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# A New Look at Henry George

BY STEVEN CORD

## I

### Introduction

THE NAME OF Henry George, once relegated by historians to the dim and distant past, has been referred to with increasing frequency in their more recent writings. History textbooks—those repositories of accepted academic opinion—are a good measure of this renaissance. Prior to World War II, few of them gave George even passing mention, whereas since that war it has been good form to cite him as an important precursor of the Progressive reform era. When history was written with a heavy political and economic emphasis, George was overlooked because the writers had the idea that he did very little in those areas. But with the advent of intellectual history he has come more into notice, at least by historians with that approach.

Today it is generally realized that George exerted an important influence on the development of American democratic thought. He was one of the first to impress upon the American people that poverty and depressions were social evils demanding immediate government action. He was the most widely read among those Reform Darwinists who destroyed the popular notion that society could only improve if human nature itself improved, and that this improvement must wait upon the slow millennial workings of the evolutionary process.

George was especially effective in his denunciation of monopoly, and few reformers of the Progressive era failed to acknowledge that their thinking had been vitally affected by an early reading of George's *Progress and Poverty*. Newton D. Baker's comment on Henry George was characteristic of the views of many Progressive reformers: "I doubt whether many men have so profoundly affected a nation's thought as Henry George has affected the thought of America."<sup>1</sup> Professor Eric Goldman's comment is characteristic of the modern historian's viewpoint:

For some years prior to 1952, I was working on a history of American reform and over and over again my research ran into this fact. An enormous number of men and women, strikingly different people, men and women who were to lead twentieth-century America in a dozen fields of humane activity, wrote or told someone that their whole thinking had been redirected by reading *Progress and Poverty* in their formative years. In

<sup>1</sup> Newton D. Baker to Bolton Hall, June 24, 1935. Original letter in the files of the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation.

this respect no other book came anywhere near comparable influence, and I would like to add this word of tribute to a volume which magically catalyzed the best yearnings of our grandfathers and fathers.<sup>2</sup>

Any evaluation of George's influence must, of course, take note of the fact that the proposal for which he devoted his life, a single tax on land values, has never yet been given a complete trial anywhere. Despite the millions of copies of *Progress and Poverty* that have been sold and despite the legions of people influenced by that book, no simon-pure single tax legislation has anywhere been adopted, although it must be said that land has been more heavily taxed in many places of the world as a result of George's evangelism.

When all is said and done, George's influence on the course of American democratic thought stands out as of real importance. It is desirable, then, that his ideas be carefully understood by historians. Yet there are many who claim that George's ideas have been subject to serious distortion and misstatement through the years and that recent historical scholars have not been much more accurate. This is a serious charge, and it is the purpose of this paper to examine its validity. Of course it is important that the Henry George record be clarified in the interest of historical truth. But the issue is of particular moment now because his proposal of a heavier tax on land values has received support recently from many prominent authorities in the fields of urban renewal, municipal taxation, and land reform. Two such authorities among many are *House & Home*, the leading trade journal of the construction industry, and *The American City*, the leading trade journal for municipal administrators. Generally, these authorities favor not the single tax—a tax on land values *only*—but a full tax on land values, in conjunction, if necessary, with other taxes. *The Reader's Digest*, in its July 1962 edition, has vigorously supported this idea. If George's ideas have important application to present-day problems, historians especially should beware of obscuring them in a cloud of generalities and misconceptions. Let us see if indeed they have done so.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Goldman's letter to Robert Clancy, New York City, dated May 12, 1954. Goldman lists *Progress and Poverty* among the thirteen books that have most shaped the thinking of living Americans (see *Saturday Review of Literature*, July 4, 1953, p. 38).

