

The Forgotten Man: Henry George

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# THE FORGOTTEN MAN: HENRY GEORGE

By GEORGE R. GEIGER

ONE OF THE MOST CURIOUS anomalies of the entire literature of social reform has been the almost total neglect, even ignorance, in liberal and progressive circles of the work of Henry George. He is indeed the forgotten man, apparently the unmentionable. Try to find a reference to him in, say, the *New Republic* or the *Nation*. (Even the *New Masses* and the *Daily Worker* are a little more generous. Once in a while they remember his anniversaries and have some unaccountably charitable things to say about him.) This ignorance occasionally has ludicrous results. Not that George is confused by the allegedly literate with Lloyd George, but it's almost as bad as that when Mr. George Catlin (certainly an alleged literate) writes in his rather recent *Story of the Political Philosophers* that the George Junior Republic in New York State—a colony for the young—was established as an outgrowth of Henry George's work! Which is about the same as suggesting that Karl is one of those funny Marx Brothers, or that he helps run a men's clothing chain with a couple of other fellows. A trivial point surely—possibly even a typographical error. . . . Although, as some wag has put it, they can't *all* be typographical errors. The omissions of George are not all inadvertent. There are reasons, then. What are they? The following catalogue is perhaps not complete, and it is certainly uneven, containing both good and bad reasons—and all of them insufficient ground for the neglectful contempt that our present-day intelligentsia professes towards George's philosophy:

He is connected with "the land question," and that is out of date.

He believed in a "single tax" which was to be a utopian panacea.

He believed in classical economics.

He believed in God.

He has no standing in academic circles: it is not sophisticated to refer to Henry George as it is to mention Thorstein Veblen.

Look at the single taxers! They are all crackpots—vegetarians, theosophists, spiritualists, Esperantists, believers in chiropractic and anarchism.

He was perhaps a pioneer in American political economy, the economically literate might acknowledge, but no more important than Daniel Raymond or Thomas Cooper.

And so on. To be sure, arguments such as these, whether or not they are caricatures or straw men, are seldom explicit. They don't have to be, since for most individuals it is unnecessary to give reasons for not paying attention to Henry George: he is simply outside their universe of discourse.

This may be a very negative approach to the American economist and philosopher, but negative is the word to use in referring to his reception today. Now, the purpose here is certainly not to refute all the arguments which have been used to rationalize this inattention. In fact, some of them are irrefutable, e.g., the one about single taxers. Admittedly they are the chief trouble with the "single tax" (whatever might be implied by that very inaccurate phrase); and all that could be essayed in this area would be the usual *tu quoque* argument, viz., look at all the other brethren of social reform! Would Marx be a Marxist (and of which variety) were he alive today? Try the same with all rebels and their followers—including Jesus. There will always be the lunatic fringe. To judge social theory in terms of it is to confuse economics and politics with psychiatry. But even if all the arguments cannot be examined, an attempt will be made to look at a few of the more significant of the reasons for disregarding the work of George.

Possibly the most serious of these is the misconception which lingers about the phrase "the land question." George's reputation stands or falls in direct proportion to the attention given to land as an economic factor. But apparently land has become old-fashioned, something bucolic which may affect a few Southern novelists with a wistful nostalgia. At most it refers to the need for preventing erosion and for conserving natural resources (as if land itself were not *the* natural resource). That "land" might have a more elemental referent than fertile prairies and grassy plains and virgin forests seems as implausible as the opening of another frontier. Indeed, as Gilbert Chesterton complained, "our urban populations have virtually forgotten that we all live on land." Our contemporary economic architects have been equally forgetful. To be sure, there have recently been a few sporting admissions that "Henry George may have been right after all," or that in town and regional planning more attention must be paid to increased land value taxation. But certainly there

have been indications of serious blindness in the drawing of social patterns and the planning of political structures. There are programs and there are plans, all of them seemingly founded on the proposition that industry and capital and finance are ethereal essences, floating about balloon-like, quite aloof from the ground.

