

“The Poor Ye Have Always with You”

By Henry George

Though it may take the language of prayer, it is blasphemy that attributes to the inscrutable decrees of Providence the suffering and brutishness that come of poverty; that turns with folded hands to the All-Father and lays on Him the responsibility for the want and crime of our great cities. We degrade the Everlasting. We slander the Just One. A merciful man would have better ordered the world; a just man would crush with his foot such an ulcerous ant hill. It is not the Almighty, but we who are responsible for the vice and misery that fester amid our civilization. The Creator showers upon us his gifts — more than enough for all. But like swine scrambling for food, we tread them in the mire — tread them in the mire, while we tear and rend each other!

In the very centers of our civilization today are want and suffering enough to make sick at heart whoever does not close his eyes and steel his nerves. Dare we turn to the Creator and ask Him to relieve it? Supposing the prayer were heard, and at the behest with which the universe sprang into being there should glow in the sun a greater power; new virtue fill the air; fresh vigor the soil; that for every blade of grass that now grows two should spring up, and the seed that now increases fifty-fold should increase a hundredfold! Would poverty be abated or want relieved? Manifestly no! Whatever benefit would accrue would be but temporary. The new powers streaming through the material universe could be utilized only through land. And land, being private property, the classes that now monopolize the bounty of the Creator would monopolize all the new bounty. Landowners would alone be benefited. Rents would increase, but wages would still tend to the starvation point!

(Progress and Poverty, 1879)

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“The poor ye have always with you.” If ever a scripture has been wrested to the devil’s service, this is that scripture. How often have these words been distorted from their obvious meaning to soothe conscience into acquiescence in human misery and degradation — to bolster that blasphemy, the very negation and denial of Christ’s teachings, that the All-wise and Most Merciful, the Infinite Father, has decreed that so many of his creatures must be poor in order that others of his creatures to whom he wills the good things of life should enjoy the pleasure and virtue of doling out alms! ‘The poor ye have always with you,’ said Christ; but all his teachings supply the limitation, “until the coming of the Kingdom.” In that kingdom of God on earth, that kingdom of justice and love for which he taught his followers to strive and pray, there will be no poor. But though the faith and the hope and the striving for this kingdom are of the very essence of Christ’s teaching, the stanchest disbelievers and revilers of its possibility are found among those who call themselves Christians. Queer ideas of the Divinity have some of these Christians who hold themselves orthodox and contribute to the conversion of heathen. A very rich orthodox Christian said to a newspaper reporter, awhile ago, on the completion of a large work out of which he is said to have made millions: “We have been peculiarly favored by Divine Providence; iron never was so cheap before, and labor has been a drug on the market.”

That in spite of all our great advances we have yet with us the poor, those who, without fault of their own, cannot get healthful and wholesome conditions of life, is our fault and our shame. Who that looks about him can fail to see that it is only the injustice that denies natural

opportunities to labor, and robs the producer of the fruits of his toil, that prevents us all from being rich? Consider the enormous powers of production now going to waste; consider the great number of unproductive consumers maintained at the expense of producers — the rich men and dukes, the worse than useless government officials, the pickpockets, burglars, and confidence men; the highly respectable thieves who carry on their operations inside the law; the great army of lawyers; the beggars and paupers, and inmates of prisons; the monopolists and cornerers and gamblers of every kind and grade. Consider how much brains and energy and capital are devoted, not to the production of wealth, but to the grabbing of wealth. Consider the waste caused by competition which does not increase wealth; by laws which restrict production and exchange. Consider how the ignorance bred of poverty lessens production, and how the vice bred of poverty causes destruction, and who can doubt that under conditions of social justice all might be rich?

The wealth-producing powers that would be evoked in a social state based on justice, where wealth went to the producers of wealth, and the banishment of poverty had banished the fear and greed and lusts that spring from it, we can now only faintly imagine. Wonderful as have been the discoveries and inventions of this century, it is evident that we have only begun to grasp that dominion which it is given to mind to obtain over matter. Discovery and invention are born of leisure, of material comfort, of freedom. These secured to all, and who shall say to what command over nature man may not attend?

It is not necessary that any one should be condemned to monotonous toil; it is not necessary that any one should lack the wealth and the leisure which permit the development of the faculties that raise man above the animal. Mind, not muscle, is the motor of progress, the force which compels nature and produces wealth. In turning men into machines we are wasting the highest powers. Already in our society there is a favored class who need take no thought for the morrow — what they shall eat, or what they shall drink, or wherewithal they shall be clothed. And may it not be that Christ was more than a dreamer when he told his disciples that in that kingdom of justice for which he taught them to work and pray this might be the condition of all?

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