

## Speech by Henry George, Art Institute, Chicago, August 29, 1893,

Mr. George was received with cheers and long-continued applause and spoke as follows: Ladies and Gentlemen: I am to talk tonight about the single tax. Let me tell you in the first place how I became a single-tax man. I came to it from the side of labor. I came to it from pondering over what to me was the most perplexing of all problems: Why it was that as our society advanced in all that they struggled for, the condition of the mere worker became not easier but in reality harder.

I well remember the beautiful summer afternoon on the Pacific, lying on the deck of the topsail schooner that subject first incidentally presented itself to my mind. I was lounging on the deck with some miners, and myself was but a mere boy, and they began discussing the Chinese question, and I said to them speaking of the injury the immigration of the Chinese would do to California: "How can the Chinese do any harm? The diggings they are taking up and working in the mines are diggings that white men do not care to work." One of the old miners said to me: "That is true, now, but the time is coming, and coming fast, when white men will be glad to work these diggings. Wages in California now are very high, but as population increases they must fall to the same level as in the Eastern states."

And I know how that puzzled me at the time, but it passed from my mind and again and again things came up to bring the matter anew to my attention until at last at the age of thirty I came East, passing through Chicago before the railroad was built, and in the heart of the great city during those winter months in the city of New York I saw that conjunction of wealth and want—for the first time is absolutely appalling to a man from the far West.

The desire to find the remedy grew into a burning intensity. I thought and thought, but not with perfect clearness until one day when, after I had gone back to California (and then California was in flush times) the boom had followed the opening of the railroad. Improvement was seen everywhere; land was going up in value everywhere; men who had done nothing particularly were finding themselves rich.

One afternoon I mounted a horse and galloped the horse as far as he could go away from the bay of San Francisco and through to the hills, and when the horse began to show that he did not want to go at that gait any longer, I stopped. Some men were coming up along the road with provision wagons and I said to one of them: "What is land worth about here?" "About here," he said, "I don't know as you could buy it at any price, but do you see those cows away over there?"; and the cows looked like mice, and he added: "A man over there will sell some land for \$1,000 an acre!" That was the booming price. (Applause.)

A thousand dollars an acre! Like a flash reason seemed to light up my brain! A thousand dollars an acre for land having no higher qualities than it had when it could be bought for nothing an acre! What does it mean? Does it necessarily mean that if the owner of that land can get that much more that labor must get less? (Applause.) The more I thought of it and the more I studied over it the clearer did that seem to explain to me the perplexing problem.

In a few months after that I published little book, or rather pamphlet, long since out of print, entitled "Our Land and Land Policy," the same fundamental principles which were elaborated years afterwards and embodied in *Progress and Poverty*. I well remember one of the incidents associated with the publication of that book. A friend of mine meeting me on the street said to me: "I have read your little book, why what you propose is what the vanguards of the French proposed in the *impot unique!*" It did not take long for me to find out all I could about that work as I had never heard of it before. Then occurred to my mind, as it must have been in the minds of most of us, the genesis of the idea that we now call the "single tax"—the idea of taking economic rent for public purposes, and in this way giving to labor its full reward. Years passed and *Progress and Poverty* was written.

I began to meet friends who thought as I did. One of the first, and most valued of them was a newspaper editor who had vigorously denied the feasibility of our proposition, and explain why it could not prove successful. Mr. Louis F. Post (applause); and he is right here on the platform. (Turning and bowing to Mr. Post.) He was the man. I went to Europe and came back again, all the time thinking over the problem. One or two believed with me, and my friends

began to multiply rapidly. Then we were puzzled over a name for this new idea, and by the way, I remember how much that name *Progress and Poverty* bothered me when it first suggested itself to my mind, but when I talked with my friends about it it was thought by some that it was too much like Benjamin Franklin's sign, it was too alliterative: but the first name went.

