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The Social Ideas of Henry George

By AURELE A. DUROCHER

HENRY GEORGE ONCE EXCLAIMED, with reference to the "land question" of the nineteenth century: "There have been 'Holy Alliances' of kings. Let us strive for the Holy Alliance of the people.

"Liberty, equality, fraternity! Write them on the banners. Let them be for sign and countersign. . . .

"By this sign shall ye conquer!"¹

In these eloquent words, echoing the bold rhetoric of Thomas Paine, George expressed the spirit of his social philosophy. That George was a social analyst as well as economist is not widely known, yet he held many positive views about the causes of social injustice and advocated clear solutions to eliminate such injustice wherever found. John Dewey proclaimed George to be "one of the world's great philosophers."² If one would understand more completely the social history of the United States and absorb more fully the quality of the criticism of its social critics, he must know George more intimately as social critic and architect. The nature of his social ideas becomes clear by analyzing them, by discovering their underlying principles, and by examining their bearing upon his solutions for various social problems. George likewise evaluated the social theories of his day, taking particular note of the social ideas of Malthus, Herbert Spencer, and various groups of socialists and communists.

I

EXAMINING GEORGE'S SOCIAL THEORY, the student notes, at many points, how much his social philosophy owes to social doctrines current in the eighteenth century. George likens, for example, the development of society to that of an organism: in ancient times, there was first of all the rude barbarian, with strong instincts and drives, but innately possessed with the capacity for development. As plants and animals evolved from lower forms, so did the individual, who with millions of other individuals constitute society, which likewise evolved from a lower to a higher form of social organization. "As in the development of species," George as-

¹ *The Land Question: What It Involves, and How Alone It Can Be Settled*, New York, 1881, p. 108.

² Cited by Charles A. Madison, "Henry George, Prophet of Human Rights," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 43 (1944), p. 360. Madison cites Dewey in corroboration of his own comment in this article that "George's greatness . . . lies not in his originality as a political economist but in the combination of broad social vision with a passionate concern for the welfare of mankind. The love of liberty and equality agitated his spirit with consuming fervor and . . . spurred him to probe deeply into the causes of poverty and to discover the means for its alleviation." (See p. 359)

serted, "the power of conscious, coordinated action of the whole being must assume greater and greater relative importance to the automatic action of parts, so it is in the development of society."³ Consequently, the higher one goes in the scale, the greater complexity and specialization there is, not only in nature, but in individual and social evolution. This development is not a matter of caprice in nature, but a matter of law—in all realms, biological, physiological, intellectual, social, and ethical.

"Social development," George stated, "is in accordance with certain immutable laws. And the law of development, whether it be the development of a solar system, of the tiniest organism, or of a human society, is the law of integration."⁴ George further argued that "natural laws which permit social advance, require that advance to be intellectual and moral as well as material. The natural laws . . . by which our mastery over matter and material conditions is increased, require greater social intelligence and a higher standard of social morals."⁵ Therefore, since man is physically the weakest being in the link of natural development, he needs a higher intelligence than the lower beings; he has been endowed by the Creator with a godlike power of adaptation and invention.

Implicit in these pronouncements is the idea of progress, a central tenet in George's social philosophy.⁶ Where the biological development of the species ends, ". . . social development commences," said George, "and that advance of society that we call civilization so increases human powers, that between savage and civilized man there is a gulf so vast as to suggest the gulf between the highly organized animal and the oyster glued to the rocks." At this point of maximum development, new vistas of potential progress become so enticing that "When we try to think what knowledge and power progressive civilization may give to the men of the future, imagination fails."⁷ This accumulated social intelligence, which effects progressive measures, is not a set of mere abstract principles; it must be brought to bear upon our social institutions, for "The progress of civilization requires that more and more intelligence be devoted to social affairs, and this not the intelligence of the few, but that of the many."⁸ As a consequence society is an organism with its own inner logical structure and motivations, which are those of unremitting change and advancement to a higher state of social organization.

³ *Social Problems*, Chicago, 1883, p. 242.

⁴ *The Land Question*, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

⁵ *Social Problems*, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

⁶ The philosophical basis of George's thinking is treated by George Raymond Geiger, *The Philosophy of Henry George*, Grand Forks, N. D., 1931.

