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THE LAND QUESTION, AND ITS RELATION TO ART AND LITERATURE.*

• The substance of this paper was given by the author In an address delivered in New York City before the Actors' Order of Friendship.

BY HAMLIN GARLAND.

It is a significant and interesting thing to me to see the actors of America beginning to inquire into the causes of social trouble and to take part in the discussion. Their invitation to Mr. Heme and myself I regard as the most indubitable evidence of the power of a great new idea to reach every class of people, notwithstanding it has been said the actors will never take any interest in a question of this nature. I love the actor's art, the world of the drama. I love its past. When a mere child, far out on the prairies of Iowa, I climbed into my father's lap on many a winter's evening to listen to him as he told me of the great names of the theatrical Boston forty years ago. He was a hardworking man — a man who hardly knew what a fair chance was, with no time for rest or culture, but as I listened to his reminiscences of the elder Booth, of Edwin Forrest, of Charles Thorne, of Edmund Stone, and others of his favorites, it seemed like some far-off fairy land.

I love the past of the stage, but I believe in its future still more. Two sublime ideas are already entering the drama — truth and sympathy, and already there are signs that the novel will have side by side with it an equally true and equally human play. The stage will yet be the exponent of its sister art, fiction. I want every artist and writer able to be true to himself without regard to what has been done. I want him *free!* And this is why I am deep in the great land reform called the single tax. I believe it will free art as well as labor—for freeing labor will free everything. I love the cause of labor because of the value of freedom to the laborer, but I love and fight for this freedom because it is the whole battle that frees art, literature, and science. In the fate of the wage-earner is the fate of all.

I think every true artist, because he is a loyal citizen, looks upon the struggle of life here in America with pitying eyes. Art cannot rise out of the weltering smother of our daily tumult. Our socialist brethren would say, Blot out your "competitive system." But it is the lack of competition as a matter of strict fact. It is the war of the man who is disinherited with the man to whom government has granted special privileges to tax his fellows. But we are all agreed — all reformers — that the unrest and toil and brutalizing struggle to win standing room are making art false and insecure, are crippling the dramatist, and starving out the poet and novelist. We differ only in our plans of social redemption.

If you would raise the standard of art in America you must raise the standard of living — that is my first proposition. The comfort of the common American must be secured. He must have leisure and he must have means to buy to his taste. It is a physiological law that the tired, hungry man cares nothing for beauty. What does a sick man care for Millet's "Angelus," or for the view from Mount Washington? A Japanese fire-screen would be as impressive. What are the charms of parks, of landscape gardening to the poor tramp, haggard with hunger and desperate with need?

The great mass of people in America toil from ten to fourteen hours per day, and each day of the year. When they are able to gratify a desire for art, what sort of patrons would you expect them to be? How is it possible for such worn and warped natures to appreciate a quiet play, a fine actor, a thoughtful novel? They absolutely require force, farcical acting, ranting unreality. And yet their taste is better than their means; they must content themselves even then with chromos when they would buy paintings. The general public cannot buy to its taste, and its taste is kept low by the terrible drain upon the nervous system and the complete absorption of each waking hour in the struggle to live. There is much talk just now of over production, but the whole trouble is, rather, *under consumption*.

In the whole of our vast population of sixty-five millions, the audience to which the actor or novelist can appeal is very small. First we have fifteen millions of farmers, living in semi-solitude, exposed to the hardest conditions, and forced to work from sunrise to sunset, while their wives and mothers walk a ceaseless round of toil, from sleep to sleep, lonely prisoners of poverty. There are ten millions of poor whites and negroes in the South, who must also be counted out of the question; and, last, there are ten millions of artisans in the Northern states essentially cut off. These figures are all under rather than over the fact. Then counting out the children and the aged, you can see that practically the public to which the writer can appeal in America is pitifully small — relatively a handful. Because of the poverty of the mass of the people, because of the toil and worry and poverty everywhere the common inheritance of the rising generation — because of these things it is that the artist's best pictures hang on his studio walls, the novelist's best thought is unsold, the dramatist's best play is refused by the manager, and the actor is forced to play the buffoon.

We all dream of somehow touching this great, strange, wallowing, hydra-headed something called "the public" and waking its better nature into life. We dream of playing upon its heartstrings as a lute, and all the time we passively acquiesce in conditions which keep all the devilish and sordid passions of our audience as an impenetrable barrier between us. We stand mournfully regarding the blind and suffering monster, and do nothing to help it rise. We see two millions of men and their families, who would be our eager patrons, out of work, and millions more working on reduced time and at reduced wages. We see the cities swarming with beings out of whose faces all humanity is passing. We see other men getting enormously rich without toil, while the vast majority of free Americans toil all their lives and get nothing. We see all this, and begin at last to wonder if there is not something wrong, and whether this condition of things is not a menace to us as artists as well as to the laboring man.