And I well recollect the first name proposed for our little society we were endeavoring to organize. We first thought of calling it "The Free Land Society." There was a good deal of objection to that. "Free land" did not properly convey our idea, or at least it was liable to misconception. People seemed to think we wanted entire right of possession in land, that it could be held in common, and anyone come in and take it, no matter if someone else was using it. And then there was the term adopted by our friends in England called "The Land Reform Union," and there was an objection to that. The real thing we were after was the rights of labor, and the association between land and labor was not clear in people's minds; and again there had been a body of men calling themselves "Land Reformers" in New York years ago. Their theory was embodied in the idea of land limitation, and that one man might hold a certain amount of land, 640 acres I think was the limit, and no more. We had no such idea.

Then began in our society what we would now call a Single Tax Society. The best name we could think of was "The Land Restoration League," trying to bring to the front the idea that what we proposed was nothing new but merely a resumption by the people of their original and natural rights. But that did not seem to be exactly right; it sounded a good deal like resurrectionists. (Laughter) And so we continued to consult together upon our doctrine in various ways until the movement in New York arose in which these principles for the first time came into American politics, and we then adopted the name. (Turning to Mr. Post: "What was the name, Mr. Post?")

Mr. Post: I cannot recall it at the present time.

At any rate, the name first originated with the labor organization, and passed into an organization called "The United Labor Party," but we did not very clearly express what we were trying to get at, and no one could devise a suitable name until one day Mr. Shearman remarked: "I have read your literature, and it seems to me the proper title should be "the single tax." (Applause.) And then an article was published under that title, and somehow or other the name stuck, and since that time the use of the term "single tax," and "single-tax men" has been steadily growing; it originated in this country and has been well known wherever the English language is spoken. (Applause.)

Now, the advantages we have found in that title are considerable. It sets forth clearly not our aim, but our means; it leaves no room for people to say, as they used to say: "What do you propose to do after you have divided the land up equally, and it does not stay divided?" (Applause.) It leaves no room for any assumption that we want to take the landed estates from the present owners, and then turn the state into a great real-estate agency, renting it out in lots to suit, to the highest bidder; and it sets forth clearly that we propose to take economic rent by the same process of abolishing taxes on the production and exchange of wealth, by collecting in the form of taxes that great increment of wealth that attaches to land by the progress of society and public improvements.

Yet the term itself is a misnomer. What we clearly propose is not a tax, in the narrow meaning of the word, it is simply a taking by the public, by the community of a value belonging of right to the community; of a value that comes, not from the exertion of the individual but from the aggregation of men, a value which represents that addition to individual powers which comes from the union of men in society. (Applause.) It does not suit us, but it is the best thing we have been able to find so far, or rather we did not find it, it came to us, and has been given to us by its seeming fitness, and its general acceptance.

And it is worth mentioning in this connection that what the single tax is is not to be strictly inferred from its mere name; for instance there are people who contend that the single tax excludes every other tax, even a tax on dogs (laughter), even a tax on state bank note circulation (mild applause); that is an adherence to the letter which killeth not to the spirit which giveth life. The single-tax idea by no means excludes nor denies the idea that a community may, for police, sanitary, or other public purposes impose a tax; its central idea is the taking in the form of a tax that increment of land values, which grows up with the general growth and progress of the community, by what economists call "the law of rent," and makes land the only great thing that increases in value with common growth

and improvement. In that lies the central idea of what we call the “single tax.”

There are two diverse and opposing schools of thought among who, feeling today the injustice, the wastes, the disorder of society in these times, seek for some improvement. On the one side in this great division stand the anarchist, on the other side we find the socialists, each representing a great principle and each in my opinion in the acceptance of one principle losing sight of another principle, its opposite, yet its correlative. There is a feeling that the anarchists (and I am speaking now not of mere disturbers, but of philosophic thoughtful men), and their idea is no doubt true in some respects that there is far too much government; and they look for remedy in the doing away of government and put their trust upon the principle of individual freedom. The socialists, on the other hand see that there are disorders, that there are evils, that there is injustice and waste in the present organization of society, and turning to the other principle propose to organize and regulate.

