

Chapter 43

The Central Truth

OUR ECONOMIC INQUIRY led us to a certain truth. The same truth explains the rise and fall of civilizations. Furthermore, it agrees with our deep-seated perceptions of relation and sequence, which we call moral perceptions.

The evils arising from the unequal and unjust distribution of wealth become more and more apparent as modern civilization goes on. They are not signs of progress, but tendencies that will bring progress to a halt. They will not cure themselves. Unless their cause is removed, they will expand until they sweep us back into barbarism—the path every previous civilization has taken.

But this truth also shows that these evils are not imposed by natural laws. They arise solely from social maladjustments that ignore natural laws. Poverty, with all the evils that flow from it, springs from a denial of justice. By allowing a few to monopolize opportunities nature freely offers to all, we have ignored the fundamental law of justice.

By sweeping away this injustice—and asserting the rights of all people to natural opportunities—we shall conform ourselves to this law. We shall remove the great cause of unnatural inequality in the distribution of wealth and power. We shall abolish poverty; tame the ruthless passions of greed; and dry up the springs of vice and misery.

We shall light the lamp of knowledge in dark places; give new vigor to invention and a fresh impulse to discovery; substitute political strength for political weakness; and make tyranny and anarchy impossible.

The reform I have proposed will make all other reforms easier. It agrees with all that is desirable—politically, socially, or morally. It is simply carrying out, in letter and spirit, the self-evident truths set forth in the Declaration of Independence: that all people are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

These rights are denied when the equal right to land is denied—for people can only live by using land. Equal political rights will not compensate for denying equal rights to the gifts of nature. Without equal rights to land, political liberty is merely the right to compete for employment at starvation wages.

We honor liberty in name and form. We set up statues and sound her praises. But we have not fully trusted her. And as we grow, her demands grow. She will have no half service. For liberty means justice, and justice is the natural law.

Some think liberty's mission is accomplished when she has abolished hereditary privileges and given the vote. They think she has no further relation to the everyday affairs of life. They have not seen her real grandeur. To them, her poets seem dreamers, her martyrs but fools. Yet it is not for an abstraction that people have toiled and died. In every age, the witnesses of liberty have stood forth.

We speak as if liberty were one thing, and virtue, wealth, knowledge, invention, and independence were oth-

ers. But liberty is the source, the mother, the necessary condition, of all these. She is to virtue what light is to color; to wealth what sunshine is to grain; to knowledge what eyes are to sight.

In the history of every nation we may read the same truth. It is the universal law, the lesson of the centuries. Our primary social organization is a denial of justice. Allowing one person to own the land—on which and from which others must live—makes them slaves. The degree, or proportion, of slavery increases as material progress goes on.

This subtle alchemy is extracting the fruits of their labor from the masses in every civilized country, in ways they do not realize. It institutes a harder and more hopeless slavery in place of the one that has been destroyed. It brings tyranny out of political freedom, and must soon transform democratic institutions into anarchy. This is what turns the blessings of material progress into a curse, what crowds human beings into squalid tenement houses, and fills the prisons and brothels. This is what plagues people with want and consumes them with greed.

Civilization so based cannot continue. The eternal laws of the universe forbid it. The ruins of dead empires so testify. Justice herself demands that we right this wrong.

It is blasphemy to attribute the suffering and brutality that comes from poverty to the inscrutable decrees of Providence. It is not the Almighty, but we who are responsible for the vice and misery that fester amid our civilization. The Creator showers us with gifts — more than enough for all. But like swine scrambling for food, we tread them in the mire while we tear each other apart.

Suppose at God's command, for every blade of grass that now grows, two should spring up. And crops increase

a hundred-fold. Would poverty be reduced? No—any benefit that would accrue would be temporary. The miraculous new powers could be utilized only through land. And while land is private property, the classes that currently monopolize the bounty of the Creator would monopolize all the new bounty.

Landowners alone would benefit. Rents would increase, but wages would still tend to the starvation point.

This is not merely a deduction of political economy—it is a fact of experience. We have seen it with our own eyes, in our own times.

The effect of invention and improvement on the production of wealth has been precisely the same as an increase in the fertility of nature.

What has been the result? Simply that landowners took all the gain. The wonderful discoveries and inventions of our century have neither increased wages nor lightened toil. The effect has simply been to make the few richer—and the many more helpless!

Can the gifts of the Creator be misappropriated with impunity? Can labor be robbed of its earnings, while greed rolls in wealth? Is it right that many should want, while a few are gluttoned? Turn to history! On every page we read that such wrongs never go unpunished. The nemesis that follows injustice never falters nor sleeps.

Look around today. Can this continue? The pillars of state tremble, and the foundations of society shudder from forces pent-up beneath. Great new powers, born of progress, have entered the world. They will compel us to a higher plane, or else they will overwhelm us.

The world is pulsing with unrest. There is an irreconcilable conflict between democratic ideas and the

aristocratic organization of society. We cannot permit people to vote, then force them to beg. We cannot go on educating them, then refusing them the right to earn a living. We cannot go on chattering about inalienable human rights, then deny the inalienable right to the bounty of the Creator.

While there is still time, we may turn to justice. If we do, the dangers that threaten us will disappear. With want destroyed and greed transformed, equality will take the place of jealousy and fear. Think of the powers now wasted, the fields of knowledge yet to be explored, the possibilities that the wondrous inventions of this century only hint at. Who can presume the heights to which our civilization may soar?