<sup>3</sup> The conclusions of this article are based on a careful study of all the biographies of Henry George by American authors, practically all the chapter-length studies of him appearing in books of collected biographies by well-known historians, and most of the important references to him in the recognized histories of the 1880–1920 era or of American intellectual life. Literally dozens of textbooks in American history, including all the best-known ones, have been surveyed for their comments on George. A concerted effort has been made to obtain as comprehensive and fair a survey as possible in order to avoid the pitfall of weighting the sample either for or against the thesis that George's ideas have been misinterpreted by many historians.

## II

## George and the Land Value Tax

ALTHOUGH ALMOST ALL HISTORIANS have praised George as an apostle of American social reform, many of them were critical of his single tax proposal. Many such criticisms alleged that a tax on land values was administratively unfeasible. Benjamin P. DeWitt, who in 1915 wrote the first history of the Progressive movement, charged that if land values were taxed they would be rapidly reduced to zero, eventually leaving nothing to tax.<sup>4</sup> Supporters of Henry George feel this obstacle can be easily overcome. They advocate that their tax reform be imposed gradually over a period of years and when the point is reached that land values become too small to be properly taxed, then the land should be assessed at its annual *rental* value and this is what should be taxed, eventually in full. This is similar to the tax system which Canberra, Australia, has used for many years.

While attributing great influence to George as one of the first reformers of America's Industrial Age and an important precursor of the Progressive era, Daniel Aaron, in *Men of Good Hope* (1951), brushed aside "the dubious mechanics of his land tax."<sup>5</sup> The dubiousness is unexplained, though frequently referred to. Nevertheless, this attitude finds support among many other historians. For instance, Perry Miller, while regarding George as the most important exponent of Reform Darwinism, wrote that "in the cold light of history, it seems clear that this ingenious device [the land value tax] is impracticable, and one can only lament the time and energy George expended in trying to prove it feasible."<sup>6</sup>

Historians who hold this view of the land value tax should know that for many years it has been applied successfully in many parts of the world. In the United States it has been utilized in such diverse places as Arden, Delaware; Fairhope, Alabama; the California Irrigation Districts, and the city of Pittsburgh. The latter city taxes land values at twice the rate on buildings (although its county and school taxes remain unchanged), and it has received the support of practically all political factions.<sup>7</sup> Land value taxation has also been in force for many years in Denmark (demanded by the farmers); Kenya; South Africa; western Canada; Australia, and New Zealand. In the latter two countries in particular, many municipalities

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin P. DeWitt, *The Progressive Movement* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1915), p. 359.

<sup>5</sup> Aaron, *loc. cit.*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), p. 71.

<sup>6</sup> Perry Miller, ed., *American Thought, Civil War to World War I* (New York: Rinehart, 1954), p. xxv.

<sup>7</sup> The comment of the present mayor, Joseph M. Barr, is typical: "The graded tax plan has worked well in Pittsburgh and we believe it would prove equally beneficial if tested in other areas." (July 12, 1962, luncheon speech at Chatham College, Pittsburgh, Pa.)

have long paid their governmental expenses solely through a tax on land values, and the increasing number of municipalities switching to this tax system has been a constant phenomenon in recent years. Whatever may be the advantages or disadvantages of the single tax, this record would certainly indicate that it is administratively feasible and that its mechanics are not "dubious."

### III

#### The Treatment of George's Ideas

ALTHOUGH MANY HISTORIANS were reasonably sure of the extent of George's influence, they were somewhat vague in their description of his ideas. For instance, Merle Curti wrote at great length about George's history, philosophy, and impact, but devoted only two sentences to a description of the mechanics of the land value tax—George's central idea—and these were vague, if not misleading.

