

Who's Afraid of Idle Hands?

by Joseph Jamme

The following was written in response to two questions, in the HGI's course in Fundamental Economics, about conditions that are currently lead to social decline, and how George's remedy would affect them. Mr. Jamme is incarcerated in Texas.

Many social conditions that should have been checked in years past have already led to a decline in civilization. The days when a statesman would be insulted to be called a politician are long gone. Society has undergone severe moral decline. Vice has replaced virtue. Religions now have so many denominations that it is easy to find one that caters to one's favorite sin, and buttresses the status quo with blind faith, as if religion now functions as just another branch of despotic, oligarchic government. Crime, poverty and social squalor are everywhere; promiscuity and drunkenness are the norm. Political Correctness has replaced education. Family violence and divorce continue to rise. Children with no real foundation are cast adrift in a society that offers them no moral guidance.

If gunpowder is a technological improvement over, say, wood chips, then Rome could be considered a burning pile of wood chips, while America is burning like gunpowder. The prison-industrial complex is like the little brother of the military-industrial complex, sustained by wars in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, war on poverty, war on drugs, war on terror — when in fact the true war is that of the privileged against the people who are brainwashed into accepting their lot, as long as they have their fruitless, idle and even self-destructive distractions.

Is society in decline? I daresay it is dying, and those who would truly try to halt its demise are not only few in number, but also dismissed as dreamers or idiots. The powers that be will not go quietly into the night. Indeed society is a diseased organism.

As it stands now, the wealthy few are so entrenched and the people so mesmerized that it is difficult to conceive of George's remedy being instituted. Maybe some catastrophic event might rouse the masses from their stupor — but what? Is the current state of affairs not catastrophic enough? If anything, most would fight to remain where they are — if not of their own accord, then through popular propaganda, or compulsion. George says,

Inequality tends to render men adverse to improvement. How strong is the disposition to adhere to old methods, among the classes who are kept in ignorance by being compelled to toil for a mere existence, is too well known to require illustration.... The tendency to resist innovation, even though it be an improvement, is observable in every special organization — in religion, in law, in medicine, in science... a close corporation has always an instinctive dislike of innovation, which is but the expression of an instinctive fear that change may tend to throw down the barriers that hedge it in from the common herd, and so rob it of importance and power.... It is in this way that petrification succeeds progress. (Progress and Poverty, Bk. X, Chp. 3)

It is said that idle hands are the devil's workshop, but is this really true? What about the idle mind? Are there really any idle hands among the masses, or are they ever more busy toiling away to support the wealthy few? I think there are no idle minds. Most are used up in daily toil for bare existence, while being subjected to a constant barrage of propaganda and useless trivialities, to the point that aside from the demands of daily toil, most people have little or no concept of reality, and those who do are too tired to do anything about it. If indeed idle hands (and minds) were the devil's workshop, then George's remedy would be the devil's work, because if there were truly idle hands and minds not used up in fruitless toil, they they would engage in George's "incentives to progress" by fulfilling "the desires inherent in human nature." Indeed, it is probably the devil's workshop that fears idle hands, and George's remedy — for even a man who may be content with little will certainly want more for his children. But even the children are now so in the control of the powers that be that they may never entertain the idea that things aren't already as good as they can be. "Woe unto him that calls evil good and good evil." (Isa. 5:20) George's remedy would certainly bring woe to those powers that depend on social decadence and squalor to keep the masses occupied, because it would liberate the masses from their mental slavery, and the oligarchs would be taken down from their pedestals of (self-proclaimed) near-divinity. They would find themselves on the same footing as everyone else. George's remedy would improve life for everyone and return society to a state of health and growth that would benefit all. Even the filthy rich could still live decent, comfortable lives. But it is their all-consuming greed that renders them so like a virus infecting the social body. They seem as though they would sooner see the death of society than the people's liberation, and the removal of their suffering, that George's remedy would provide.