⁷ *Social Problems*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

On the basis of this evolutionary social development George formulated what he called an inevitable law of human progress. Given man at any current stage of his development, it is obvious that change will take place. Much historical evidence shows that this change is sometimes for the worse, which George said was actually occurring in the nineteenth century, all over the world, but in a particularly distressing fashion in industrial countries like the United States. Here the phenomenon of poverty and progress was baffling to people of a melioristic frame of mind and spirit. Whether the change will be for the betterment of society is dependent on certain conditions. One of these is that man must use the innate intelligence given him by the Creator to solve his problems, none of which are ultimately insoluble. That he does not do so is no argument that they cannot be solved. Though history clearly shows, declared George, that every civilization has experienced alternating periods of vigorous growth, stagnation, decline and fall, this evolution is not irrevocably decreed.⁹

A second factor strongly influences the possible betterment of society. This factor is the principle of human equality: ". . . association in equality is the law of progress, which will explain all diversities, all advances, all halts, and retrogressions. Men tend to progress just as they come closer together, and by cooperation with each other increase the mental power that may be devoted to improvement, but just as conflict is provoked, or association develops inequality of condition and power, this tendency to progression is lessened, checked, and finally reversed."¹⁰ So long, George thought, as man used his intelligence and kept in mind the necessity for basing law and social fact upon human equality, progress was inevitable. However, just as soon as apathy and selfishness subvert this fundamental principle of equality, stagnation and social decay follow.

II

IN THUS PROPOUNDING his evolutionary theory of social development, George was motivated by certain principles whose validity he profoundly believed in. Antecedent to all evolution in society are the basic rights of man, which are paramount in the natural scheme of things. The basis of all man-made law, he asserted, is the law of the Creator, which is impressed upon and revealed through nature and exists above and before all human laws, which must conform to this higher law. This transcendental law is, moreover, the foundation law for all social organization,

⁹ See George's *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry Into the Cause of Industrial Depressions and of Increase of Want With Increase of Wealth*, 50th Anniversary ed., New York, 1932, pp. 484 ff. for an amplification of this remark.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 508.

and is a moral law: "That mankind should dwell together in unity is the evident intent of the Divine mind,—of that Will, expressed in the immutable laws of the physical and moral universe which reward obedience and punish disobedience."¹¹

George explained this principle by means of an analogy: machines obey physical laws, the body the laws of health, and human beings the moral laws. These moral laws include all of man's natural rights, which are universal and inalienable. They may be found in the *Declaration of Independence*, the preamble to the *Constitution of the United States*, and the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizens of France*. These rights, furthermore, need to be implemented as well as professed; a subversion of them leads to social maladjustments and therefore injustice. To explain the presence of overproduction, political corruption, economic dislocations, and social ills as somehow due to the nature of things is to blind oneself to the reality and necessity of the natural, moral law, which also includes man's rights and obligations. Once the truth of these principles is recognized by human beings in association, George believed, the right economic, social, and political adjustments logically follow, and individual and social health becomes a reality.

These basic rights of man, George exclaimed, are inseparable from the philosophy of ethics itself.¹² He viewed the hierarchy of value as an entity with an ascending order, at the apex of which he posited the value or quality of ethics and justice; all other values are subordinate to this category, and all social institutions must conform to it. "You will see," he averred, "that the true law of social life is the law of love, the law of liberty, the law of each for all and all for each; that the golden rule of morals is also the golden rule of the science of wealth; that the highest expressions of religious truth include the widest generalizations of political economy."¹³ In fact, George pointed out, the primary perceptions of human reason are identical to certain fundamental teachings of the Christian faith. We are our brother's keeper, George explained: "I believe that

¹¹ *Social Problems, op. cit.*, p. 261.

¹² The ethical emphasis of George's social theory is one of his most characteristic marks. A careful review of George's entire career shows how deeply his sense of ethics permeated his views. As early as 1856, when he was not yet seventeen, he was profoundly moved by the clash between some working men and their bosses, which he witnessed in Hobson's Bay, port of Melbourne, Australia, while foremast boy on an American ship, the *Hindoo*. Such clashes, no matter what the provocation, seemed to him wrong and subversive of the order of general goodness he later preached on many occasions. Many like instances of George's measuring of problems and maladjustments against an absolute ideal of righteousness are referred to by Charles Albro Barker in his *Henry George*, New York, 1955.