Henry George had a very different approach to "the land question." It was for him a concept as much metaphysical as economic. Land was Nature. It was our own Earth. It was all that was unmade by man, the physical world which provided the foundation for each of his efforts. Without land man was as rootless as a pulled flower. But metaphysics is unpopular now. So is classical economics. Therefore the sweep of meaning which George gave to land seems dated and irrelevant, too bound up with the rationalism of the traditional land-labor-capital distinctions. It's a profound pity, however, that the fallacy of association has to operate here so crudely, causing the obloquy which has been attached to metaphysics and classical political economy to fall upon the idea of land itself. For "the land question" can stand upon its own feet, quite independent of the benefits (or the handicaps) of classicism.

First of all, whatever it is called—by the standard term of "land" or by something more modern—there is a physical base for the economic process. It does not have to be celebrated by metaphysics or rhetoric: it is literal not poetic. Men labor and produce goods; the goods are distributed and consumed, directly or in a roundabout fashion. This is the *physical* process which economics studies (although economists are often more fascinated by the psychological processes involved in demand and motivation). Now, to confine discussion of this process to the worker, or to his tools, or to the esoteric manipulation of the fiscal means by which the worker is able (rather, unable) to buy back the goods he produces, without casting even the most furtive of glances at the geographical site which the worker uses, or at the raw materials which he transforms into commodities, or at the avenues of transportation which distribute the goods, is certainly a symptom of some kind of allergy. To be sure, the phrase "raw materials" does have a familiar ring these days! The war and national defense have had some disintoxicating effects upon our economic smugness.

But what magic has "raw materials" which "land" does not have? Certainly it is not simply Henry George who would insist that natural

resources are but one element of "land," more spectacular but just as earth-bound as the familiar Illinois-prairie, barn-yard connotation of the word. It should be superfluous—at least for those who have taken the trouble to read George—to point out that the most sedentary of accountants, working in some lofty aerie of a New York skyscraper, is using land—in fact, using perhaps the most precious land on earth. (The absurd paradox of the matter seems to be that the more valuable land is, the more it tends to be ignored—at least by many who consider themselves to be both progressive and economically literate.) It should be equally gratuitous to indicate the crushing economic power that resides in franchises, rights-of-way, control of industrial sites, and all the myriad aspects of what in economics is so harmlessly designated as "land."

Whether this is a problem for semantics raises a nice issue. In one sense that problem has already been raised by those not exactly liberal archcritics of George, Messrs. Ely and Seligman. They have asserted again and again, in their most graciously patronizing style, that "land," as used by George and his followers, is much too broad an economic term. There are many kinds of land, and therefore one must be more specific and talk about this kind of land or that. (Had they been writing at present they would have undoubtedly made much use of the semantical subscript.) Thus, there is no "land question." There are specific problems of adjustment here and there. Now, this approach has a realistic and plausible, even pragmatic, tone; it becomes specious, however, when we remember that Henry George was a social reformer, perhaps an unsung revolutionary. For he used "land" as Marx used "labor" and "capital." That is to say, beyond the economic analysis, which both men elaborated rigorously, there was the cry for action. The Ely-Seligman argument could show that similarly there is no problem of "labor," or of "capital," or of class conflict because there is no referent for labor or capital or even for class consciousness. And that argument might be sound if all that language did was to communicate information. But language is hortatory and persuasive; it arouses emotion and directs action.

The denial that there is any "land" is of a piece with the pseudo-sophisticated denial that there are "natural rights," or that "all men are created equal," or that "labor creates value." Denials like these have a sophomoric illumination which give a sense of superiority, the superiority of finding out that there isn't any Santa Claus. But, as has been pointed out

many times, these admittedly abstract, sometimes even unreal, concepts of economics and politics are to be understood as strong weapons for social change. They are presumptive fictions, "as-if" hypotheses, moral ideas, which are not to be taken as representing any tangible "referent," but rather as indicating goals to be achieved, programs of action that must be inspired by great words. What would a Mexican mural be without the motto of "land and liberty"? This argument must not be misunderstood. "Land," in George's philosophy, is by no means a purely emotional term, although it is certainly surrounded by poetic, even religious, haloes. Its economic aureole is much more brilliant. The present paragraphs are simply suggesting that an abstract, metaphysical, even sentimental, interpretation of "land" has a quite definite place, at least in helping to stir the apathy which the word ordinarily encourages.

