

Afterword

Who Was Henry George?

By Agnes George de Mille

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO a young unknown printer in San Francisco wrote a book he called *Progress and Poverty*. He wrote after his daily working hours, in the only leisure open to him for writing. He had no real training in political economy. Indeed he had stopped schooling in the seventh grade in his native Philadelphia, and shipped before the mast as a cabin boy, making a complete voyage around the world. Three years later, he was halfway through a second voyage as able seaman when he left the ship in San Francisco and went to work as a journeyman printer. After that he took whatever honest job came to hand. All he knew of economics were the basic rules of Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and other economists, and the new philosophies of Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill, much of which he gleaned from reading in public libraries and from his own painstakingly amassed library. Marx was yet to be translated into English.

George was endowed for his job. He was curious and he was alertly attentive to all that went on around him. He had that rarest of all attributes in the scholar and historian—that gift without which all education is useless. He had mother wit. He read what he needed to read, and he understood what he read. And he was fortunate; he

lived and worked in a rapidly developing society. George had the unique opportunity of studying the formation of a civilization—the change of an encampment into a thriving metropolis. He saw a city of tents and mud change into a fine town of paved streets and decent housing, with tramways and buses. And as he saw the beginning of wealth, he noted the first appearance of pauperism. He saw degradation forming as he saw the advent of leisure and affluence, and he felt compelled to discover why they arose concurrently.

The result of his inquiry, *Progress and Poverty*, is written simply, but so beautifully that it has been compared to the very greatest works of the English language. But George was totally unknown, and so no one would print his book. He and his friends, also printers, set the type themselves and ran off an author's edition which eventually found its way into the hands of a New York publisher, D. Appleton & Co. An English edition soon followed which aroused enormous interest. Alfred Russel Wallace, the English scientist and writer, pronounced it "the most remarkable and important book of the present century." It was not long before George was known internationally.

During his lifetime, he became the third most famous man in the United States, only surpassed in public acclaim by Thomas Edison and Mark Twain. George was translated into almost every language that knew print, and some of the greatest, most influential thinkers of his time paid tribute. Leo Tolstoy's appreciation stressed the logic of George's exposition: "The chief weapon against the teaching of Henry George was that which is always used against irrefutable and self-evident truths. This method, which is still being applied in relation to George, was that of hush-

ing up People do not argue with the teaching of George, they simply do not know it." John Dewey fervently stressed the originality of George's work, stating that, "Henry George is one of a small number of definitely original social philosophers that the world has produced," and "It would require less than the fingers of the two hands to enumerate those who, from Plato down, rank with Henry George among the world's social philosophers." And Bernard Shaw, in a letter to my mother, Anna George, years later wrote, "Your father found me a literary dilettante and militant rationalist in religion, and a barren rascal at that. By turning my mind to economics he made a man of me...."

Inevitably he was reviled as well as idolized. The men who believed in what he advocated called themselves disciples, and they were in fact nothing less: working to the death, proclaiming, advocating, haranguing, and proselytizing the idea. But it was not implemented by blood, as was communism, and so was not forced on people's attention. Shortly after George's death, it dropped out of the political field. Once a badge of honor, the title, "Single Taxer," came into general disuse. Except in Australia and New Zealand, Taiwan and Hong Kong and scattered cities around the world, his plan of social action has been neglected while those of Marx, Keynes, Galbraith and Friedman have won great attention, and Marx's has been given partial implementation, for a time, at least, in large areas of the globe.

But nothing that has been tried satisfies. We, the people, are locked in a death grapple and nothing our leaders offer, or are willing to offer, mitigates our troubles. George said, "The people must think because the people alone can act."

We have reached the deplorable circumstance where in large measure a very powerful few are in possession of the earth's resources, the land and its riches and all the franchises and other privileges that yield a return. These positions are maintained virtually without taxation; they are immune to the demands made on others. The very poor, who have nothing, are the object of compulsory charity. And the rest—the workers, the middle-class, the backbone of the country—are made to support the lot by their labor.