¹³ From George's 1877 lecture, "The Study of Political Economy," delivered at the University of California. Cited by Barker, *George, op. cit.*, p. 240.

the idea of duty is more potent for social improvement than the idea of interest; that in sympathy is a stronger social force than in selfishness."¹⁴

Paraphrasing *Genesis*, George used the story of creation to prove that Providence ordains equality and social justice. In the beginning men were equal creatures of God's bounty and equal subjects of his care. As a consequence, God has decreed that men satisfy their wants through their labor. Divine being gave them the land and raw materials, the resources of the earth, on which to work. Does it not follow, George argued, that God does not intend that some individuals, being equal subjects of his care, have so much more than others that the latter are deprived of opportunity and subsistence? Men by their labors are individually entitled to the use of their own powers and the enjoyment of the results, subject to their moral obligations toward others. Therefore "there is but one right of property that conduces to the prosperity of the whole community, and that is the right which secures to the laborer the product of his labor."¹⁵ The ownership in things produced by labor is derived from God and is anterior to man-made law.

This right which attaches to property in things produced by labor, however, does not extend to property in things created by God, in keeping with the principle expounded above that God has made a free gift of the earth to all men for their common use. Man creates values, it is true, and these he may retain in his possession provided others are not hurt; but those values—land, raw materials, natural resources—which he has not created, since they are gifts of Divine Providence, he cannot appropriate under pain of violating the moral law. As George explained, "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."¹⁶

On this ethical basis of social theory, George erected his economic program. If God intends man's equality and prosperity, and if the existence of increasing land values tends to depress the propertyless and thus subverts God's intention, then society has a moral right to take in the form of taxes these land values, to be held in trust for the public good. In

¹⁴ *Social Problems*, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

¹⁵ Henry George, *A Perplexed Philosopher: Being an Examination of Mr. Herbert Spencer's Various Utterances on the Land Question, With Some Incidental Reference to His Synthetic Philosophy*, New York, 1911, p. 235.

¹⁶ *The Condition of Labor: An Open Letter to Pope Leo XIII*, New York, 1906, p. 5.

other words, "Here is a natural law by which as society advances the one thing that increases in value is land—a natural law by virtue of which . . . all general improvements of whatever kind, add to a fund that both the commands of justice and the dictates of expediency prompt us to take for the common uses of society."¹⁷ By so doing, George rounds out his argument, we follow God's "clear simple rule or right . . . taking for the community the value that attaches to land by the growth of the community itself" so that not merely may evil modes of raising public revenues "be dispensed with, but all men would be placed on an equal level of opportunity with regard to the bounty of their Creator, on an equal level of opportunity to exert their labor and to enjoy its fruits."¹⁸ Concluding, George asserted that private property in land is therefore unethical, unnatural, and unchristian.

III

SUCH A POSITION, so logical to George, was not so equitable to others. He noted, for example, that most people were complacent about social ills: such a state of mind implied a condoning of social maladjustments and injustice by contemporary institutions. The press, the churches, the schools, colleges, and universities—all of them were complacent, George felt. The survival of the fittest doctrine, which had its origin in biology, held such sway over the minds of men that it seemed to cause these institutions to suffer from a myopia in the face of many patent abuses. George thought it incredible that this doctrine was equated with the will of Divine Providence, as he pointed out in a lecture on Moses, whose life, like the institutions promulgated by the author of the Decalogue, "is a protest against that blasphemous doctrine, current now as it was three thousand years ago—that blasphemous doctrine preached oftentimes even from Christian pulpits—that the want and suffering of the masses of mankind flow from a mysterious dispensation of Providence, which we may lament, but can neither quarrel with nor alter."¹⁹

George inferred from this tendency of official leaders to preach such a doctrine that they either were intimidated by certain influential interests or actually believed that ethics had nothing to do with the solution of social questions. George was convinced, nevertheless, that people remained baffled by enormous problems. When they received shibboleths for answers as to causes and solutions from the orthodox interpreters of the dogma, they heeded panaceas that he maintained were "futile and

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁹ Henry George, *Moses*, New York, 1918, p. 23. A lecture first delivered in San Francisco in June, 1878.