Only one major economic aspect of the land question can be introduced here. Yet it will be the largest and the most provocative of controversy; it should at least indicate that George's point of view was not a piddling one. Whether he was right or wrong, he had a depth and perspective that seem comparatively unfamiliar to those—they really ought to know better, too—who still think of "the land question" as something rural, rustic, at most, suburban. To put it bluntly, George argued that since land was the physical foundation of the economic process, its control was the basic control. Something more than a figure of speech is intended by foundation: land provides the materials which are to be transformed into commodities, it affords the location for the transforming, it supports the worker who from it *pro-duces* goods. Therefore, to dominate land, argued George, means to dominate the entire economic structure. The monopoly of land is the parent of all monopolies; the private ownership of land is the most dangerous form of economic power, for all privilege is related to it, directly or indirectly. To be "radical," then, to seek for the roots of exploitation means to investigate first the land question. And in this connection, it is strange that the words of Marx seem to be unknown or ignored by those who claim the name of progressive:

We have seen that the expropriation of the mass of the people from the soil forms the basis of the capitalist mode of production. . . . The only thing that interests us is the secret discovered in the new world by the political economy of the old world, and proclaimed on the house-tops: that the capitalist mode of production and accumulation, and therefore, capitalist private property, have for their

fundamental condition the annihilation of self-earned private property; in other words, the expropriation of the labourer.<sup>1</sup>

And again:

The expropriation of the agricultural producer, of the peasant, from the soil, is the basis of the whole process. . . . The monopoly of landed property is an historical premise, and remains the basis of the capitalist mode of production, just as it does of all other modes of production, which rest on the exploitation of the masses in one form or another.<sup>2</sup>

George indeed agreed with Marx that there was a class struggle, but it was between those who owned the earth and the others who sought their permission to work on it. Marx seems to bear witness to that possibility.

Now, the point here is not to avoid argument, much less to pontificate. It is well realized that the focus of George's type of generic exposition can be shifted so as to throw into illumination other sources of economic exploitation, notably "capital." The force of the George-did-not-go-far-enough contention is equally understood (although very often that complaint indicates the entire logic of George's position has been missed). Whether his concentration on land was myopic or the exaggeration needed to get a good idea a hearing need not be fought out again. But what should become clearer is some awareness of the expanded range of meaning which George gave to "the land question." A sensitivity to such an expansion of meaning and to the series of implications which flow from it seems to be at the same time the most difficult and the most unavoidable orientation that has to be made in coming to grips with George's proposals. Especially does it appear difficult to disintoxicate our ultramoderns from the comfortable notion: Well, maybe Henry George had something to say at the time he wrote. There was still some free land. But the last frontier has been long since reached, there is no more land, the whole subject is of antiquarian interest.

George had the shrewdness, however, to realize that free land did not necessarily mean the untrod ranges of newly discovered continents, or the virgin territory that once gave opportunity to the colonist and the pioneer. He saw that "free land," in this literal sense, was simply poetic. The focus of his badly misnamed "single tax" was to *make* land free, even if it were under a skyscraper in downtown Manhattan—and owned by

<sup>1</sup>*Capital* (Chicago, Kerr ed.), Vol. I, pp. 841, 848.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 787; and Vol. III, p. 723.



the Astor family. How could this bit of magic be done? "We may safely leave them the shell," he wrote, "if we take the kernel." The shell is the land itself; the kernel is land value. Land is free, according to George, only when the owner has no power of exploitation. That power rests in (1) the withholding of land from use by means of its high price, and (2) the private appropriation of land rent, which is definitely a social product. Thus, for land to be free, it must be forced into use—when and where socially necessary; and its rent must be directed into public instead of private channels. These aims he proposed to accomplish by a tax on land values, a tax which would gradually rise so that all (or nearly all) of land's economic rent would be absorbed.

