

The Ethical Philosophy

by STEVEN CORD

DURING the past ten years, there has been much progress and improvement in the image of Henry George emanating from the writings of American historians and economists. In line with this new trend, the Pennsylvania Historical Association invited me to present a paper at its annual convention at Beaver Falls this past week on the subject of "Henry George and Urban Renewal in Pennsylvania." Incidentally I received welcome support from a professor and his wife who had taken the basic course at the Henry George School in New York years ago and who thought they were the only Georgists in all of western Pennsylvania. I was able to assure them that there were others, even many others.

I did not attempt to *convert* the Pennsylvania historians to land value taxation. One speech could hardly be expected to do that. But if this contact with the ideas of Henry George is supplemented by other Georgist speeches, articles and books — and the possibility of such supplementary Georgist contacts is increasing steadily these days — then we can hope to breach the wall of apathy surrounding this issue.

I *did* attempt to stress George's ethical philosophy as much as possible, feeling that if a man agrees with George ethically, the economic advantages of land value taxation will have more impact upon him. I know we live in a pragmatic and existentialist age, but I still think that the way a man looks at life ethically will determine his commitment to reform and social action. Take a look at the Georgists among us who have given years of service to the movement. Sure, they think that land value taxation will bring great economic benefits to society, but if this were their only motivation most of them would have wan-

dered out of the ranks a long time ago. After all, the economy is booming along nicely and is likely to do so for the foreseeable future. It could do better, as we Georgists know, but so much effort will be required to increase taxation on land to a substantial amount, that without the ethical vision a Georgist is apt to become un-moored and give up the cause for more easily obtainable ones. In the short run, the glitter of economic benefit is a great spur to action, but in the long run "man does not live by bread alone" and an ethical orientation is needed.

And Henry George provided it. I take the following to be the essence of *Progress and Poverty* and George's main contribution to ethics:

"What constitutes the rightful basis of property? What is it that enables a man justly to say of a thing, 'It is mine?' From what springs the sentiment which acknowledges his exclusive right as against all the world? Is it not, primarily, the right of a man to himself, to the use of his own powers, to the enjoyment of the fruits of his own exertions? Is it not this individual right, which springs from and is testified to by the natural facts of individual organization — the fact that each particular pair of hands obey a particular brain and are related to a particular stomach; the fact that each man is a definite, coherent, independent whole — which alone justifies individual ownership? As a man belongs to himself, so his labor when put in concrete form belongs to him."

As we go down through the years, let these sentences be our guide. By all means we should stress the economic benefits of land taxation, but let us not forget that "unless its foundations be laid in justice, the social structure cannot stand."