

the Henry George News

PUBLISHED BY HENRY GEORGE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE • JULY, 1970

Message To a Superfluous Man

by ROSALIE M. SCHULTZ

FROM everywhere come dire pronouncements of the world's present state of over-population, and you uneasily wonder if it was your arrival that turned company into a crowd. The air-conditioner repairman sweeps perfunctorily in and out of the house with a heavy schedule writ on him; the doctor makes polite inquiry about your family, but he's too flaccid to hold your answer, and you worry that the cares of your ailment may be what collapses him. All the market places you are dependent upon for the goods of life are crammed, and you suspect sometimes that your total effect on earth is to deplete the general store and block the aisles.

This vague sense of being a possible surplus harries even the most productive people into greater and greater frenzies of justifying activity. We all become as aged parents bent on assuming double-duty in the households of our children in order to avoid "becoming a burden." But our increased tempo brings little relief because we can hear the growing mutterings of sufferance behind us. Officialdom ever less patiently speaks of "the problem" of educating the individual, of making the room and getting the funds to discharge its duty in that regard. Finding jobs for every

man is likewise "a problem." Even in this country, the providing of bare essentials like food, water and breathable air is increasingly viewed as "a problem." How can any amount of productive activity on your part make up for all these problems your existence poses?



This long train of thought was perhaps started speeding on its way a century and a half ago with the popularity of economists like Malthus and Ricardo. Their theories, when logically extended, condemned every additional person to being nothing more than a siphon on the community. In our age their dismal sect has swept into leaden consensus. Add the weight of such a doctrine to the weight of living in a time when all the room in the body of the world seems to be already reserved, and the burden is great indeed. We feel oppressed even amidst our freedom, and diminished even amidst our steady expansion.

So now is as appropriate a day as ever there was to read Henry George and be reminded of a few things. That

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which is basic always tends to get sludged over until man is standing on a completely artificial vantage point and viewing the scene from a distorted angle. Somewhere beneath the modern quagmire of pessimism are buried just such basic realities of society. George dredges down to these first principles in his classic nineteenth century economic analysis, *Progress and Poverty*, and exposes them plainly for each new generation to firmly ground itself in. From this truer perspective it can be seen that if the individual is not unconditionally an asset, neither can he ever be dismissed as irrevocably a liability.

George reminds us, for example, that the sparsely populated, disconnected country can never achieve the largesse of civilization for its citizens. By the term "civilization" one doesn't refer to the existence of any particular kind or degree of technology, but simply to the ability of a society to satisfy its member's manifold needs, hopes and wishes. The lone person in a scattered land may be able to eke out enough to meet his bare physical requirements; however, where can he realize his wishes for a varied, intricate experience of life, and what can come of his hopes for a knowledge of the larger whole. He can't let any such luxuries divert him, for he must narrowly keep to the labors at hand in order to meet the minimums of existence. Thoreau may have led a sublime life isolated at Walden Pond, but only because he was heir to the abundances of the roaring civilization around him. He left society in order to quietly mull the complexities of a mind forged in it, much as a child would steal away to the garden's end to privately examine the baubles in his mother's jewel box.

No, the truly backwoods and fron-

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tier dweller leads a blunt, little demarcated life. Only as more settlers come to populate the area can his world begin to open up. Henry George for all times makes the point in his famous Chapter Two, "Savannah" passage. As a community begins to build, tasks can be assumed by specialists or shared, so the individual no longer has to do everything for himself. The range of goods and ideas available to him steadily expands. But perhaps not so important as what a person can now get is what he can now give. In the growing theater, his work can benefit many besides himself and his small family. And when the audience gets large enough, it will be able to elicit what is particular in him. A born home-run hitter in a region of few and far between would spend his life at the same common chores of survival that would occupy all his sparse fellowmen. Only among a great conflux of people would his special talent find a demand and an opportunity. It takes quite an aggregation to support the uncommon, and to give every man a chance to do what only he can do.

So already George's philosophy turns our thoughts more hopeful. He shows each person to be of essential value to a community. The process is constant and effortless—another human being, another set of skills, experiences, ideas—another thread to make the texture of the society yet richer.

But the question persists. However much an individual may deposit to society's account, don't his needs compel him to first and foremost withdraw from it an even larger sum?

For this, Henry George reminds us of what has so long been obscured by bad economics, namely that "with every mouth comes a pair of hands." That's of course a metaphorical way of pointing out each person's greater capacity for contributing than for consuming. More specifically the phrase refers to each person's having the wherewithal to proportionately expand the resource pool from which he draws his subsistence. Even such eminent thinkers as Adam Smith failed to see this obvious welcome to mankind. So, throughout modern history, one of the most prevalent impelling assumptions has been—the more people, the more minutely wealth has to be divided. Such implicit notions are what have carried much of the bitter competition between men into our own lifetimes. Every newly arrived flock that has ever demanded entrance into the labor force has been viewed as a threat, in the form of a driving wedge that would inevitably leave smaller pieces for everyone.

