GEORGE LAND MEMORIAL EDITION

The Master Motive of Human Action

By Henry George

Published by

The United Committee for the Taxation of Land Values, Ltd., 94 Petty France, London, S.W.1

THE MASTER MOTIVE OF HUMAN ACTION

Being Passages from "Progress and Poverty," by Henry George

DEDICATED TO GEORGE LAMB

Published by

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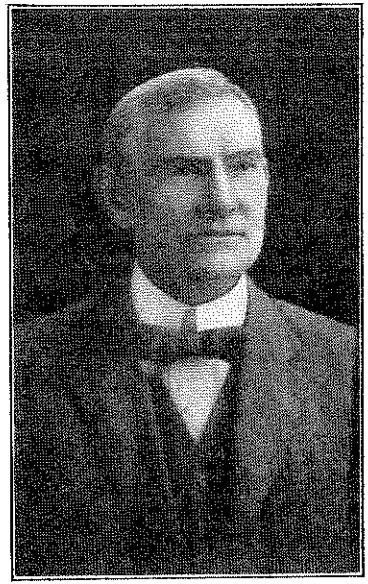
"Short-sighted is the philosophy which counts on selfishness as the master motive of human action. It is blind to facts of which the world is full. It sees not the present, and reads not the past aright. If you would move men to action, to what shall you appeal? Not to their pockets, but to their patriotism; not to selfishness, but to sympathy. Self-interest is, as it were, a mechanical force—potent, it is true; capable of large and wide results. But there is in human nature what may be likened to a chemical force; which melts and fuses and overwhelms; to which nothing seems impossible. 'All that a man hath will he give for his life'—that is self-interest. But in loyalty to higher impulses men will give even life."



GEORGE LAMB

1861—1926

George Lamb was a devoted disciple of Henry George. He lived the part. He knew Henry George personally, and in this friendship he held himself to be one of the most envied of men.

During his brief public career as Councillor and Mayor of Bootle, my brother George Lamb took a leading part in the Municipal Movement for the Rating of Land Values. He was the delegate of the Bootle Town

Council at the representative Land Values Conference held in Glasgow, October, 1899.

Speaking at a dinner in his honour as Mayor of Bootle, 1889-1900, he said :—

> " I attended the first meeting in Liverpool addressed by Henry George, held under the auspices of the Financial Reform Association. Many people have been driven to study the land question through suffering hardship, incidental to our present system of land tenure. It was not so with me. So far, I have no personal tale of woe to record, nor has my family. I was attracted both by the moral and the economic bearings of the question on industry and social life. I applied the arguments used to my own native town. The more I investigated the matter, the more proof I found in the soundness, and the justice, of taxing land values. . . . Pass this measure into law and see how it will work. It will increase the marketable quantity of land, and this can have but one result—land will be cheaper : It will break down the monopoly and give free play to the natural progressive character of our British trade and commerce."

These observations were noted at the time as the advice of a business man to business men ; but behind the spoken word there was the vision of one who could " tell how of a little village to make a great and glorious city."

All through his life George Lamb had indifferent health, and latterly had to winter abroad. His ambition was to take an active

part in the propaganda, yet in his enforced retirement he never complained. " They also serve who only stand and wait," and he willingly and gladly served through *Land & Liberty*. His constant thought was concerned with the progress of Henry George's ideas. He knew that the progress must be slow, and faltered not in face of any disappointment. Even those who disagreed with him felt his charm and honoured him for his splendid faith in the cause he had made his own.

The chapter in *Progress and Poverty* containing the vivid passage on the master motive of human action made a special appeal to him. As he himself said : " It is my favourite reading in the great book. It is this belief in man so convincingly stated that brought me into the movement and more than anything else keeps me there."

In memory of my brother I gladly present this little pamphlet to the literature of the Henry George movement.

MARGARET E. LAMB.

THE MASTER MOTIVE OF HUMAN ACTION

By Henry George

Passages from PROGRESS AND POVERTY, *Book IX, Chapter IV, entitled "The Changes that would be wrought in Social Organisation and Social Life."*

Consider for a moment the vast changes that would be wrought in social life by a change which would assure to labour its full reward; which would banish want and the fear of want; and give to the humblest freedom to develop in natural symmetry.

