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Henry George

X

Is our Civilization Just to Working Men ?

By Henry George

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by Mr. Richard McGhee.*

Is our civilization just to working men ? It is not. Try it by whatever test you will, it is glaringly, bitterly and increasingly unjust.

If it does not seem so, it is because our moral perceptions are obscured by habit.

The tolerance of wrong dulls our sense of its injustice. Men may become accustomed to theft, murder, even to slavery—that sum of all villainies—so they see no injustice in it, yet that which is unjust is unjust still, and whoever will go back to first principles will see that it is unjust. Work is the producer, the fashioner, the bringer forth ; the means whereby intelligence moulds matter to its purpose. The earth and the heavens are they not, as the Scripture tells us, the work of God ?

And what kind of a world is that on which we find ourselves ? It is a world in which only the raw materials are furnished us—a world in which human life can only be maintained and human wants met and desires gratified by work. Beast, bird and fish take the food they find, and are clothed they know not how. But man must work. Created in the image of the Creator, he, in a lower way, must create in his turn. Food, clothing, shelter—all the things that we call wealth—are brought into being by work. Nature yields to labour, and to labour alone.

These are truisms which everybody knows. The first man knew them.

Yes, the first man knew them ; and if we would see how they are ignored in the facts of to-day, imagine that, in the slumber of night, that first man stood by your bedside in one of those great cities that are the flower, crown, and type of our civilization, and asked you to take him through it.

Here you would take him through wide and well kept streets, lined with spacious mansions, replete with everything that can enhance comfort and gratify taste, adorned with magnificent churches. Again, you would pass into another quarter, where everything is pinched and niggard—where families are packed together tier on tier, sometimes a whole family in a single room, where even such churches as you see are poor and mean, and only the grog-shops are gorgeous. Which quarter do you think Adam would understand you to mean if you spoke of the working man's quarter ?

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Knowing that wealth comes only by work, would he not necessarily infer that the fine houses were the homes of the working men, and the poor, squalid houses the homes of the people who do no work? You might by ocular demonstration convince the simple old man that the very reverse of this is true, but how would you convince him that it is just?

Here is the eternal law—wealth comes only by work. Here, wherever our civilization extends, is the social fact, those who work hardest and longest, those whom we style the working classes, are the poorest classes. The very word working man is synonymous with poverty. A working man's hotel is everywhere a poor hotel; a working man's restaurant is a mean restaurant. In a working man's store you will find only the cheaper and coarser goods. What physician wants a working man's practice if he can get any other? What minister a working man's church? Who wishes his son to become, or his daughter to wed a working man? We prate vainly of the dignity of our labour; facts give our words the lie. Labour is everywhere condemned and despised. Everywhere it slinks to a back seat; aye, even in the house of God! Magnificent churches are dedicated to a carpenter, to a fisherman, and to a tentmaker, but are they working man's carriages which stand on Sundays before the door? Are their well-dressed congregations composed of the class of which the carpenter, the fisherman and the tentmaker of eighteen centuries ago belonged? Why even in the cathedrals of that Church which most boasts that before her priesthood, all are equal, the carpenter, the fisherman and the tentmaker of the present day must go into the five cent place or the ten cent place. The good places are the soft seats—they are for the people who have got above labour.

It were idle to complain of this. The prettiest theory must bend to the logic of facts. God intended labour to be honourable among men. That is clear, for He made wealth the reward of labour. But somehow or other, as we have managed to fix things in the civilization of which we are so proud, labour has been divorced from its natural reward, and this being the case, the signet of respectability is gone.

But it may be said, in speaking of working men, we mean, for the most part, mere handworkers. Manual labour is but a low kind of labour. The great agent of production is mind, not muscle.

