

# letter from the editor

Christmas is approaching and the various charities for the homeless are appealing for donations. Each year they do all they can to provide shelter and a meal at Christmas, mostly with the help of volunteers. Yet homeless numbers are the highest they have ever been in the UK. According to Big Issue, they are now around 324,990, a rise of 10% on 2023. A large proportion of these are children, and a growing proportion are under twenties.

This is not simply due to a housing shortage, though that plays a large part. A major cause is social breakdown, within families and the larger community, with drug trafficking and drug addiction a large contributing factor. The money involved in drug use in the UK is many times greater than that raised by local authorities and charities for homelessness. Although a major cause of crime, it is also part of social breakdown. Crime and deprivation have always run together in the UK since Victorian times which gave rise to gangsters in the slums. As Henry George observes in *Social Problems*, poverty leads inevitably to crime.

Historians show us how the land enclosures drove the smallholders, cottage industries and villagers into the cities, breaking up the community networks that extended over generations. Economic forces overrode human community, leading to the disembedding of the economy from social relations or control as Polanyi documents on *The Great Transformation*. In different words, individual self-interest replaced social loyalties. The land ceased to be the home of the community and became an industrial commodity. And so alienation from the land becomes the seed of social alienation. No amount of mass production can compensate for this fundamental alienation from the land and its natural support for small communities. The commodification of the land enabled the harsh exploitation of labour, while labour itself becomes a commodity or mere means of mass production. The natural order of things is inverted, with society serving the economy rather than the economy serving society.

Yet nature always seeks to restore the natural balance. The commodification of land and labour may no longer be seen by economists as the root cause of social deprivation and poverty, but human nature itself remains inclined towards community and the common good. So, despite exploitation, working conditions have gradually been improved through the unions and government legislation – both fiercely resisted in the nineteenth century. If there has been progress in society since the industrial revolution, it has largely been through eradicating the injustices imposed upon society through economic exploitation. Advances in technology are secondary.

Despite improvement in working conditions and the enormous increase in wealth, social conditions in the UK are declining. UK local authorities expenditure on social services for 2022/23 was £28.4 billion, the largest expenditure after education. £2.5 billion was on housing, 17.2% higher than budgeted for. The UK illicit drugs market is estimated at £9.4 billion, three times more than local

authorities spend on housing needs. £1.4 billion is spent annually by police enforcing drug laws in England alone, with an additional £733 million across the criminal justice system.

Family breakdown, drug abuse, deprived areas absorbed into drug trafficking and related crimes, especially through recruiting children, all contribute to the general breakdown of community and in particular to homelessness. The homeless, after a short time on the streets, become incapable of social integration or employment.

Before the enclosures the smaller scale communities shared responsibilities for one another, sustained by the church which provided education, hospitals and care for the destitute. In medieval times the land was regarded as sacred. Church and community were integrated, unlike our modern bureaucratic local authorities. We have no secular equivalent of the church, apart from the charities spontaneously created by private citizens. The church in the UK is more preoccupied with identity politics and reparations for slavery than it is for the immediate crisis of community. It has itself become alienated from society.

It may seem a long stretch of the imagination to link the present crisis of homelessness to the land question. Charities such as Shelter or Centre Point almost make the link by arguing that the housing crisis is due to buyers consistently out-bidding each other and so driving up the price of homes. They observe that buyers regard a home as a 'property investment' rather than setting up a household. In this sense they are right. Society in general is implicated in land speculation. If a land value tax is proposed, the first question people ask is 'how will that effect the value of my house?'

Growing homelessness in a wealthy society indicates a decline in collective responsibility. Recent research shows that social media contributes to social alienation. It is a poor substitute for real human association.

Can we really trace all this back to the land question? What is clear is that the way a society understands its relation with the land will determine its economy, its laws and institutions, and the well-being of its citizens. This is equally true for primitive society as for high civilisation. In Henry George's words: "Political liberty, when the equal right to land is denied, becomes merely the liberty to compete for employment at starvation wages. This is the truth that we have ignored. And so there come beggars in our streets and tramps on our roads."



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