In thinking of the possibilities of social organisation, we are apt to assume that greed is the strongest of human motives, and that systems of administration can only be safely based upon the idea that the fear of punishment is necessary to keep men honest—that selfish interests are always stronger than general interests. Nothing could be further from the truth.

From whence springs this lust for gain, to gratify which men tread everything pure and noble under their feet; to which they sacrifice all the higher possibilities of life; which converts civility into a hollow pretence, patriotism into a sham, and religion into hypocrisy; which makes so much of civilised existence an Ishmaelitish warfare, of which the weapons are cunning and fraud?

Does it not spring from the existence of want? Carlyle somewhere says that poverty is the hell of which the modern Englishman is most afraid. And he is right. Poverty is the open-mouthed, relentless hell which yawns beneath civilised society. And it is hell enough. The Vedas declare no truer thing than when the wise crow Bushanda tells the eagle-bearer of Vishnu that the keenest pain is in poverty. For poverty is not merely deprivation; it means shame, degradation; the searing of the most sensitive parts of our moral and mental nature as with hot irons; the denial of the strongest impulses and the sweetest affections; the wrenching of the most vital nerves. You love your wife, you love your children; but would it not be easier to see them die than to see them reduced to the pinch of want in which large classes in every highly civilised community live? The strongest of animal passions is that with which we cling to life, but it is an everyday occurrence in civilised societies for men to put poison to their mouths or pistols to their heads from fear of poverty, and for one who does this there are probably a hundred who have the desire, but are restrained by instinctive shrinking, by religious considerations, or by family ties.

From this hell of poverty it is but natural that men should make every effort to escape. With the impulse to self-preservation and self-gratification combine nobler feelings, and love as well as fear urges in the struggle. Many a man does a mean thing, a dishonest thing, a greedy and grasping and unjust

thing, in the effort to place above want, or the fear of want, mother or wife or children.

Now, men admire what they desire. How sweet to the storm-stricken seems the safe harbour; food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, warmth to the shivering, rest to the weary, power to the weak, knowledge to him in whom the intellectual yearnings of the soul have been aroused. And thus the sting of want and the fear of want make men admire above all things the possession of riches, and to become wealthy is to become respected, and admired, and influential. Get money—honestly if you can, but at any rate get money! This is the lesson that society is daily and hourly dinning in the ears of its members. Men instinctively admire virtue and truth, but the sting of want and the fear of want make them even more strongly admire the rich and sympathise with the fortunate.

It is well to be honest and just, and men will commend it; but he who by fraud and injustice gets him a million dollars will have more respect, admiration, and influence, more eye service and lip service, if not heart service, than he who refuses it. The one may have his reward in the future; he may know that his name is writ in the Book of Life, and that for him is the white robe and the palm branch of the victor against temptation; but the other has his reward in the present. His name is writ in the list of "our substantial citizens"; he has the courtship of men and the flattery of women; the best pew in the church and the personal regard of the eloquent clergyman who in the

name of Christ preaches the Gospel of Dives, and tones down into a meaningless flower of Eastern speech the stern metaphor of the camel and the needle's eye. He may be a patron of arts, a Mæcenas to men of letters; may profit by the converse of the intelligent, and be polished by the attrition of the refined. His alms may feed the poor, and help the struggling, and bring sunshine into desolate places; and noble public institutions commemorate, after he is gone, his name and his fame. It is not in the guise of a hideous monster, with horns and tail, that Satan tempts the children of men, but as an angel of light. His promises are not alone of the kingdoms of the world, but of mental and moral principalities and powers. He appeals not only to the animal appetites but to the cravings that stir in man because he is more than an animal.

Take the case of those miserable "men with muck-rakes," who are to be seen in every community as plainly as Bunyan saw their type in his vision—who, long after they have accumulated wealth enough to satisfy every desire, go on working, scheming, striving to add riches to riches. It was the desire "to be something"; nay, in many cases, the desire to do noble and generous deeds, that started them on a career of money getting. And what compels them to it long after every possible need is satisfied, what urges them still with unsatisfied and ravenous greed, is not merely the force of tyrannous habit, but the subtler gratifications which the possession of riches gives—the sense of power and influence, the sense

of being looked up to and respected, the sense that their wealth not merely raises them above want, but makes them men of mark in the community in which they live. It is this that makes the rich man so loth to part with his money, so anxious to get more.