We are taxed at every point of our lives, on everything we earn, on everything we save, on much that we inherit, on much that we buy at every stage of the manufacture and on the final purchase. The taxes are punishing, crippling, demoralizing. Also they are, to a great extent, unnecessary.

But our system, in which state and federal taxes are interlocked, is deeply entrenched and hard to correct. Moreover, it survives because it is based on bewilderment; it is maintained in a manner so bizarre and intricate that it is impossible for the ordinary citizen to know what he owes his government except with highly paid help. We support a large section of our government (the Internal Revenue Service) to prove that we are breaking our own laws. And we support a large profession (tax lawyers) to protect us from our own employees. College courses are given to explain the tax forms which would otherwise be quite unintelligible.

All this is galling and destructive, but it is still, in a measure, superficial. The great sinister fact, the one that we must live with, is that we are yielding up sovereignty. The nation is no longer comprised of the thirteen original

states, nor of the thirty-seven younger sister states, but of the real powers: the cartels, the corporations. Owning the bulk of our productive resources, they are the issue of that concentration of ownership that George saw evolving, and warned against.

These multinationals are not American any more. Transcending nations, they serve not their country's interests, but their own. They manipulate our tax policies to help themselves. They determine our statecraft. They are autonomous. They do not need to coin money or raise armies. They use ours.

And in opposition rise up the great labor unions. In the meantime, the bureaucracy, both federal and local, supported by the deadly opposing factions, legislate themselves mounting power never originally intended for our government and exert a ubiquitous influence which can be, and often is, corrupt.

I do not wish to be misunderstood as falling into the trap of the socialists and communists who condemn all privately owned business, all factories, all machinery and organizations for producing wealth. There is nothing wrong with private corporations owning the means of producing wealth. Georgists believe in private enterprise, and in its virtues and incentives to produce at maximum efficiency. It is the insidious linking together of special privilege, the unjust outright private ownership of natural or public resources, monopolies, franchises, that produce unfair domination and autocracy.

The means of producing wealth differ at the root: some is thieved from the people and some is honestly earned. George differentiated; Marx did not. The consequences of our failure to discern lie at the heart of our trouble.

This clown civilization is ours. We chose this of our own free will, in our own free democracy, with all the means to legislate intelligently readily at hand. We chose this because it suited a few people to have us do so. They counted on our mental indolence and we freely and obediently conformed. We chose not to think.

Henry George was a lucid voice, direct and bold, that pointed out basic truths, that cut through the confusion which developed like rot. Each age has known such diseases and each age has gone down for lack of understanding. It is not valid to say that our times are more complex than ages past and therefore the solution must be more complex. The problems are, on the whole, the same. The fact that we now have electricity and computers does not in any way controvert the fact that we can succumb to the injustices that toppled Rome.

To avert such a calamity, to eliminate involuntary poverty and unemployment, and to enable each individual to attain his maximum potential, George wrote his extraordinary treatise a hundred years ago. His ideas stand: he who makes should have; he who saves should enjoy; what the community produces belongs to the community for communal uses; and God's earth, all of it, is the right of the people who inhabit the earth. In the words of Thomas Jefferson, "The earth belongs in usufruct to the living."

This is simple and this is unanswerable. The ramifications may not be simple but they do not alter the fundamental logic.

There never has been a time in our history when we have needed so sorely to hear good sense, to learn to define terms exactly, to draw reasonable conclusions. As George said, "The truth that I have tried to make clear

will not find easy acceptance. If that could be, it would have been accepted long ago. If that could be, it would never have been obscured.”

We are on the brink. It is possible to have another Dark Ages. But in George there is a voice of hope.

Agnes George de Mille was the granddaughter of Henry George. Famous in her own right as a choreographer and the founder of the Agnes de Mille Heritage Dance Theater, she received the Handel Medallion, New York's highest award for achievement in the arts. She was the author of thirteen books. This essay was published as the preface to the centenary edition of *Progress and Poverty* in 1979.