

Louis F. Post: Philosopher of Social Service

PART I
by David Domke

Throughout its long history the Georgist movement has attracted a variety of reform minded people of diverse backgrounds and this has contributed greatly to the enrichment of the movement. This was especially true during the American Reform Era, both during Henry George's time and after. One thinks of Lincoln Steffens, known in his time as the "American Socrates" and one of the first "muckrakers," journalists famous for their exposures of corruption among business and political interests. Tom L. Johnson, who made an early fortune exploiting monopolistic interests, became converted by George's writings and ended up as reform Mayor of Cleveland. The list is long: Felix Adler, founding member of the New York Ethical Society, and a eulogist at Henry George's funeral. Father Edward McGlynn, beloved pastor of one of the largest congregations in the country and a stalwart advocate of labor and the poor. Joseph Fels, manufacturer of Fels-Naphtha soap and, through his Fels Fund, a major contributor to the single-tax movement on a national scale. One might also mention Patrick Ford, editor of *The Irish World*, and other labor leaders who saw both the land and labor questions as parts of a single dynamic.

Any list of early movement luminaries would remain somewhat dim, however, if it did not include Louis F. Post, author, lawyer, newspaper editor, Ku Klux Klan adversary, Henry George campaign advisor and Assistant Secretary of Labor in the Wilson administration. Throughout his life Post tirelessly worked to educate people about Henry George's ideas and in the process articulated a broad social vision. Said by many to have been the *de facto* leader of the Single Tax Movement after the death of Henry George, Post's scope was always wider than his focus; in later life, as his thinking matured, he developed what he called "a rational spiritualism," and a "philosophy of spiritual life," a vision of life connecting individual aspiration with community effort.

Louis Freeland Post was born in Vienna, New Jersey, in 1849. He attended public schools in New Jersey and New York and at the age of fifteen became a printer's apprentice. Through his apprenticeship he learned the nuts and bolts of the newspaper business and later went on to edit the *Cleveland Recorder* and Henry George's *The Standard*. In 1870, at the age of twenty-one he was admitted to the New York bar. He practiced law in New York for twenty years and was for a while in partnership with Charles Frederick Adams, a well known single-taxer. He also served for a while as Assistant U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of New York.

In 1871 Post was called to South Carolina by a Senate Committee to help investigate a series of Ku Klux Klan murders. At that time, as a northerner, Post later recollected, he had looked upon the Klan as a "mardi gras comedy rather than racial tragedy," merely a bunch of guys who liked to dress up and ride around at night. Reports of their true nature that were received up North seemed wildly exaggerated, lurid stories fabricated by the press. "But after I was in South Carolina a few weeks, Klan terrorism seemed real enough," Post later wrote, "I found myself face to face with the terrible reality." Post was in South Carolina for a total of fifteen months as a Federal observer.

What he saw was the early post-Civil War era — the devastation of the political and social fabric of a defeated people. The South before the war had been a rigidly hierarchical society, a "feudal" state run by an aristocracy of land owners who based their economy on slave labor. Now, the South was overrun by Northern carpetbaggers and Union soldiers, and "her whites felt themselves a conquered people under the military heel of the conqueror. They beheld a previously servile race lifted out of slavery and into political power by a triumphant foe." Some of the dispossessed were

forming a quasi-religious militia to maintain "law and order" and search for likely victims. It seemed to him as though the citizenry of the South had been forced to internalize all the conflicts of the war. In their desperate attempt to exorcise these conflicts they scapegoated the only class of people who seemed to have benefitted from the war: former slaves. "A sense of outraged loyalty to country or class cares little for such 'abstractions' as simple justice," Post wrote.

Post was witness to several Klan murder trials, mostly involving lynching. One case involved five black soldiers who had been "surrounded and lynched by five-hundred armed and masked horsemen." All the cases he relates were similar acts of murderous cowardice; the Klan, "an engine of murder," always either outnumbered or outgunned its victims. All told fifty-five Klansmen were sentenced, mostly "young men with little or no education." While it was widely taken for granted that ex-military officers and even some politicians, "the old aristocratic parasites," Post calls them, were involved, none of the so-called "higher-ups" were brought to justice, though there were attempts. Later all "Kukluxers" were given a general pardon by President Grant. As he left the South Post saw, in the period following Reconstruction, "aristocratic parasitism deliberately casting aside another opportunity to save the South from the parasitism of ignorance steeped in poverty."