In place of the existing system of taxation George proposed a single tax on all increments in the value of land. This would merely allocate to the public, to all individuals, that part of the value of a given piece of land that the public, or all individuals, had created.<sup>8</sup>

This hardly gives an adequate explanation of the mechanics of the land value tax. Besides, what George actually proposed was that all the value of land be taxed away, not merely part of it, the increments or increases in it. Curti's vagueness about the mechanics of the land value tax affected his evaluation of George's ideas:

Moreover, the unearned increments of mines, real estate, and other landed properties were distributed in widely held insurance policies, stocks, bonds, and mortgages. Henry George in reality never understood the pervasive nature of capitalistic society. Consequently he provided for no adequate political means for effecting his program. Nor did he understand the obstacles in the way of mobilizing power behind a program that in effect would have entailed a virtual revolution against capitalism.<sup>9</sup>

Did Curti realize that land rent can be separated from other economic factors and collected by the government in taxation? The reader may wonder what political means Curti would regard as adequate for winning adoption of the land value tax. Wherever that tax has been applied the ballot box and the existing municipal tax administration have proven quite sufficient. As for the remarkable statement that "a virtual revolution against capitalism" would be required, an opinion once expressed by Karl Marx becomes relevant: he called the single tax "capitalism's last ditch" and an attempt to "rear [capitalism] anew upon a firmer basis than its

<sup>8</sup> Merle Curti, *Growth of American Thought* (New York: Harper, 1943), p. 615.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 616.

present one."<sup>10</sup> In misunderstanding the mechanics of George's proposal, Curti and others were led to believe that it would require a complete revamping of our present social and economic arrangements.

Other leading historians are equally vague. Eric Goldman in *Rendezvous With Destiny* (1953) makes numerous and lengthy references to George, but nowhere describes his chief proposal. Ralph Gabriel devoted only one sentence to the mechanics of land value taxation in his lengthy (and quite illuminating) section on George, writing that "George did not propose the complete nationalization of land but merely, as a practical measure, the appropriation by the State of the unearned increment in value which society itself brings about."<sup>11</sup> The term "unearned increment" is more suitable to John Stuart Mill's proposal that only the *future* increase in land values be taxed away, and that land values existing at the time of the institution of his tax remain inviolate (in fact, it was Mill who first popularized the term). George, on the other hand, wanted to tax away all land values by collecting the *full* land rent for government use. The term "unearned increment" never appears in *Progress and Poverty*.

One of the most questionable statements made by historians about George is the oft-repeated charge that he advocated land nationalization.<sup>12</sup> In great measure, this error also came about because many historians inadequately or only vaguely understood the mechanics of the land value tax. Land nationalization has a very definite meaning: the ownership and control of land by the government. The land value tax, although it is levied on the rent from land, does not in any way diminish an owner's right to retain his title to the land. It may be asked, Why should anyone retain title when the rent is taxed away? The answer is that an owner would want to keep his title in order to use the land as he may wish and in order to maintain the security of ownership in his improvements on the land. The rent measures the special locational advantage of a particular piece of land. If this advantage is taxed away, the landowner would still be able to derive an income from his own labor and capital improvements on that

<sup>10</sup> Letter written by Karl Marx to a friend, June 20, 1881, and reprinted in *The People* (New York), June 5, 1892.

<sup>11</sup> Ralph Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought* (New York: Ronald Press, 1940), p. 202.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, see Benjamin P. DeWitt, *op. cit.*, p. 358; Thomas Beer, *Mauve Decade* (New York: Knopf, 1926), p. 11; James Ford Rhodes, *History of the United States From Hayes to McKinley, 1877-1896* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), p. 286; Stewart Holbrook, *Dreamers of the American Dream* (New York: Doubleday, 1957), p. 161; Charles Madison, *Critics and Crusaders* (New York: Henry Holt, 1947), p. 282; Saul K. Padover, *Genius of America* (New York: McGraw-Hill), p. 231. For textbooks making this error, see Steven Cord, *How American Historians and Economists Have Viewed Henry George* (New York: Columbia Teachers College doctoral dissertation, 1962), p. 213-14.

land. George added that his tax buttressed the land title and the security of improvements because it would replace the taxes on those improvements.

