

the Henry George News

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HENRY GEORGE

by EDWARD J. ROSE

I HAVE decided to begin by placing George without argument in the Jeffersonian tradition, a point of view he himself took on many occasions during his lifetime, including his last campaign for elective office, and by stressing his lifelong war on poverty.

He was fond of quoting Jefferson's phrase that the land belonged in usufruct to the living. He reminded Pope Leo XIII that a defense of private ownership of the land was logically untenable: "To attach to things created by God the same right of private ownership that justly attaches to things produced by labor is to impair and deny the true rights of property. For a man who out of the proceeds of his labor is obliged to pay another man for the use of ocean or air or sunshine or soil, all of which are to men involved in the single term land, is in this deprived of his rightful property and thus robbed. . . . Clearly, purchase and sale cannot give, but can only transfer, ownership. Property that in itself has no moral sanction does not obtain moral sanction by passing from seller to buyer. If right reason does not make the slave the property of the slave-hunter it does not make him the property of the slave-buyer. Yet your reasoning as to private property in land would as well justify property in slaves.

Dr. Rose, author of *Henry George* (reviewed HGN June '68), is a professor of English at the University of Alberta and a newly appointed member of the Academic Advisory Council, New York. This address, given at the Gebrist annual graduation banquet in Edmonton, was published in the newsletter of The School of Economic Science with headquarters in Calgary—site of the 1970 HGS conference, July 7.

To show this it is only needful to change in your argument the word land to the word slave."

For George all that was necessary was land and liberty. Both poverty and class in society he saw as the results of speculation in land, which struck, in turn, at human liberty. He also anticipated the arguments of a present day priest in Florence who is in trouble with his Church, but not his congregation, about Christ's commitment to the poor: "For is it not clear that the division of men into classes of rich and poor has invariably its origin in force and fraud; invariably involves violation of the moral law; and is really a division into those who get the profits of robbery and those who are robbed; those who hold in exclusive possession what God made for all, and those who are deprived of his bounty? Did not Christ in all his utterances

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"Come to Calgary," Says Russel Conklin

The opportunity for the Henry George School Conference to meet in Calgary July 8-12 is too good for any Georgist to miss. Here in the West where the air is fresh and the streams run clear with ice-cold water from the melting snows of the Rockies, one feels refreshed. I had the opportunity two years ago to drive from Great Falls (Mont.), about 300 miles through Glacier Park with the snow-clad mountains on the left all the way, to address the graduating class of Jim Ramsay's school. It was an exhilarating experience.

Please come. We'll do our best to make you welcome, and if you want to see the West in action, Calgary is the place. It is a fair-sized city and an exceedingly friendly one.

Henry George

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and parables show that the gross difference between rich and poor is opposed to God's law? Would he have condemned the rich so strongly as he did, if the class distinction between rich and poor did not involve injustice—was not opposed to God's intent?"

Well, the poor people have marched unsuccessfully on the well-furnished White House and they have not in the past or present done much better with the sumptuous Vatican. The Christian and Republican principles that moved George in everything he did and wrote enabled him to challenge privilege and vested interest wherever and whenever they asserted themselves, whether in the Church, in Government, or in business. He saw that continued poverty would lead inevitably to increasing suffering and violence.

I think the time has come for a full appreciation of Henry George's ideas and by that I mean more than just straight-forward economic theory. It takes some time for societies to catch up to their prophets. As you well know, George's observation in "How Modern Civilization May Decline" near the end of *Progress and Poverty* has recently been affirmed several times over. He wrote: "Whence shall come the new barbarians? Go through the squalid quarters of great cities, and you

may see, even now, their gathering hordes! How shall learning perish? Men will cease to read, and books will kindle fires and be turned into cartridges!" This passage reminds me of Melville's description of the typhoon in *Moby Dick* as a bomb bursting out of the blue Pacific calm over the Japanese Isles.

Great writers utter prophecy as a matter of course. We have lived through the bomb that burst over Japan and the Nazi book-burnings (not to mention the people-burning), now we have the barbarians in our midst. What is the cause?

The cause is poverty, not only economic poverty but cultural and spiritual poverty. When I speak of George or of Melville as a prophet I must be understood in the sense in which the prophet is defined by Blake: "Every honest man is a prophet; he utters his opinions both of private and public matters. Thus: If you go on So, the result is So. He never says, such a thing shall happen let you do what you will. A Prophet is a Seer, not an Arbitrary Dictator. It is man's fault if God is not able to do him good, for he gives to the just and the unjust, but the unjust reject his gift."

Henry George was a just man and interested in seeing that men were justly treated. If our civilization does not rid itself of its chronic corruption it is doomed. George described this devel-

opment clearly: "As corruption becomes chronic; as public spirit is lost; as traditions of honor, virtue, and patriotism are weakened; as law is brought into contempt and reforms become hopeless; then in the festering mass will be generated volcanic forces, which shatter and rend when seeming accident gives them vent. Strong, unscrupulous men, rising up upon occasion, will become the exponents of blind popular desires or fierce popular passions, and dash aside forms that have lost their vitality. The sword will again be mightier than the pen, and in carnivals of destruction brute force and wild frenzy will alternate with the lethargy of a declining civilization."