The single-tax idea steers between the two. (Applause.) It recognizes on the one hand that man is an individual, but it recognizes on the other hand that man is a social animal (applause), born in society and intended to live in society.

Now, on the mere question of the use of land; no matter what be the school of thought, whoever really thinks must see that after all men are but land animals; that after all what we are doing in this world is endeavoring to make a living, to satisfy our needs, and to gratify our desires by working up the raw material of Nature, that is to say, the land. (Applause.)

But the anarchists, if I correctly understand their philosophy, would simply let things alone with regard to land, or if they could go that far, would prevent—if anarchists can really believe in prevention (laughter)—would prevent any holding of land unless it was occupied and used. To do that unless there was some regulation would necessarily leave the possession of land in the hands of the strong. If there was that regulation which restricted the holding of land to possession and use, how would that enormous injustice be done away with that enables the owner of an acre in a city like this to derive from its mere possession a princely income without doing anything?

On the other hand, the socialists, taking all land into the Possession of the state would also direct its cultivation, improvement, and use by the state, and surely we of the United States do not have to go to abstract reasoning to see that in things that the state undertakes to do, the state is a mighty poor manager (applause), and that we cannot carry state management and state direction very far without in some way or other finding in place of the state the boss.

What we propose is simply then to let men take the land they want to use and occupy it without state direction or regulation until such time as the value of the land, irrespective of improvement, economic rent proper, begins to grow, and then not bother with the land itself but take the rent for the use of the state (applause): and in this simple way we put all upon an equal basis with regard to natural elements. Under those conditions, whether a man held much land or little land, poor land or rich land, land hitherto on an unbroken prairie, or land in the center of a great city like this, would make no difference, it would give him no advantage, the advantage that came from his own exertions (applause), and in this way there is worked out an enormous simplification of government, doing away with unnecessary function which are now imposed upon the state.

And while thus leaving to the individual all that belongs to the individual, even that individual right to the equal use of land that comes with existence in this world, it would, at the same time, give to the state an enormous income that could be used for public purposes, thus doing away with all those taxes, unjust in themselves, and demoralizing in their exactions which aim to take from the individual, taking from the things that have been produced by the exertion of labor for the use of the community. What we mean by single tax is the recognition of a great law, a law that, as Bishop Nulty has said seems more than any other law we have yet discovered to show the moral wisdom, or the beneficence of that power whose creatures we are. (Applause.)

Now, look! Man is a social animal, not merely an individual. As individuals there is nothing whatever to show that the men of today are one whit in advance of the men of three-thousand years ago, or five-thousand years ago, or as far back as we are able to trace. All our advance is a social advance, the advance in knowledge, advance in habit, and advance in all these things that pertain not to an individual, but to the individual as a member of society.

(Applause.) There is a law of human advancement, the law of civilization.

Now, look! If that be so then it follows that every advancement in civilization necessitates a larger and larger social revenue. The Indians who existed here before the white man came had no need for public revenues but as a higher civilization begins, as men grow closer to each other, as cities arise, as roads must be opened, as organized government must be formed, as schools are to be maintained, and all the ever-increasing needs of a growing and advancing social organization come, there is a higher and a higher, a greater and greater need for public revenues to meet those expenses. That is a natural law, and there is a natural need for human society; the state, the nation, the community are as much a thing of natural history as is the man himself. (Loud applause.)

Now, look! With that advancing need for public revenues we may see everywhere a growth in land values. In such a social state as that of the Indians there was no value attaching to the land. When Chicago could have been bought for a pair of boots, that was just about all Chicago was worth. (Laughter.)