"Single tax," like "the land question" itself, is another nominalistic bogey. The phrase, more than the idea, is the hurdle. For whether a tax on land value be single or one of many has nothing whatever to do with its merits. It is even questionable whether George himself would have boggled at the problem. (There is only one casual reference to "single tax" in his entire *Progress and Poverty*; furthermore, when the words became current later, he expressed his strong disapproval of them.) Be that as it may, it is certainly true today that George's taxation schemes can be appreciated no matter what one's reaction to a "single tax" might be. Yet that appreciation has been very meager on the part of the "progressives" to whom this entire essay is largely being directed. Even the most orthodox of economists do not scruple to pay their wholehearted respect to the soundness of high taxes on land values and correspondingly low taxes on land improvements. Not so the fiscal experts who write taxation schemes for the liberal weeklies. They do not seem able to look beyond the rather obvious criterion of ability to pay and the belligerent one of taxes-as-clubs. These criteria, of course, have both strength and plausibility, and, as transitional devices, they are imperative. But few of our left-wing fiscal experts appear to have bothered much about an explicit theory or philosophy of taxation. Taxes for them are so often purely *ad hoc*. Perhaps these writers do have an implicit logic, i.e., that *unearned* incomes ought to be the first and neatest subject for the taxation ax. If that is so (and it would be a good idea to make such an assumption—or any other—an avowed one), then the imbalance of talking only about excess capital profits and never about the unearned increment of land is glaring.



That land value is peculiarly social value and therefore superbly adapted for social uses via taxation is so elementary an observation that no economic literate can be ignorant of it. Maybe it's too elementary to be impressive, just as it is apparently too athletically simple to suggest that society should collect the value which society creates. Now, that there are "other values which society creates" is absolutely correct, and that there are other antisocial incomes besides that of the traditional unearned increment of rent is equally clear. But (1) a tax upon any unearned income in no way precludes taxes upon other unearned or antisocial income; and (2) the argument that of any economic return, land rent is par excellence social in nature and least justified as a fund for private exploitation seems just as effective today as in its original labor-theory dress. In any case, the complaint here is directed at the complete neglect—and that is not an exaggeration—with which our present-day liberal greets the notion of high land-value taxation. As a possible evidence that this neglect is primarily the result of a fashionable ultra-sophisticatedness, the following contention, recently offered to the writer, may be introduced: Everyone knows that population is no longer increasing. (This was before the draft!) Therefore, no more land booms are possible. George's proposals were the product of an era of speculative land bubbles. (Has Florida, 1929, been so quickly forgotten? And are we not reading today about the speculative high jinks at the power dam sites, notably Muscle Shoals?) They have little relevance now when population is becoming static and land values frozen.

This approach has the specious competence which follows a reading of the census reports; it is being mentioned here, not for the sake of refutation, but because it seems somewhat typical of an entire attitude, the why-ain't-you-heard-where've-you-been-everyone-knows attitude. It's simply *de trop* to be familiar with George. (In passing, it may simply be noted that this argument makes some interesting assumptions: (a) that increase of population alone causes increase in land value; (b) that existing land values—if they do not increase, even if they decrease—do not have to be considered as a problem; (c) that ideas which become spectacularly clear at a given stage in economic development have little relevance at other periods—which, for example, would make any ideas stemming from the paleotechnic phase of the industrial revolution, even those of Marx, *ipso facto* inapplicable for neotechnics.)

This is not an essay on fiscal problems. For there is much more to George than single tax or even the land question. But his name has been made so parochial, so bound up with a special economic technique, that some exposition of his direct proposals is always necessary. George's chief criticism of the phrase "single tax" was precisely that it connoted only a fiscal program, whereas his interest was always a moral one. Until only yesterday this was still another reason why he could be so confidently ignored. Because economics had nothing to do with ethics. Depending upon one's school, economics could be regarded as a calm, objective study of historical phenomena which informed us how our institutions came to be what they were; or as an acute psychological analysis of why people wanted things; or as an intricate mathematical manipulation of a price calculus. Whether our institutions were any good or not; whether people's desires had any relevance; whether price had an ethical dimension; what economics was for anyway—these queries were impudent, sophomoric, at best meaningless. That is, they were until the last few desperate years have made them the most screamingly pressing of all questions. "Knowledge for what?" has become menacingly real.