This conception of the nation's capital stock as a pie, baked hard into shape and set, is erroneous. Wealth is not a fixed quantity. It's not as a dead man's estate on which the more distant cousins make claims the less there will be for any one of them. Neither is it as a father's bank account on which the child can draw and draw with only idle future intentions of repayment. Far from having this finished, *deus ex machina* quality, wealth is something continuous and man-made. It is generated and maintained only by men's labors; its quantity is limited only by the extent of men's labors. And man's reward is forever contingent upon his first having fruitfully labored.

## The Question

Although initially it seems relentless in its demands, this realization also proves to be a reassurance to man. We now see that what we honestly earn comes not from some all too readily exhausted reservoir, but from our own labors. We see that our reward does not lessen the reward of another man nor increase the apprehension with which we must regard him. Our wages are seen as value received for the value our exertions have added to the natural materials with which we started. Ah, but still the question pursues us—what when man becomes so numerous that he exhausts the natural resources and exhausts the world's ability to make a place for him?

Is that time upon us? Is that time inevitable in its coming? Some say it is, in the same breath with which they quote to us the fact that two-thirds of the people in the United States live on two percent of the land. And then Henry George reminds us of a few things. To him, predicting our future population based on our present rate of birth is like predicting that a child will become a gargantua based on his first month's explosive rate of growth. All rates are explosive in the first days of a thing's being, and mankind is surely yet in his first days. There eventually occurs a tapering off. In the case of man's birth rate, this tapering will occur when he reaches the maturity to provide himself with a satisfying life. A man desperately proliferates himself only in order to see a progeny that have something he had not, that do something he did not, that are something he was not. When a person can realize a complete life himself he need no longer hope in children for completeness. If people do one day crowd and crowd until they really are nothing but problems for each other, it may be because they never found wisdom enough to achieve such a life.

### The Answer

Or, Henry George reminds us, it may be because they were circumscribed, plugged up into one small corner of the full range of possibilities. The latter certainly describes the circumstance of our present mad jostling. We have to strenuously squeeze ourselves into place each day; we can know no ease of motion—not because there are too many of us on earth, but because there are too many of us forced along the same narrow corridors. No part of the still great stretches beyond these can be had for our own either cheap or easy. Every beckoning opportunity seems locked up in escrow. The man who would build for his family a house on pleasant country terrain, finds he must become an executive and earn until retirement before he can bid on the site. The man who would start a business finds he must first know and have a great deal, because he will be paying too dearly to risk failure. Oh, land, land everywhere, but not an acre to grow on!

There's a great optimism revealed here none the less. If a man in this time and place feels himself a heavy problem on the shoulders of his fellowmen, it is not because man always and everywhere is a problem. It's because something in his group's social organization has cut him off from all means of independence. The problem is grown in the social system, not inherent in the man. And since social

systems can be changed, their problems can be solved. Henry George's solution is to levy a single tax on citizens, equal to the full value of the land they presently own.

This action would have a very specific relevancy for our time. By forcing the valuable land fringing all down-town areas out of the slum landlord's hands, it would give a chance for mass squalor to be replaced by individual business. By freeing land from the speculator's disinterested ownership, it would make space available to people's life-long dreams. The uneasy jobless could readily obtain land on which to launch their own ventures. The black man, the Indian, would have alternatives to life in the mainstream. They would have a place to do things their way.

But however urgent his economic cure, it's still George's underlying philosophy that is most compellingly relevant to our age. Implicit in his words is a message to our growing sense of being surplus, of being unneeded pebbles thrown at the foot of a mountain. He speaks to the fears of us all. To the man who feels insignificant amidst the dazzling riches, George says, "It is you who make the wealth." To the man who feels unjustified in asking for some room, George says, "You have a claim." To the man who questions if he can really add anything, George says, "You can." To modern man who craves so to be needed, George says, "You are."

San Francisco friends celebrated the 21st anniversary of the Henry George School on June 19th at the Athletic Club, with a civic dinner and a discussion of how proper taxation can improve various communities. The guest of honor was the president of San Francisco's Board of Supervisors, Dianne Feinstein. Ed Hart, a news analyst, was the master of ceremonies on this all-woman program which included Mrs. Jean Barnard, Mrs. Ilene Weinreb and Mrs. Winifred Frederick, all active in civic affairs.