In 1872 Post returned to New York and the practice of law. He involved himself in various liberal enterprises, including editing a progressive journal entitled *Truth*, published by Joseph Hart. In his book *The Prophet of San Francisco*, Post recounts how he first encountered the ideas of Henry George. One evening he was sitting around the editorial offices of *Truth* with Kenward Philp, a sort of journalistic jack-of-all trades who "lived from pen to mouth," according to Post. Philp was a newspaper editor, a writer of fiction pieces, doing both originally in London and then coming to New York as a sort of literary and political gadfly; "a companionable bohemian of Newspaper Row," is how Post affectionately referred to him. This man of "submerged renown," as Mark Twain was to call him, was well versed in the ideas of Henry George but, as Post recalled later, "when Ken Philp tried to open my mind and conscience to



his message, Henry George was to me no more than a newspaper name, one associated with "soap box oration" or "red" or "radical," or whatever might be the favorite epithet of the malicious and the thoughtless." Indeed, though he listened politely, Post at the time was little receptive. "For several weeks George's ideas did not so much as impinge upon my mental orbit;" but like Webster's Hound of Heaven, which pursues its prey even when they least know it, Post was being darkly pursued by the hound of 'truth.' "But I could not escape my fate."

One day, some weeks later, Post was in the composing room of *Truth* complaining about "the deadly dearth of subjects for editorial comment." A certain William McCabe, a New Zealander by birth who had known Henry George "both as a fellow craftsman and as a locally distinguished editor in San Francisco." McCabe asked him if he'd ever read *Progress and Poverty*. Post remembered his conversation with Kenward Philp and replied that he had no intention of reading it, having decided already there was nothing to George's ideas. "Maybe so," replied McCabe, "but just the same, there are enough editorial subjects in that book to last a lifetime." A few days later Post found a copy of George's *The Land Question* on his desk. "It had just been published, the copy on my desk being one of the first to come off the press. I picked up the book and listlessly opened it, wondering what this illiterate long-haired crank could say for himself. Glancing swiftly through the opening sentences, I began to realize the author was neither

illiterate nor cranky." As he read further, Post was beginning to see how much plain sense could be discerned in George's writing. "Drawn farther and farther into the body of the book by its common-sense statements, its cogent reasoning, its attractive diction, I read on and on and on, no longer listlessly but curiously and eagerly. Before I finished, a new light had flashed upon me." Henry George's ideas had a manifold effect upon him; they touched upon many things he had already known but had not the conceptual tools to pull into focus. "Reviving within me my anti-slavery spirit of Civil War times, I followed the thought of my new found Prophet with ease and sympathy as he traced the gross inequalities of human life — my experience as a practicing lawyer verified the facts — to their economic origin in the monopolization of natural resources." Henry George had written: "Rob a man or a people of money, or goods, or cattle, and the robbery is finished there and then...but rob a people of the land on which they must live, and the robbery is continuous." Post quotes this saying as one that really hit home.

Post embraced George's ideas enthusiastically, in deeds as well as words. Upon reading *Progress and Poverty*, Post decided that *Truth* must

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publish the entire book serially in its Sunday editions. He prevailed upon the publisher Joseph Hart after some discussion but Hart wanted to meet the author first. Post prevailed upon William McCabe to arrange the meeting. His account of that first meeting: "Henry George's

personal appearance as he entered our sanctum is photographed upon my memory. He was a man of ordinary build, except for his legs, which were shortish... a black frock-coat emphasized his breadth and his untrimmed beard and mustache were brick red, so was his hair, what little there was of it. His air was somewhat that of a stranger in a strange place, but he was unabashed." Soon after *The Truth* began serialization of *P & P* and George was off to Ireland as a correspondent for the *Irish World*.

