

A Modern Economic Scientist's Appraisal of Henry George

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IN ORDER to appraise any man justly, his life and work must be seen against the background of his times and with the perspective gained from an understanding of the broad and deep historical trends.

Several hundred years ago western civilization consisted of many vast feudal estates, innumerable peasant holdings of small farms, uncounted villages and towns, and a few cities, small by today's standards. For the most part, men lived as their fathers and grandfathers before them had lived; folk lore and superstition were generally considered the intellectual keys to understanding, and scientific knowledge as we think of it today was almost unheard of.

Intellectual freedom opened the doors to the new frontiers of science. As a result, technological progress arose like a giant from sleep to aid the wealth-producing activities of men. Here in America circumstances were most propitious for a civilization based on the idea of freedom. The results we are familiar with; but the magnitude of them is sometimes overlooked, because to us they have become commonplace.

Freedom found acceptance in parts of Europe also. Major social changes marked its advent, and great material progress was one result. However, in much of that area the great revolution never was so successful as it was in the United States. Apparently in only two countries of Europe, Denmark and Switzerland, has the great revolution maintained its gains or progressed in recent decades. In fact, during Henry George's maturer years, retrogression was becoming evident in much of Europe.

Even here in the United States, complete freedom was not reached. Conditions here differed greatly in many respects from those in the Old World; but we now realize that various laws and customs carried over from the Old World had the effect of denying freedom, at least in some degree, to many of the people of our own nation.

So striking did the increasing maldistribution of wealth become that many men abandoned the battle for freedom and turned back, thus the counterrevolution within western civilization was born. For the past hundred years the counterrevolution has been gaining strength. Its basic ideas were developed earlier by the utopian Socialists and were organized as counter-revolutionary doctrine by Karl Marx and his followers in the three decades just prior to the first publication of Henry George's book *Progress and Poverty*. Those ideas of the early Socialists are the roots from which modern communism, socialism, Fascism, the New Deal, and the Welfare State all have grown, but in Henry George's day few men had the vision to see that socialism was the counterrevolution within western civilization.

Such was the world as Henry George found it. The broad and deep historical trend toward freedom for the individual man of our civilization must have seemed like a great tidal wave that was beginning to lose its strength and forward momentum. Confidently expected benefits for the common man had not materialized or, where they had materialized in part, were also accompanied by degrading influences such as those in the slums of growing cities that seemed destined to crush all the manliness from men.

Under such circumstances freedom itself

seemed more a curse than a boon to much of mankind. The counterrevolution with its roots in utopian socialism was but a natural reaction for innumerable men of good will and limited intellectual capacity.

Henry George, the Scholar

Realizing that the knowledge he could gain from observing what was going on before his eyes was inadequate for the purposes of scientific generalization, Henry George became a scholar determined to examine all of the pertinent factual reports by contemporaries and predecessors and all of the theories espoused in the textbooks of his and earlier days. His success in this seemingly superhuman undertaking is attested to by Francis Neilson in the comment.¹

"No matter how often I return to the book *Progress and Poverty*, I am more and more impressed with the fact that George reveals . . . a thoroughness of review which covers all the known works of the chief economists who wrote in English in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Moreover, *Progress and Poverty* shows a familiarity with studies that lie on the fringe of the science of political economy . . ."

If there is a scholar familiar with the English language who is better qualified than Francis Neilson thus to appraise Henry George, I do not know of him. Nor have I ever seen a criticism of George's work that could be considered even in a slight degree a refutation of this appraisal.

Henry George, the Scientist

Only in recent decades have the methods of science been subject to painstaking study by men seeking to understand what those methods have in common and how they can be applied successfully in all fields where knowledge is sought. Of the many who have inquired into this program whose work we have studied, one seems to have stood head and shoulders above his contemporaries and his predecessors. This man is John Dewey. The small brochure entitled "An Appreciation of Henry George," published by Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, makes clear his views regarding him.

Thus we see that the appraisal of Henry George as a social scientist is fully as favorable as the appraisal of him as a scholar. Considered separately, these are remarkable tributes to his genius; but considered together, they are even more remarkable.

Francis Neilson is a scholar of the liberal arts and sciences in the classical tradition. But like others educated in that school, certain of his comments evidence something less than full appreciation of John Dewey's work. Similarly, John Dewey seemed to find difficulty in both understanding and being understood by even the most eminent scholars such as Francis Neilson. Surely for any one man to have gained the unstinted admiration of both these men in their respective fields, wherein their keen intellects spent fruitful lifetimes, is a most remarkable achievement indeed.

Henry George's Great Contribution

Most of the scientific geniuses who have gained world renown have made more than one important contribution and many lesser ones to the accumulating fund of knowledge. Nevertheless, in nearly every instance, the names of particular men are associated with particular

landmarks that trace the course of the scientific advance. Their other contributions usually lead to or followed from their major achievements.

In Henry George's work we also find one major achievement that in the centuries ahead seems destined to be accepted as his major contribution to knowledge in the general field of economics. The attention of Henry George's enthusiastic followers has been concentrated on his proposed remedy for social ills and on his logical exposition of the relations between rent, wages, and interest. With reference to these particular aspects of his work, however, Henry George must be credited not with discovery but with clarification.

In Book X of *Progress and Poverty* we find what we at the Institute have come to regard as his great discovery, his unique and original contribution to knowledge of man in society. This section of his work develops what he has called "The Law of Human Progress." It is here that we find the most striking evidence of genius, of the scholar and social scientist as Francis Neilson and John Dewey described him.

To me it seems evident that both Francis Neilson and John Dewey were correct in their appraisals. Henry George's work is both scholarly and scientific. The importance of his principal "discovery," which he chose to call "the law of human progress," can hardly be overestimated. I do not see how any society that fails to understand and apply the principle of freedom can hope to flourish. His work has stood the test of time and has demonstrated that it has little to fear from its enemies. Thus far, even the cleverest who have attacked it have but made themselves ridiculous. My personal belief is that only the misguided efforts of his friends can much longer delay the recognition for which his work is destined.

The land question once again is coming to the fore. All over the world, the necessity for land reform is being recognized. Moreover, there seems to be increasing appreciation of the fact that the counterrevolution means retrogression, that communism and Fascism are the logical and inevitable end results for those who follow that one-way street. Surely the time is coming when, unless western civilization is to perish, there will be a rebirth of freedom, an increasing realization that progress toward the goals of the great revolution must be resumed. When that day comes, we can rest assured that Henry George will be accorded the recognition that is his due.

¹From Francis Neilson's *Henry George the Scholar*, reprinted in "Modern Man and the Liberal Arts," Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, New York, 1947.

[Excerpt from address at Montreal Conference.]