George's Last Words

If the government is a government of *all* the people, then it is the duty and responsibility of all the people to care for any portion of its members. If we are to avoid state socialism in any guise, Marxist or otherwise, then we must remove the causes that encourage the monolithic state. To do this successfully we cannot abandon the poor and downtrodden to the vicissitudes of a fundamentally unjust society that dehumanizes its members by condemning them to live in a spiritual as well as an economic morass. If we are to "help the people to help themselves," as George said the night he died, then we must sweep out of the way all (not some) of that which prevents them from helping themselves—and that means private as well as governmental obstacles.

George was always conscious of the grinding effect of poverty on individual human life and the health of social institutions. If men were poor, George reasoned, what could they do but seek in every just way to rid themselves of their poverty. Those who are struggling merely to exist on the animal level cannot afford the luxury of sympathy

which seems denied them even by those who can truly afford it. But *want* and fear of poverty in those who *have* is the real economic basis for self-seeking. The progress of a nation and the poverty of its people make "civilized existence an Ishmaelitic warfare": "Carlyle somewhere says that poverty is the hell of which the modern Englishman is most afraid. And he is right," wrote George. "Poverty is the open-mouthed, relentless hell which yawns beneath civilized society. And it is hell enough. The Vedas declare no truer thing than when the wise crow Bushanda tells the eagle-bearer of Vishnu that the keenest pain is in poverty. For poverty is not merely deprivation; it means shame, degradation; the searing of the most sensitive parts of our moral and mental nature as with hot irons; the denial of the strongest impulses and the sweetest affections; the wrenching of the most vital nerves."

"From this hell of poverty, it is but natural that men should make every effort to escape," says George. Naturally, they will live their lives according to "the lesson that society is daily and hourly dinning in the ears of its members. Get money—honestly, if you can, but at any rate get money!" One has only to look at the ads from banks luring people into debt. One has only to look at a society which is constantly on the edge of bankruptcy to know to what extent money is used to invent poverty, even when poverty is not here already, and to capitalize on the poverty when the poverty is present.

In his acceptance speech for his first New York City mayoralty nomination in 1886, George described what it was that made him pledge himself to campaign forever against poverty: "Years ago I came to this City from the West, unknown, knowing nobody, and I saw and recognized for the first time the shocking contrast between monstrous wealth and debasing want. And here I

made a vow, from which I have never faltered, to seek and remedy, if I could, the cause that condemned little children to lead such a life as you know them to lead in the squalid districts."

Poverty—Then and Now

New York City has not changed and many other cities across North America and the rest of the world are just like it. And there is much more rural poverty than in George's day right now. And whether urban or rural, our wealthier society is still more than ever plagued by greater and greater poverty. Many nodded but few listened to George seriously enough to take action. Now the problem is more pressing and more complex than it was.

In the mid-1880's George and some of his associates organized the Anti-Poverty Society whose existence was unfortunately short-lived. Several years ago President Johnson was still declaring war on poverty (among other things) while economists were publishing books on the problems of the affluent society. The irony of it all would be amusing if it weren't so tragic.

The remedy today is the same as it was one hundred years ago: "We must make land common property." In 1854, some twenty-five years before George wrote *Progress and Poverty*, Thoreau had written in *Walden*: "Enjoy the land, but own it not. Through want of enterprise and faith men are where they are, buying and selling, and spending their lives like serfs."

In his own way, George shared this vision: end speculation on land and you end speculation in human misery. The wealth of a nation belongs to all, not the privileged few—certainly not to the speculators. To George, as to Jefferson, the American dream was not a nightmare and was the dream of free men from the time of Moses. George

sought to make that dream a reality. Why should we not also seek that reality?

At the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *Progress and Poverty*, Hamlin Garland read Edwin Markham's poem, "The Hand of Privilege," which caught the spirit of George's commitment implied in his rebuttal of Pope Leo's opinions on the condition of labor:

"The Hand of Privilege
... picks the pockets of the poor,
To make the Idle Few secure.
Three evil fingers, knotty and bent,
Are Profit, Interest and Rent:
One, like a thorn upon the hand,
Is Private Ownership of Land:
And last the crooked and crafty thumb
Is pointing the poor to the world to come!

Neither Government nor Business (clerical or lay) can continue to ignore or pretend to counter the major commodity and inevitable result of a supposedly affluent society—human poverty and misery—which self-interest and social pyramidism creates? In the words of the old spiritual, we must let our people go. If we do not, we shall *all* go down together. And that decline will not be gentle. The only world that is to come may well be one of continual revolution and repression, the cause and effect of our persistent disregard of the real problem—poverty. Poverty is not an honored social institution established by divine decree, it is the creation of a selfish society. The protests that have and will continue increasingly to take place will not be answered by applying revived Malthusian theories which George himself dismissed as unsatisfactory almost one hundred years ago. Racism and nationalism, totemism and tribalism, revolt and repression, are greater now than ever.

Obviously something is wrong. Perhaps we ought to give Henry George's remedy more than just a half-hearted try.