It is worthwhile to quote George himself on this matter. In *Progress and Poverty*, he wrote: "I do not propose either to purchase or to confiscate private property in land. The first would be unjust; the second, needless."<sup>13</sup> In his later book, *A Perplexed Philosopher*, he wrote: "I am not even a land nationalizationist, as the English and German and Australian land nationalizationists well know. I have never advocated the taking of land by the State or the holding of land by the State, further than needed for public use; still less the working of land by the State."<sup>14</sup>

Another recurrent charge that is equally questionable classifies George as a socialist. Sometimes the term "socialist" is qualified by "agrarian" or "Christian."<sup>15</sup> In fact, it would be hard to prove that he was any type of socialist. His respect for industrial competition and the private ownership of the means of production permeate *Progress and Poverty* and indeed all of his books. It is true that as a side interest he advocated government ownership (by purchase) of utilities on the ground that competition was impossible in such industries. But government rate regulation (such as we now have in the United States) won his reluctant approval as an acceptable substitute. It is true that he often spoke of "true socialism" as being a desirable goal, but he thought of it as being capable of accomplishment only in the far distant future, and by that phrase he meant a socialism of the Owenite voluntary and cooperative type motivated by a religious spirit, and not the Marxist kind of socialism now most frequently debated—the socialism by which the government owns the means of production. Indeed, George had nothing but contempt for Marx and his ideas, calling him "the prince of muddleheads."<sup>16</sup> George did accept the support of the socialists in his 1886 campaign for the New York City mayoralty, but it must be remembered that he ran on a platform of his own choosing and, after repeated quarrels, evicted them from his party in the following year. His followers contend that a high degree of socialism exists when the

<sup>13</sup> Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1960; originally published 1879), p. 405.

<sup>14</sup> Henry George, *A Perplexed Philosopher* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1946; orig. 1892), p. 70.

<sup>15</sup> For instance, see Lewis Einstein, *Roosevelt, His Mind in Action* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930), p. 39; Fred E. Haynes, *Social Politics in the U.S.* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1924), p. 117; Arthur Ekirch, *The Decline of American Liberalism* (New York: Longmans Green, 1955), p. 157; Jennings B. Sanders, *A College History of the United States* (Evanston, Ill.: Row, Peterson & Co., 1962), Vol. 2, p. 150. For textbooks making this error, see Steven Cord, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

<sup>16</sup> George R. Geiger, *Philosophy of Henry George* (New York: Macmillan, 1933), p. 239.

government can take 48 per cent of a corporation's profits and 14 per cent of a poor person's income. By making such taxation unnecessary they feel that the land value tax is anti-socialist.

A final decision cannot easily be rendered on two other criticisms commonly leveled against George's ideas because they fall into the category of questions of opinion. The first of these criticisms finds fault with George's reliance on absolute natural law, asserting that it is the State which is the sole source and final arbiter of our rights (social utility theory).<sup>17</sup> To which George replied: "There are those who say that the right of property, as all other rights, is derived from the State. But they do not really think this; for they are as ready as any one else to say of any proposed State action that it is right or it is wrong, in which they assert some standard of action higher than the State."<sup>18</sup>

The other frequently encountered criticism leveled against George maintained that his tax was not predicated upon the ability-to-pay principle.<sup>19</sup> George replied that it is better to tax an income that society produced and which is essentially unearned by its recipients than to tax incomes earned and produced by individuals. Besides, it is possible to employ "soak the rich" taxes in conjunction with the land value tax, if it is so desired. Another consideration is that since the most valuable land is owned by rich people, George's tax does indeed adhere to the ability-to-pay principle, perhaps even more so than the present income tax with its many loopholes.

#### IV

##### Erroneous Ideas about George

ANYONE WHO HAS MADE a careful study of the treatment of George in historical literature is struck by the surprising large number of incidental errors that creep into such accounts. Such literature is generally characterized by the most careful pursuit of verifiable facts, and although the mistakes in the sections on George are not to be construed as casting aspersions on the accuracy of the other sections, this paradoxical finding can only be explained by the fact that George's career and ideas had never been carefully studied by many historians. It will be instructive to look at the many examples:

(1) Thomas Beer wrote that George supported the Populist Party in 1896, whereas the exact reverse was true.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Young, *Single Tax Movement in the United States* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1915), p. 303.