Granted that the more intelligent work—the work we call brain-work—ought to be paid more than mere manual labour, this does not prove it just that manual labour should get so little. What can the brain produce without the hand? Suppose Adam, when driven from Paradise, had set himself under a tree and resolved to make a living with his brain, what would have become of him? Suppose that the hand-workers of the world were to stop work to-day, what would become of brain-workers? Furthermore, is not all hand-work brain-work, and have not those in the ranks of hand-workers just as much natural intelligence as those in any other walk of life?

But I make no narrow definition of the term working man. Whoever does productive work of any kind is really a working man. But all exertion is not work. The gambler I do not call a working man, whether he gamble with dice, or cards, or in stocks or produce. The thief I do not call a working man, whether he picks pockets or wrecks railroads. The confidence operator I do not call a working man, whether his gains be dollars or millions; and

whether he dwell in an almshouse or in a palace—whether he ride in a prison van or in a coach and pair, I do not call the mere appropriator a working man.

A man may toil from early manhood to hoary age to increase his gains, he may in the struggle for wealth wear out his body, distort his mind, warp his instincts, and lose his soul, and yet be not a working man, if his struggle be merely to take—not to make!

But him I call a working man, who, with hand or with head, takes the part of a producer in the complex machinery of which human wants are satisfied. Whether his work be physical, or whether it be mental, if he would aid in providing for the needs of the body, of the intellect, for the needs of the soul—him I call a working man! And using the term in the widest sense, I still insist that our civilization is unjust to working men.

Is it not notorious that brain-work is, on the whole, as much underpaid as hand-work? Are there not many brain-workers who, at times, are tempted to envy the hand-worker? How many authors, how many inventors, how many newspaper writers, how many teachers, do you know of who have got rich by work? I do know of some newspaper writers who have got rich, but it has been by being led into "fat things." I do know of some teachers who have made fortunes, but it has been by successful speculation. I do know of one author who by the sheer earnings of his pen has bought himself what most of us would call a fine house, though it is not as good as some millionaire's stable, but he writes detective stories for boys' papers. Even in business, do not statistics show that something like 95 per cent. of all that start fail?

Getting rich by hand-work—that is utterly out of the question; and if you have a strong, vigorous brain, and want to get rich, use it not to do productive work, but to appropriate the work of others. That is the way to get rich.

When I was a boy and went to Sunday school, I used to want to be rich. Dollars was the sum I used to dream about, for fortunes were not so large in those days. But since I have seen more of life, since I have seen how great wealth masters the man, I fear the responsibilities. But poverty, in such a civilization as ours, this does not merely mean hard work and poor fare, but weakness and contempt; the dulling of the intellect; the cramping of the soul. The injustice of our civilization to working men is not so much that it deprives them of physical gratifications they ought to have, but that it deprives them of higher things—of leisure and opportunity for mental and moral growth.

The working class is everywhere necessarily the least cultured class. Go into our prisons and you will find them tenanted not from the rich, but from the poor. Inquire into the history of the girls you may find at night prowling the streets of our great cities, in nine cases out of ten it was poverty that sent them there.

I listened last night with deep interest to the discussion of education.

I fully agree with all that was said as to the superiority of the moral to the intellectual. To merely develop the intellectual faculties without commensurate development of the moral sense seems to me but to make the man a monster.

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But what is the education of the school as compared with the education outside the school? How little will it avail if you teach the child in school that honesty is the best policy, when from the time he can think, the lesson that he everywhere learns is if you would escape pain and gain pleasure, if you would win respect and consideration, get MONEY. Get it honestly if you can, but at any rate get money. You ministers may preach every Sunday, of hell and of heaven, but the hell that the mass of your congregation most fear is the hell of poverty. The heaven which most attracts them is the heaven of wealth; nor is it strange that it should be so.

This is the necessary result of that fierce struggle for existence, which rages wherever our civilization extends, and becomes fiercer and fiercer as it progresses. But the fierce struggle is not natural; our moral perceptions tell us that. The very construction of man, with his capacity for thought and capacity for feeling, show us that he was intended for better things than to spend nine-tenths of his powers to get an animal existence, as most men have to do.

