

Dr. Funk: I dislike to trouble or interfere with Mr. George's remarks but I understand the car leaves at 10:30.

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### Speech of Mr. Henry George at Chickering Hall, New York, on the Proposed Tenement House Law, February 17, 1895

Ladies and Gentlemen: It is the charge against us single-tax men made by the gentlemen, who, for the want of a better term, I have called milk-and-water socialists, that we are not practical.<sup>107</sup>

Their notion is that we object to every practical measure proposed for the relief of the suffering that exists in this city among the poorer classes, for it is not the rich who suffer. They claim until people will come to the single tax, our panacea, or what some of them term our quack remedy: that we want to hold things back, that we object to any improvements of the streets, to any more rapid transportation, to any making of public parks, even to precaution against fire; until we can force people to our panacea.

That is not our position. We are, on the other hand, in all that we propose, the most practical of men. This bill that has just been read is a practical proposition to do something practical for the overcrowding that prevails in this city. It is simple, but it is all the more practical because it is simple.

People have crowded in this city closer than they are anywhere in the world, and yet the fact is shown by the recent investigation made by the postal authorities, that within the limits of this city there are over fifteen-thousand building lots today vacant. Why is there such overcrowding? Not because there is not land enough, because, before anyone can get one of these vacant lots on which to erect a house, he must pay a price for it, based not merely upon present value, but upon the expectation of future value. The "dog in the manger" holds it, and that is the reason why people are crowded together.

There is another reason. There are not houses enough for the people in this city. There are not building accommodations enough. Give to our people even the room required for health and comfort and decency; yet what would happen to the man who puts up a building. The moment he does so, well, the moment he begins to dig the foundation, down comes the tax assessor and

levies what is virtually a fine upon him for increasing the number of buildings. There, right upon the surface so anyone who chooses to look may see, lies the cause of overcrowding. He is a quack who proposes to cure a broken leg by a dose of soothing syrup. If you want to cure an evil, you must go to the cause of that evil.

The bill . . . have presented does in no respect go to the cause of the evil. It has some very good provisions, some in my mind indifferent, and some bad, but good, bad, or indifferent there is not one of them that will reach the cause of the disease. If you want to remove overcrowding, if you want to help these people packed together almost like sardines in a box, packed together almost tighter than anywhere else in the world, you must make house rent and room rent as there are many people who live in houses of their own. You must make room rent cheaper. On the contrary, even their remedial measures have the direct effect of increasing house rent or room rent in two ways.

In the first place, they require where they interfere with the building of houses, more costly houses that must be paid by the tenant. In the next place, they will increase even by the public expenditure they propose, the tax levy of the city, the greater part of which falls, not upon the owners of the land, not upon the owners of the houses, but upon the users of the houses. By a natural law as certain as the natural law of gravitation, it must be paid by the user. So far as it has any effect, their proposition will make house rent dearer, not cheaper. The man who can pay for it can get abundant accommodation even in this overcrowded city. The man who can pay for air can get air, and the man who can pay for light can get light, and the man who can get to a park can pay the city for going to a park. People with whom it is not a question as to what kind of a house he can get, but [whether] he shall get any accommodation at all, those are the men and women and children who feel the effect.

Now, the simple proposition made in this bill does go directly to the cause of the evil. To take taxes off of buildings as is proposed, would at once stimulate the erection of buildings. To take taxes off of buildings would most certainly lessen in a little while by the greater competition, the price that must now be paid by the tenant for his rooms. On the other hand, the increase in tax on the value of the land would at once convert the real-estate tax from what it is now very largely, a tax, a fine upon the erection of buildings, into a tax, a fine upon the holding of vacant land. A man does not need to be a philosopher, a man may be a butcher, . . . a baker, a candlestick maker, and cannot pass through the streets of New York without seeing what is the effect of allowing people to hold valuable land idle.

