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William Lloyd Garrison
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William Lloyd Garrison, "Why I Am a Single-Taxer," *Twentieth Century* 4 no. 18 (May 1, 1890): 5–6.

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Why I Am a Single-Taxer

William Lloyd Garrison

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I am an advocate of the Single-tax because it stands for a fundamental reform based on a moral principle. The name is intended to indicate a practical method of reaching and curing much of the misery that afflicts society. It seems shameful that in a world of plenty, with more than enough for all to live upon in comfort, there should exist, side by side, congested wealth and abject poverty, evidently arising from a derangement of forces.

What is the primal cause? Is it a decree of nature? Manifestly not, for nature is lavish and unstinting when properly approached. She responds quickly to the husbandman, grants to the animals which contribute to men's food a fecundity far beyond human increase, yields plentifully to effort the riches stored in the earth, and has endowed man with thought and ingenuity which makes him a creator of wealth.

If nature is not responsible for the trouble then man must be, and the imperfect distribution of the necessities and commodities of life must be laid at his door. Some hands succeed in securing and holding more wealth than is good for the possessors. Others, vastly greater in number, grasp wildly for it, but lack the power to

retain more than enough for a bare subsistence. We must explain how these extremes exist.

There are many and diverse answers to the problem. The temperance reformer, seeing crime and suffering associated universally with alcoholic drink, declares that to be the root of the evil. To regenerate men we must destroy the drink habit. There is much force and sense in this contention. The woman suffragists affirm that the trouble is caused by denying the purer and equally interested half of the human race the right to a voice in making the laws by which they are governed. They aver with reason that the wisdom and tenderness of woman, were she justly admitted to her share in the government, would speedily find a way to mitigate and change the social evils that appall us. The advocates of education insist that schools and teaching are the 'chief regenerative influences; while the Church, which calls itself Christian, and pretends to be superior to all other agencies, makes its appeal for souls, undismayed by nearly nineteen hundred years of effort and its discouraging result.

The advocates of the Single-tax have their diagnosis and remedy to offer. Their grievance is that the earth, which is a bounty of nature, due to no man's virtue or labor, has been monopolized. That, as men must have land to live upon, those who control the land control also the labor which finds employment upon it, and thereby hold undue advantage. By the present system the many become subject to the few and are not permitted to gather the fruits of their toil. The ownership of land, implying as it does the right of absorbing wealth produced by others, without returning a corresponding service, is therefore manifestly unjust, and should not be recognized in the court of equity.

It breeds artificial distinctions and makes classes. From it springs the assumption that the poor should be governed by the rich; that the laws of trade may be safely tampered with; that protective tariffs, which deny the right of natural exchange and rob the poor, are beneficial to the nation. Out of this land system grows a crop of fallacies, which the Single-tax antagonizes and seeks to expose.

We, who believe in the profound and far-reaching effects of our methods, are by no means indifferent to the kindred reforms already mentioned. We agree with the temperance people that drunkenness is a terrible curse. I, for one, have never been at all convinced by the reasoning of my Single-tax coadjutors that government had not a right to protect itself against the sale of intoxicants, to the full extent of prohibition. But it is pertinent to ask whether drunkenness is not as often the refuge as it is the cause of misery? How can we make men and women sober and self-respecting who herd together in slums and swarming tenements, because natural opportunity for work is denied them? With land rescued from speculation and easy of access to every one who wishes to use it, who doubts that improved conditions of living would lessen depraved appetite and brutality?

Our movement has always been broad enough to recognize and champion the rights of woman equally with man. It welcomes her as a worker and rejoices in her companionship and help. In the emancipation of the soil must follow larger scope for her employment and independence. Of the educator we ask : “What can the brain acquire while the stomach is empty and the body worn and wearied?” To the Church we express our conviction that comfortable subsistence must precede all appeals to the higher nature which we call the soul. Poverty is the enemy of civilization and the barrier to progress.

I believe in the Single-tax because it is not a fanciful scheme or theory. It is intensely practical and looks for no Utopia, or anything—

..... too bright or good
For human nature’s daily food.

It does not insist that men shall be saints and society perfect before it can be realized. It demonstrates that the people are bending under heavy and self-imposed burdens. They cannot attain an

upright attitude because the tax load weighs down their stooping shoulders. It calls in ringing tone for volunteers to the rescue, as if the city were burning and lives in peril. It points with energy to the breaking backs, and shouts, "Off with the wicked load! Take those protective tariff taxes first; they are the nearest. Work, brothers and sisters, work, else will the human form be like the brute!"

I am a believer in the Single-tax because it means the abolition of armies and navies. It does not confine itself to one country or one hemisphere. It breaks down barriers of race and language and recognizes in the widest sense the brotherhood of man. Its great exemplar is in request by all English-speaking nations, and now preaches the gospel of liberty to eager ears beneath the Southern Cross. If only all tongues were alike to him, he would be called by every people where freedom of speech is tolerated. And wherever the principle of the Single-tax shall be accepted, what room is there for forts and naval fleets! All the peace organizations since Christianity was born seem impotent beside this messenger of love and human fellowship.

I am a believer in the Single-tax because it works in harmony and intimately connects the great reforms that appeal to my reason and nobler feelings. It does not say, "Come, let us build up by statute a grand edifice which seems to us best for humanity." It says, instead, "The moral law of the universe needs no reenactment. Bad human edicts have interfered with it and wrought confusion and suffering. Abolish them."

These wait their doom, from that great law
Which makes the past time serve today;
And fresher life the world shall draw
From their decay.

It is based on faith in human nature.

Finally, I believe in the Single-tax because it reconciles with justice a universe which without it seems irreconcilable, and makes existence sweeter and more hopeful for mankind.