Almost every page of George's work breathed the conviction that political economy had no point, no life, unless it celebrated the securing of human welfare. Only as a means for helping to achieve some measure of decency and dignity for man did an economic system or an economic theory have any relevance. To be sure, his phrasing of the problem of human values is now an unpopular one. He spoke of natural rights, of a labor theory of property value, even of the design of God. But there should be little difficulty in making a suitable translation. John Dewey has made this point so clearly that it bears repeating:

It has repeatedly been pointed out that the real issue in the "natural rights" conception is the relation of moral aims and criteria to legal and political phenomena. Personally, I have little difficulty in translating a considerable part of what George says on nature over into an assertion that economic phenomena, as well as legal and political, cannot be understood nor regulated apart from consideration of consequences upon human values, upon human good: that is, apart from moral consideration. The question of whether a "science" of industry and finance, of wealth, or of law and the State, can exist in abstraction from ethical aims and principles is a much more fundamental one than is the adequacy of certain historical concepts of "nature" which George adopted as a means of expressing the

supremacy of ethical concepts, and on this fundamental question I think George was in the right.

His ethical interpretation of economics and politics helps to fix George's 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. For he was in many ways a figure of transition. His economic "pessimism," for example, was in striking contrast to the trend of American political economy, although it was in no way a revival of the classical gloominess of a wages fund and Malthusianism, both of which George completely repudiated. Up to the Civil War period, American economists (few as they were) had been unsympathetic to the classical school, specifically to Ricardo. Despite the physical presence in this country of "no-rent" land, an implicit assumption of the entire Ricardian system, the whole idea of diminishing returns and of a static margin of distribution has been repugnant to the American economist. Even the classical distinction between land and capital has had little popularity in the United States (which is still true), perhaps because Americans actually could see farms being "made" under their feet. Now, this early American anticlassicism was in no sense theoretical. That is to say, the real reason why men from Raymond and Carey to Francis Walker could attack Smith and Ricardo was that this was a young, growing, lusty nation, expanding and developing, buoyant and confident. The dismalness of English political economy could find little place in a pre-industrial, frontier-pushing land. It is to the eternal credit of George that he was never seduced by all this, not even by the protective tariff siren. He turned a shrewdly jaundiced eye to American "progress." When we remember that his first ideas in economics ripened in the California of the years immediately following the gold rush, and that the close of his life found him in New York during the months of imperialistic jingoism leading up to the Spanish-American War, the fact that he did not fall for the American dream is a remarkable testimony to his critical powers and to his moral scruples. As early as 1868 he wrote an article for the *Overland Monthly* on "What the Railroad Will Bring Us," and this is what it will bring:

Increase in population and wealth past a certain point means simply an approximation to the conditions of older countries—the Eastern States and Europe. . . . The truth is that the completion of the railroad and the consequent great increase of business and population, will not be a benefit to all of us, but only to a por-

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tion. . . . Those who have, it will make wealthier; for those who have not, it will make it more difficult to get.

The same thoughts are found, in a much more eloquent form, in the prophetic words of *Progress and Poverty*, written while George was still in California:

The "tramp" comes with the locomotive, and almshouses and prisons are as surely the marks of "material progress" as are costly dwellings, rich warehouses, and magnificent churches. Upon streets lighted with gas and patrolled by uniformed policemen, beggars wait for the passer-by, and in the shadow of college and library and museum are gathering the more hideous Huns and fiercer Vandals of whom Macaulay prophesied. . . . Whence shall come the new barbarians? Go through the squalid quarters of great cities, and you may see, even now, their gathering hordes! How shall learning perish? Men will cease to read, and books will kindle fires and be turned into cartridges.