Against temptations that thus appeal to the strongest impulses of our nature, the sanctions of law and the precepts of religion can effect but little; and the wonder is, not that men are so self-seeking, but that they are not much more so. That under present circumstances men are not more grasping, more unfaithful, more selfish than they are, proves the goodness and fruitfulness of human nature, the ceaseless flow of the perennial fountains from which its moral qualities are fed. All of us have mothers; most of us have children, and so faith, and purity, and unselfishness can never be utterly banished from the world, howsoever bad be social adjustments.

But whatever is potent for evil may be made potent for good. The change I have proposed would destroy the conditions that distort impulses in themselves beneficent, and would transmute the forces which now tend to disintegrate society into forces which would tend to unite and purify it.

Give labour a free field and its full earnings; take for the benefit of the whole community that fund which the growth of the community creates, and want and the fear of want would be gone. The springs of production would be set free, and the enormous increase of wealth would give the poorest ample comfort. Men would no more worry

about finding employment than they worry about finding air to breathe; they need have no more care about physical necessities than do the lilies of the field. The progress of science, the march of invention, the diffusion of knowledge, would bring their benefits to all.

With this abolition of want and the fear of want, the admiration of riches would decay, and men would seek the respect and approbation of their fellows in other modes than by the acquisition and display of wealth. In this way there would be brought to the management of public affairs, and the administration of common funds, the skill, the attention, the fidelity, and integrity that can now only be secured for private interests, and a railroad or gasworks might be operated on public account, not only more economically and efficiently than as at present, under joint stock management, but as economically and efficiently as would be possible under a single ownership. The prize of the Olympian games, that called forth the most strenuous exertions of all Greece, was but a wreath of wild olive; for a bit of ribbon men have over and over again performed services no money could have bought.

Short-sighted is the philosophy which counts on selfishness as the master motive of human action. It is blind to facts of which the world is full. It sees not the present, and reads not the past aright. If you would move men to action, to what shall you appeal? Not to their pockets, but to their patriotism; not to selfishness, but to

sympathy. Self-interest is, as it were, a mechanical force—potent, it is true ; capable of large and wide results. But there is in human nature what may be likened to a chemical force ; which melts and fuses and overwhelms ; to which nothing seems impossible. "All that a man hath will he give for his life"—that is self-interest. But in loyalty to higher impulses men will give even life.

It is not selfishness that enriches the annals of every people with heroes and saints. It is not selfishness that on every page of the world's history bursts out in sudden splendour of noble deeds or sheds the soft radiance of benignant lives. It was not selfishness that turned Gautama's back to his royal home or bade the Maid of Orleans lift the sword from the altar ; that held the Three Hundred in the Pass of Thermopyle, or gathered into Winkelried's bosom the sheaf of spears ; that chained Vincent de Paul to the bench of the galley, or brought little starving children, during the Indian famine, tottering to the relief stations with yet weaker starvelings in their arms ! Call it religion, patriotism, sympathy, the enthusiasm for humanity, or the love of God—give it what name you will ; there is yet a force which overcomes and drives out selfishness ; a force which is the electricity of the moral universe ; a force beside which all others are weak. Everywhere that men have lived it has shown its power, and to-day, as ever, the world is full of it. To be pitied is the man who has never seen and never felt it. Look around ! among common men and

women, amid the care and the struggle of daily life, in the jar of the noisy street, and amid the squalor where want hides—ever here and there is the darkness lighted with the tremulous play of its lambent flames. He who has not seen it has walked with shut eyes. He who looks may see, as says Plutarch, that "the soul has a principle of kindness in itself, and is born to love, as well as to perceive, think, or remember."

And this force of forces—that now goes to waste or assumes perverted forms—we may use for the strengthening, and building up, and ennobling of society, if we but will, just as we now use physical forces that once seemed but powers of destruction. All we have to do is but to give it freedom and scope. The wrong that produces inequality ; the wrong that in the midst of abundance tortures men with want or harries them with the fear of want ; that stunts them physically, degrades them intellectually, and distorts them morally, is what alone prevents harmonious social development. For "all that is from the gods is full of providence. We are made for co-operation—like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of the upper and lower teeth."

