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# The Land for the People

by Henry George

*An Address Delivered  
on July 11, 1889, in  
Toomebridge, County  
Derry, Ireland.*

**The ROBERT SCHALKENBACH FOUNDATION**  
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## Notes on Henry George

Born in Philadelphia, Pa., September 2, 1839. Father a publisher of religious books. Left home at sixteen to sail as foremast boy to Calcutta. Moved to California in 1859, settling in San Francisco. Married Annie Corsina Fox. Victim of depression of the Seventies and often unable to find work. Learned printing trade and began to write articles on social problems in spare time. Got job as editor of a local paper. Gained national attention when his article on Chinese immigration was published in *New York Tribune*. The question, why poverty exists in the midst of abundance tormented him. Assigned to New York in 1868, he was confronted with the monstrous wealth of that city, side by side with debasing want. This convinced him that an economic relationship existed between these two extremes. Returned to California and wrote "Our Land and Land Policy," and then his master work, "Progress and Poverty," which was an international success. Moved to New York and wrote other books including a book on free trade. Ran twice for mayor of New York. A coalition of the major political parties defeated his first attempt. Died October 28, 1897 before the second election was held. His funeral occasioned one of the greatest outpourings of popular feeling and respect ever given to a private citizen.

## THE LAND FOR THE PEOPLE

By HENRY GEORGE

**T**HE Land Question is not merely a question between farmers and the owners of agricultural land. It is a question that affects every man, every woman, and every child. The Land Question is simply another name for the great labor question, and the people who think of the Land Question as having importance simply for farmers forget what land is.

If you would realize what land is, think of what men would be without land. If there were no land, where would be the people? Land is not merely a place to graze cows or sheep upon, to raise corn or raise cabbage. It is the indispensable element necessary to the life of every human being. We are all land animals; our very bodies come from the land, and to the land they return again.

Whether a man dwells in the city or in the country, whether he be a farmer, a laborer, a mechanic, a manufacturer, or a soldier, land is absolutely necessary to his life. No matter what his occupation may be, if he is engaged in productive labor, that productive labor, if you analyze it, is simply the application of human exertion to land, the changing in place or in form of the matter of the universe.

**W**E speak of productive work. What is productive work? We make things. How do we make them? Man does not create them. Man cannot create something out of nothing. All the things that we call making are producing; bringing forth, not creating.

Men produce coal by going down under the ground, hewing out the coal, and bringing it to the surface of the earth; they produce fish by going to the lough, or river, or ocean and pulling the fish out; they produce houses by bringing together timber and stones and iron into the shape and form of a house; they produce cloth by taking the wool of a sheep or the fibers of a plant and bringing them together in a certain connection;

they produce crops by opening the ground and putting in seed and leaving it there for the germinating influences of nature—always a bringing forth, never a creation, so that human exertion—that is to say labor upon land, is the only way that man has of bringing forth those things which his needs require and which are necessary to enable him to sustain life. Land and labor—these are the two necessary and indispensable factors to the production of wealth.

**N**OW, as to the rights of ownership—as to that principle which enables a man to say of any certain thing—“This is mine; it is my property”—where does that come from? If you look you will see that it comes from the right of the producer to the thing which he produces. What a man makes he can justly claim to be his. Whatever any individual, by the exercise of his powers, takes from the reservoirs of nature, molds into shapes fitted to satisfy human needs, that is his; to that a just and sacred right of property attaches. That is a right based on the right of the individual to improvement, the right to the enjoyment of his own powers, to the possession of the fruits of his exertions. That is a sacred right, to violate which is to violate the sacred command, “Thou shalt not steal.” There is the right of ownership. Now that right, which gives by natural and Divine laws, the thing produced to him whose exertion has produced it, which gives to the man who builds a house the right to that house, to the man who raises a crop the right to that crop, to the man who raises a domestic animal a right to that domestic animal—how can that right attach to the reservoirs of nature? How can that right attach to the earth itself?

**W**E start out with these two principles, which I think are clear and self-evident: that which a man makes belongs to him, and can by him be given or sold to anyone that he pleases. But that which existed before man came upon the earth, that which was not produced by man, but which was created by God—that belongs equally to all men. As no man made the

land, so no man can claim a right of ownership in the land. As God made the land, and as we know both from natural perception and from revealed religion, that God the Creator is no respecter of persons, that in His eyes all men are equal, so also do we know that He made this earth equally for all the human creatures that He has called to dwell upon it. We start out with this clear principle that as all men are here by the equal permission of the Creator, as they are all here under His laws equally requiring the use of land, as they are all here with equal right to live, so they are all here with equal right to the enjoyment of His bounty.

We claim that the land of Ireland, like the land of every country, cannot justly belong to any class, whether that class be large or small; but that the land of Ireland, like the land of every other country, justly belongs in usufruct to the whole people of that country equally, and that no man and no class of men can have any just right in the land that is not equally shared by all others.

