

# LAND&LIBERTY

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## message from the honorary president

In an address delivered by Henry George at Burlington, Iowa, in 1885 Henry George spoke about 'The Crime of Poverty' and said 'I should like to show you that poverty is a crime. I do not mean that it is a crime to be poor. Murder is a crime; but it is not a crime to be murdered; and people who are in poverty I look upon not as criminals in themselves as much as victims of a crime for which others, as well perhaps, as themselves, are responsible.' This begs a question - which of us are then complicit in this crime? Are those who do not question the taxing of people for working and exchanging, or a means tested system of state benefits that constitutes a 'poverty trap', culpable?

In law abiding societies actions or omissions that transgress the laws that it makes are deemed crimes and, if the culprit or culprits can be identified, held and successfully charged, that society punishes them accordingly. In the natural world actions or omissions that contravene its laws i.e. the laws of nature, are not normally called 'crimes', (although genocide and ecocide are notable exceptions), and the consequences do not depend upon the culprits being identified, held or charged. However there are always consequences and there is no human power that can prevent or impede the operation of nature's laws. The most we can do, as we must do, in order to satisfy our needs and desires, is to act in harmony with nature's laws. It has only been by such actions that we have been able to gather, hunt and cultivate the food we eat, produce the buildings and clothes that house and protect us, traverse our planet by land, sea and air, and explore the space beyond our planet. Sadly though, needless desires can tempt us to ignore nature's laws and the socioeconomic and environmental crises that now confront humanity are two examples.

In *The Science of Political Economy* George identifies 'That which feels, perceives, thinks, wills; which to distinguish, we call mind or soul or spirit' as the most important factor or element in the world as we know it. He points out how it is '...the initiative of all our motions and movements'. Later, being more specific he says 'All human actions - at least all voluntary and conscious actions are prompted by desire, and have for their aim its satisfaction'. He goes on to point out how human desires are liable to increase with the ability to satisfy them and how that ability increases as the main mode of production develops from adapting to growing to exchanging i.e. trade. When we see this in connection with what he identified as the fundamental law of political economy i.e. that 'men seek to satisfy their desires with the least exertion' it is clear that in every age the prevailing quality of human desire determines what is valued, the culture, and the character of the man-made world in that age.

In his Burlington address George points out how 'The curse born of poverty is not confined to the poor alone; it runs through all classes, even to the very rich'. In the largely secular society in which we now live the consequences of offending a law of nature are rarely thought of as 'punishments'. However it is not difficult to see how someone who recognizes that spirit which is the initiative of all our motions and movements as the most important factor or element in the world as we know it, and who sees a yet greater spirit in operation throughout the universe, would!

Such a person might then seek to reconcile society's response to actions and omissions that transgress man-made laws - crimes and actions and omissions that transgress laws that are beyond human control - sins.

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