

PROTECTION OR FREE TRADE?

By HENRY GEORGE.
CHAPTER IV.
INTRODUCTORY.

If this be so, then popular government is hopeless, and, confronted on one side by the fact to which all experience testifies, that a people can never safely trust to any portion of their number the making of regulations which affect their earnings, and on the other by the fact that the masses can never see for themselves the effect of such regulations, the only prospect before mankind is that the many must always be ruled and robbed by the few.

But this is not so. Political economy is only the economy of human aggregates, and its laws are laws which we may individually recognize. What is required for their elucidation is not long arrays of statistics nor the collocation of laboriously ascertained facts, but that sort of clear thinking which keeps in mind the distinction between the part and the whole, seeks the relation of familiar things, and which is as possible for the unlearned as for the learned.

Whether protection does or does not increase national wealth, whether it does or does not benefit the laborer, are questions that from their nature must admit of decisive answers. That the controversy between protection and free trade, waged so ardently and energetically as it has been carried on, has as yet led to no accepted conclusion cannot therefore be due to difficulties inherent in the subject. It may in part be accounted for by the fact that powerful pecuniary interests are concerned in the issue, for it is true, as Scully said, that if large pecuniary interests were concerned in determining the attraction of gravitation, at most obvious of physical facts would have disputers. But that many fair-minded men who have special interests to serve are still so far from being able to see the variance on this subject can only seem to me, be fully explained by the assumption that the discussion has not been carried far enough to bring out that full truth which unmasks all partial truths.

The present condition of the controversy, indeed, shows this to be a fact. In the literature of the subject I know of no work in which inquiry has yet been carried to proper end. As to the effect of protection upon the production of wealth, all has probably been said that can be said, but that part of the question which relates to wages which is primarily concerned with the distribution of wealth has not been adequately treated. This is the very heart of the controversy, the ground from which it is thoroughly explored, and in which all the difficulties and confusions must necessarily arise, to envelop in obscurity that which has of itself sufficiently explained.

The reason of this failure is not far to seek. Political economy is the simplest of the sciences. It is the intellectual recognition, as applied to social life, of laws, which are in their moral aspect men instinctively recognize, and which are embodied in the simple teachings of whom the common people understand gladly. But, like Christiani- political economy has been obscured by institutions which, denying equality and brotherhood, have enlisted authority, and have ingrained in the masses a habit of

thought. Its professors and teachers have almost invariably belonged to or been dominated by that class which tolerates no questioning of social adjustments that give to those who do not labor the fruits of labor's toil. They have been like physicians employed to make a diagnosis on condition that they shall discover no unpleasant truth. Given social conditions such as those that throughout the civilized world to day shock the moral sense, and political economy, fearlessly pursued, must lead to conclusions that will be as a lion in the way of those who have any tenderness for "vested interests." But in the colleges and universities of our time, as in the Sanhedrim of old, it is idle to expect any enunciation of truths unwelcome to the powers that be.

Adam Smith demonstrated clearly enough that protective tariffs hamper the production of wealth. But Adam Smith—the university professor, the tutor and pensioner of the Duke of Buccleuch, the prospective holder of a government place—either did not deem it prudent to go further, or, as is more probable, was prevented from seeing the necessity of doing so by the atmosphere of his time and place. He at any rate failed to carry his great inquiry into the causes which from "that original state of things in which the production of labor constitutes the natural recompense or wages of labor" had developed a state of things in which natural wages seemed to be only such part of labor as would enable the laborer to exist. And, following Smith, came Malthus, to formulate a doctrine which throws upon the Creator the responsibility for the want and vice that flow from man's injustice—a doctrine which has barred from the inquiry which Smith did not pursue even such high and generous minds as that of John Stuart Mill. Some of the publications of the Anti Corn-Law League contain indications that if the struggle over the English corn laws had been longer continued, the discussion might have been pushed further than the question of revenue-tariff or protective tariff; but, ending as it did, the capitalists of the Manchester school were satisfied, and in such discussion as has since ensued English free traders, with few exceptions, have made no further advance, while American advocates of free trade have merely followed the English free traders.

On the other hand, the advocates of protection have evinced a like indisposition to venture on burning ground.

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