There are people into whose heads it never enters to conceive of any better state of society than that which now exists—who imagine that the idea that there could be a state of society in which greed would be banished, prisons stand empty, individual interests be subordinated to general interests, and no one seek to rob or to oppress his neighbour, is but the dream of impracticable

dreamers, for whom these practical level-headed men, who pride themselves on recognising facts as they are, have a hearty contempt. But such men—though some of them write books, and some of them occupy the chairs of universities, and some of them stand in pulpits—do not think. If they were accustomed to dine in such eating houses as are to be found in the lower quarters of London and Paris, where the knives and forks are chained to the table, they would deem it the natural, ineradicable disposition of man to carry off the knife and fork with which he has eaten. . . .

But it may be said, to banish want and the fear of want, would be to destroy the stimulus to exertion; men would become simply idlers, and such a happy state of general comfort and content would be the death of progress. This is the old slave-holders' argument, that men can only be driven to labour with the lash. Nothing is more untrue.

Want might be banished, but desire would remain. Man is the unsatisfied animal. He has but begun to explore, and the universe lies before him. Each step that he takes opens new vistas and kindles new desires. He is the constructive animal; he builds, he improves, he invents, and puts together, and the greater the thing he does the greater the thing he wants to do. He is more than an animal. Whatever be the intelligence that breathes through nature, it is in that likeness that man is made. The steamship, driven by her throbbing engines through the sea, is in kind, though not in degree, as much

a creation as the whale that swims beneath. The telescope and the microscope, what are they but added eyes, which man has made for himself; the soft webs and fair colours in which our women array themselves, do they not answer to the plumage that nature gives the bird? Man must be doing something, or fancy that he is doing something, for in him throbs the creative impulse; the mere basker in the sunshine is not a natural, but an abnormal man. . . .

It is not labour in itself that is repugnant to man; it is not the natural necessity for exertion which is a curse. It is only labour which produces nothing—exertion of which he cannot see the results. To toil day after day, and yet get but the necessaries of life, this is indeed hard; it is like the infernal punishment of compelling a man to pump lest he be drowned, or to trudge on a tread-mill lest he be crushed. But, released from this necessity, men would but work the harder and the better, for then they would work as their inclinations led them; then would they seem to be really doing something for themselves or for others. Was Humboldt's life an idle one? Did Franklin find no occupation when he retired from the printing business with enough to live on? Is Herbert Spencer a laggard? Did Michael Angelo paint for board and clothes?

The fact is that the work which improves the condition of mankind, the work which extends knowledge and increases power, enriches literature, and elevates thought, is not done to secure a living. It is not the work of slaves, driven to their task either by the

lash of a master or by animal necessities. It is the work of men who perform it for its own sake, and not that they may get more to eat or drink, or wear, or display. In a state of society where want was abolished work of this sort would be enormously increased.

I am inclined to think that the result of confiscating rent in the manner I have proposed (*to abolish all taxation save that upon land values*) would be to cause the organisation of labour, wherever large capitals were used, to assume the co-operative form, since the more equal diffusion of wealth would unite capitalist and labourer in the same person. But whether this would be so or not is of little moment. The hard toil of routine labour would disappear. Wages would be too high and opportunities too great to compel any man to stint and starve the higher qualities of his nature, and in every avocation the brain would aid the hand. Work, even of the coarser kinds, would become a lightsome thing, and the tendency of modern production to subdivision would not involve monotony or the contraction of ability in the worker; but would be relieved by short hours, by change, by the alternation of intellectual with manual occupations. There would result, not only the utilisation of productive forces now going to waste; not only would our present knowledge, now so imperfectly applied, be fully used; but from the mobility of labour and the mental activity which would be generated, there would result advances in the methods of production that we now cannot imagine.

For, greatest of all the enormous wastes which the present constitution of society involves, is that of mental power. How infinitesimal are the forces that concur to the advance of civilisation, as compared to the forces that lie latent! How few are the thinkers, the discoverers, the inventors, the organisers, as compared with the great mass of the people! Yet such men are born in plenty; it is the conditions that permit so few to develop. There are among men infinite diversities of aptitude and inclination, as there are such infinite diversities in physical structure that among a million there will not be two that cannot be told apart. But, both from observation and reflection, I am inclined to think that the differences of natural power are no greater than the differences of stature or of physical strength.

