

Publisher's Foreword

WE OWE Bob Drake a debt of gratitude for this meticulous condensation and modernization of Henry George's great work. The original version had an elegance that evoked a passion for social justice among millions of readers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, by the beginning of the twenty-first century, George's complex prose stood in the way of that intention for large numbers of people. Now his ideas can once again be widely accessible.

What were those ideas and why are they still important today? When *Progress and Poverty* was published in 1879, it was aimed in part at discrediting Social Darwinism, the idea that "survival of the fittest" should serve as a social philosophy. That ideology, developed by Herbert Spencer, William Graham Sumner, and others, provided the intellectual basis for 1) American imperialism against Mexico and the Philippines, 2) tax policies designed to reduce burdens on the rich by shifting them onto the poor and middle class, 3) the ascendancy of the concept of absolute property rights, unmitigated by any social claims on property, 4) welfare programs that treat the poor as failures and misfits, 5) racial segregation in education and housing, and 6) eugenics programs to promote the "superior" race. The intellectual defense of racism is in abeyance, but the economic and political instruments of domination have changed little. The renewed defense of

taxing wages and consumer goods rather than property holdings, expanded intellectual property rights, and vast imperial ambitions are indications that Social Darwinism is back in full force.

The revival of Social Darwinism continues to justify social disparities on the basis of natural superiority or fitness. *Progress and Poverty*, by contrast, reveals that those disparities derive from special privileges. Many economists and politicians foster the illusion that great fortunes and poverty stem from the presence or absence of individual skill and risk-taking. Henry George, by contrast, showed that the wealth gap occurs because a few people are allowed to monopolize natural opportunities and deny them to others. If we deprived social elites of those monopolies, the whole façade of their greater “fitness” would come tumbling down. George did not advocate equality of income, the forcible redistribution of wealth, or government management of the economy. He simply believed that in a society not burdened by the demands of a privileged elite, a full and satisfying life would be attainable by everyone.

Henry George is best remembered as an advocate of the “single tax” on location values. (I say “location” rather than “land” to avoid the common confusion that George was primarily interested in rural land. In fact his attention was focused on the tens of trillions of dollars worth of urban land that derives its value from location.) Yet, for George, wise tax policy was merely a vehicle to break the stranglehold of speculative ownership that effectively limits the opportunity to earn a decent living and participate in public life.

Perhaps the image that best captures George’s ultimate intention is the final scene in a popular science fiction

film, when the hero is able to restore the oxygen supply to the surface of a planet so that people will no longer be enslaved by the man holding the oxygen monopoly. Freeing people from the oppression of monopoly power in any form was Henry George's great dream. Those who have conceived of George as being concerned only with tax policy should closely read the last third of *Progress and Poverty*, which reveals his larger vision of justice and genuine freedom.

Progress and Poverty stands the test of time. It contains profound economic analysis, penetrating social philosophy, and a practical guide to public policy. Those who read it today will find in George's work a great source of vision and inspiration.

Cliff Cobb

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