Shortly after Henry George returned from Ireland the American Free Soil Society was formed with Post as President. In the summer of 1883, Post and George took their families on a two week camping trip to Budd's Lake, New Jersey, where they discussed the Society's formation and other matters. Both George and Post were present at the meeting for the adoption of the Society's constitution. The document declared that "property in the products of labor has a natural basis and sanction while property in land has none" and that any "recognition of exclusive property in land is necessarily a denial of the right of property in the products of labor." The Constitution further stated "the common right of the people to the soil upon which they must live and out of which the Creator designed that by their labor they should obtain their own subsistence." Membership in the Society excluded no one, recognizing "no distinction of race, sex, nationality or creed." It was as a member of this society that Henry George first visited England and, Post later wrote, "he thrilled an immense audience and his fame and influence as an orator spread over Great Britain."

Organizations much like the Free Soil Society were springing up all over the map. There was the New Churchman's Single Tax League, the New York Tax Reform League, the Manhattan Single Tax Club, the Chicago Single Tax Club. In England, the English League for the Taxation of Land Values was formed after one of George's visits. These groups were part of a groundswell that boosted Henry George on its shoulders, leading to his New York Mayoral campaign of in the early autumn of 1886. On the 23rd of September a political labor conference, organized by the Central Labor Union, for which Post was legal counsel and which represented one hundred and seventy-five labor organizations, formally nominated Henry George as its mayoral candidate. Post began editing the campaign newspaper, *The Leader*.

Interest in the campaign was not confined to labor. Its appeal spread to, as Henry George put it, "the great body of citizens, who, though not working men in the narrow sense of the term, feel the bitterness of the struggle for existence as much as does the manual labourer, and are as

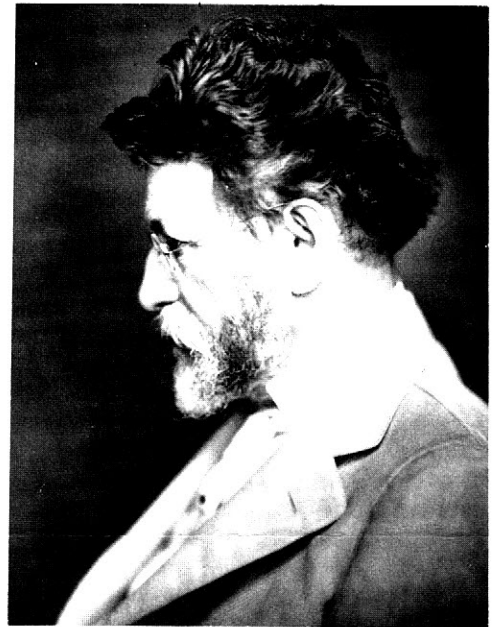
deeply conscious of the corruptions of our politics and the wrong of our social system." In agreement with this sentiment, Post wrote "No contest for human rights, such as Henry George inspired and waged, can hope to conquer in any mere class contest... the Singletax phase of the movement—a phase which, ignoring class contests and class interests as such, appealed to the one rational method of laying the only firm foundation for a truly democratic structure." Post also believed that one could become too narrowly focused on the phrase "singletax," treating the various and complex problems of human society as reducible to a simple economism (privately Post and George referred to such people as "Singletax Limited"). He later resigned from the Single Tax Club of Chicago for that very reason. Which is not to say he ever wavered in his belief in Henry George and his proposals, only that he saw the singletax as a necessary and urgently needed first step in the struggle for broad social reform.

Post also spoke out against what he called the "individualistic opposition" to Henry George, the view, which today we would call libertarian, that favors an abnegation of social responsibility and social labor and advocates an exaggerated and isolationist view of the individual. Post writes: "Henry George opposed the drawing, in the Singletax platform, of any definite line between public and private functions" in terms of the use of natural resources. He quotes Henry George as saying, in *Protection or Free Trade*, "Man is primarily an individual—a separate entity—differing from his fellows in desires and powers... but he is also a social being, having desires that harmonize with those of his fellows, and powers that can be brought out only in concerted action...and the natural tendency of advancing civilization is to make social conditions relatively more important and more and more to enlarge the domain of social action." Post also quotes George as saying: "The advances in which civilization consists are not secured in the constitution of man, but in the constitution of society."