We say that all the social difficulties we see here, all the social difficulties that exist in England or Scotland, all the social difficulties that are growing up in the United States—the lowness of wages, the scarcity of employment, the fact that though labor is the producer of wealth, yet everywhere the laboring class is the poor class—are all due to one great primary wrong, that wrong which makes the natural element necessary to all, the natural element that was made by the Creator for the use of all, the property of some of the people, that great wrong that in every civilized country disinherited the mass of men of the bounty of their Creator. What we aim at is not the increase in the number of a privileged class, not making some thousands of earth owners into some more thousands. No, no; what we aim at is to secure the natural and God-given right to the humblest in the community—to secure to every child born in Ireland, or in any other country, his natural right to the equal use of his native land.

How can we secure that? We cannot secure it by dividing the land up equally, by giving each man or each family an equal piece. That is a device that might suit a rude community, provided that, as under the Mosaic code, those equal

pieces be made unalienable, so that they could never be sold away from the family. But under our modern civilization where industry is complex, where land in some places is very valuable and in other places of but little value, where it is constantly changing in relative value, the equal division of the land could not secure equality.

**T**HE way to secure equality is plain. It is not by dividing the land; it is by calling upon those who are allowed possession of pieces of land giving special advantage to pay to the whole community, the rest of the people, aye, and including themselves—to the whole people, a fair rent or premium for that privilege, and using the fund so obtained for the benefit of the whole people. What we would do would be to make the whole people the general landlord, to have whatever rent is paid for the use of land to go, not into the pockets of individual landlords, but into the treasury of the general community, where it could be used for the common benefit.

Now, rent is a natural and just thing. For instance, if we in this room were to go together to a new country and we were to agree that we should settle in that new country on equal terms, how could we divide the land up in such a way as to insure and to continue equality? If it were proposed that we should divide it up into equal pieces, there would be in the first place this objection, that in our division we would not fully know the character of the land; one man would get a more valuable piece than the other. Then as time passed the value of different pieces of land would change, and further than that if we were once to make a division and then allow full and absolute ownership of the land, inequality would come up in the succeeding generation. One man would be thriftless, another man, on the contrary, would be extremely keen in saving and pushing; one man would be unfortunate and another man more fortunate; and so on. In a little while many of these people would have parted with their land to others, so that their children coming after them into the world would have no land. The only fair way would be this—that any man among us should be at liberty to take up any

piece of land, and use it, that no one else wanted to use; that where more than one man wanted to use the same piece of land, the man who did use it should pay a premium which, going into a common fund and being used for the benefit of all, would put everybody upon a plane of equality. That would be the ideal way of dividing up the land of a new country.

**T**HE problem is how to apply that to an old country. True, we are confronted with this fact all over the civilized world, that a certain class have got possession of the land, and want to hold it. Now one of your distinguished leaders, Mr. Parnell in his Drogheda speech some years ago, said there were only two ways of getting the land for the people. One way was to buy it, the other was to fight for it. I do not think that is true. I think that Mr. Parnell overlooked at that time a most important third way, and that is the way we advocate.

That is what we propose by what we call the single tax. We propose to abolish all taxes for revenue. In place of all the taxes that are now levied, to impose one single tax, and that a tax upon the value of land. Mark me, upon the value of land alone—not upon the value of improvements, not upon the value of what the exercise of labor has done to make land valuable, that belongs to the individual; but upon the value of the land itself, irrespective of the improvements, so that an acre of land that has not been improved will pay as much tax as an acre of like land that has been improved. So that in a town a house site on which there is no building shall be called upon to pay just as much tax as a house site on which there is a house.

I said that rent is a natural thing. So it is. Where one man, all rights being equal, has a piece of land of better quality than another man, it is only fair to all that he should pay the difference. Where one man has a piece of land and others have none, it gives him a special advantage; it is only fair that he should pay into the common fund the value of that special privilege granted him by the community. That is what is called economic rent.

**B**UT over and above the economic rent there is the power that comes by monopoly, there is the power to extract a rent, which may be called monopoly rent. On this island that I have supposed we go and settle on, under the plan we have proposed each man should pay annually to the special fund in accordance with the special privilege the peculiar value of the piece of land he held, and those who had land of no peculiar value should pay nothing. That rent that would be payable by the individual to the community would only amount to the value of the special privilege that he enjoyed from the community. But if one man owned the island, and if we went there and you people were fools enough to allow me to lay claim to the ownership of the island and say it belonged to me, then I could charge a monopoly rent; I could make you pay me every penny that you earned, save just enough for you to live; and the reason I could not make you pay more is simply this, that if you would pay more you would die.

