

Justice - Not Self-Interest

By HENRY GEORGE



To show men that the concentration of taxes on land values will reduce the taxes they have to pay and directly benefit them, is a good thing to do, especially among the farmers, who have been told that our object is to lay on them the whole burden of taxation. But to bring men to our side who will stay there through thick and thin, to arouse the enthusiasm that is alone capable of carrying a great reform against powerful vested interests, we must appeal to something stronger than any hope of individual gain.

It is a mistake to suppose that men are altogether selfish, and view everything from the standpoint of how it will affect them. On the contrary, men are naturally sympathetic; they naturally love justice; they are naturally moved by questions of right and wrong, even when these do not affect them. And in large matters, and when large bodies of men are concerned, the power that can be aroused by the appeal to higher and nobler instincts, is always more potent and more enduring than that which can be aroused by appealing to the lower qualities. Therefore it is that I believe that while the fiscal side of the great reform we would bring about is important, the moral side is more important still.

It may be well at times to put the fiscal side to the front, but it would be the greatest of mistakes to permanently ignore the moral side. On that side we reach men whom we could not reach from the fiscal side, and from that side it is that we get the energy, the devotion, the activity that is carrying our movement forward.

As Mazzini pointed out, when men are appealed to by considerations of self-interest, they

can be carried away whenever their self-interest is appealed to on the other side; and thus it is that reform movements based on appeals to class interest have constantly been shorn of their leaders. Therefore, as he contended, every great and successful movement for social reform must be in essence a religious movement; must appeal to men; not assert or promote individuals or class rights or interest, but to secure to all that freedom their Creator intended them to have.

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Every once in a while some one, thinking only of the opposition, writes me that he deems it a mistake that in "Progress and Poverty" I should have said anything at all about the right of individual ownership of land; and that it would have proved far more effective if I had contented myself with pointing out the economic benefits of concentrating taxation on land values. I know that this is not so. I know that the feeling that induced me to write that book is the feeling to which it has appealed. The success it has had and the forces it has set in motion, are to me proofs of the truth of what I wrote in it when I said:

"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."

In the long list of men whom I know as having since then given money, time, influence, toil, to the spreading of the doctrines that book sets forth, I know of no single case in which the moving motive was any individual benefit, or even the idea of great and beneficial reform. In every

case of which I know, the moving motive was the idea of overthrowing a monstrous wrong, the idea of making life better, brighter and fuller for those worse off than themselves, and for those yet to be born. I have known many who have recognized the fiscal side of the reform alone; but I have never known of any efficient aid from them. The men who have worked, the men who will work, the men who can be counted on everywhere, and every time, till death closes their eyes, are those to whom this reform appeals from the moral, the religious, side; those who see in it not a mere improvement in taxation, but a conforming of our most important social adjustment to the law of justice, to the will of God; a restoration to the disinherited of the bounteous provision which the Intelligence that laid the foundations of the world and brought them upon it has provided for them.

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And so, while we point out the fiscal advantages of the single tax, while we show men how it will reduce their burdens and increase their incomes; let us never lay aside the appeal to the higher principles—never seek to gain recruits by presenting to others in the light of a trading expedition that shall bring back much gain to those who participate in it, what to us is really a crusade. The unenlightened selfishness which brings want amid all the elements of plenty, which forces us to stint where we might enjoy, which converts into barren waste what might be gardens, and makes life a drudgery where it might be a development, cannot be cast out enlightened selfishness.

Selfishness can only be overcome by what is higher than selfishness. This is the core of Christ's teaching—the fundamental truth that it is only by seeking the good of others that men can fully secure what is truly good for themselves. And it is to the quick and sure moral sense, rather than to the slower and duller in-

tellectual perceptions, that we can most successfully appeal. We seek to substitute a rational for an irrational system of taxation; we seek to bring into full play all the factors in the production of wealth; by abolishing the system that imposes fines and restrictions and prohibitions upon them. But what we primarily seek, is to do justice and give freedom. The great end to which the single tax is but a means, is to secure to all men the natural rights of man—to give to each during his life the equal rights to the use of those natural opportunities that the Creator has provided for the sustenance and enjoyment of life, and to secure to each the equal benefit of what has been won for the common advantages by the progress of the race and the development of civilization. There are many slow to understand our economic reasoning who will be quick to appreciate our moral purpose.

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And it is because they do not understand our moral purpose, because they only look on the fiscal side of what we propose, that there are so many who do not appreciate the economic advantages of the single tax without seeing it in anything to stir this enthusiasm. "It will increase wealth," they say, "but how will it abolish poverty?" "It is a reform" they say, "but when so many reforms are needed, how can it be a cure-all?" And so to them our concentration upon it seems the concentration of cranks who have lost the sense of proportion; our ideas of what it would accomplish, like the idea that all physical diseases can be cured by one medicine. Possibly because we are obliged to devote to the economic side of our propositions so much attention, they take this for all, and do not see that the **only cure-all in which we trust is justice**; that what we build our expectations upon is, not a mere improvement in human laws, but such simplification of human laws as in the most important of all human relations will give free play to the natural law.

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