dangerous remedies." When these dogmatists scolded the people for heeding visionary schemes, George pointed out that the mistaken notions of the people were "largely due to the fact that those who assume and are credited with superior knowledge of social and economic laws have devoted their powers, not to showing where the injustice lies but to hiding it; not to clearing common thought but to confusing it."²⁰ With such obscurantism prevailing in the inner circles, it was obvious, claimed George, that many great fortunes were made by various unscrupulous methods. The production of wealth, instead of being due to labor and real individual efforts, arose just as often or more often from the unearned increment from land, tariff protections of many kinds, and from monopoly. Inevitably, such a system created the many contemporary social evils caused by failing to acknowledge natural and moral laws. Indignantly, George declared:

"Here is a system which robs the producers of wealth as remorselessly and far more regularly and systematically than the pirate robs the merchantmen. Here is a system that steadily condemns thousands to far more lingering and horrible deaths than that of walking the plank—to the death of the mind and death of the soul, as well as death of the body. These things are undisputed. No one denies that Irish pauperism and famine are the direct results of this land system, and no one who will examine the subject will deny that the chronic pauperism and chronic famine which everywhere mark our civilization are the results of this system."²¹

George was not content merely to deal in generalities. He studied at some length many social evils, many still existent in various parts of the world. He devoted two books and several lectures and essays to an examination of these problems. The two books are the trenchant *Progress and Poverty*, published in 1879, and *Social Problems*, published in 1883. No matter which particular problem he considered, whether social, economic, or political, he traced its cause to a single condition. He collected statistics as to the incidence of crime, prostitution, poverty, and destitution. The enormous waste of productive power on the part of the armed forces in all civilized countries came under his scrutiny. Labor problems, economic dislocations, agrarian unrest, urbanization, the monopolization of land—to George the basic social evil—he closely examined. He was certain that all of them, so far as their causes were concerned, had a basis

²⁰ *Perplexed Philosopher*, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

²¹ *The Land Question*, *op. cit.*, pp. 49–50. The immediate occasion of the publication of this work, as seen from the quotation cited, was the land system prevailing in Ireland, in which George was much interested for its seeming illustration of his theories as to causes. George's absorption in Ireland and the British Isles is studied by Elwood P. Lawrence in his *Henry George in the British Isles*, East Lansing, Mich., 1957.

—whether mediately or immediately—in social injustice. This phenomenon involved a denial of fundamental rights provided for all in nature and Christian ethics.

Turning to solutions of these social problems, George offered a program that was simple, bold, and breathtaking. Following his principles, he first of all reiterated the axiom that at all times solutions must be based on a return to ethical tenets and social justice. Since all political and social problems centered in the maldistribution of wealth, caused by the institution of private property in land, the cure lay not in treating symptoms or proposing solutions bound to result in greater evils than those purported to be cured. The cure lay rather in removing the causes preventing a just distribution of wealth, which lead directly and indirectly to social injustice. This distribution of wealth is just when it is given to him who creates it and is secured to him who saves it. By an immutable natural law, George stated, wealth is given only to labor as a matter of justice; the two other means of obtaining wealth lay in outright gifts from some source or in social theft. Consequently, society must see to it that each person is secure in the free use of his labor and powers to create wealth, limited only by the obligation everyone has to others, who also have equal freedom to create wealth by their labor. This social maxim follows because “the rights of men to the use of land are not joint rights; they are equal rights. . . . Where there is more than one man on earth, the right to the use of land that any one of them would have, were he alone, is not abrogated: it is only limited. The right . . . is still a direct, original right, which he holds of himself, and not by the gift or consent of the others; but it has become limited by the similar rights of others, and is therefore an equal right.”²²

In this way everyone is free to enjoy his own earnings in so far as he contributes to the purposes of the common good, because the “ideal social state is not that in which each gets an equal amount of wealth, but in which each gets in proportion to his contribution to the general stock.” For society to condone the method of a few unscrupulous profiteers and speculators who have been able to garner untold wealth and wield enormous influence means that ethical justice is not only subverted, but that the many real producers of wealth are deprived of their natural inheritance. Restoring to the latter their rightful privilege to garner and hold the wealth they create by keeping land common property, and also by restoring to the body politic the social wealth taken from the profiteers by means of

