, movement and choice that prevailed for slaves in the past. It is no surprise that when eventually slaves came to be released, because they had no access to land many had to seek employment from their old masters in conditions far worse than what they had previously experienced.

In my sermon I likened our condition today to the prisoners in Plato's famous analogy of the cave. The prisoners had never been outside the cave. They sat manacled looking at its back wall upon which shadows of the outside world played. They perceived and believed the shadow-world to be 'reality'. Behind them, outside the cave, shone the light of 'freedom', of which the prisoners could not conceive.

This inability to appreciate the limited conditions under which we live, not unlike the inability of those in previous centuries to see the iniquity of slavery, is of course the reason why it appears so difficult to achieve the changes that could bring about the state of 'liberty' that could transform society. As Henry George also said, "once a practice, however wicked and dehumanising, becomes established in a culture, it appears to be normal and becomes accepted by the majority of that culture...." So how was it that the practice of buying and selling human beings as chattels, which had been a practice amongst many cultures for millennia, could eventually be outlawed by this country, and those enslaved set free?

Not in the first place by the actions of parliamentarians – that came right at the end. The process began with the workings of the conscience and religious sentiments of individuals and groups, in particular non conformist religious groups such as the Society of Friends – the Quakers – both in America and in Britain. Next to create an impact were the opinion formers of the day – the writers amongst whom included Jean-Jacques Rousseau

in France, and in England Horace Walpole and Dr Samuel Johnson. But of fundamental significance was the remarkable statement formulated by the great lawyer, Sir William Blackstone, in his Commentaries on the Laws of England published between 1765 and 1769. Blackstone stated that the law of England "abhors and will not endure the state of slavery within this nation.... a slave or a negro, the moment he lands in England, falls under the protection of the laws and, with regard to natural rights, becomes a freeman".

But prompting the start of the abolition process in Britain was the courageous actions of individuals whom history allows often to go unnamed: one of these a young clerk called Granville Sharp. In 1765 he took in and restored to health a man of African origin who he had found in the streets of London. He had been beaten close to death by his owner, a lawyer by the name of David Lisle. In due course Sharp was sued by Lisle who wished to regain his 'property' and have him shipped for sale in the West Indies. Sharp researched the law himself, and with argument based on the above passage from Blackstone managed to secure the man's freedom.

In due course the case against the slave trade entered the political arena. A number of significant figures started putting the power of conscience and oratory behind the cause of abolition. The most notable of these was William Wilberforce, but others included the Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger, Richard Sheridan, Charles Fox, George Canning and the renowned Edmund Burke. Ultimately, in 1805, the act was passed that would forbid the import of slaves from Africa into British colonies – coming into effect in 1807. So the parallel is clear between the abolition of the slave trade and the efforts of those who have been struggling to bring about the conditions under which land can once again become free. What would seem to be required is persistence and courage, and having faith, as Henry George maintained in my opening quote, in the power of the Truth of the cause. Then, ultimately – against the pressures of vested interest – providing Parliament with the mandate to take the necessary actions to bring about change.

Preaching a sermon is certainly different to giving a lecture or a speech, and one is forced to look deep into, and try to present, the essential causes of things. I took my text from John 8:32 "And ye shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you free." Once the truth that governs the relationship between humanity and nature can become seen and acknowledged, then the possibility of free land and economic justice will become inevitable. It might require a crisis situation to bring this about, and one is approaching, but society, in the right circumstances, can change its mind about its fundamental relationship with nature. *L&L*

Other writing by Timothy Glazier, including 'Slavery Then and Now' and 'The True cost of Owning Nature', are available at www.timothyglazier.com



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