

### III

#### **George: Moralist, Social Theorist and Social Philosopher**

Early in our survey of the George literature, it became evident that it would take a book adequately to expound the economic, social, political and cultural philosophy that Henry George developed by study, observation, analysis and contemplation. Professor Geiger's very successful exposition did take a book and a very thick one of 600 pages. Professor Barker, with very little duplication, required an equally large one, even though his research added new dimensions to the understanding of George's ideas. Professors Andelson and Cord, and Dr. Michael Silagi also required books, again with little duplication. And the subject is far from exhausted.<sup>1</sup>

While most economists in his time shunned George as an outsider, an agitator and propagandist, this was not true of the moral and social philosophers. They claimed him as one of their own, and welcomed him into their ranks. Perhaps this is why it is so difficult to condense George's economic and ethical ideas into a brief essay. The specialist in philosophy is accustomed to taking vast expositions in stride.

There were exceptions among the philosophers, of course, Marx, admittedly envious of George's felicitous style, attacked him as a panacea monger. But Marx knew only *Progress and Poverty*. Two philosophers achieved world renown in the 20th century, John Dewey and Bertrand Russell. Both were admirers of George. As the historians tell us, George was assimilated into the social gospel movement in the churches. He also was adopted by the social protest and the social reform movements, for he had much to contribute to them.

In his social philosophy George did not originate the American dream of a more perfect society than the pioneers had left behind in Europe. The idea came from a line of democratic leaders and thinkers of the 18th and 19th centuries who gave America a basically democratic society, a relatively free economy because the existence of an unsettled frontier moderated the maximization of profits and also the rent-seeking of the landed and propertied classes. What George contributed was an updating of this philosophical ideology for an economy becoming completely industrialized, an economy and society revolutionized by high technology and most instant communications.<sup>1</sup>

To this world of material progress he brought a dream of a universal moral order in which freedom reigned because justice ruled, an abundant economy because everyone was rewarded by incentives to produce according to his or her ability, an egalitarian society in which the institutions promoted the fullest development of each individual personality, according to his or her unique talents.

A utopia? Of course. But not in the sneering, pejorative way that Karl Marx and others have used the word. Not an impractical system of ideas imagined by a hopeless visionary. But one in a long tradition. From Moses describing a Garden of Eden, to Plato's *Republic*, to Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, to B. F. Skinner's *Walden Two*. Although George's *Progress and Poverty* was about economics, people seem to have sensed that it met their need for a utopian ideal. This is undoubtedly what made it a best seller. As Professors Cord and Schumpeter have shown, George's competence as an economist made his utopia unusual. It was mostly a practical one.<sup>2</sup>

George's message was a prophetic one and it began and ended like Plato's. As the distinguished Plato scholar Francis MacDonal Cornford has noted: ". . . Plato's thought, from first to last, was chiefly bent on the question how society must be reshaped so that man might realize the best that is in him. This is, above all, the theme of his central work, the *Republic*."<sup>3</sup>

Professor Barker recognized the full significance of George's prophetic message. Practical and detailed shortcomings in *Progress and Poverty* have one effect, he writes; they display "the ethical magnitude and elevation of the work as a whole."<sup>4</sup>

Professor Barker also echoes a chapter in Professor Geiger's *The Philosophy of Henry George* in analyzing in detail *Progress and Poverty's* fusion of economics and ethics. This aspect of the book is one reason that led John Dewey, the great philosopher of pragmatic instrumentalism, to call George the greatest social philosopher America has produced. Barker wrote: "*Progress and Poverty's* fusion of economics and ethics, its passionate blend of love of God with comprehension of the entrenchment of selfishness, give it. . . an intensity which places it at once high in letters, and yet at the threshold of the common man."<sup>5</sup>

Is George's system of ideas, his ideology in the philosophical sense of the term, an independent and autonomous set that might be called Georgism, in the same way that Marx's has come to be called Marxism? Or is it, as George, and Barker and Geiger and others claimed, a system of ideas within the framework of the classical school in economics, 19th century philosophical radicalism and liberalism in social theory, and the democratic traditions of the early German tribes, of Anglo-French democracy and of the Greeks and Romans?

John Stuart Mill considered himself a member of the school of Smith and Ricardo. Yet Mill revised a number of their basic ideas. George considered Mill his teacher and master and he considered himself a follower of Smith and Ricardo. Yet he completely revised a number of Mill's premises -- and he pushed to their limits some of Smith's and Ricardo's. So we conclude that in economics George was a member of the classical school.

A valiant effort to prove that George's ideas comprised a distinct set apart from Smithian-Ricardianism has been made by Dr. Charles Collier. It is faulted, in our opinion, by the fact that Dr. Collier developed his thesis from a study only of *Progress and Poverty* and the incomplete, posthumously published *The Science of Political Economy*. And also because, unlike Professor Petrella, for example, Dr. Collier does not analyze George's work in the light of the now well-developed philosophy of science, controversial though some of the philosophy's elements may be.

When George's other books, articles and speeches are taken into account, a different view of George's proposals, principles, and insights emerges and a different view of George's system of ideas appears. But the article is presented in full so readers can make up their own minds.

The idea of value appears in all systems of philosophy — of economic, social, political and cultural philosophy. Its status in the ideas of Henry George is analyzed by a scholar whose specialties include the history of ideas: the distinguished legal scholar, Morris David Forkosch. While Professor Forkosch's main specialty was juristic science, his first doctorate, he also took a Ph.D. in economics and a postdoctoral master of social science degree in sociology.