It was not simply intuition which distorted (or shall we say focussed) his gaze. There was plenty of empirical evidence for George's pessimism. For one thing, he sensed, even in the West, a growing restlessness. In spite of the boom-town optimism, which always had something of a frenetic flush, the suspicion that all this could not last was never absent. It became much more than a suspicion when the depressions of 1873-1877 hit the Pacific Coast, and the Dennis Kearney rioting against the Chinese and the Central Pacific Railroad brought into California some measure of the fire and blood that had been streaked through the great Eastern railway centers. In fact, *Progress and Poverty*, first published in 1879, may be looked upon in part as a commentary on the labor troubles and the panics of the '70's. George felt that he was watching in miniature the unhealthy development of industrial civilization. California was but repeating Illinois, and Illinois repeating New York; the whole New World was paralleling the evolution of the Old. He occupied a privileged position in witnessing the early convulsions of a new social order.

Furthermore, his background seemed to show him something even more specific than the change from progress to poverty. As one economic historian has put it, "he witnessed intimately perhaps the most discreditable episodes in all our checkered public land policy." At first hand George observed an orgy of land speculation that was almost obscene. As but one of many typical illustrations, the arrival of a brig from New York could overnight send up San Francisco water-front lots from \$5,000 to \$10,000. In addition, there was the riotous disposal of public land to the railroads.

For example, more than sixteen per cent of the entire area of California was granted to the railways, and within eighteen years of the first pre-emption act, in 1863, the State had disposed of all her vast landed possessions. George had ample evidence for both his economic fears and for the particular twist he gave to their cause. He was no more impressed by nineteenth-century American expansion than was Veblen.

George was equally a critical figure in the transitions of American economic theory. He never accepted the "historical" school which the young German-made Ph.D.'s like Seligman imported into the United States in the '80's. For George, who underestimated the institutional possibilities in this approach, the academic pretensions of the historical theorists never were able to cover their bald defense of the *status quo*. They were the rationalizers and apologists for an economic system whose origins they traced diligently, and whose values they took for granted. They were ethically aloof and contemptuously so. Therefore they could not even be historians. George's relations to the Austrian school were more interesting. He took note of it (as well as of Marshall and the historical group) in his last work, *The Science of Political Economy*, which was published after his death in 1897; and he appeared very skeptical of what he considered the statistical jargon of the marginal utility approach. Yet, as Teilhac has pointed out, George himself anticipated the whole emphasis upon the demand factor. It was the demand pressure for land which made dynamic the processes of marginalism, and which, for George, gave life and movement to the entire Ricardian system. (In this connection, it must also be remembered that the marginal productivity synthesis of J. B. Clark was suggested to him—in Clark's own words—by "the claim advanced by Mr. Henry George that wages are fixed by the product which a man can create by tilling rentless land [which] first led me to seek a method by which the product of labor everywhere may be disentangled from the product of co-operating agents and separately identified.")

The point here is not to try to connect George with all of the nineteenth-century trends of American political economy. But it is to insist that in both the economic history and the economic theory of this country George was a major character, and that, despite Professor Knight's pontifical edict that he belonged to the "pre-arithmetical" school of economics, to ignore him is to betray a measure of illiteracy. As John Dewey has said: "I am not speaking of acceptance of his [George's] ideas but of acquaint-

ance with them, the kind of acquaintance that is expected as a matter of course of cultivated persons with other great social thinkers, irrespective of adoption or nonadoption of their policies." When we consider that *Progress and Poverty* has had a greater circulation than any other book in political economy (partially unverified figures would indicate a greater circulation than all the other combined works in economics), and that in England George is still looked upon as the parent of the Fabian movement and the outstanding theorist of the land question whose taxation proposals are an integral part of the Labor Party's program, Dewey's advice should be superfluous.

