

We Need Henry George Today

by DAVID SKLAR

PERHAPS one of the most interesting items in the history of thought is the antagonism between Henry George and the academic world.

When *Progress and Poverty* was first published there were a number of favorable reviews by academicians, but as the book began to create a sensation about six months after its publication, many attempted to refute George's ideas. The refutations merely fanned the flames of controversy and caused a wider discussion. Within ten years of the book's publication George's ideas were being so widely discussed that he himself believed it was only a matter of time before his proposals would be put into practice.

Instead of continuing to argue with George, the academic world, becoming alarmed, met him with icy silence. Thus an effective means of dealing with him was discovered, and for the most part the academic world has treated the subject with silence to the present day. As George Geiger said in *The Philosophy of Henry George*: "In the academic world of political economy the work of George has been received with little favor. Too often there has been a rather pronounced neglect of the implications of his thought, but even when they have been appreciated it has been seldom with sympathy."

What is there about George that so antagonizes most of the academic world?

First, it is the revolutionary position contained in his ideas. George attacks the very basis of the power of those who endow and direct universities by attacking land ownership and suggesting an effective means of doing away with the profit contained in these institutions. Such ideas certainly cannot be allowed.

Second, oddly enough it is the clarity and completeness of his argument that most frightens the professors. To place George's writings side by side with those of the popular academic economists is to reveal the poverty of the academicians' thoughts. Compare, for example, Book III of *Progress and Poverty*, "The Laws of Distribution," with Chapter 4 of Samuelson's *Economics*, "Individual and Family Income." George presents a scholarly and penetrating analysis of rent, wages and interest. Samuelson's chapter is a superficial and puerile bit of writing on the distribution of income in the United States, with such subchapter titles as "Wage Income From Work," a most sloppy and unscientific use of terminology.

In the last 80 years much has been written in the field of economics that could not stand up if George's ideas were acknowledged. For in-

stance, the whole idea of deficit financing as a means of stimulating the economy and reducing unemployment would become unnecessary if the tax on land values was instituted instead. The whole welfare program, which is in the main supported by the academicians, would lose its function if the present cause of the maldistribution of wealth were eliminated. Economics has actually become a study designed to cover the truth that George tried to reveal. In these circumstances it would be naive to expect the academic economists to reverse themselves by teaching George.

Let us make no bones about it. The academicians form the most effective shield between the interests of what Franz Oppenheimer called "the State" and the clearer thinking of the 19th century, of which George is one example. It is important that this be understood because unless the authority of the academicians is challenged in the field of economics, it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible to again make George's ideas the subject of such wide discussion as they enjoyed shortly after the publication of *Progress and Poverty*. The most popular argument against George at that time was that he was not an educated man. Today the popular argument is that his ideas are outdated. The statement is generally accepted because it has been made by respected authorities, but no detailed supporting evidence has yet appeared.

The opposite, in fact, is true. George in 1879 anticipated the very social problems that plague our society today. The basic cause of poverty that George outlined has intensified. The proposed remedies of today are the proposed remedies that George analyzed in Book VI of *Progress and Poverty* and showed to be wanting. The most remarkable feature of *Progress and Poverty* is its relevance for 1971.

If we wish to stimulate a wider interest in George, our first line of attack should be against the silence of the academicians. If Henry George's ideas were again discussed they would again cause a sensation.

The "Best Known" Plan

In the Birmingham (Alabama) News an editorial research report from Washington states, "probably the best known and certainly the most radical plan for reforming the property tax was put forward by Henry George almost a century ago." Then followed an explanation of George's "single-tax idea" with mention of several places where it has made progress, though "seldom in its pure form."

The picturesque buffoonery in Punch during George's life is now forgotten, and the silence that followed his death is at last being broken by the public media as a new generation writes of him with the zest of discovery. A faithful and convinced few have waited a long time for this emergence of the truth that he tried to make clear. That truth is finding friends, as he predicted it would, though admittedly in a limited context.