<sup>18</sup> Henry George, *A Perplexed Philosopher*, p. 211.

<sup>19</sup> Edward R. Lewis, *History of American Political Thought . . .* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), p. 280-81.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Beer, *op. cit.*, p. 38.



(2) James Ford Rhodes claimed that George's 1886 mayoralty campaign was aided by the Haymarket Affair and the railroad strike in the Southwest, although all other scholarly accounts take an opposite stand.<sup>21</sup>

(3) On one page of his masterwork, *Main Currents in American Thought*, Vernon L. Parrington included George with Virginia Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin, "Citizen" George Francis Train, Henry Bergh, Ben Butler, Ignatius Donnelly, and Bob Ingersoll as a "goodly company of cranks." But on another page he placed George in company with Darwin, Spencer, Mill, Karl Marx, Haeckel, Taine, and William James as "masters of which no school in any age need feel ashamed."<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere he stated that "from the classical economists Henry George got little," contradicting George's own assertions and the obvious facts.<sup>23</sup>

(4) Eric F. Goldman alluded to George's supposed unfriendliness toward Jews.<sup>24</sup> However, the quotation he gives to prove this merely indicates George's reasons why he thought Jews were different. The main ones, said George, were environmental rather than hereditary. George's close personal ties with Jews throughout his adult life would refute Goldman's inference.

(5) Arthur Ekirch wrote that, according to George, the basic source of poverty "lay in the ratio of population to land."<sup>25</sup> Actually, George was indignantly anti-Malthus and devoted four chapters in *Progress and Poverty* to disproving Malthus' contentions.

(6) Edward R. Lewis wrote: "It is clear that he [George] was wrong in his theory that wages are the direct result of the contribution of labor."<sup>26</sup> However, this theory is commonly accepted among economists today and it is not true, as Lewis stated, that Frank W. Taussig disagreed with George on this point.

(7) Gerald W. Johnson, in his *Lunatic Fringe*, referred to George as a devout Episcopalian throughout his life, claimed he was nominated for mayor in 1884, was unaware of Marx, threw aside natural law. He also made no less than seven other similar errors (yet the other chapters of his book were seemingly free from such misstatements).<sup>27</sup>

(8) George did not advocate the income tax, nor, in my opinion, were Condorcet, Comte, and Fourier his ideological forerunners, as Daniel

<sup>21</sup> James Ford Rhodes, *op. cit.*, p. 286.

<sup>22</sup> Parrington, *loc. cit.* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927), Vol. 3, pp. 12, 402.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>24</sup> Goldman, *Rendezvous With Destiny* (New York: Knopf, 1953), pp. 99-100.

<sup>25</sup> Ekirch, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

<sup>26</sup> Lewis, *op. cit.*, p. 278.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson, *loc. cit.* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1957), pp. 110, 111, 113, 115, 117, 118. Also, see Cord, *op. cit.*, pp. 198-99.

Aaron stated in *Men of Good Hope* (1951).<sup>28</sup> Nor should George be criticized, as in this book he is, for dismissing two aides, M'Cready and Sullivan, from *The Standard*, George's weekly newspaper, in view of the fact that they both moved into George's home uninvited during his summertime absence and then commenced to issue scurrilous statements about George and the single tax movement. A reader may wonder why Aaron characterizes George's break with Father Edward McGlynn as a blunder after McGlynn's insistence that their single tax party be expanded to nation-wide scope even though the party had just suffered a disastrous defeat in New York State (1887). McGlynn had founded and led the whirlig-dervish Anti-Poverty Society, which had often embarrassed George by its near-fanatical enthusiasm for the single tax.

(9) Saul K. Padover's *Genius of America* (1960) stated that the land value tax is unconstitutional,<sup>29</sup> a view disproven by its many practical applications within our borders.