²² *Perplexed Philosopher*, *op. cit.*, pp. 27–8. The reader no doubt recognizes in this quotation the eighteenth century overtones attached to arguments concerning civil rights. Cf. Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*.

the single land tax, society gives the common man life again. As to long-term results of such a policy, George prophesied that “. . . in such a social state there would not be less incentive to exertion than now; there would be far more incentive. Men will be more industrious and more moral, better workmen and better citizens, if each takes his earnings and carries them home to his family, than where they put their earnings in a pot and gamble for them until some have far more than they could have earned, and others have little or nothing.”²³

In reply to the charge that the foregoing program would stir up class animosity, George gave this clear answer: “I am not denouncing the rich, nor seeking . . . to excite envy and hatred; but if we would get a clear understanding of social problems, we must recognize the fact that it is to monopolies which we permit and create, to advantages which we give to one man over another, to methods of extortion sanctioned by law and by public opinion, that some men are enabled to get so enormously rich while others remain so miserably poor.”²⁴ Nor would such a program mean “coddling” of the “idle,” or a reduction of social classes to a level of mediocrity; such charges, George asserted, merely beclouded the real issue. The unethical practice of allowing the few to become inordinately wealthy, while others suffer through no direct fault of their own—regardless of their capacity to produce wealth for themselves, if they had the land and the opportunity denied them under the present system—must be swept away. On it must be erected a system that accords with the best ethical philosophy and the ageless canons of social justice.

IV

SUCH A PROGRAM implies a sweeping transformation of social and economic relations; to effect it, the government must assume a definite role, said George. Today, government regulation is taken as a matter of course, despite grumbling in certain quarters. George’s reliance on government therefore seems old hat, but when his program was promulgated it seemed so revolutionary in its implications that Leo XIII, then Pope of the Roman Catholic Church, issued an encyclical (*Rerum Novarum*) aimed at least indirectly at George’s social and economic program (so George thought).²⁵ The principle on which he relied to justify his program George stated simply, in sentiments later associated with Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal:

“As society develops, the State must assume these functions [*e. g.*, regulation of monopoly], in their nature cooperative, in order to secure the

²³ *Social Problems, op. cit.*, p. 35.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

²⁵ George’s feelings about what he considered was the Pope’s intervention on the side of the powerful are explained in more detail by Barker, *George, op. cit.*, pp. 571–7.

equal rights and liberty of all. That is to say as, in the process of integration, the individual becomes more and more dependent upon and subordinate to the all, it becomes necessary for government, which is properly that social organ by which alone the whole body of individuals can act, to take upon itself, in the interests of all, certain functions which cannot safely be left to individuals."²⁶

The particular proposals that George advocated in his governmental program were clear and simple. They indicate the essential prophetic nature of many of his utterances. First of all, as might be expected, George would secure the implementation of the Bill of Rights in the Constitution and the tenets in the *Declaration of Independence*. This implementation would be actual and real. This the government could easily execute by enforcing these basic provisions of our law. George further advocated the astonishing proposal that the armed forces and the diplomatic services of the executive department be abolished. By this step, he believed, a large amount of revenue now diverted to useless services would be plowed back into the social fund.

Realizing that much injustice was perpetrated by wealthy individuals able to subvert justice by having laws enacted for their selfish benefit, fat legal fees for which were exacted, George next proposed that the entire administration of law be reformed. This measure would, he thought, lead to a fair dispensation of justice. Next to legal reform would have to come considerable restriction of political abuses. In George's view, politicians and lawyers were about on the same level of amorality; therefore, their actions must be closely supervised by a careful government. The latter institution, in turn, came in for a share of attention in George's program. He advocated a close scrutiny by the citizenry of the legislation enacted by local governmental units. In many cases he had observed that local officials had condoned and even profited by conniving with various interests in the appropriation of thousands of acres of good public lands. The people, he declared, are closest to these local conditions and can do much to force honest dealings on the part of local officials. The latter, closely watched by the public, could guarantee that land owners no longer were free to plunder the public domain.

Turning to economic measures, George felt that all businesses with a public interest must be rigidly regulated. They would include the commonly known public utilities, but George had specifically in mind the railroads, whose high-handed actions in the greatest period of their development in the last century are still remembered. In the area of public welfare,

²⁶ *Social Problems, op. cit.*, pp. 241-2.

