

letter from the editor

It is extraordinary how modern economics and politics never discuss the meaning of work. Yet if there is one argument above any other that ought to persuade anyone that George's remedy is worth applying, it is that it would change the status and meaning of work. In the closing chapters of *Progress and Poverty* George writes:

The fact is that the work which improves the condition of mankind, the work which extends knowledge and increases power, and enriches literature, and elevates thought, is not done to secure a living. It is not the work of slaves, driven to their task either by the lash of a master or by animal necessities. It is the work of men who perform it for its own sake, and not that they may get more to eat or drink, or wear, or display. In a state of society where want was abolished, work of this sort would be enormously increased. (Book X, Chapter 4)

For most people today work remains driven by "animal necessities". A recent survey shows that the average rent for a home in the UK is now 60% of income. At the same time wages are being driven down by zero-hour contracts which circumvent practically all employment legislation by defining the person as a 'worker' or as 'self-employed' rather than an 'employee'. Most zero-hour contracts are in the hotel and catering industry, supermarkets, health care, public services, and not-for-profit organisations. When wages are forced down to a mere minimum, and rents raised to a maximum, work becomes mere struggle for material necessities and degrades the human person. For the majority of employed people the idea of work being meaningful or fulfilling is plain wishful thinking. But George argues that the opposite would be so if the land tax were to be implemented:

The hard toll of routine labor would disappear. Wages would be too high and opportunities too great to compel any man to stint and starve the higher qualities of his nature, and in every avocation the brain would aid the hand. Work, even of the coarser kinds, would become a lightsome thing, and the tendency of modern production to subdivision would not involve monotony or the contraction of ability in the worker; but would be relieved by short hours, by change, by the alternation of intellectual with manual occupations. There would result, not only the utilization of productive forces now going to waste; not only would our present knowledge, now so imperfectly applied, be fully used; but from the mobility of labor and the mental activity which would be generated, there would result advances in the methods of production that we now cannot imagine.

It is the repression of the creative human spirit that is the worst effect of poverty, worsened by the fact that this poverty is sustained by economic ignorance. It requires a great effort of imagination to envisage how humanity would be transformed by the removal of 'fear and want' as the driving force of human work. Once it became easy for all to acquire sufficient for their material needs, human desire would then naturally aspire to higher things.

Consider the moral elevation, the intellectual activity, the social life. Consider how by a thousand actions and interactions the members of every community are linked together, and how in the present condition of things even the fortunate few who stand upon the apex of the social pyramid must suffer, though they know it not, from the want, ignorance, and degradation that are underneath.

The reduction of work to the acquisition of the mere necessities of life not only degrades the individual, it also destroys community and cooperation. In Book X of *Progress and Poverty* George argues that as society develops a natural division of functions and institutions emerge, and this tends to produce inequality which in turn inhibits progress as different factions seek power or status. It is this tendency for progress to meet obstacles that presents the greatest challenge to civilisation. It demands new insight into the nature of society to see how these natural obstacles are to be met. This is because the division of functions requires a higher order of cooperation. It is for the sake of this higher order of cooperation that the various civil institutions arise. The danger then is that these institutions may seek to serve themselves instead of the community that gives rise to them. When the institutions of society become self-serving they petrify and obstruct further social progress instead of enabling it. This in turn leads to further inequality. According to George, these issues are inherent in society, as the two principle forces of progress, association and equality, each drive innovation. Progress is not automatic but requires that society reflects upon itself as a whole and understands what George calls 'the law of human progress.'

But the great cause of inequality is in the natural monopoly which is given by the possession of land. The first perceptions of men seem always to be that land is common property; but the rude devices by which this is at first recognized - such as annual partitions or cultivation in common - are consistent with only a low stage of development. The idea of property, which naturally arises with reference to things of human production, is easily transferred to land, and an institution which when population is sparse merely secures to the improver and user the due reward of his labor, finally, as population becomes dense and rent arises, operates to strip the producer of his wages.

Here George illustrates that land monopoly arises naturally as society becomes more complex, presenting a precise challenge at a certain stage of development. If a society fails to meet this new challenge it will drift towards inequality. Innovation, instead of enriching all, will tend towards the production of luxuries for the rich and powerful. Supplying luxuries for the rich not only widens the gap between rich and poor, it is also a waste and degradation of labour. It destroys the real meaning of work and reduces it to servitude. And since work of this kind is essentially exploitative, keeping wages low, it also destroys community by limiting human cooperation. By limiting cooperation all kinds of higher social and cultural innovations are suppressed. And without cooperation there cannot be freedom, since freedom is the exercise of cooperation, and cooperation is the opposite of servitude.

Economic justice is about far more than fair distribution of wealth. Human nature is fulfilled through meaningful work, satisfying in itself, and further enriched through association. Work of this kind ennoble society and removes all envy. But so long as the private appropriation of land remains an unseen injustice and an unmet challenge to understanding, all other economic injustices can at best be only partly mitigated.



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