In Union Square, the center of New York, from the top of the Century

Building, one may see there in one direction three great pieces of land, lying today absolutely idle. There on one side is that Brentano Building, the ruins of it. That was destroyed by fire two years ago. What keeps it idle? There are any number of people ready to come forward and put up those buildings and pay besides for the use of the land. As a matter of fact, I am told that forty thousand dollars per year has been offered, the offerer to put up the buildings at his own expense and pay forty thousand dollars per year to the owner of the land, then after a certain time the buildings to revert to the owner. Yet, the owner of the land holds it idle and proposes to continue holding it idle, until a higher price than forty thousand dollars will be paid for that land.

And again, on the other side of Fourth Ave., on the adjoining street, there are two great lots not being used at all, except on the high fences are great big, flamboyant pictures of characters in loving embrace, in many cases insulting to the eye of passersby. So, all through this city, put your tax upon the holding of land, the keeping of other people out, which does no good whatever to the people of the city at large: put your tax on land and take the tax off of the erection of buildings and what would be the result?

We do not propose this as our panacea for all social ills. We do not propose this even as the single-tax proposition. It is not the single-tax proposition. It is a practical remedy for present conditions; not a full and complete remedy, but a remedy that would do something and do it at once, immediately. No sooner could that bill pass, even though it should not go into operation until the first of next January, no sooner would that bill be passed than building would be stimulated all over the city, and the holders of vacant lots would begin to think it time for them to improve, or make some terms with people willing to improve the lots. It would be felt immediately; before it went into operation, it would be felt in the price of rent; that is in house rent by lowering it.

This would not work a full nor a complete remedy. It is not the single-tax proposition. The single-tax proposition is to go further than that. It is to abolish all taxes. Place the tax upon the value of land and increase that tax not merely to suffice for the municipal government of this city, but to a point of taking as nearly as possible the whole value of land. Pass this measure and the effect would be to reduce house rent; reduce it immediately and considerably. More accommodations could be had cheaper in this city, but we know that all improvements, so long as land, the basis of all value, the absolute necessity for all human exertion, is held by some and the equal, natural rights of all denied. And then that all improvements must ultimately go to the owners of the land, would ultimately be so, even in this case.

But people would come into New York, and as they came, demand for accommodation would increase and the price that would be demanded for

the use of land would go up. That is the only thing that goes up with the increase of population and growth of the city. Buildings do not increase in value. Houses do not become more valuable with age. All improvements in the arts, all of our discoveries and inventions are lessening the cost of production, and should reduce the price of the things that are produced by human labor.

Land is not produced by human labor. Land has no cost of production. Land was here before man came. Land will be here after men go. What gives it the value is the increase in the demand for its use. Why, if one man or one woman, like the Astors, were the absolute owners of the city, looking to their ultimate benefit, this practical proposition that we make would commend itself to their enlightened proposition.

What does the bill propose? It proposes to take off the tax upon the things that increase the general wealth of the city of New York, and put the tax upon the use of what was here when Hendrick Hudson came up the North River.<sup>108</sup> It is the same principle which any great landlord applies to his own estate. He does not put a multiplicity of taxes upon his tenant, if a wise landlord does not make any charge to them for the elevators, lighting, and accommodations; such things are furnished free in the largest buildings. He puts them all into one tax, which is ultimately a tax upon the use of so much land or so much water.

What we propose in this bill is just this simple, commonsense measure. But this is also clear, that if this measure were adopted for New York alone, the very improvements that would be made in the masses of New York City as compared with those of other places, would bring new people here.

This is only a simple measure. It is not what we want, but it is a beginning in the way we want to go. That bill passed in the legislature of New York and ratified by the people of the city of New York, would start an impetus and be felt all over the country. Let us do that here and the great ball will be started rolling and the impulse will be felt in other cities and other states. Even put our municipal tax upon the value of land, exempting the value of improvements, and how long will it be before the people of this city and state and all over the country, will demand that it go further. It will establish the great truth that the value of land (what is usually called land) is the proper, I believe the divinely intended source by which to meet the demands for public revenue, that come with the growth of civilization.

We make no quarrel with the gentlemen of the Tenement House Commission, but they have not proposed a measure that will at once abolish poverty and they have kept out of sight anything that looks towards the abolition of poverty. We believe poverty can be abolished the moment men are willing to abolish it. We believe poverty does not come from the decree

of (Mr.) Almighty, but that it is merely the result of men's injustice. We know that is slow and we do not expect to see everything done at once, but we will not be satisfied unless there is some movement in the true line. There is no other way, no other path. All these milk-and-water measures that make a pretense of doing something to remedy the effects of poverty, while doing nothing to affect its cause; they make a pretense of doing something to help the poor, while doing nothing to hurt the rich, accomplish nothing at all.