Turn to the lives of great men, and see how easily they might never have been heard of. Had Cæsar come of a proletarian family; had Napoleon entered the world a few years earlier; had Columbus gone into the Church instead of going to sea; had Shakespeare been apprenticed to a cobbler or chimney-sweep; had Sir Isaac Newton been assigned by fate the education and the toil of an agricultural labourer; had Dr. Adam Smith been born in the coal hews, or Herbert Spencer forced to get his living as a factory operative, what would their talents have availed? But there would have been, it will be said, other Cæsars or Napoleons, Columbuses or Shakespeares, Newtons, Smiths, or Spencers. This is true. And it shows how prolific is our human nature. As

the common worker is on need transformed into queen bee, so, when circumstances favour his development, what might otherwise pass for a common man rises into a hero or leader, discoverer or teacher, sage or saint. So widely has the Sower scattered the seed, so strong is the germinative force that bids it bud and blossom. But, alas, for the stony ground, and the birds and the tares! For one who attains his full stature, how many are stunted and deformed?

The will within us is the ultimate fact of consciousness. Yet how little have the best of us, in acquirements, in position, even in character, that may be credited entirely to ourselves; how much to the influences that have moulded us. Who is there, wise, learned, discreet, or strong, who might not, were he to trace the inner history of his life, turn, like the Stoic Emperor, to give thanks to the gods, that by this one and that one, and here and there, good examples have been set him, noble thoughts have reached him, and happy opportunities opened before him. Who is there, who, with his eyes about him, has reached the meridian of life, who has not sometimes echoed the thought of the pious Englishman, as the criminal passed to the gallows, "But for the grace of God, there go I." How little does heredity count as compared with conditions. This one, we say, is the result of a thousand years of European progress, and that one of a thousand years of Chinese petrifaction; yet, place an infant in the heart of China, and but for the angle of the eye or the shade of the hair, the Caucasian would grow up as those

around him, using the same speech, thinking the same thoughts, exhibiting the same tastes. Change Lady Vere de Vere in her cradle with an infant of the slums, and will the blood of a hundred earls give you a refined and cultured woman?

To remove want and the fear of want, to give to all classes leisure, comfort, and independence, the decencies and refinements of life, the opportunities of mental and moral development, would be like turning water into a desert. The sterile waste would clothe itself with verdure, and the barren places where life seemed banned would ere long be dappled with the shade of trees and musical with the song of birds. Talents now hidden, virtues unsuspected, would come forth to make human life richer, fuller, happier, nobler. For in these round men who are stuck into three-cornered holes, and three-cornered men who are jammed into round holes; in these men who are wasting their energies in the scramble to be rich; in these who in factories are turned into machines, or are chained by necessity to bench or plough; in these children who are growing up in squalor, vice, and ignorance, are powers of the highest order, talents the most splendid. They need but the opportunity to bring them forth.

Consider the possibilities of a state of society that gave that opportunity to all. Let imagination fill out the picture; its colours grow too bright for words to paint. Consider the moral elevation, the intellectual activity, the social life. Consider how by a thousand actions and interactions the mem-

bers of every community are linked together, and how in the present condition of things even the fortunate few who stand upon the apex of the social pyramid must suffer, though they know it not, from the want, ignorance, and degradation that are underneath. Consider these things, and then say whether the change I propose would not be for the benefit of every one—even the greatest landholder? Would he not be safer of the future of his children in leaving them penniless in such a state of society than in leaving them the largest fortune in this? Did such a state of society anywhere exist, would he not buy entrance to it cheaply by giving up all his possessions?

I have now traced to their source social weakness and disease. I have shown the remedy. I have covered every point and met every objection. But the problems that we have been considering, great as they are, pass into problems greater yet—into the grandest problems with which the human mind can grapple. I am about to ask the reader who has gone with me so far, to go with me further, into still higher fields. But I ask him to remember that in the little space which remains of the limits to which this book must be confined, I cannot fully treat the questions which arise. I can but suggest some thoughts, which may, perhaps, serve as hints for further thought.

* * *

THESE "FURTHER THOUGHTS" ARE GIVEN IN THE FINAL SECTION OF *Progress and Poverty*; AND IN THE CONCLUSION ENTITLED "THE PROBLEM OF INDIVIDUAL LIFE."

land by reason of neighbourhood, public improvements, etc. Thus the farmer would have no more taxes to pay than the speculator who held a similar piece of land idle, and the man who on a city site erected a valuable building would be taxed no more than the man who held a similar site vacant.

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