

Transcription, February 2015:

*The Times* (London) No. 30383 (21 Dec. 1881): 11c-11d.

[p. 11c]

‘To the Editor of *The Times*.’

Sir,—Mr. Alfred Wallace’s letter to you of the 24<sup>th</sup> of November, objecting to Mr. Caird’s assertion that the fewer numbers engaged in cultivating the land the better it is for the community at large, raises a question which, I fear, does not admit of an answer to satisfy disputants without an appeal to first principles—a process generally regarded, however, as somewhat tiresome and pedantic; but by your leave I will risk the imputation of being both in doing so.

Mr. Wallace expresses dismay at the idea of land being made by any system to yield its increase with only one half of its present numbers being engaged in the necessary preparation. Rents would rise and half of the existing agricultural population would have to starve or go into the workhouse. I will go farther than Mr. Wallace, and suppose the case of land spontaneously yielding its products without any labour at all being needed in its preparation. The great purpose of all land in giving food will all the same be still fulfilled. The whole crops would be there at the landlord’s disposition, instead of a balance only as now, after satisfying the demands of those engaged in the business of its cultivation—for example, the workmen who have mined the iron and fashioned it into ploughs and other implements, the men who have provided the artificial manures, ploughed the fields, sown the seed, harrowed it in, reaped the harvest, and carried it to market—in a word, who have done all that is now being done towards bringing into play Nature’s great law of increase inherent in the soil when duly made ready for the process.

All these operations exhaust, I believe, about three fourth parts of the whole value produced, leaving one fourth part or thereby for the landlord as rent, whether paid in kind or in its equivalent of money from its conversion by the tenant previously in the market. If paid in kind, of what conceivable use would any surplus be to the landlord after providing for his own and his family’s daily wants, except in its exchange directly into what it is generally exchanged for by money indirectly, in the purchase of commodities affording wages to the artisans to be converted by them into products which the land has given?

Under the extreme hypothesis of the season’s crops being gained without labourers or labour of any kind, they would none the less be there, ready for their sole purpose, value, or function of being consumed by the nation. Whoever as landlords would in such case own the whole could not possibly consume more than they now are doing in owning only a part.

The agricultural and other workmen presently employed on land requirements would merge into industries now turning out the other exigencies of life, the volume of which would not necessarily increase; but fewer hours of work would effect the same results in respect of the larger numbers now to be engaged in the process. The purchase power of wages in buying the quantity, still the same as before, of the products of the land would remain unaltered whatever their money expression might be, and all would go on very much as before, except in the pleasant reduction of hours of work to those who, in having to consume what the landowners themselves had no use for, cause any value whatever to be ascribed to these products of the land.

I am not speculating on the possibility of any such results in agriculture ever occurring. I am only attempting, by a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* argument, to realize what would be the tendency towards results indicated were numbers now engaged in agricultural business to be reduced owing to the advancing power of science and experience to do without them.

The current of popular opinion and argument seems to be that landlords can increase their income only at the expense of the community, who must lose what the landlords gain; and I argue that Mr. Wallace is of this persuasion. No doubt it would be so were these landlords to destroy what constitutes this increase, but in disposing of it along with that which they have already, it falls still to be consumed by those who prepare the commodities which the landlord is enabled to acquire in disposing of the increase in question.

The owners first-hand of the year's income, whether derived from land or other source, can in parting with it only designate what class of artisan is to be employed and remunerated in preference to any other class, but this only after all the requirements of land for labour in its cultivation are first satisfied. So long as the soil will not produce crops without the previous intervention of man's labour, so long must it be provided before any other industries can be supplied, and we may be sure that however few or many may be needed, according as ingenuity may devise mechanical substitutes, the numbers will be forthcoming to any extent required. Food must be supplied before any other bodily or mental exigencies can even be thought of.

I cannot but concede, therefore, Mr. Caird's general proposition that the less labour used in cultivating the fields the more of the products will there be for the community at large not so engaged, and Mr. Wallace's objection is very much in the direction of his deploring the introduction of the spinning jenny and power-loom in substitution of the spinning wheel and hand-loom. To adopt Mr. Wallace's doctrine would be very much like declaring that we had better have kept to the system of rock and distaff, and so have been able to give employment to the greater number required for such mode of clothing the people. "Speed the plough" is a good toast or sentiment at farmers' festivals, not because of the ploughman being paid wages for guiding it, but because the land without it, whether drawn by steam or horses, would not give food to the people, the ploughman himself being included in the category.

I have, I confess, never been able to see the political economy forest for the trees, but I can find a foot-path through its intricacies, I fancy, in reflecting that nobody can possibly use a farthing of his income, whether large or small, or whencesoever derived, except through the medium of wages paid or to be paid to the workman to whose labour the purchased commodity is due. It would be going beyond the purpose of this letter to enlarge (even were space allowed me) on this view of the national contract between employers and employed, between the industrial class, who for wages do all the physical work of the kingdom, and the other class who do the professional, distributing, organizing, and other mental work, alike for the industrial and leisure classes. But I am disposed to think that it is in this direction that a popular solution of the social problem is to be found.

I am, Sir, your obedient servant,  
Borthwick.  
Ravenstone.

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*The Alfred Russel Wallace Page*, Charles H. Smith, 2015.