

“The Accumulation of Wealth” and “The Land Reformer”

Frederick Douglass*, 1856

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The Accumulation of Wealth

THE [ancient] Spartan lawgiver who discouraged the accumulation of wealth, because of its tendency to impair the liberties of his country, was fully justified in the extreme measures he adopted, by the universal experience of nations, and the fate of his own country

His aim to exterminate wealth and refinement entirely, was, perhaps, not wise; it is not wealth of itself that produces the dreaded effects, but its accumulation in the hands of a few – creating an aristocracy of wealth, ready to be the tool of an aggressive tyranny, or to become aggressive upon its own account. With an increase of wealth comes an increase of selfishness, a devotion to private affairs, and a contempt of public – unless politics can be made to minister to all the absorbing selfishness of the individual.

The advocates of unbridled accumulation claim for their system that it is founded on nature, that the faculty of acquisition is found existing in man everywhere and in all stages of development; that the world owes much to the enterprise developed by its influence; and that it would be shallow statesmanship to interfere with its action.

We are ready to grant that the condition of man, cast as he is into the world naked, and surrounded by elements unfriendly to his continued existence, renders a degree of acquisitiveness necessary for the security of life; but is it just to plead this moderate degree of accumulation, indicated by nature, in justification of the unlimited hoarding of wealth, and monopolies of land, which has converted almost the entire civilized world into an abode of millionaires and beggars; which renders the enslavement of the peoples of the world possible, and shrouds the future of liberty with gloom?

To look at the treasures of Paris, or London, or New York, and other centers of wealth, one might at first feel disposed to agree in the assertion that man is an acquisitive creature, even in the extreme sense claimed by the defenders of the present system, by which wealth is

accumulated by the few, instead of being distributed, as it should be, among the mass, rendering none rich, allowing none to remain poor.

A wider range of observation, however, ... will show that with the vast majority of mankind, a satisfaction of the wants of nature is all that is sought; and even in those centers of selfishness ..., there are vast multitudes who would be thus satisfied, but that the rush and crash of the mighty machine of society compels them, in self-defense, to join in the rush for wealth. 'Tis the old question, "whether 'tis better to be a victim or a victimizer," and they decide against being victims.

The best men of the world, its exemplars, they who have taught and illustrated by their lives the superiority of virtue over vice, have been almost universally unselfish beings, struggling against the ills of poverty, or if born rich, noted for the prodigality with which their wealth was distributed. ... Finally, we may conclude that no precept of Christianity will violate a principle of nature; and the example of the Savior, as well as the teachings of the Scriptures, are opposed to that undue accumulation of wealth, against which we are protesting.

Wealth has ever been the tool of the tyrant, the readiest means by which liberty is overthrown. A nation starting with free institutions and customs begins to increase in wealth, and that wealth to accumulate in the hands of a few, and here is the lever by which, eventually and certainly, the liberties gained in a simpler age will be overthrown. Wealth is averse to agitation; it abhors revolutions; it calls for peace, at whatever sacrifice. A tyranny of an individual or a class may be winding its subtle meshes around the wealthy, depriving them of the right of unrestrained locomotion, the right of speech, the right of private judgment; but if it leaves them the privilege of grasping and accumulating gold, they are content – nay, will aid the tyranny... , for the agitation might endanger their gains. ...

Louis Napoleon holds his seat to-day, and other tyrants with him, because they have enlisted the sympathies of capital, by professions of law and order, encouraging and increasing the facilities for growing rich. Say to one of these blinded instruments of tyranny, that personal liberty, the freedom of speech, of thought, of the press, is overthrown; and they will answer you, that commerce flourishes, manufactures increase, public securities are at par. The golden calf set up, they fall down and worship, and shut their eyes to the foul wrongs perpetrated every day on human rights.

Poverty, the natural consequence of wealth unduly accumulated, plays its part in the drama of national degradation. Wherever the palaces tower highest, and enclose within their walls the greatest accumulations of luxury and wealth, there does the peasant grovel lowest in ignorance and misery; there is tyranny most secure and freedom most hopeless. ...

From whence, in our own country, comes the danger to liberty? Who are the ready tools and apologists of slavery, ready to excuse its evil tendencies, and hide from the people its ultimate tendency to overthrow the liberties of all in the nation? The plain answer is, the wealth and poverty of the nation. ... We have the controllers of our commercial centers, blinding or buying the poverty-stricken, ignorant masses that fester in their alleys, to the unblushing support of the policy of the slaveholding tyranny... .

The virtuous middle classes, who have not enough of wealth to render them selfish or oblivious of the true interests of the nation, and are not dependent enough to compel a servile obedience to the will of the wealthy and powerful of the land, they are the defenders and lovers of liberty. ...[S]ociety is like barreled fish, generally good in the middle, but apt to spoil at both ends. They represent that equable state which a just distribution of national wealth would produce; a state highly favorable to public and private virtue... . No nation is so rich that its inhabitants can all be raised to that degree of wealth destructive to virtue..., if its riches be equitably distributed among its citizens; no nation is so poor that its citizens may not be raised above the temptation and degradation of poverty. ...

Here is a problem worthy of the attention of that noblest of men, the true statesman, ... one who seeks to reach and improve the condition of all subject to his sway, to make that improvement lasting, to render government a blessing instead of an evil... . If such a statesman shall devise measures, which, while they will not hamper private enterprise shall yet prevent the undue accumulation of wealth in the hands of individuals or associations, he will have merited and secured a fame more lasting than has yet fallen to the lot of man. ...

The Land Reformer

... Can poverty be prevented? If so, how? Must civilization be always like a whited sepulcher, outwardly fair, but within full of rottenness? Can no care be devised to relieve the poverty-stricken throng, from whose ranks our criminals, male and female, are so numerously recruited? Poor houses, soup societies, ragged schools, and Five Point Missions, are looked to by

some to stem the tide of poverty. But what we want is not that poverty shall be promptly relieved, but that it shall be at once removed. Like the purchase of one or two individuals from slavery, as is frequently done by benevolent minded individuals or communities, we are glad to see the manifestation of good feeling; but what we want is a preventative, not an ameliorator. We want the necessity for the purchase of men removed, and so with the necessity for relieving the poor. We want no poor.

... Earth, air, fire and water, are essential to human existence, and should be free to all men, in virtue of their heaven descended right. What justice is there in the ... Government giving away, as it does, the millions upon millions of acres of public lands, to aid soulless railroad corporations to get rich? Or in the laws by which capitalists enter upon the possession of the national domain, and when the thrift and labor of the pioneer has raised the value of the lands, to compel the pioneer, not only to pay the Government price of lands, but also to pay the landlord for the increased value of the land, increased, though it was, by his own labor. ...

In our country there need be no violence committed on the rights of property. All we need is a land limitation law, and an act conferring upon the settlers of the public domain the possession of their land, and defending them against land sharks and speculators. Estates too large for the good of society will, in a few generations, be reduced to moderate dimensions... .

We believe that with land limitation slavery would be impossible. Your slaveholder is ever a land monopolist. We believe the general education of the people would be promoted by land limitation; and the thousands of children who are now toiling in mills and workshops at a time when they should be at school, will be, by their independent parents, placed under instruction and good influences. ...

Let the means of [obtaining homes be given to] the young men of the country ... and before a single generation the beneficial effect can be felt. Multiply the free homes of the people... and the rampant vice and rowdyism of our country will disappear.

*(*Both articles originally unsigned, like most editorials in Douglass' paper. These are likely his work, though possibly with contributions from co-editor Julia Griffiths and/or editorial assistant Peter Clark)*