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We are examining in this paper some of the reasons for George's neglect today, neglect, at least, in the circles where it seems so egregious. Some of these reasons are plausible, others unquestionably factitious. To the more legitimate reasons may be added an unfortunate tendency on the part of the most influential of George's present-day American supporters to use his work as a club with which to belabor "collectivists" of all sorts—from Stalin to Roosevelt! What may be called the right-wing group of Georgists seems to have been unduly influenced by the ideas of Albert Jay Nock, whose rather recent book, *Henry George: an Essay*, expresses clearly the sophisticated anarchism which he has always preferred to "our enemy, the state." The joys of philosophic anarchism are heady and beguiling. In fact, there is almost no social reformer who would not want to see the state ultimately wither away. But real differences certainly exist between the petulant complaints directed against the inevitable extensions of the powers of present governments, and the long-time (admittedly utopian) vision of a classless society and therefore a powerless state. The extraordinarily bitter attacks upon "statism" which evoke the blessing of many prominent Georgists today do not have even the ring of genuine anarchism. They sound more like the "viewings-with-alarm" of a Chamber of Commerce or the National Association of Manufacturers.

There is of course no point in discussing the merits of rigorous anarchism. (Mr. Nock's brand seems somewhat unorthodox, since he has a distinct contempt for the uneducable masses, and feels that George made his

fatal mistake in trying to appeal to them.)<sup>3</sup> For as a political theory addressed to a technological society it is unquestionably as enticing and as visionary as a mirage. (Perhaps syndicalism should be excepted here.) And in some measure the same judgment must unfortunately be placed upon the traditional "liberal crowd" of the late '90's among whom George found such strong support. It was a Jeffersonian "individualism" coupled with a burning hate of "the shame of the cities" that served to tie together men like Hamlin Garland, Brand Whitlock, Tom L. Johnson, William Dean Howells, Louis F. Post, Lincoln Steffens, and a host of others during the great liberal reform era of the Bryan and post-Bryan days. Now, there is much in Henry George that testifies to the "individualism" many of his modern followers are now thumping so loudly. Passage after passage can be quoted in which he attacks "socialism" and praises the genuine economic competition that would follow the breaking of land monopoly. Yet nearly every anti-collectivistic sentiment expressed by George followed his bitter political squabbles with the socialists which accompanied the collapse of the United Labor Party in 1889.

The Party had backed George in the New York mayoralty election three years earlier when he was barely defeated by Tammany Hall (actually George received a majority of the votes, but the deciding ballot boxes, according to later testimony, were carefully deposited in the East River). George's support came from a powerful but amorphous collection of all the left-wing elements in the city, and the inevitable dissolution of its popular front called forth the usual unpleasant bickerings. This does not mean of course that George's ideological differences with American and English socialists, with whom he debated violently for many years, arose from a political clash; but it seems significant that before 1886 he appeared indifferent to the tags people put on him. And it must be remembered that his major books were published before that date. For example, in *Protection or Free Trade* he could write:

The term "socialism" is used so loosely that it is hard to attach to it a definite meaning. I myself am classed as a socialist by those who denounce socialism, while those professing themselves socialists declare me not to be one. For my own part I neither claim nor repudiate the name, and realizing as I do the

<sup>3</sup>Since this was written several articles by Mr. Nock have appeared, and in them he has taken the first steps down a path which must unquestionably be called a fascist one.



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correlative truth of both principles can no more call myself an individualist or a socialist than one who considers the forces by which the planets are held to their orbits could call himself a centrifugalist or a centripetalist. . . . In socialism as distinguished from individualism there is an unquestionable truth—and that a truth to which (especially by those most identified with free-trade principles) too little attention has been paid. Man is primarily an individual. . . . 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. There is thus a domain of individual action and a domain of social 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.

During his phenomenally successful lecture trips through England and Ireland in the early '80's, which did so much to crystallize British left-wing forces, he was universally—and apparently without his objection—introduced as the “great American socialist”; and even Teilhac's recent (and very careful) book refers to George's “socialism” as “pre-Marxian, rationalistic, humanistic, and universalistic.”

It is futile to argue what ism has the most proper claim upon Henry George. Our semantics friends have a clear illustration here of the absurdity of many abstract terms. And it would be equally futile to predict George's position were he alive today. That prediction would depend entirely upon the basic assumptions and interpretations which a Georgist might apply to the current social scene. But it seems certain, at least to the present writer, that George would scarcely approve of the unabashed Republicanism and pink-baiting that are professed by some of his followers today. Even more certain is it—regardless of whether George was an “individualist” or a “socialist”—that his permanent influence in American social thought will be in those very circles that are now being alienated by such right-wing tactics.