And when we look into the social laws, which are as truly the laws of the Creator as are the physical or moral laws, we can see that civilization, instead of enriching one class and impoverishing another, ought to make it easier for all to live. My time is too short for argument, but let me try, as well as I can, to show this in a word.

Here, let us say, is a primitive community—one part engaged in fishing, one part in agriculture, one in mechanical operations. Now, if in one of these occupations, either by the increase in productiveness of nature or by invention or discovery, which increases the productiveness of labour, the power of obtaining wealth is increased, the benefit will not be confined to those engaged in that particular occupation, but by virtue of what is known to economists as the law of values, must be shared by all.

This principle that increased efficiency in one department of labour virtually increases the productiveness of all labour—the principle that the growth in wealth of one people is a benefit to all other peoples with whom they exchange—runs through all the social laws, and by virtue of the principle, every invention and every improvement ought to make it easier for those in every department of industry to get a living. By virtue of this principle, the rudest manual labourer ought now to live in affluence as compared with his predecessor in a rude state of society.

What is the fact? The fact is that in the very heart of our civilization there are great masses with whose lot the veriest savage could not afford to exchange—masses, who not only can get a bare living by the hardest toil, but who often cannot get a living at all, and would starve but for charity. In the primitive condition, of which we have a record in the Bible, we hear nothing of pauperism; nothing of women compelled to unwomanly toil; nothing of little children forced to monotonous employment; nothing of hungry want in the midst of overflowing plenty—things so common to-day. Six centuries ago, before any of the great modern inventions had been made, before even our most prolific vegetables and fruits had been introduced, when all the arts were rude beyond comparison with the present state, pauperism was unknown in England; eight hours was the ordinary day's work, and the rudest manual labour, as such investigators as Prof. Thorold Rogers tells us,

lived in a rude plenty, which is affluence itself, as compared with what they get now, and even in times of actual scarcity were untroubled by the fear of want. Is our civilization just to working men, when that is the fruit of all this advance?

Is not civilization unjust to working men when want so exists in the midst of plenty? Read the papers to-day. Everywhere you will read of reduction of wages, or of strikes against reduction of wages. What is the reason? Overproduction, they say. That is to say, there is such a plethora of food—such a glut of goods—that the working man must stint his family.

From the Esquimaux of the North to the Terra del Fuego of the South there is not a savage tribe that can comprehend the chronic poverty that exists in the heart of our civilization.

Is it any wonder that that which most astonished Sitting Bull on his recent visit to the East was the children that he saw at work—children, who, as he said, ought to be at play. Ought it not astonish us? Discovery and invention have multiplied a hundredfold, yea, a thousandfold, the power of human labour to supply human needs; yet when machinery is in its latest development you will find young girls and little children straining brain and muscle in monotonous work for ten and twelve hours a day. We do not offer our children up to idols; we do not sacrifice our virgins to propitiate the dark powers—we are Christians; but we do give them to disease and death in mill and mine and factory.

These are the bitter fruits of injustice.

What is that injustice? Many minor injustices there may be, but the first, the wide-spread, the great injustice—an injustice sufficient to account for all these effects—is so glaring that all who will look may see it.

Read the first chapter of Genesis, consider the relation between man and the planet which he inhabits, and you can have no doubt what it is.

It is the injustice which robs man of his birthright. It is that we have made private property of what the Creator intended for the common heritage of all.

Let me quote the words of a Christian bishop, Thomas Nulty, Bishop of Meath, "The land in every country is the common property of the people of that country, because its real owner, the Creator, who made it, has bestowed it as a voluntary gift upon them. The earth has He given to the children of men." Now, as every human being is a child of God, and, as all His children are equal in His eyes, any settlement of the land of this or any other country, that would exclude the humblest of God's children from an equal share in the common heritage, is not merely a wrong and an injustice to that man, but is an impious violation of the benevolent intention of the Creator.

Is not that truth—is not that truth with which religion has to do? Think of it.

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