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The Civilization that is Possible.

BY HENRY GEORGE.

BEING CHAPTER XIV OF THE LAND QUESTION.

In the effects upon the distribution of wealth, of making land private property, we may thus see an explanation of that paradox presented by modern progress. The perplexing phenomena of deepening want with increasing wealth, of labor rendered more dependent and helpless by the very introduction of labor-saving machinery, are the inevitable result of natural laws as fixed and certain as the law of gravitation. Private property in land is the primary cause of the monstrous inequalities which are developing in modern society. It is this, and not any miscalculations of Nature in bringing into the world more mouths than she can feed, that gives rise to that tendency of wages to a minimum—that “iron law of wages,” as the Germans call it—that, in spite of all advances in productive power, compels the laboring classes to the least return on which they will consent to live. It is this that produces all those phenomena that are so often attributed to the conflict of labor and capital. It is this that condemns Irish peasants to rags and hunger, that produces the pauperism of England and the tramps of America. It is this that makes the almshouse and the penitentiary the marks of what we call high civilization; that in the midst of schools and churches degrades and brutalizes men, crushes the sweetness out of womanhood and the joy out of childhood. It is this that makes lives that might be a blessing a pain and a curse, and every year drives more and more to seek unbidden refuge in the gates of death. For, a permanent tendency to inequality once set up, all the forces of progress tend to greater and greater inequality.

All this is contrary to Nature. The poverty and misery, the vice and degradation, that spring from the unequal distribution of wealth, are not the results of natural law; they spring from our defiance of natural law. They are the fruits of our refusal to obey the supreme law of justice. It is because we rob the child of his birthright; because we make the bounty which the Creator intended for all the exclusive property of some, that these things come upon us, and though advancing and advancing, we chase but the mirage.

When, lit by lightning-flash or friction amid dry grasses, the consuming flames of fire first flung their lurid glow into the face of man, how must he have started back in affright! When he first stood by the shores of the sea, how must its waves have said to him, “Thus far shall thou go, but no farther”! Yet, as he learned to use them, fire became his most useful servant, the sea his easiest highway. The most destructive element of which we know—that which for ages and ages seemed the very thunderbolt of the angry gods—is, as we are now beginning to learn, fraught for us with untold powers of usefulness. Already it enables us to annihilate space in our messages, to illuminate the night with new suns; and its uses are only beginning. And throughout all Nature, as far as we can see, whatever is potent for evil is potent for good. “Dirt,” said Lord Brougham, “is matter in the wrong place.” And so the squalor and vice and misery that abound in the very heart of our civilization are but results of

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the misapplication of forces in their nature most elevating.

I doubt not that whichever way a man may turn to inquire of Nature, he will come upon adjustments which will arouse not merely his wonder, but his gratitude. Yet what has most impressed me with the feeling that the laws of Nature are the laws of beneficent intelligence is what I see of the social possibilities involved in the law of rent. Rent* springs from natural causes. It arises, as society develops, from the differences in natural opportunities and the differences in the distribution of population. It increases with the division of labor, with the advance of the arts, with the progress of invention. And thus, by virtue of a law impressed upon the very nature of things, has the Creator provided that the natural advance of mankind shall be an advance toward equality, an advance toward co-operation, an advance toward a social state in which not even the weakest need be crowded to the wall, in which even for the unfortunate and the cripple there may be ample provision. For this revenue, which arises from the common property, which represents not the creation of value by the individual, but the creation by the community as a whole, which increases just as society develops, affords a common fund, which, properly used, tends constantly to equalize conditions, to open the largest opportunities for all, and to utterly banish want or the fear of want.

The squalid poverty that festers in the heart of our civilization, the vice and crime and degradation and ravening greed that flow from it, are the results of a treatment of land that ignores the simple law of justice, a law so clear and plain that it is universally recognized by the veriest savages. What is by nature the common birthright of all, we have made the exclusive property of individuals; what is by natural law the common fund, from which common wants should be met, we give to a few that they may lord it over their fellows. And so some are gorged while some go hungry, and more is wasted than would suffice to keep all in luxury.

In this nineteenth century, among any people who have begun to utilize the forces and methods of modern production, there is no necessity for want. There is no good reason why even the poorest should not have all the comforts, all the luxuries, all the opportunities for culture, all the gratifications of refined taste that only the richest now enjoy. There is no reason why any one should be compelled to long and monotonous labor. Did invention and discovery stop to-day, the forces of production are ample for this. What hampers production is the unnatural inequality in distribution. And, with just distribution, invention and discovery would only have begun.

Appropriate rent in the way I propose, and speculative rent would be at once destroyed. The dogs in the manger who are now holding so much land they have no use for, in order to extract a high price from those who do want to use it, would be at once choked off, and land from which labor and capital are now debarred under penalty of a heavy fine would be thrown open to improvement and use. The incentive to land monopoly would be gone. Population would spread where it is now too dense, and become denser where it is now too sparse.

Appropriate rent in this way, and not only would natural opportunities be thus opened to labor and capital, but all the taxes which now weigh upon production and rest upon the consumer could be abolished. The demand for labor would increase, wages would rise, every wheel of production would be set in motion.