In fact, Louis Post's philosophy of life might be summed up with the title of one of his many books — *Social Service*. In matters of political economy he followed and advocated the single tax; in the broader context of reform, within which the single tax was a vital component, he proposed the social gospel. "Once more I try to pray, but in my work rather than on my knees." ["A Non-Ecclesiastical Confession of Faith"] For Post the natural and the spiritual were intimately connected; "human society," he wrote, "is no mechanical structure to be torn apart and rebuilt; it is a natural organism to be weeded and cultivated." In a sense all social labor was, for Post, social service. In a just society, even private gain-seeking contributes to the general welfare. Post took the idea of unconscious cooperation as the basis of a spiritual calling.

Post says, in his book *Ethics of Democracy*, that there is a natural law in the moral world just as there is such a law in the material world and "idealism can express itself in this material world only through utilitarianism (service)." Further on in the same book he writes:

So accustomed have men become to the association of elegant leisure with civilization that they realize only with considerable mental effort that civilization depends neither upon leisure nor a leisure class, but altogether upon the interchange of work. Service for service is the condition of life... (continued on back page)



Louis F. Post (continued from page five)

Should we altogether stop serving one another, civilization would collapse. Though men may live without serving, it is only through some degree of interchange of service that they can live civilized lives. Service for service, in other words wholesome business, is the central law of social development.

In his essay "An Inquiry into the Institutional Causes of Crime," we find Post elaborating on this idea of mutual service as it regards free trade and labor. Post says "any social institution that interferes with, that checks cooperation in the production of wealth helps to make unemployed men," consequently, "it is an absurd notion that a class of employers is necessary to employment.... Workers are not employed by an employing class. Except as employers are also workers, they are parasites upon industry. Workers are employed by one another. They employ one another by trading the products of their respective specialties. To check this trade is to check mutual employment." He goes further in this essay, broadening his scope to include the land question: "Civilized life demands not only that men shall be untrammelled in exchanging their products, but also that they shall be untrammelled and equal in their right to use the planet...cooperative man is dependent upon the earth for the highest cooperative life."

In the "Open Shop and the Closed Shop" Post states that land monopoly increases the extraction of an unearned increment because by increasing unemployment, wages are kept to a minimum, thereby allowing land monopolists and their functionaries to reap a greater surplus.

To what alchemy does the capitalist resort in order to exploit them (the workers)? Investors in land bring on a conflict of interests between land monopolizing and land usage. This conflict, by lessening the opportunities for work, checks effective demand for products, which further lessens opportunities for work. Meanwhile, this process of action and reaction brings forth "the jobless man," and from that moment the surplus product increases. The surplus product tends to absorb the whole product of labor above a bare living for the lower level of workers. It is composed in part of actually-paid rent for land, and in larger part of the so-called capitalistic fleecings of labor, those

fleecings which are possible only when the earth is a closed shop...

When and where land is monopolized, progress increases its value, and thereby makes its utilization increasingly difficult. It is not for lack of machinery, which the working class itself produces, that the working class is exploited by the owners of machinery; it is for lack of available free land to compete with valuable land and thus relieve the congested condition of the labor market.

[Land monopolization causes] the surplus to increase faster than the increase of productive power. The single-taxer explains that the germ of this surplus product of labor is the rent or premium for scarce and superior parts of the earth. Capitalize this rent, and you create a disposition in progressive localities to buy land in the (speculative) expectation that its premium-bearing qualities will increase.

Directly to this point of the power of land ownership over labor Post, in a footnote in *Ethics of Democracy*, approvingly quotes "the well-known single-tax lecturer John Z. White who rightly insists that it is legal power to extort service and not land hunger that causes land monopoly. 'Land monopolists have no hunger for land,' says Mr. White, 'what they desire is the legal power to extort labor from others... Being empowered by law to exclude producers from land, they are thereby able to force producers to surrender a share of their products for the mere permission to produce. This is all there is to land monopoly. It is nothing but legal power to extort.'" So the monopolization of land, according to Post (and White) is in its totality dependent on the exploitation of labor — for it is not only the landowner who employs workers who extracts a surplus, but also the land speculator who employs no one directly but extorts the social labor of the entire community as he sits back and watches land values increase. "Thus we are recreating through real estate transactions a more powerful land oligarchy than that of the feudal barons...feudal landlordism governed through personal relationships, plainly and brutally; capitalistic landlordism governs by economic pressure and convulsion with the subtlety and severity of natural law."

Post was, as he called Henry George, "a thorough-going democrat in the broadest sense of that sadly narrowed term."