

THE STANDARD / November 1887

The Social Aspect of the Land Tax

An address by Hamlin Garland at the meeting of the Boston Anti-Poverty Society, 20 November, 1887

The speaker began by saying that while all classes would be benefited, in a pecuniary sense, by the concentration of all taxes on land values, he proposed for the evening to consider the other benefits which would accrue, advantages which he designated as social rather than pecuniary. It was not necessary, he said, to prove that people were starving or selling themselves to the devil in order to live; for even were it true that all men in this country had enough to eat, yet there were things quite as necessary to social existence which they were unable to obtain.

The consequences of the insane policy of the people here have been to permit the speculators and monopolists to fence in, practically, the whole country not already occupied. Today, he said, free land is a myth. We have squandered our inheritance. We gave it away in empires, we sell it now in counties. We have prepared the way for our children to be serfs under the control of the land owner. The tillable land is almost gone, and unless we rob the Indian again in the course of a few years the last of our government farming lands will be but a memory. Aye! I will go further and say that for nearly a century free land has been a myth. Every foot of it was bought with blood and sweat and tears. It was and is bought with the loss of comfort, society education. All that justifies and makes life sweet has been given

up by the settler for his lonely farm. Herbert Spencer has said that no society can be highly developed when its units are scattered over wide areas. Our land policy has constantly opposed our social development by constant dispersion of men through the wilderness. Throughout the two centuries of American history, and especially during the last century, a large portion of the American people have lived in a semi-solitude, unable to enjoy the crudest forms of education. And the tendency is toward a still wider dispersion. I went out to my native west this last summer on a visit, and everywhere I found indications of a tendency toward depression [dispersion?] which frightened me. The farms are everywhere, in Illinois, Dakota, Minnesota, and Iowa getting larger, passing into the hands of the town speculator. Higher education in the rural districts is a farce. The farm for the ambitious girl or boy is a living grave, a terrible solitude that eats out the life and hope and joy of life. Youth, gloomy and despairing, old age hopeless and fruitless. In the farther west and south it is feudalism repeated - two classes, lords and serfs. Look again at the cities. Monopolization of land has produced tenement houses, kept vice and drunkenness and ignorance alive, turned millions of young men and women into machines, wearing out their lives in hopeless toil [...].

It is obvious (that the remedy must do two things; it must concentrate the units of the rural regions, and removing the pressure on the centres of population, must permit them to spread. Religion, in the ordinary sense, will not do this; prohibition will not do it: labor

combinations will not do it; protection will not do it [...]. Let us raise (axes from (he products of human exertion and tax the land values created by the whole people. Let us free the land [...].

Land being held for use, not for sale, farmers would use it in the natural, civilized way; they would draw together in groups, and with the closer society would come the higher education, art, music, the drama, and the leisure to enjoy all these. Production freed, wealth would be produced till all were satisfied. Matchless musicians will not waste their lives on lonely farms, nor superb voices be lost in far sierras. Sculptors will not die in dark mines, nor poets be silent for lack of education and encouragement. The reign of justice will have begun.