But here, as everywhere, civilization goes on, and the inevitable result is to increase the value of land. With our social progress all other values tend to lessen. As the cost of production is reduced the value of all manufactured articles, of all things brought into existence by human exertion tends to grow less and less, we see that everywhere; but while these values lessen there is one value which steadily arises, that is the value of land. (Applause.) That is by virtue of a natural law. The law of rent is as all-pervading, as inflexible as the law of gravity; there is absolutely no way of getting rid of it; all we can decide is who shall take it. (Applause.)

Now, here! The natural order is on one side the growing demand for public revenues; here, in the natural order is the increasing supply. By virtue of social growth, the very condition arising by reason of an increasing population and advance in the arts, which requires greater revenues, brings a supply in the nature of a value that no one can call his own, in a value that does not come from the exertion of any individual. Take this land in Chicago, so enormously valuable: who has made it valuable? Not the owners, not even the men who have built upon it. Take away the people of Chicago and how much would that land be worth? (Applause, a voice: "A pair of boots.")

Now the same law that gives to the producer that which he produces, that which gives to the laborer, that which his labor brings forth from the inexhaustible stores of Nature, that same law, the basis of all property, these values belong not to individuals, but to the community. (Applause.) Here is the natural provision in the creative forethought for the very needs that our modern civilization is developing.

And look! Were that done for us and economic rent taken, I think I may really say its predestined purpose—were that growing value really taken— what would be the result? This, and clearly this, that our advance in civilization would mean an advance toward a greater equality among men (applause), not as now, to a more and more monstrous inequality (applause), for here also is a law of the universe that we may see written in every page of history: If a proffer of goods is not taken it must result in evil, and if we advance materially we must also morally advance. (Applause.)

With our inventions and discoveries, the new powers added to us and placed in our hands, we require a keener justice, a more careful treatment of men. And here comes the curse. By virtue of a natural law of economic rent, the unearned increment of land values, as John Stuart Mill calls it, grows with the common growth, advances with all social advancement, instead of taking that, when we leave it to the individual there is necessarily set up a grasping greed to get possession of the land, even without using it, or intending to use it. (Applause.) There is set up a speculation in land, the very element of life and labor; that constantly tends to produce all the practical effects of an absolute scarcity in land, and there is the reason why today in this great city of Chicago, the center of railroads, running for thousands of miles through unused and half-used land, you have the cry of the unemployed. (Loud applause.)

Employment of labor! Heavens and earth! Think of it! If we could send up a committee to the high court of Heaven and tell the Creator, Himself, that there were men in this country who, through no fault of their own could find no employment, what do you suppose the answer would be? "Have you not land enough?" What is it that God gives to

labor? The power to labor, and land. (Long continued applause; a voice: ‘That’s a hot one’; cheers and applause.)

This money question people are thinking about so much, and writing about so much money, important as it may be, is but an instrument of production; money, in itself, is but a medium, mark you, not *the* medium in the transfer of values and in the making of exchanges. Why, look at our friends in Kansas, and such states, talking about the money questions and the gold bugs as though that were the reason why they are eaten up by mortgages: as though that were the reason why they find it so hard to live! It was not the money question that filled the roads of Ireland with carts, carrying the produce of the soil to England at the very time they were digging ditches in which to bury their population. (Loud applause.)

What is happening now? What we men of the West are beginning to feel is the same condition of things that has so long existed in Ireland (Applause and “hear, hear”) Why is it that the produce of the West is being steadily drained to the East? Why is it that the millionaires are centering in cities like New York, Boston, and Chicago, and are about leaving those cities and going over to settle in London and in Paris? (Applause.) The East and Europe own land in the West. (Applause.) How much land of the East and of Europe is owned in the West? (Applause, a voice: “Hear, hear.”)

The settler comes along seeking for a home; he finds the speculator has been ahead of him, and he has to purchase at a price that absorbs his little capital, and compels him to mortgage his labor for permission to till unused soil (applause): soil in which the plowshare has never been struck?