We begin to perceive that the nation is a solidarity, and that whatever produces disease in one part of the social body produces distress in the whole body; that the poor sewing girl, the farmer, the artisan, *cannot be crushed without a certain reaction upon art*. To this idea we owe the splendid awakening on the social subject among artists in America, led by Beard, En ticing, Inness, and Brush, and among literary men, led by Howells, George, and Bellamy.

The best artists in Boston tell me they are doing nothing. The sale of pictures is accomplished only now and then at ruinous prices. There is no money in the writing of fiction, especially the best fiction. People can't afford to buy books, and while the struggle for food and fire is so hard they will read cheap sensational or farcical stories. So in the theatrical world, the present moment

is ominous. I need not tell you of the thousands of men and women out of work in your profession. You meet them in your daily walk.

But you have all admitted the presence of the wrong. Can there come a cure? I think so. But it must come to the actor and novelist indirectly. It must come from freeing labor. *It must come from raising the common man to freedom and affluence.* What is the great bar to the progress to affluence of the common man? There are many apparent, but they mainly spring from one great fundamental and monstrous system of injustice: speculative monopoly of the benefits of nature — mines, forests, or what the economists call *land*. And the cure is, I believe, to be found in the single tax reform, which is a handy name for the doctrine so magnificently advocated by Henry George.

Land is the prime necessity of life, and speculation in it is the most far-reaching curse of our nation to-day. To it can be directly traced the overcrowding of cities, the semi-solitude of the farms, the creation of tenement houses, the bondage and discouragement of art and the slavery of labor. These are grave charges, but I think they can be substantiated. Let us see if I cannot indicate, at least, the line of argument to convince.

The same principle operates to disperse the farmers of America, and also to pile men in buildings seven stories high in the cities. This principle is the desire to escape rent. In the city, rent is lessened by many people occupying the same house, by whole families living in one or two rooms. In the country, rent is lessened by dispersion, by pushing out further into the wilderness.

Rent is made unnaturally high by the speculative holding of lands out of use. Men get and hold more land than they can use, and wait till the bitter need of some other man makes it necessary to pay the price which satisfies the speculator. Everywhere is an artificial scarcity of land. Ground rent being enormously increased because of artificial scarcity of land, the rents of houses rise in proportion, and the tenant must pay the annual increase in ground rent as well as an interest on the capital in the house. Our coal lands are monopolized by speculators who mine only here and there a part of coal tract, and regulate the price of coal at the same time that they pay labor a pittance for heaving it to the surface. Thus the poor man of the city pays tribute to the landlord in ground rent and tribute to the coal king through the monopoly price of coal, and, worst of all, finds *his wages kept at starvation point by the bitter competition of people like himself seeking a chance to work* and a chance to rent his miserable tenement.

There is no real scarcity of land — we have only twenty people to the square mile as a nation; but the *artificial* scarcity of land is already to the danger point. Land in New York is worth \$14,000,000 per acre. And there are 330,000 people to the square mile, with greater pressure and more acute misery than in any city on the earth. I say speculative holding of the earth is the greatest barrier to progress. It is a survival of the feudal system; it is a despotic tribute levied upon the helpless men and women of our time. It opposes all advance in science, art, and religion. It must be abolished. *We must raise the standard of living to raise the standard of thinking*, and to do that means attacking the supreme cause of the present low conditions of living. We must make labor free. We must destroy the tenement house and make America a nation of homes. We must keep down the number of millionaires and raise the number of the well-to-do.

Speculation in land means the getting from some one else a value which we have not earned. It means living upon somebody else. I am a teacher, for example. I get a little money laid by from my teaching. I feel the necessity of investing it somewhere. I buy a piece of land in a growing town * for a thousand dollars. I go on with my teaching. At the end of five years the city has grown about my land. Its value has doubled; it is now worth two thousand dollars. I have paid a small tax each year on the original value of the land. My industrious neighbors have been taxed upon their industry, while I have been allowed to go comparatively free of tax — yet my investment has paid me one hundred per cent. At length a man who needs my land very much offers me twenty-two hundred dollars, and I take it. I pocket the extra eleven hundred dollars though I have done nothing to earn it. It was a value which the growth of the city had made; it belonged to the city for public purposes. To the extent of \$1,000, clear, I have lived upon the labor of somebody else. I have, in fact, taken a tribute which another man was forced to pay me before he could use a plot of ground whose value was measured by the industry and enterprise of the whole community.

