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‘The Land Question. Professor Wallace at West Hartlepool. Speech by Mr E. Withy.’

On Monday evening Professor A. Russel Wallace, LL.D., F.R.G.S., delivered a lecture in the Athenæum, West Hartlepool, on the subject, “Why should we nationalize the land?” Mr E. Withy, Avon Villa, West Hartlepool, presided, and there were also on the platform Messrs W. B. Cherrett, T. Hope, T. Bowman, Young, Adams, &c., &c.

Mr Withy, in opening the meeting, said that Professor Wallace was present that evening to enlighten them more fully on the views of the Land Nationalization Society, on which Miss Taylor spoke a month ago. Questions would be answered at the close of the lecture, but anything like debate, which might be desirable later, would not be practicable that evening. The central objects of the Society might be defined thus: To let everyone possess the wealth which his labour had added to the common stock, and therefore to prevent any from appropriating to themselves what they had not produced. Do not seek to divide wealth equally, and do not believe in artificial regulation of its distribution. Indeed, what they wanted was to do away with existing provisions which affected the distribution of wealth, and which tended to the present great inequality. The earth was created before man, and its productive powers were necessary to his existence. It was not the result of his labour, but was the free gift of God to all His creatures. Let them listen to the charter by which He granted it. Genesis, i., 26-30, “And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in His own image in the image of God created He him; male and female, created He them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed which is upon the face of the earth, and every tree in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to everything that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat.” Here, then, was no hint of a minority holding the monopoly of these gifts, and demanding rent from the majority as their only means of sharing them. Neither was there any anticipation that the multiplication of the race should outrun the means of sustenance. The production of these fruits was impossible without the use of land, and that being now monopolised by a few, the fruits of it were also in their hands. The rest of us had to pay the few an annual tribute, called rent, before we were allowed to share in what God gave us as a free gift to all without distinction. It was only within about 200 years that this state of things had existed in England, and their Society wished to revert to the original character, which he had read. They wished to abolish, as soon as might be, this maintenance of the few of many luxuries by the many of many wants. (Applause.)

Professor Wallace prefaced his remarks by stating that the monopoly of land by hereditary landlords and great capitalists was the fundamental cause of the persistent pauperism which abounded in our midst, and that a just and true land system would tend to abolish pauperism by leading to a fairer distribution of wealth amongst those who created it. He then discussed the question whether the evil was increasing or decreasing, and said it appeared to be almost certain that the extremely poor and miserable were increasing even more rapidly than the population, and the approximate causes which led to this state of things were increasing year by year in severity. As to the cause of this misery, as stated by Malthusians, wealth had actually increased immensely faster than population. Coming to what he maintained to be the real and only fundamental cause of poverty in the midst of wealth, he said it was our vicious and unjust land system. The special feature of our land system,