There is the beginning of your mortgages. There is the same drain going on that has impoverished Ireland and Poland; and people talk as though it was the money question, lacking everywhere but at the land under their feet, upon which they were born, to which they must return again, and from which comes all the wealth man can produce; and now, as ever, it is true that the men control the land must ultimately control the people. (Loud applause.)

Aye, since we first began talking about it how steadily the advance has gone on. I remember very well, and I think it was the gentleman who just sang for us a little while ago, I remember one of the songs he used to sing when I was a boy, and it was a very popular one:

Come along, come along, make no delay,  
Come from every nation, come from every way;  
Our land is broad enough; do not be alarmed,  
For Uncle Sam is rich enough to give us all a farm. (Applause.)

And it was not so long ago to you and to me that we heard that song.

Where are those farms now? (Applause.) Do you know that according to statistics of the last census the majority of the American people are utterly landless. (Applause, a voice: ‘That’s right.’) The independent farmer! We are accustomed to talk and think of him as though he were the owner of the soil beneath his feet! The independent farmer in a little time will be in history as are the same class in England. In every state according to the report of the Census Bureau ... the tendency is increasing among the farming population toward that serious condition of mortgages, and debts are growing in number and in ratio.

The cause of it is clear, as is the cure of it. (Applause.) There is no other remedy, no other possible remedy under our civilization than this measure which we call the “single tax.” (Applause, long continued.)

I have talked to you too long, and must stop. (Cries of: “Go ahead, go ahead.”) It is my own fault; I have been busy and came too late—but just one word. (A voice: “We will stay here all night if you will talk,” cheers and applause.)

Our advance is to be seen on every hand. We are alive and enthusiastic. We have met together here with representatives from away off New South Wales and from still further south, from Australia and far-off Norway, and in every country where the English language is spoken, this doctrine called the single tax is showing itself to be the

question of the immediate future (applause), and in Spain and Germany and France everywhere it is being talked of with earnestness, and here in the United States I believe we do not begin to know our strength. (Loud applause.)

Why, it is like air that men imbibe: these principles are making their way through every avenue, and by-and-by they will begin to come into action; and when that time comes, with a power that will astonish even their friends. (Applause.) In all directions the night is breaking and the light is coming, most especially in our West; with us who know what we want, and know how to get it. (Applause and cheers.) We will see the future is ours—aye, in ways that even the most sanguine of us never could have dreamed of.

The last time that I stood on this platform beside that man (pointing to Dr. McGlynn) he was an excommunicated priest. (Applause.) The highest power in the largest church the world has ever known had declared that no Catholic could hold this doctrine without incurring the ban of the church. Learned theologians knew better than that, but the word of the Archbishop of New York passes as of record; and something so strange, it seems to me, as to be more passing strange than anything that has happened in our time has come to pass.

I think it was Macaulay who said, thirty or forty years ago, that there were two places in this world in which a great man might rule the world; the throne of the Emperor of China, and throne of the pope of Rome.”(Applause.) And a great man has appeared in one of them. (Loud applause.) Leo, the XIII (applause), long past the age of youthful vigor when he became pontiff, has worked, and is working a revolution, a beneficent revolution, which seems to me is destined to write his name as the greatest and most beneficent in the role of the great successors of Peter.

He has condemned the doctrine that the want and the suffering that exist among men in the very centers of our civilization have nothing to do with religion. (Applause; and a voice: “Good.”) He has condemned most emphatically that doctrine that a Catholic cannot believe in the equal rights of man. (A voice: “Amen, good.” and applause.)

And today we have standing among us that man who was condemned for his utterances of that truth, that priest, who, because of his adherence to them was stripped of his functions; we have him with us duly accredited and authorized as a priest of that greatest of churches—aye, the world advances as the years advance. (Applause.) Let what we have seen be to us but an earnest of what is yet to come. (Continued applause and cheers.)