George believed that the government could provide for such measures as aids to education, public assistance, and the provision of funds for recreation, science and invention, public libraries, and other service enterprises. To George, social health was an absolute *sine qua non*; imbued with this conviction, he had a vision of individuals cooperating with one another, through the medium of government, in the attainment of social justice. Man is so constituted, he stated, "that it is utterly impossible for him to attain happiness save by seeking the happiness of others" so that it seems "to be the nature of things that individuals and classes can obtain their own just rights only by struggling for the rights of others. . . . And herein we may see the deep philosophy of Him who bid men to love their neighbors as themselves."²⁷

However desirable the foregoing reforms by government may be, the only real, fundamental solution to the social ills that plague society is that of land reform, George insisted. Despite the efficacy of the type of governmental reform already described, George felt that it was no more than nibbling at the real remedy. Social correction would only be shortlived and superficial unless the basic evil of private property in land were eradicated from the economic structure of the nation. This truism (to George) was realized in all its implications long ago by Moses, who "saw that the real cause of the enslavement of the masses . . . was what has everywhere produced enslavement, the possession by a class of the land upon which and from which the whole people must live. He saw that to permit in the land the same unqualified private ownership that by natural right attaches to the things produced by labor . . . would enslave labor—to make the few the masters of the many. . . ."²⁸

The solving of this deep-seated economic problem is not effected, however, by a mere parceling out of the land to propertyless individuals in small lots, argued George, for this procedure only divided the landed areas without abolishing private ownership in land.²⁹ Such a half-measure would soon cause the reappearance of the original evils, whereby certain unscrupulous persons would garner social wealth created by the mass of people. No, what must be done is the abolition of private ownership of land by taxing away the unearned increment expressed by the value of the land, while allowing everyone who works the land to retain the improvements he

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 330-1.

²⁸ George, *Moses*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

²⁹ See Lawrence, *George in the British Isles*, *op. cit.*, pp. 8, 9, 15, *passim*, for George's disagreement with the Irish agrarian leader, Charles Parnell, regarding the true solution to the land question of Ireland, much debated in the British Isles in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

has created by his own efforts. In other words, George said, “. . . what we propose by the single tax to take for . . . use, is the value of the land *as it is*, exclusive of the value of improvements *as they are* in or on the land privately owned. What would thus be left to the landowners would be their personal or movable property, the value of all existing improvements in or on their land, and their equal share with all other citizens in the land value resumed.”³⁰

Stated thus, the remedy is amazingly simple, and when George noted the hesitation of people to implement it, despite ultimate, glowing results, he was incredulous. For this proposal would, he was confident, “remove want and the fear of want, give to all classes leisure, and comfort, and independence, the decencies and refinements of life, the opportunities of mental and moral development, would be like water into a desert. The sterile waste would clothe itself with verdure, and the barren places . . . would ere long be dappled with the shade of trees and musical with the song of birds. Talents now hidden, virtues unsuspected, would come forth to make human life richer, fuller, happier, nobler.”³¹ This is, indeed, an enticing picture, tantalizing to the heart’s desire; a study of *Progress and Poverty* will show how George thought this happy outcome could be effected.

Such, then, is the social edifice that George imagined; the seductiveness of its appeal has attracted many followers and admirers, as well as those who “pant after the waterbrooks” of social betterment. George, however, was more than a visionary: he engaged in many melioristic activities of his day. He also was an omnivorous reader of the social and economic writings of the day, was keenly alive to the issues raised, and reacted to them characteristically and vigorously.

For instance, he utterly condemned the Malthusian doctrine. He believed that it played right into the hands of powerful interests who were exploiting the landless section of the populace for gain and power. The doctrine also provided many arguments for the soothsayers who defended the existing order of affairs, for “it is eminently soothing and reassuring to the classes who, wielding the power of wealth, largely dominate thought.” In a lengthy analysis in his most important book, George established the thesis that there was absolutely no warrant for the doctrine of Malthus, however comforting it was to those who had an interest in perpetuating the *status quo*. He insisted that the “globe may be surveyed and history may be reviewed in vain for any instance of a considerable country in which poverty and want can be fairly attributed to the pressure of an increasing

³⁰ *Perplexed Philosopher*, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

³¹ *Progress and Poverty*, *op. cit.*, pp. 470–1.

population." Furthermore, the aggregate increase in population which Malthus predicted simply has not materialized: "On the presumption that population tends to double every twenty-five years, they [the descendants of Confucius] should, in 2,150 years after the death of Confucius, have amounted to 859,559,193,106,709,670,198,710,528 souls."