which was the immediate cause of poverty, which was the fact of land being treated as merchandise, to be bought and sold and speculated with, and let out on the owners' terms. Land was essential to human existence; it was the very element without which man could no more live than without air. Land and labour were the source of all wealth; the possessors of the land were primarily the possessors of all wealth, and of the means of acquiring it; no one could work or live without first making terms with them. Hence, when the labourers were all without land, and all almost without capital, they must work for wages or starve. It was this fact that inevitably reduced the wages of unskilled labour to the minimum, that minimum being the point at which they could just manage to live—just manage to save themselves from starvation. In all countries where land was monopolised by a limited class this was the case, while wherever the land was accessible to the labourer wages and the standard of comfort immediately rose higher. The maximum of true wages of labour was the whole produce of that labour, and that true maximum would be obtained if the labourer lived upon land obtained from the State, with a fixity of tenure. The labourer would then become absolutely free from the extortion of the landlord or the capitalist, and all he earned would be his own. The Lecturer quoted evidence in favour of his assertion that the depopulation of the rural districts and the overpopulation of towns were attributable to the present land laws, and went on to maintain that property in land never justly arose, because it was not the product of man's labour, and was the source of all wealth, as well as being absolutely essential to human existence. To allow individuals or a class to make it private property was to deny the very right to exist to all who did not own it—a denial which was not only theoretically possible, but was constantly exercised by landlords. He denied that land would ever be justly private property, any more than men could be held as private property. The ownership of land by a class did actually result in the enslavement of the poor who were not landowners. Another fact was that the whole commercial and selling value of land—bare land—as distinct from improvements put upon it was the creation not of individuals, but of society, and should belong to society. Professor Wallace spoke of the horrors of eviction, and of the depopulation of land to make room for grouse, sheep, and deer. He charged the present land system that, by its very existence, it defrauded the labourer of the just reward of his labour, that it kept wages down to the minimum possible to maintain life, and promoted pauperism. He charged it, as a money-making instrument, with depopulating the rural districts, and with being the direct cause of the great part of the overcrowding, and consequent misery and vice and destitution, in the great towns and cities. In the midst of peace the system enabled the cruelties of war to be introduced, and its possessors exercised powers which were not only not consistent with individual liberty, but which permanently diminished our defensive power. He contended that he had proved these charges; but confirmatory evidence was found in the fact that if they looked to countries, or places, or even individual cases, where the landlord's power was greatly diminished, or did not exist, it would be found that corresponding benefits immediately arose. The main conclusions to which the enquiry had led them were: First, that the possession of land as merchandise to buy or sell, or to accumulate, or let out, was inconsistent with the freedom and well-being of all who were not owners. Secondly, that an opportunity for all to occupy land on equal terms and on a secured tenure was the only means of raising wages permanently above the present minimum, and was, therefore, the only cure of chronic pauperism. To carry out the logical results of these conclusions was the object of land nationalization. In conclusion, he wished to urge upon them that by far the most important part of the great question of land nationalization was a clear comprehension of the evils due to our present system. Was it true that the present system was the fundamental cause of pauperism, which accompanied and increased with our ever-increasing wealth; that by it wages could be kept down to starvation point; that this poverty was intensified by the landlords preventing the national growth of the rural populations, and adding to the surplus population in towns by simply denying them land on which to live and work? If this were true, the system was surely condemned. It was his belief that we should look in vain amongst civilised people for any institution so utterly bad, so totally unnecessary, so disastrous in its effects as this system. It was a deadly upas tree, which overshadowed the land and poisoned the social system. Its evil effects were so rooted that no half measures would remove, or even mitigate them. It was a system which stood in

the way of all real progress, and which made labour a curse instead of a blessing. Suffering humanity had too long groaned under it, and could bear it no longer. — Professor Wallace resumed his seat amidst loud applause. — Professor Wallace, in reply to a question from the body of the Hall with regard to what method he could apply to the landlords to bring the land into the market so that the nation might purchase it, said that it was not desirable for the nation to purchase it at all, or to bring it into the market. — Mr T. Hope asked Mr Wallace to point out a remedy for the evils he referred to. — The Lecturer said that he had proved that landlordism was absolutely responsible for the evils, and, that being the case, the only remedy was to totally get rid of them. (Applause.) The universal objection that had hitherto been made whenever it had been proposed to get rid of landlordism had always been the evils of State management. That, he contended, was a fictitious evil, and one that did not exist. The land could be divided into two elements—the land as made by nature, and that added to it by society and cultivators. The natural part of the land could be taken over by the State without the evils which were attributed to this process, it merely requiring the State to fix it at a fair rent, and, consequently, all Government interference would be absolutely unnecessary. It was absolutely impossible to purchase the land from the landlords. The State must declare that it is necessary that it should have the land, and that it will, therefore, take it. Every landlord who got revenue out of his land should have that revenue paid to him by the State, which would say that in order to produce this great benefit they could not allow it to be paid for generations, and that it should be limited to his life and his living heir—that was, the heir born at the time of passing of the Act so that no one living at the time would suffer. He maintained that that system did injustice to no man, for it obtained the land at once, and that was the great thing they wanted. The unborn heir, whom some people distressed themselves so much about, would come into a very superior world to that which his ancestors lived in, and would have a fair opportunity of earning his own living. Mr Wallace then briefly alluded to the manner in which the land would be tenanted by the people, and the method by which each individual would have the right to choose a piece of land conveniently situated. — Mr Boanson asked if the system proposed by Professor Wallace would not act unjustly and injuriously in the case of mines? — The Lecturer said all he could say was that if the ownership in land was an evil, the ownership in mines was infinitely worse, for it was absolutely carting away the minerals from our mines for the benefit of individuals, and not for the advantage of all. If it was important to nationalize the land, much more so was it important to nationalize the mines. (Hear, hear.) — The meeting terminated with the usual vote of thanks.

*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2021.