A more theoretical argument may be introduced in this connection. It is true that George made a notable attempt to distinguish between earned and unearned income and an even more notable distinction between the ownership of land and its use. He could oppose “land nationalization” in a memorable passage in which he held that

I do not propose either to purchase or to confiscate private property in land. . . . Let the individuals who now hold it still retain, if they want to, possession of that they are pleased to call *their* land. Let them continue to call it *their* land. Let them buy and sell, and bequeath and devise it. We may safely leave them the shell, if we take the kernel.

The kernel, of course, is economic rent. To be sure, earlier in *Progress and Poverty* George also had written, "We must make land common property," a sentence which right-wing Georgists must strain at. Actually, however, the distinction between shell and kernel is an oversubtle one. For if one hundred per cent of land value were taken by the government in taxation, land would have no selling price. The market price of land depends upon its return, upon its ground rent; if all of that went into public channels, it is clear that the market price would fall to zero. (This is the reason why some followers of George insist that not all of the ground rent be collected, so as to preserve the functions of a real estate market.) In any case, it would appear that the socialization of rent or of land value is different from the socialization of land in only a Pickwickian sense. (The semantics people do not do sufficient justice to Mr. Pickwick.) That men should be tenants of the state rather than of private landlords must be the inevitable outcome of a rigorous "single tax." This would still be quite different from the socialization of other avenues of production and distribution, and there certainly is no attempt here to interpret George as a collectivist in his fundamental thinking (although he did wish to extend government ownership to all public utilities); but many Georgists seem to blink the fact that a government which collected the land values of a country like the United States—if a constitutional amendment ever made that possible—would have a staggering political control of the nation's economic life. Despite Mr. Nock, a government which followed Henry George would be socialistic, not laissez-faire.

Even George seemed to recognize this point when, in his last work, *The Science of Political Economy*, he protested against the change of "political economy" to "economics." He wrote:

Political economy, therefore, is a particular kind of economy. In the literal meaning of the words it is that kind of economy which has relation to the community or state; to the social whole rather than to individuals. . . . Some recent writers, indeed, seem to have substituted the term "economics" for political economy itself. But this is a matter as to which the reader should be on his guard.

This very same point is being made today; perhaps "political economy" should never have been abandoned.

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Henry George's most unequivocal success has rested upon the idea, sometimes only the phrase, of "progress and poverty." Even Nicholas

Murray Butler once delivered a commencement address using this theme, the phrase, and George's name. But the idea has become so commonplace that, in taking it for granted, we have tended to neglect George's almost revolutionary eloquence and his pioneer position in making Americans conscious of the tragic anomalies of technological culture. True, in recent days a few modern writers have begun to quote from him again. Yet in his philosophy of history George's reception has closely paralleled that of Marx—philosophical doctrines which at first are anathema become so generally accepted that everybody knew them all along and what's all the shouting for?

In his more technical economic suggestions, George has been least successful. Here again there is a similarity with the Marxist system, extending even to identical unpopular ideas, e.g., a labor theory of value. George's emphasis upon the land question, for instance, has had to fight that whole fundamental shift in modern theory which has turned its attention to the intangibles of economics, to accountancy and financial manipulation. This shift is unquestionably of overpowering significance and there can be no escaping the portentous trends which such a reorientation has disclosed, above all the dangerous separation of industrial ownership from industrial control and the consequent relocation of monopoly power in a fiscal and investment area. Yet, without repeating our earlier arguments, it still seems as if the forest is being ignored for at least some of the trees, as if wide-sweeping perspectives and horizons—those outlined by the land question—are being unconsciously foreshortened and blurred. George's particular economic program is still insufficiently understood or appreciated.

There should, however, be no misunderstanding or lack of appreciation of his place in American progressive thought. Whether or not he was "one of the world's great social philosophers, certainly the greatest which this country has produced," as John Dewey declares him to be, he was a prophet—a revolutionary prophet—of social change.