The gentlemen's speeches that I heard at Cooper Union, when the tenement-house recommendations were proposed and that have been made since, say: look at the reforms that have been done in England by similar measures, by tearing down the houses in the slums and building modern tenement houses; by erecting poor people's lodgings, where, one gentleman said at the meeting I referred to, a man could lodge like a gentleman for seven cents. I have seen some of those lodgings. I do not think anyone would call himself a gentleman who cared to lodge there. They are clean, perhaps; they give you a bunk and they give you a stove upon which you can cook a herring, but it is not such a lodging as any American citizen ought to have. (Applause.) What has been the result?

Mr. Merryweather (?) told it from this platform a week ago; how in Naples the old slums had been done away with, fine buildings now taking their places. What is the result? A richer class of people occupy those buildings and the poor people have gone off to make other slums. So it is in London and so it is in Liverpool. If any of you have read in the London cablegram of the *Sun* today, you saw there a slight evidence of what I mean. Liverpool is one of the cities referred to in which so much had been done. In Liverpool the people are actually starving to death and when the socialists get up a fund and propose to give out coarse food, people trample upon each other to get the food.

That is the condition of the workers in England and all through those cities. There is a large body of people who must make a choice between want and food. The writer tells of one poor Italian who was sent to jail for one week for the crime of "sleeping out"; having no place to go. When he was driven out of jail after his term had expired, having no money, no shelter, and no means of getting them, he deliberately took off his clothes, lay down and froze to death.

We are accused of being one-idea men. Commence today from any standpoint, try to remedy any social difficulty and ultimately you cannot continue your investigation unless you come to the land question. All roads once led to Rome; so today all roads that attempt to tackle any side of the social question, come to the land, for the relation between man and the planet on which he lives must be the most fundamental of all relations. On the land

upon which we live—all that live at all—on the land and from the land we must produce all of our money and produce all things, no matter what. It is ultimately but the working up in form of the crude materials furnished by Nature. Our very bodies, our flesh and blood are drawn from the land and to the land they must return again. These monstrous buildings towering far above the spires of the old churches, now being erected here, their topmost stories rest on land; there is nowhere else they can rest. So it is with the social structure, the bottom is the land question.

Take the labor question, the temperance question, the money question, or the question of the education of children: the fact is that with all of our boasted common schools there is a great body of children growing up here and put to work before their muscles or bones are developed; put to work without proper education, and this goes at once to the land question. There can be no social reform that does not touch the land question. You might as well attempt to build a home without land to build upon, to touch any of these questions without considering the land question. That is the reason why we single taxers see in all measures of reform something that bears upon the land question. But you cannot make up your minds that the landlord shall be hurt, without thinking that he is the great sacred white elephant that must not be touched. It is like learning to swim without going near the water.

All of this trouble is not confined to New York City alone; it exists all over the country, in San Francisco as well as in New York and on the plains of Nebraska, as by the shores of the sea. What proportion of the produce of his labor can the laborer get for exerting his labor? And today the great change that has come over this country has gone so far that the majority of the people are tenants of the Irish type; that today the great majority of the American people can call no part of this land their own. They are forced to pay to landlords from week-to-week, or month-to-month, or year-to-year for the privilege of having some foot of land to stand upon, some shelter against the inclemency of the weather, that the great majority of the American people are today without what we properly call homes. They have no estate whatever in the country and we wonder that popular government is breaking down.

I heard a few hours ago on this very platform a prohibitionist speaker declare that popular government had broken down in our great cities, because, as he put it, more than fifty percent of the people were either criminals or sympathized with the criminal classes. And then he told us about the immigration of people coming here not Americans [sic]. (Laughter.) Different he said from what it was ten years ago, when we used to get the noble Irishman, Englishman, and Scotchman; now we were getting the scums from the Latin races.<sup>109</sup>

Democratic government must break down in any country where the mass of the people are very poor and the few of the people are very rich. It always

has and always must. Democratic government is the best of all governments, where the majority of the people have some estate in the community; where there is something like an equal division. Where the masses have no estate in the well-being of the community; where the mass of the people are mere tenants; where the mass of the people must struggle for a bare living, and some few of the people are so enormously rich that they need not care as to what happens today, you must invariably have the boss and a corrupt government.