* The late Benjamin F. Butler, in a symposium on "How to get Rich," counselled buying land in the suburbs of growing towns.

Do you not see that there is a clearly-defined line dividing what is really mine from that which is not mine? Do you not see, moreover, that to tax the man upon the house which he proceeds to build, is to make it just that much more difficult for him to build? that it keeps him just that much longer in a tenement house? If he is a business man, it makes it just that much harder to start in business. If he builds a tenement house the tribute which he paid me must be added to the cost of the house, and thus comes at last out of the pocket of the person least able to pay it—the poor tenant.

Take another illustration. I own a lot on a street in Boston. Mr. Jones thinks it an excellent place for a theatre. He comes to purchase it. I charge \$100,000 for a lot upon which I have never put spade. I bought it twenty years ago for one thousand dollars. I have paid a very small tax upon it yearly. It has been assessed at 30% of its value because I've left it unused. Mr. Jones can't pay my price, but rents it at a large rent for a term of years. This is the first tribute to monopoly. He proceeds to build, and in every foot of lumber, and every pound of iron or coal he pays tribute to the land speculators, from whose land the coal, iron, and lumber came, and a tribute to the railway monopoly in high freights. Every article that goes to build that theatre is artificially enhanced in value by ground rent, by tribute to monopoly. At last the theatre is built; then comes the electric monopoly, the gas monopoly, the heating monopoly, and, last of all, the tax collector, who claps a fine upon Mr. Jones for his enterprise in the shape of a round yearly tax, while I continue to draw my ground rent.

Now Mr. Jones, to get even, must cut down on the wages of his hands, scrimp on gas and lights, and narrow his dressing rooms, etc. He must also charge the travelling manager larger rent. The travelling manager, in order to meet this advance, must cut down the salaries of his men. The actors find their salaries being cut and wonder at it. The travelling manager wonders at it, and gets to be a monopolist himself as soon as possible.

It is the increase in the value of theatre sites which makes the production of a new play each year more difficult. It increases the cost of production just that much. It keeps down competition just that much. Therefore the local manager books those plays only which are "assured successes," which cuts off the original playwright and fosters imitation and timidity, precisely as in the novel. This sad condition will increase in hopelessness so long as land monopoly exists unrestricted. The single-tax idea, applied to theatres, would release the theatre from tax, but would tax the land value. More theatres would be built. One manager told me he had twelve applications for his open time for every one he booked. Another placed it seven to one. This does not mean that the best were selected, but that the manager believed they would fill his theatre.

The whole problem resolves itself down to a question of monopoly of benefits which nature designed for all men, for *land* means natural resource, mines, forests, mill-privileges, as well as farms and theatre sites. As a question of abstract right, the single tax lays this down as a cardinal principle: *Whatever a man produces by his skill, economy, or foresight is his without tax, and without molestation.* So far it is individualistic, not admitting the right to tax even. *But the natural value of land, the site value, the value of the mere monopoly of any mine, lot, or location is not a product of individual skill or industry, and belongs to the general community, to be so held and its value taken as a tax.*

To bring the change about, to set industry free, and to discourage monopoly, the single tax would levy all taxes upon the site value of land, having no regard for improvements. It would do this by *a gradual exemption of all personal property from tax, and correspondingly increasing the assessments on land values,* and especially upon land values held out of the market for speculation. It would exactly reverse the present system of things. It would bear heavily on the speculator, and lightly on the industrious and enterprising man.

It would tax a man according to the exclusive advantage which he held over his fellow-men—according to his privileges and not according to the value he produces. It would tax railways as all other monopolies—upon the annual value of their monopoly, not on the value of their accommodation to the public needs.

This simple reform is one of the most radical and far-reaching of changes. The first effect would be to cheapen land. The speculator, seeing that his taxes were being raised in proportion to the industry of the community, taxed just the same as if his land were in use, would begin to use or sell to some one who will use. Land would everywhere seek a market. Money will seek "to get out of land and into houses." The result of this would be to immensely benefit the man of moderate means, and especially the working man, and this will react upon the drama. For with cheapening of lands the working man will find it easier to buy a lot, and with no tax on houses will find it easy to build a house. Material will be cheaper, because mines and forests will be open to labor. Coal will no longer cost the laborer eight dollars a ton in Boston, while his brother toiler gets thirty-nine cents for mining it. The "getting out of land and into houses" will of course decrease rents, and will at the same time increase wages.

