

HENRY GEORGE: AN INTRODUCTION

ON JULY 9, 1881, Alfred Russell Wallace, the British naturalist, wrote to his friend, Charles Darwin, from Godalming:

I am just doing what I have rarely if ever done before—reading a book through a second time immediately after the first perusal. I do not think I have ever been so attracted by a book, with the exception of your *Origin of Species* and Spencer's *First Principles* and *Social Statics*. I wish therefore to call your attention to it, in case you care about books on social and political subjects, but here there is also an elaborate discussion of Malthus's "Principles of Population," to which both you and I have acknowledged ourselves indebted. The present writer, Mr. George, while admitting the main principle as self-evident and as actually operating in the case of animals and plants, denies that it ever has operated in the case of man, still less that it has any bearing whatever on the rest of social and political questions which have been supported by a reference to it. He illustrates and supports his views with a wealth of illustrative facts and a cogency of argument which I have rarely seen equalled, while his style is equal to that of Buckle, and thus his book is delightful reading. The title of the book is *Progress and Poverty*. It is the most startling, novel and original book of the last twenty years, and if I mistake not will in the future rank as making an advance in political and social science equal to that made by Adam Smith a century ago.

Darwin died less than a year later without recording whether he had read Henry George's book. But very many others read it. "Henry George," wrote John A. Hobson in 1897, "may be considered to have exercised a more directly powerful influence over English radicalism of the last fifteen years than any other man."

Henry George left school in his native city of Philadelphia at the age of fourteen, but he continued his education before the mast, at the printer's case, and at the editor's desk. His economic thinking was based on his belief in individualism and in the philosophy of freedom. Although he had conceded the ideal of Socialism to be "grand and noble" and "possible of realization," he believed it "evident that whatever savors of regulation and restriction is in itself bad and should not be resorted to if any other mode of accomplishing the same end present itself." In order to meet the problem of mass unemployment, he wrote, "it is not necessary to nationalize capital, as the Socialists would have us do, nor yet to coax employers to benevolently give a larger share of their earnings to their workmen."

And yet, paradoxically, it was George who gave the impetus to the British Socialist movement which grew out of the Fabian Society. Sidney Webb pointed out: "Little as Henry George intended it, there can be no doubt that it was the enormous circulation of his *Progress and Poverty* which gave the touch that caused all seething influence to crystallize into a popular Socialist movement. The optimistic and confident tone of the book, and the irresistible force of its popularization of Ricardo's Law of Rent sounded the dominant 'note' of the English Socialist party of today."

George Bernard Shaw was even more emphatic in acknowledging the debt which he felt the Fabians owed George: "My attention was first drawn to political economy as a science of social salvation by Henry George's eloquence and his *Progress and Poverty*, which had an enormous circulation in the early 'eighties, and beyond all question had more to do with the Socialist revival of that period in England than any other book."

And he added, "When I was swept into the great Socialist revival of 1883, I found that five sixths of those who were swept in with me had been converted by Henry George."

The first volume of *Das Kapital* had appeared in 1867, twelve years before the publication of *Progress and Poverty*. But evidently it did not receive much attention until the latter work began to make people curious about economics and economic theory. For George's book, said H. Russell Tiltman, "dominated the minds of the Radical wing of the Liberal party just as it galvanized into action those who had been groping

toward a Socialist commonwealth. It even achieved the undoubted feat of making Karl Marx a popular author, for chapters of *Das Kapital* were published and read as sequels of *Progress and Poverty*."

Half a century later Philip Snowden, Chancellor of the Exchequer, introduced in Parliament the Finance Act of 1931, invoking the spirit, the name, and even the words of Henry George with this sentence which concluded the Budget Debate: "The principle underlying this bill is to assert the right of the community to the ownership of the land."

George's influence touched not only Great Britain. It may be traced, in varying degree, to Australasia, China, Western Canada, Denmark, Germany, and of course his own United States. The actual teaching of Georgist principles was first introduced on a wide scale in Denmark, which has adopted national land value taxation and where George's economic theories have taken deepest root.

In America the Georgist movement is largely sustained by the Henry George School in New York, founded in 1932, and its twenty-four branch schools in other large cities, and by publications in this country and abroad, including the publishing enterprises of the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, which was endowed for the purpose of disseminating Georgist literature. The Henry George School claims students in every county of the United States and in every country of the world.

In his lifetime and afterward, George's influence on leading personalities was profound. The so-called Progressive movement of the early part of the century owed much to his writings and to the memory of his inspiring personality. To the names which will be found in this book, many others might be added—names of men who were affected in some way by George's teachings and who acknowledged directly or indirectly their debt.

For example, Sun Yat-sen, the father of the Chinese republic, said of the American economist, "I intend to devote my future to the promotion of the welfare of the Chinese people as a people. The teachings of Henry George will be the basis of our program of reform."

The immense impact of George's teachings was registered on other great intellects. Wrote Leo Tolstoy, after reading *Progress and Poverty*, "People do not argue with the teaching

of George; they simply do not know it. He who becomes acquainted with it cannot but agree."

In our own time, Aldous Huxley wrote in the foreword to *Brave New World*, "If I were now to rewrite the book, I would offer a third alternative... the possibility of sanity... Economics would be decentralist and Henry-Georgian."

And Woodrow Wilson, the consummate scholar of government, put it this way, "The country needs a new and sincere thought in politics, coherently, distinctly and boldly uttered by men who are sure of their ground. The power of men like Henry George seems to me to mean that."