You will ultimately have the tyrant and behind him must come the destruction that always at last ends corruption. What is going on here in our boasted Republic is what went on in Rome, only it is going on . . . much faster as our means of locomotion are faster than those of the ancient Romans. These great inventions, steam and electricity, the new powers that have been harnessed to man's car, only hasten the catastrophe. All improvements, in their nature, must under the condition of things where some few own the natural opportunities and labor, increase the power of the few to gain wealth without working for it and reduce the masses to a still more hopeless poverty. Is it not wonderful that democratic government in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston is breaking down, but the whole American system is breaking down? And in this bill proposed here lies the opening wedge of the only possible remedy that can possibly be applied.

There is nothing that cannot be explained by anyone looking at the facts about New York. People are crowded together under conditions that do not give them light and air nor food enough. Today, every day the year round people are starving in this great, rich city. Starvation does not mean the absolute breaking down of the human machine from the want of food; starvation has a thousand ways of showing itself before it gets that far. Here in this wintry weather there are thousands of people in this great city who must be supported by charity or by public hands. Supported how long? Not for the life that is their allotted portions. Aye, people today [are] starving to death even in our public institutions. I read in the newspapers this morning of a man who had lost his work, moved from one place to another with his wife and little child; then the wife was taken sick and the little child also sick; he, during that great snowstorm, had a chance to do a day's work or so and slipped and broke his arm. In the meantime, his wife had gone to the Bellevue Hospital and they told her what the little child needed was a more generous supply of food. The child died.

That goes on all the time. Here was an individual absolutely powerless. All he could do was to help a little here and a little there, but it is like stem-

ming the tide that sets in from the ocean. What shall be done under the present conditions? There must be some way to do something.

I remember that when I visited Glasgow, not Glasgow, it was . . . I was taken to the rooms of a charitable society working in taking care of the children of the very poor and there they pointed out to me a puny starving little girl. They told me how when the hungry, famished little creature was offered food, before [she] touched it, she clasped her little hands together and bowed her head and thanked her Father in heaven for His mercy. So she had been taught. The gentleman who told me that seemed to think it only an evidence of how even the very poor could retain some religious trait. But think of it! That poor little creature thanking her Father in heaven for His bounty. Was the bounty of her Father in heaven? (Voices: "No, no, no.")

We might better say there is no God. Philanthropy says that is all there is that can be done for God's creatures. The bounty of our Father in heaven! It is true that He gives us each day our daily bread, but all that God gives us is summed up in one word—it is "land." God gives us the land, the soil. He gives us the water, the land, the air, the sunshine; He gives us all of those things which work through Nature, and they are all tried and summed up in the one word—"land." What God gives to all of His creatures is grabbed by some and held by some under such conditions that there must be poverty in the midst of natural abundance; not by God's decree, but by man's selfishness.

No, we are not men of one idea. We are men who have hold of the fundamental truth. We are not men with a fad; we are men with a principle. We are not quack venders of a patent panacea. Our panacea is a panacea and it is the only panacea; it is justice. It is justice that we demand, that each shall accord to another that which is another's right. Until that is done, there can be no social relief. If we will not do it, social pressure must increase until ultimately, at last, justice will assert herself, as she does always at last assert herself if adhered to, then the people who deny her will be crushed off [from the face] of the earth. Then where will the Huns and Vandals come from that will destroy our civilization? Macaulay saw them when he pointed to the poverty squalor in that city by the lake.

We present you this practical measure. After all, I care not how parties may be entrenched; how forces may have gathered power; what the forms of government are. At last, the people will arise and assert themselves. At last, if public opinion be educated, enlightened and consecrated, it must have its way. Let us press forward this reform in season and out of season—that to those who have and to those who starve, it is truth, it is justice, and at last it must have its way.