His investigation of the theoretical background of George's idea of value traces the evolution in George's mind. From an evaluation of economics according to the norms of the philosophy of science as the latter was understood in his time, George (Dr. Forkosch shows) proceeded to a philosophical understanding of the nature of wealth and this led to an analysis of the idea of value, an idea then and now the subject of well-argued controversy. As Dr. Forkosch discovers, George's reproduction cost theory of (economic) value goes back to what George considered the basis of all human life: "Desire is the prompter and its satisfaction . . . is the end and aim of life. . . ."<sup>6</sup>

Professor Cord, a specialist in the theory and history of social movements, noted that extensive research was required to understand "why some of George's more worthy proposals haven't had much impact" in our day and he undertook that research.<sup>7</sup> Investigations of the same topic were also carried on by two leading economists, Columbia's C. Lowell Harriss and Georgia's David R. Kamerschen. The amazing thing is that tax reform recently became an all-important issue and resulted in decisions far less efficient and practical than George's proposals. Moreover, a series of revisions of the tax laws has left the problem unsolved and the whole legislative process will have to be undergone once again in the near future.

Those who deprecate George for offering in *Progress and Poverty* a proposal which they maintain, correctly, would not prove by itself to be a "remedy" for "industrial depressions" overlook one thing: not a single economist has ever

done so. The great institutionalist, Columbia's Wesley Clair Mitchell, together with the economist who later served notably as chairman of the Federal Reserve Board, Arthur F. Burns, sought to do this, as Fred Harrison and Will Lissner write. They failed although their research team included top economists and analytical statisticians. The failure underscores the social problem that still remains unsolved even in the American democratic social philosophy.

As George showed, cyclical depressions produce poverty and while poverty arises from a number of causes, the relevant cause in most cases is economic. It was "the combination of broad social vision with a passionate concern for the welfare of mankind" which in Charles A. Madison's opinion accounted for George's greatness as a social philosopher. This is recalled by Professor Aurele A. Durocher in evaluating George's social ideas. George's social philosophy, Professor Durocher finds, "is a very powerful body of social theory."

Is all this a tempest in a teacup, a scholars' learned disputation? Not according to George's theory (borrowed from a tumultuous period in world history when the Huns were almost at the gates of Vienna) which he called "the new Barbarians." John M. Kelly, an economist, who owned and managed many real estate enterprises, elaborated George's theory of the New Barbarians. Repeated rioting in the slums, the murders, looting and other crime in cities, the violent crimes in rural areas, the widespread squalor of ghettos, and the pitiful misery of the homeless in the streets who must grub in garbage cans for scraps when the limited means of altruistic people run out — this is poverty in the concrete.

George believed that truth would prevail and that people would end the monopoly and privilege that gnawed cancer-like on the body politic of the time. And Mr. Kelly is no less optimistic. The computer revolution followed the electronic revolution and is leading to the information revolution. This, Mr. Kelly believes, plus the horror of the conditions that supporters of the status quo tolerate, will lead to an intellectual revolution conquering the "New Barbarism."

#### Notes

1. George has been dismissed as a writer with a belief in "the 19th century myth" of the perfectability of mankind. But the overwhelming evidence is that this doctrine, a central issue of traditional philosophy, goes back to, at least, Plato and Aristotle, leaving Old Testament writers aside. After reviewing this evidence, the distinguished Australian philosopher, John Passmore, concludes: ". . . it is very hard to shake off the feeling that man is capable of something much superior to what he now is . . . . There is certainly no guarantee . . . . His passions are not 'useless' (Sartre) if they help him become a little more humane, a little more civilized." *The Perfectability of Man* (New York: Scribner's, 1970), pp. 326-327.

2. Glenn Negley and J. Max Patrick studied 31 utopias, some famous, some hitherto inaccessible. They conclude that utopia authors certainly cannot be called "irresponsible and witless dreamers" and they say "the ideals of such men in the past are the realities of the present." *The Quest for Utopia* (New York: Henry Schuman, Inc., 1952), p. 8. Two other utopists, Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, quote Lewis Mumford approvingly: "Utopia has long been another name for the unreal and the impossible. We have set utopia against the world. As a matter of fact it is our utopias that make the world tolerable to us; the cities and

mansions that people dream of are those in which they finally live. The more men react upon their environment and make it over after a human pattern, the more continuously do they live in utopia; but when there is a breach between the world of affairs and the overworld of utopia, we become conscious of the part that the will-to-utopia has played in our lives, and we see our utopia as a separate reality." F. E. Manuel and F. P. Manuel, eds., *French Utopias: An Anthology of Ideal Societies* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), (New York: Schocken Books, reprint, 1971), pp. 15-16.

3. Francis MacDonald Cornford, in his introduction to his translation of *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941 and 1945, reprinted, 1969), p. xv.

4. C. A. Barker, *Henry George* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 302. More than anyone else, except John Dewey, Professors Geiger and Barker appreciated the full significance of George's ideas.

5. Henry George, *The Science of Political Economy* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1981), p. 82

6. George was confident that, with basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter assured, of course, mankind's desires would be elevated.

7. Steven B. Cord, *Henry George, Dreamer or Realist?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965; reprinted, New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1985).