**T**HE power to exact that monopoly rent comes from the power to hold land idle—comes from the power to keep labor off the land. Tax up land to its full value and that power would be gone; the richest landowners could not afford to hold valuable land idle. Everywhere that simple plan would compel the landowner either to use his land or to sell out to some one who would; and the rent of land would then fall to its true economic rate—the value of the special privilege it gave would go not to individuals, but to the general community, to be used for the benefit of the whole community.

I cannot pass on without mentioning the name of one of the distinguished Irishmen who have declared for the principle long before they heard of me. I refer to only one name. Many of you know, and doubtless all of you have heard, of Dr. Nulty, the Bishop of Meath.

**I**N 1881, before I had ever been in Ireland or Dr. Nulty had ever heard of me, he wrote a letter on the Land Question to the clergy and laity of the diocese of Meath. Dr. Nulty lays

down precisely the principle that I have endeavored to lay down here before you briefly, that there is a right of ownership that comes from work, from production; that it is the law of nature, the law of God, that all men should work; that what a man produces by his labor belongs to him; that the reservoir from which everything must come—the land itself—can belong to no man, and that its proper treatment is just as I have proposed to let there be security of possession, and to let those who have special privileges pay into the common fund for those privileges, and to use that fund for the benefit of all. Dr. Nulty goes on to say what every man who has studied this subject will cordially endorse, that the natural law of rent—that law by which population increases the value of land in certain places and makes it grow higher and higher—that principle by which, as the city grows, land becomes more valuable—that that is to his mind the clearest and best proof, not merely of the intelligence but of the beneficence of the Creator. For he shows clearly that that is the natural provision by virtue of which, if men would only obey God's law of justice, if men would only obey the fundamental maxim of Christianity to do to others as they would be done to them: that by virtue of that provision, as the advance of civilization went on, it would be towards a greater and greater equality among men—not as now to a more and more monstrous inequality.

**T**HESE are the plain, simple principles for which we contend, and our practical measure for restoring to all men of any country their equal rights in the land of that country is simply to abolish other taxes, to put a tax upon the value of land, irrespective of the improvements, to carry that tax up as fast as we can, until we absorb the full value of the land, and we say that that would utterly destroy the monopoly of land, and create a fund for the benefit of the entire community. How easy a way that is to go from an unjust situation like the present to an ideally just situation may be seen among other things in this. Where you propose to take land for the benefit of the whole people you are at once met by the demands of the landlords for compensation. Now, if you tax them, no one

ever heard of such an idea as to compensate a people for imposing tax.

In that easy way the land can again be made the property in usufruct of the whole people, by a gentle and gradual process.

**W**HAT I ask you here tonight is as far as you can to join in this general movement and push on the cause. It is not a local matter, it is a world-wide matter. It is not a matter that interests merely the people of Ireland, the people of England and Scotland or of any other country in particular, but it is a matter that interests the whole world. What we are battling for is the freedom of mankind; what we are struggling for is for the abolition of that industrial slavery which as much enslaves men as did chattel slavery. It will not take the sword to win it. There is a power far stronger than the sword and that is the power of public opinion. When the masses of men know what hurts them and how it can be cured when they know what to demand, and to make their demand heard and felt, they will have it and no power on earth can prevent them. What enslaves men everywhere is ignorance and prejudice.

If we were to go to that island that we imagined, and if you were fools enough to admit that the land belonged to me, I would be your master, and you would be my slaves just as thoroughly, just as completely, as if I owned your bodies, for all I would have to do to send you out of existence would be to say to you "get off my property." That is the cause of the industrial slavery that exists all over the world, that is the cause of the low wages, that is the cause of the unemployed labor.

**H**OW can you remedy it? Only by going to first principles, only by asserting the natural rights of man. You cannot do it by any such scheme as is proposed here of buying out the landlords and selling again to the tenant farmers. What good is that going to do to the laborers? What benefit is it to be to the artisans of the city? And what benefit is it going to be to the farming class in the long run? For just as certain as you

do that, just as certain will you see going on here what we have seen going on in the United States, and by the vicissitudes of life, by the changes of fortune, by the differences among men—some men selling and mortgaging, some men acquiring wealth and others becoming poorer—in a little while you will have the reestablishment of the old system. But it is not just in any consideration. What better right has an agricultural tenant to receive any special advantage from the community than any other man? If farms are to be bought for the agricultural tenant, why should not boots for the artisans, shops for the clerks, boats for the fishermen—why should not the Government step in to furnish everyone with capital? And consider this with regard to the buying out of the landlords. Why, in Heaven's name, should they be bought out? Bought out of what? Bought out of the privilege of imposing a tax upon their fellow-citizens? Bought out of the privilege of appropriating what belongs to all? That is not justice. If, when the people regain their rights, compensation is due to anybody it is due to those who have suffered injustice, not to those who have caused it and profited by it.