(10) David S. Muzzey referred to George as the editor of the *San Francisco Times*—actually he was editor of the *Post*. A more important error—he also stated that George called labor the chief factor in the production of wealth. No such thought can be found anywhere in George's writings. The mistake probably stemmed from a confused notion of George's labor theory of value and property.<sup>30</sup>

(11) Eugene O. Golob described the British Labor Party's Town and Country Act (1947) as "interesting evidence of the continued vitality of Henry George's economics in England."<sup>31</sup> Yet this act was vehemently condemned by British single taxers because it did not provide for land value taxation—it even made its future imposition more difficult—and contained many coercive features concerning land use.

(12) George Soule made the same misstatement and in addition admonished Henry George for not attempting to analyze depressions.<sup>32</sup> Actually, Henry George devoted the first half of *Progress and Poverty* to just such an analysis.

(13) Robert Heilbroner referred to George's supposed "equation of rent with sin" (not so—George did not wish to abolish rent) and in discussing George's elopement with his bride-to-be, Heilbroner implied that

<sup>28</sup> Aaron, *op. cit.*, pp. 75, 79, 89.

<sup>29</sup> Saul K. Padover, *loc. cit.* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960), p. 231.

<sup>30</sup> David S. Muzzey, *The United States of America* (New York: Ginn, 1924), Vol. 2, p. 192. George's labor theories of value and property differed entirely from the theories of Marx.

<sup>31</sup> Eugene O. Golob, *The "Isms"—A History and an Evaluation* (New York: Harper, 1954), p. 286.

<sup>32</sup> George Soule, *Ideas of the Great Economists* (New York: Viking, 1952), p. 86.

George thought he was marrying a rich woman, a view which finds no basis of support from George's scholarly biographers, nor from any other book; his future wife's very limited finances were well known by all those who knew her.<sup>33</sup>

If the scholarly historians are confused by Henry George, then we should not be surprised if we find errors in the textbooks, and such is in fact the case. Out of twenty-one recent textbooks making more than cursory reference to George, seven committed what could be considered errors, all duplicating those already mentioned above.<sup>34</sup> Since very few of these texts devoted more than two paragraphs to George, the prevalence of error is remarkable. Although these same textbooks erred in their brief sections on George, they exhibited a high degree of factual reliability on practically all other subjects.

## V

## George's Scholarly Biographers

NATURALLY, NO HISTORIOGRAPHICAL TREATMENT of Henry George can be considered complete without mention of his scholarly biographers. Only three book-length studies exist in English<sup>35</sup> and, as one might expect, they exhibit a high degree of factual reliability. These writers, at least, have fully read their Henry George. However, some questionable interpretations stand out.

For instance, Albert Jay Nock wrote an interpretative book-length essay in 1939, based on a right-wing philosophical anarchist point of view.<sup>36</sup> Nock accepted the single tax wholeheartedly but claimed that George's great mistake was that instead of spending his life in philosophical contemplation and writing books on ethics, he chose the lower life of polemicist, agitator, humanitarian, and lecturer. Rather than trying vainly to appeal to the masses and frittering away his energies in various political efforts, George should have concentrated his efforts on a rather vaguely defined elite of mankind, according to Nock.

However, it is hard to see how George could have made a living without lecturing or writing magazine articles. Nock himself admitted that it was George's agitation on the Irish land question which catapulted him and *Progress and Poverty* into the public spotlight. Sales of the book had

<sup>33</sup> Robert Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1953), pp. 176-82.

<sup>34</sup> Steven Cord, *op. cit.*, pp. 213-14.

<sup>35</sup> Excluding such excellent works as those by Henry George Jr. and Anna George de Mille on the somewhat arbitrary ground that they were not professional scholars.

<sup>36</sup> Nock described it as a rewrite of Henry George Jr.'s work.

been limping along at a very unsteady pace until that episode. Would anyone ever have heard of George if he had followed the contemplative life? If he had not related his philosophy to the pressing problems of his day, would he and his ideas have been consigned to oblivion as happened to such contemplative precursors as Dove, Ogilvie, Filangieri, Burgess and Spence?