Cheap coal, cheap lumber, cheap clothing, will be cheap because of the prodigality of our great mother, Nature, rather than because flesh and blood are cheaper than coal and cheaper than shingles. God alone knows what the "cheap" clothing of today means.

But the greatest effect of all will be the opening up of opportunity for capital and labor to employ themselves without first paying tribute to the mere land owner. Let it be observed that there is no war against capital, against legitimate business. Labor and capital are allies; their common battle is against the land-monopolist who stands ever in the way of progress.

I come now to the law of wages. There is but one law of wages. As long as there are two men seeking one job, wages will be low. As long as the mass of laborers are shut out from the opportunity to employ themselves they are essentially bond, and not free men, and must take what such hard conditions offer. What matters the glory of literature and art, the inconceivable advances of science in locomotion, labor-saving machinery, and sanitation, to the white slaves in New York city tonight, or to the millions of farmers far out on the lonely farms of the West?—for the farmers are as surely wage-earners as the city mechanic. They are not land-owners, that is sure. There are more than a million men out of work today. These men are seeking work. They crowd the doors of employers, they bid for work by offering to take lower wages. They keep wages down, in spite of invention and the infinite goodness of mother Nature.

The solution of the whole problem lies in freeing labor, by breaking down monopoly in mines, forests, building lots, and farms, and opening wide to labor a thousand natural opportunities to employ itself. With twice as many jobs as men, labor will demand and get its proper share of its product. The laborer under the single tax would have no tax upon his industry, no tax upon his home. He could make his own contract then, and his fear of poverty would be gone.

His prosperity would instantly react upon all art and all lines of legitimate business. Wages would go up in every branch of trade, while trade would be placed on a healthy and safe basis of corresponding activity. As Mr. Heme has indicated in his remarks, there can be no over production as long as men have opportunity to satisfy their reasonable wants. When men have enough to eat, they turn to art and literature. There is no over production of theatres; there are not too many actors. The whole trouble, I repeat, lies in the inability of the farmer, the mechanic, the doctor, the teacher, the millions of common Americans, to gratify their taste for the stage. Remove this disability, increase the wages of these men, and instantly art and literature would feel the effect of the reaction of the mind of the common man to buoyancy and hope.

Under the single tax, with lands taxed on site value irrespective of improvements, the man holding land out of use would use or sell; his motive for holding would be gone. The farmers would draw closer together. The growth of towns into cities would be accelerated, and as they grew in popular affluence they would become centres of light and civilization. Schools, concert halls, theatres, would spring up, and the domain of art be everywhere illimitably extended. This prosperity of the farmer, like that of the mechanic, would react upon the dramatist, the actor, and the novelist in a most inspiring way.

Over production! It is impossible. When you have raised the standard of living of the common American till he can go to the theatre when he pleases, he'll demand better plays and be willing to pay for them, just as he'll buy paintings and not chromos. The dramatic millenium will come when the laborer receives the full reward of his labors, and not till then.

In the general renaissance of trade and improvement in material things, art and literature will bloom like the rest. With leisure to enjoy and means to purchase to his refining taste, the common man would be no longer a common man, and art, genuine art, with free and happy intellects before it, would no longer be the poor, begging thing it seems now.

And, finally, and most glorious of all, that horrible waste of human genius, so common now, would lessen. Some of the finest voices I have ever heard are swallowed up in the roar of machinery, or wasted on the wide prairie air. One of the most gifted families of musicians I ever knew, lived all their several lives out on the border, and the world knows nothing of them. There are superb young actors deep in the forests, singers in the depth of mines, painters toiling on lonely farms. This waste of human genius would not go on under the new system of things. With leisure and full opportunity to select a vocation, each man or woman would gravitate to that vocation for which he or she seemed best fitted, and only those best fitted would or could remain. With countless avenues of employment open to him, the man would not find experiment a fear and a menace.

In summing up, let me say that as artists we are addressing only a handful of the great democracy. Just now you are playing to a minority that does not grow. Times are hard, and growing harder. There is no expansion, no widening, of your field or my field; it is rather narrowing. The whole country is like a factory town when the engines are all cold.

The cause of art is the cause of humanity. The dignity of the drama depends upon the comfort and leisure of the common man. The whole social order must undergo change before American art will become the jubilant and perfectly wholesome art it should be.

O the brave future! when the mouth of hunger shall be filled, and every child be flushed with warmth. In the future we all hope for, there is the most beautiful drama and the most human fiction. Men and women of the drama, your art is not supported by the few, after all; it rests upon the support of the many. Its fate is bound up with that of the working man. You too must become reformers. You too must stand for equal rights, with all that the fearless leaders of present-day thought have made that phrase mean.