Appropriate rent in this way, and the present expenses of government would be at once very much reduced—reduced directly by the saving in the present cumbrous and expensive schemes of taxation, reduced indirectly by the diminution in pauperism and in crime. This simplification

*I, of course, use the word "rent" in its economic, not in its common sense, meaning by it what is commonly called ground rent.

in governmental machinery, this elevation of moral tone which would result, would make it possible for government to assume the running of railroads, telegraphs, and other businesses which, being in their nature monopolies, can not, as experience is showing, be safely left in the hands of private individuals and corporations. In short, losing its character as a repressive agency, government could thus gradually pass into an administrative agency of the great co-operative association—society.

For, appropriate rent in this way, and there would be at once a large surplus over and above what are now considered the legitimate expenses of government. We could divide this, if we wanted to, among the whole community, share and share alike. Or we could give every boy a small capital for a start when he came of age, every girl a dower, every widow an annuity, every aged person a pension, out of this common estate. Or we could do with our great common fund many, many things that would be for the common benefit, many, many things that would give to the poorest what even the richest can not now enjoy. We could establish free libraries, lectures, museums, art-galleries, observatories, gymnasiums, baths, parks, theatres; we could line our roads with fruit trees, and make our cities clean and wholesome and beautiful; we could conduct experiments, and offer rewards for inventions, and throw them open to public use.*

Think of the enormous wastes that now go on: The waste of false revenue systems, which hamper production and bar exchange, which fine a man for erecting a building where none stood before, or for making two blades of grass grow where there was but one. The waste of unemployed labor, of idle machinery, of those periodical depressions of industry almost as destructive as war. The waste entailed by poverty, and the vice and crime and thriftlessness and drunkenness that spring from it; the waste entailed by that greed of gain that is its shadow, and which makes business in large part but a masked war; the waste entailed by the fret and worry about the mere physical necessities of existence, to which so many of us are condemned; the waste entailed by ignorance, by cramped and undeveloped faculties, by the turning of human beings into mere machines!

Think of these enormous wastes, and of the others which, like these, are due to the fundamental wrong which produces an unjust distribution of wealth and distorts the natural development of society, and you will begin to see what a higher, purer, richer civilization would be made possible by the simple measure that will assert natural rights. You will begin to see how, even if no one but the present landholders were to be considered, this would be the greatest boon that could be vouchsafed them by society, and that, for them to fight it, would be as if the dog with a tin kettle tied to his tail should snap at the hand that offered to free him. Even the greatest landholder! As for such landholders as our working farmers and homestead owners, the slightest discussion would show them that they had everything to gain by the change. But even such landholders as the Duke of Westminster and the Astors would be gainers.

For it is of the very nature of injustice that it really profits no one. When and where was slavery good for slaveholders? Did her cruelties in America, her expulsions of Moors and Jews, her burnings of heretics, profit Spain? Has England gained by her injustice toward Ireland? Did not the curse of an unjust social system rest on Louis XIV. and Louis XV. as well as on the poorest peasant whom it condemned to rags and starvation—as well as on that Louis whom it sent to the block? Is the Czar of Russia to be envied?

This we may know certainly, this we may hold to confidently; that which is unjust can really profit as one which is just can really harm no one. Though all other lights move and circle, this is the pole-star by which we may safely steer.

* A million dollars spent in premiums and experiments would, in all probability, make aerial navigation an accomplished fact.

Telephone Competition.

(From Article in WESTERN ELECTRICIAN, Chicago, March 6, 1897.)

When the telephone was introduced in Sweden in 1880, it was regarded as an expensive luxury, almost a scientific toy, and for three years while the International Bell Telephone Company enjoyed a monopoly, it made comparatively little progress in securing recognition as a commercial agent.

It was only when competition appeared that the real advantage of the instrument was made known to the people.

In Stockholm the General Telephone Company was formed, and rates were reduced to \$27.00 per year, and as a result the new company secured as many subscribers in a few months as the Bell Company had gotten in three years. The next year the General Company had three times as many subscribers and the Bell system had made no progress whatever. Moreover, the new corporation proved a profitable investment, to the astonishment of the Bell Company, and the General Company now has 15,000 instruments in use, which is really a remarkable showing, considering the fact that the population of the city is only about a quarter of a million.

It should not be imagined that this company has an exclusive franchise, as a matter of fact the Government engaged in active competition with the General Company, put in metallic circuits, provided direct connection with subscribers on its lines in other parts of the country, and placed its rate of yearly service \$5.00 lower than the General Company's. The latter concern at once improved its service, but did not reduce its price.

The result of four years of this competition is interesting: despite the advantages possessed by the State, the General Company increased its service by the addition of 3,150 new subscribers, while the Government succeeded in getting only 2,000.

The principal exchange of the General Company is located in the old part of the town, and it has been found necessary to enlarge this several times, until at present the capacity of the main exchange is 15,000.

The profits of the General Company have increased steadily each year, making it possible to pay an eight per cent. dividend; to extend the business to an extent unprecedented elsewhere; to convert the system from a ground return to metallic circuits, and to establish a fund of over \$500,000 in reserve for possible contingencies. And it is to-day furnishing the City of Stockholm the best telephone service in the world according to competent critics.

The history of the telephone in Sweden should impress those who are interested in the development of the industry in this country.

There is no good reason why the Bell Company should control the situation, and if the anti-Bell interests pursue an intelligent and progressive policy, the American Bell Telephone Company, powerful as it is, will be compelled to yield to public demands.

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