On the contrary, argued George, the want and starvation which Malthus attributed to an increasing population, which allegedly tends to outrun the means of subsistence, are the direct results of other factors. By an examination of conditions in China and India, classic examples in the nineteenth century of widespread misery and deprivation, he discovered these factors to be countless exactions and oppressions grinding the populace into a wretched poverty, and the merciless and murderous rapacity of the ruling classes; therefore "Neither in India nor China . . . can poverty and starvation be charged to the pressure of population against subsistence." Actually, by a contrary principle, man's means of subsistence actually increases in quantity relative to his increase, for an increase of plants and animals is much greater than that of man. The latter, by scientific methods of stimulating the production of foodstuffs, can so augment the means of his support that only his ingenuity really stands in the way of taking advantage of this means. "In short," George concluded, "while all through the vegetable and animal kingdoms the limit of subsistence is independent of the thing subsisted, with man the limit of subsistence is, within the final limits of earth, air, water, and sunshine, dependent upon man himself." This conclusion reached, George demolished the entire structure of Malthusian theory by declaring unequivocally: "I assert that in any given state of civilization a greater number of people can collectively be better provided for than a smaller. I assert that the injustice of society, not the niggardliness of nature, is the cause of the want and misery which the current theory attributes to over-population."³²

Henry George also seriously pondered the social analysis of Herbert Spencer, especially his views regarding land and property.³³ Though Spencer's reputation in his day was prodigious, George was not overawed. By a close study of both editions of *Social Statics* and Part IV of *Ethics* ("Justice") George wished to discover, not only what Spencer had written concerning property ownership, but to determine for himself the precise reason why Spencer was so highly respected by the powerful on both sides of

³² The analysis of the Malthusian doctrine appears in *Progress and Poverty*. The quotations cited in the text of this paper regarding George's statements about this doctrine are found, respectively, on pp. 98, 106, 112, 122, 132, and 141.

³³ For a fuller discussion of the relations between George and Spencer, see Geiger, *Philosophy of George op. cit.*, pp. 187-235.

the Atlantic. What he learned, given his philosophy, was not reassuring. The principle relating to the right to land and to property which Spencer evolved in the 1850 edition of *Social Statics* George found to be substantially correct, from his own point of view. Spencer had stated that all men have equal rights to life and to personal liberty, as well as rights to the use of the earth. In his explanation as to the just character of this postulate, Spencer had pointed out that in the course of time society had found it necessary to grant the privilege to private individuals of owning land and of expending their labor upon it, although in ancient times common ownership had been the rule. George felt that this interpretation, though correct enough in its general lines, was misleading. He would not concede any right to society to grant persons the right to own land; the right was retained by the people in general, down to modern times. Furthermore, such a principle seemed to suggest that when Spencer spoke of "equal rights" to land, he meant "joint rights." These types of right were, according to George, incompatible. George agreed with Locke, who had maintained that the right to land springs not from society, which Spencer asserted, but inheres in the individual person. If, however, Spencer were only confused as to terms, and meant by "joint," "equal," George was quite willing to agree with his basic position.

But as the nineteenth century wore on there was increasing evidence that more and more people were suffering misery due to private ownership in land and therefore were becoming increasingly clamorous concerning this seemingly unjust principle. Powerful groups became frightened, and because of their strong hold on the formation of public opinion made it dangerous for any critic to take up the cudgels for the dispossessed. Spencer, aware of this potential threat, began to modify his views, according to George. First of all Spencer stopped the publication of the 1850 edition of *Social Statics* and issued a new one in 1892, with the references to right of land ownership deleted. In various articles he repudiated his former stand that all persons maintained equal rights to the ownership and use of land. Moreover, in the section on justice in his *Ethics*, which was an integral part of his monumental *Synthetic Philosophy*, he now stated that the right to land was not a natural right at all, but was on the contrary a product, like other phenomena, of evolutionary development. This position implied, of course, that Spencer felt the day of common ownership to land to be remote.