Elwood Lawrence's able *Henry George in the British Isles* (1957) recorded George's influence in the British Isles, the scene of his greatest triumphs. Among other things, Lawrence offers evidence to show why George was often misidentified with the doctrines of socialism and land nationalization: in the British Isles he often appeared on lecture platforms sponsored by the Fabian Society or Alfred Wallace's Land Nationalization Society and his vigorous attacks on poverty and social injustice identified him in the minds of many as some sort of extreme radical.

By far the most extensive scholarly treatment of Henry George is to be found in Charles A. Barker's recent biography (1955). Barker doesn't believe in personally evaluating the ideas or actions of his subject, but the few evaluations he does make raise eyebrows. For instance, he feels that if George had "admitted the rough-hewn rightness of the 160-acre—or 80-acre—homestead as democratic policy for the well-watered farming regions," he might have gained the support of the farmers, or at least have avoided their opposition.<sup>37</sup> But the reader may feel that the "rough-hewn rightness" did not remain so for long as landholdings gradually but inevitably concentrated into the hands of a few large-scale farmers. Furthermore, recent scholarship has shown that most of the land given out under the Homestead Act went to land speculators, George's nemesis as well as that of the farmers and society in general. Lastly, under this homestead policy the government did not receive a considerable land value tax revenue over the years to which, according to George, it was justly entitled.

Barker also chided George for not realizing that his ethical views required not merely the nationalization (!) of land but its internationalization by a world organization with power to tax.<sup>38</sup> The fact is that George sought to achieve international acceptance of land value taxation and free trade, visiting many countries in the campaign. Also, it may be unreasonable to chide George for not advocating world government prior to his death in 1897 or for not postponing his attempts to get land value taxation adopted in a particular town, state, or nation until a world govern-

<sup>37</sup> Charles A. Barker, *Henry George* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 298.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

ment had been established. The fact is, of course, that George was ahead of his time in urging a league of nations.

In his brief evaluation of *Progress and Poverty*, Barker pointed to an alleged confusion, a contradiction, in George's thinking:

*Progress and Poverty* says, first, that under land-value taxation, Society would thus approach the ideal of Jeffersonian democracy, the promised land of Herbert Spencer, *the abolition of government*. Then, after explaining a bit, appears the equally strong hope that, "Government would change its character, and would become the administration of a great cooperative society. It would become *merely the agency by which the common property was administered for the common benefit*."<sup>39</sup>

The contradiction is removed when we examine George's intervening explanation. After Barker's first quoted sentence, George wrote, "But of government only as a directing and repressing power," thus defining what he meant by the immediately preceding phrase, "*the abolition of government*."<sup>40</sup> George then explained that by simplifying and even abrogating most of the present government functions, thereby reducing governmental repressions of various sorts, we could then safely entrust the management of natural monopolies and certain welfare functions such as parks, museums, and schools to the government. With this explanation, the two sentences Barker quoted out of context are more naturally linked.

## VI

### Conclusion

THE EVIDENCE PRESENTED in this paper points to the rather surprising conclusion, then, that despite George's recently recognized importance as a prophet of social reform and arouser of America's social conscience in the new age of industrialism, his ideas have not been well understood by many historians. The principal source of difficulty has been a lack of knowledge about the mechanics of land value taxation, his central proposal. The result of this has been that many students of history have a distorted image of the man and his ideas. This is unfortunate, not only because a part of the American past has become obscured, but also because George's tax proposal has been advanced as a useful approach to urban renewal and as a relatively untapped revenue source for local government. The recent adoption in Hawaii of George's tax reform idea on a modified basis, as a state tax, lends current interest and importance to what he said. It is therefore doubly incumbent upon historians to clarify the record concerning Henry George.

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

<sup>40</sup> George, *Progress and Poverty*, *op. cit.*, p. 456.