George interpreted Spencer's modification of original views to be tantamount to tacitly approving all the abuses associated with land monopoly. George further maintained that private property in land had really usurped

the older idea of common property in land and was therefore not a sociological development at all. When Spencer remained silent about past social abuses arising from private land ownership, and as he continued to defend his thesis that private property was based on his "relative ethics" concept, George inferred that the English philosopher was not only inconsistent to a great degree but was compromising his principles. Therefore, George became convinced that Spencer was really a mere trimmer, was dishonest intellectually, and by upholding the *status quo* was truckling to "the vested interests."³⁴

In George's day many proposals were issuing from various groups of socialists, each with a social and economic panacea. Though he was considered by some to be a socialist, George was very wary about accepting the philosophy and program of socialism. He felt that the analysis and demands for reform of the socialists were too extreme. As he put it: "There are many . . . who feeling bitterly the monstrous wrongs of the present distribution of wealth are animated only by a blind hatred of the rich and a fierce desire to destroy existing social adjustments. This class indeed is only less dangerous than those who proclaim that no social improvement is needed or is possible."³⁵ Not only did he believe that the socialists were too extreme in their demands, George likewise condemned what he considered to be their narrowness of view: "With both anarchists and socialists, we [the single taxers] fundamentally differ. We regard them as erring in opposite directions—the one in ignoring the social nature of man, the other in ignoring his individual nature. . . . The anarchists seem to us like men who would try to get along without heads and the socialists like men who would try to rule the wonderfully complex and delicate internal relations of their frames by conscious will."³⁶

As for the communists, George dealt somewhat more kindly with them. He pointed out that in ancient times there had been a sort of communism that was peaceful and altruistic, its adherents being motivated by a common faith. He saw also that many of the religious orders of the Roman Catholic Church were organized and ruled along basically communistic lines, though he stressed the fact that the common faith and sense of solidarity thereby engendered within these orders were absolutely necessary to make them successful. George however doubted that there was sufficient agreement as

³⁴ Spencer is defended against George's imputations by Geiger, *Philosophy of George*, *op. cit.*, pp. 245 ff.

³⁵ *Letter to Leo XIII*, *op. cit.*, pp. 54–5. Nevertheless, in spite of this rather clear declaration, George had a profound influence on the philosophy and program of the Fabian Socialists in Great Britain, as shown by Lawrence in *George in the British Isles*, already cited.

³⁶ *Letter to Leo XIII*, *op. cit.*, p. 57.

to a common faith and a burning enough zeal in secular society to make communistic measures empirically successful. He thought that, given the status of society as he viewed it, only a radical change in the ownership principle toward land could effect the reform that he had in mind. In the contemporary state of society, then, he felt that neither socialism nor communism was feasible or desirable.

V

IF ONE GRANTS George his premises and his analysis of social conditions of his day, we detect in the foregoing account a very powerful body of social theory. He was one of the few great men in modern times who unblushingly stated, in unequivocal terms, that ethics and justice were greater and higher values than those associated with the practical, the expedient, the selfish. As one observer remarks: "His [George's] ethical interpretation of economics and politics helps to fix his position in American economic theory and economic history, and it is one that is worthy of attention even from the coolly historical point of view."³⁷ Henry George was sincerely motivated by disinterestedness and personal altruism; his kindness and essential humanity were facts of widespread knowledge in his day. It could be said with a great deal of truth that he died for the cause he believed in, despite the fact that, as his physician reminded him, another campaign for the mayoralty of New York City in 1897 would prove suicidal, which it did. Henry George died battling for the principles of ethical justice in which he sincerely believed. He takes his place among those seers and artists who have always known that right must prevail no matter what the obstacles are. Consequently, when the undoubted achievements of John Dewey, Thorstein Veblen, Lester Frank Ward, and Walter Rauschenbusch are recounted, those of Henry George must be counted with theirs.

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³⁷ George R. Geiger, "The Forgotten Man: Henry George," *Antioch Review*, 1 (1941), p. 300.

The United States is a privileged nation. Its citizens enjoy a measure of prosperity and well-being and an extent of liberty under free institutions unequalled in the history of the world. Our ideals and our ideology place upon us a responsibility for leadership and for cooperation with other nations and other peoples which we accept willingly and with pride.

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER