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Henry George and Karl Marx: A Plutarchian Experiment

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# Henry George and Karl Marx

## *A Plutarchian Experiment*

By JOHN HAYNES HOLMES

### I

HENRY GEORGE AND KARL MARX were coevals. Their lives did not exactly synchronize, as George (1839–1897) was born twenty-one years later than Marx (1818–1883), and died fourteen years later. But in their careers they were contemporaries in the heart of the nineteenth century.

The two men never met. Karl Marx did not visit America; Henry George visited Ireland and England in 1881–82, but apparently did not encounter Marx. There is no record of the two men communicating with one another, and scant record of their discussing one another's works. George Raymond Geiger<sup>1</sup> quotes "practically the only written mention of George by Marx" in a letter to the latter's friend, Sorge, from London, June 30, 1881. Conceding that George was "a writer of talent," Marx insisted that "the man is in theory completely 'behind the times.' He understands nothing of the nature of surplus value. . . . He has the repugnant arrogance and presumption which inevitably mark all such panacea-breeders." H. M. Hyndman tells the story of Marx looking through a copy of "Progress and Poverty," and exclaiming "with a sort of friendly contempt, 'the capitalists' last ditch!'" George returned these compliments in scattered comments upon Marx. Thus, in a letter to Hyndman (1884), he wrote that Marx "lacked analytical power and logical habits of thought. . . . He certainly seems to me . . . a most superficial thinker." Again, in a letter to an English friend (1890), George characterizes Marx as "the prince of muddle-heads."

<sup>1</sup> In "The Philosophy of Henry George," New York, The Macmillan Co., 1933, pp. 237–8.

Only in such casual clashes as these did the swords of the two protagonists cross.

It is unlikely, had Karl Marx and Henry George ever met, or ever studied profoundly one another's thought, that they would have agreed even on small matters. It is true that they were stirred by the same sentiment, a horror of poverty; that they were fixed in the same conviction, that poverty is a product of social injustice and therefore unnecessary; that they were dedicated to the same resolve, to correct injustice and abolish poverty. But in their understanding of the problem and their remedy of its evil, they were as far apart as the two poles. Marx with his Socialism and George with his Single Tax moved in precisely opposite directions. Rivals for two generations in the same great field of economic and political reform, they were molded as though by destiny to fundamental differences. The contrast between these men is amazing.

## II

THUS, KARL MARX was a German Jew, a European. He lived in a crowded continent, later in a crowded England, where everything was so old as to run back to ancient times. Henry George was an American, who lived in the vast spaces of a land that was sparsely inhabited and new to history. It was easy for Marx to see things as coming to an end, whereas it was inevitable that George should see things as still in process of beginning.

Marx was the product of a decadent feudalism and emerging capitalism, in which class distinctions, as between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, for example, were still predominant. George was the product of a free society, in which class distinctions were unknown, or at least unrecognized; the very words, "proletariat" and "bourgeoisie," were not a part of the American language. An interpretation of the social problem in terms of a class struggle was therefore as

natural, indeed inevitable, to the former as it was unnatural and abhorrent to the latter.

Karl Marx knew little of democracy; to the end of his days he had contempt for the common people, and no confidence at all in their ability to work out their problems by indirect methods of persuasion and political action. Henry George, on the other hand, was a citizen in a democracy; he trusted the common people, and the exercise of their power as free men to determine destiny. The idea of a dictatorship of the workers, for however long or short a time, which was an essential part of Marx's program, would never have entered George's head save to disgust and frighten him.

Karl Marx spent more than half of his life, and practically all the years of his productive activity, in England, which was the industrial leader of the world. England had been an agricultural country, and there came a time when there was a land question! The enclosure of the commons, as it is called, was one of the supreme tragedies of English life. But with the development of power machinery came the industrialization of the realm. "England's green and pleasant land," to quote William Blake, was now begrimed with the smoke of belching chimneys; her lovely countryside was crossed and recrossed by clanking railways; her cities and even her villages were fetid with reeking slums.

And did the countenance divine  
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?  
And was Jerusalem builded here  
Among these dark Satanic mills?

The answer to these questions was as challenging to the German economist as to the English poet. At the heart of the problem of this new and dreadful age, as Marx saw it, was the factory; and there could be no end of the world's misery, and no escape from its doom, save in the capture and use of the factory by the workers.

## III

HENRY GEORGE, *per contra*, was born and reared in a country which was still agricultural. He had seen the farm-lands of the East and the vast prairies of the West. He lived in California, which was the frontier of a nation possessed of boundless territories and receding horizons. Industrialism, to be sure, had begun—in the cotton mills of New England, for example! But still for years was land and its cultivation the central factor of American life. What more natural therefore than for George to read the problem of modern society in terms of land, and to believe that in free land lay the all-sufficient solution of the ills threatening in the phenomenon of a growing wealth and poverty. Just as the factory question, in other words, was dramatized in England in the mid-nineteenth century, so the land question was dramatized in America.

In this contrast of scene and setting, we discover a central contrast between these two men. Marx saw clearly the menace of capitalistic monopoly; George saw as clearly the menace of land monopoly. Marx focused his attention primarily on the factory, and only incidentally and accidentally on the land on which the factory was built and from which it drew its substance;<sup>2</sup> George focused his attention on the land, and only incidentally and accidentally on the factory which stood upon the land. Marx never penetrated to the land as the ultimate source of all wealth; George did not follow through to the factory, and the whole system of which it was the baleful symbol, as a supplementary and very potent instrument of exploitation. Marx was not fundamental, as George was fundamental. Henry George was really getting down to the bottom of things! But the Single Tax will never reach to the top of things, never compass the whole area of

<sup>2</sup> [Cf. F. C. R. Douglas, "Karl Marx's Theories of Surplus Value and Land Rent," London, Henry George Foundation, 1939—EDITOR.]

social ill, until it has grappled at first hand not only with land ownership, but with monopoly control of production, finance capitalism, international cartels, and imperialistic wars. Our civilization, as it has developed through a hundred years, is neither agricultural nor industrial; it is both. Therefore must any reform, adequate to save our civilization, solve the problem of land and machine together. There is something more than chance in the dramatic circumstance that in the same age, and in the same way, two books captured the imagination of the American people—Henry George's "Progress and Poverty" (1879), and Edward Bellamy's "Looking Backward" (1888).

## IV

ANOTHER CONTRAST! Karl Marx was a materialist, and based his whole philosophy upon the hard and fast doctrine of economic determinism, or "the materialistic conception of history." This attitude of mind was in part a reflex from Marx's strangely perverted hostility to religion, and in part also the result of the philosophical materialism which was rampant in the thought of Europe in Marx's formative years. It led to a new interpretation of the historical process which is of the greatest value. No one can write or read the story of mankind in the traditional pre-Marxian sense ever again! But it involved also a complete neglect of the moral and spiritual forces which indubitably play an important, perhaps the decisive rôle in the drama of human events, and thus persuaded Marx to surrender history to the gaunt and grim necessity of a mechanistic fatalism, and to project collapse or revolution as the denouement of our age. It contributed as well to his scorn for men, and his repudiation of democracy as the means of social advance.

Henry George, on the other hand, was a religious man. Reared under the training of a religious family, he preserved

to the end of his days, and in all his activities, an intense and moving religious consciousness. This did not mean any particular devotion to the rites and ceremonies of the church—on the contrary, his attacks upon the church for its failure to vindicate the law of righteousness among men were as vigorous as they were unanswerable. Neither did his religion take any special forms of pietistic practice or theological belief. With George, as with all great prophets, religion was a rule of life and an utter dedication to mankind. It was a recognition of and a reverence for God's will, a resolute determination that this will shall be done upon the earth, and a high sense of responsibility that this determination should not fail. "The religious spirit," writes Dr. Geiger,<sup>3</sup> "was to him always the crusading spirit. . . . He led the attack upon the land monopoly in almost the spirit of a holy war; his economic postulates were the sacraments of a religion that was to make all men brothers and God a father whose ways could now be understood." I know of nothing more touching, in all the range of our American literature, than that famous passage in "Progress and Poverty" where George seems to have completed his great argument for the Single Tax. Through hundreds of pages he has made his way through the economics of rent, wages, interest, taxation, and at last has come to his conclusions. "My task is done," he writes. But it is not done! The pen sweeps on. "The thought still mounts. The problems we have been considering lead into a problem higher and deeper still." And George soars, in these last pages, like an aeroplane into the stratosphere, into a discussion of the meaning of life as "absolutely and inevitably bound by death." "Progress and Poverty" is the only treatise on political economy I know which ends with a statement of faith in the immortality of the soul. In this, George found assurance of those "eternal laws" which must at last bring vindication to the cause of truth.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 337.

It was this religious aspect of George's nature which enabled him to bring a solution to the baffling problem of a society which produces poverty in exact ratio to its production of wealth. It cannot be made too plain that Karl Marx, for all his exhaustive and exhausting examination of data and analysis of trends, had no remedy for a sick world. He simply awaited what he regarded as the inevitable catastrophe which must overtake a capitalistic civilization, and tried to prepare the workers to take over the ruins, to become the heirs of chaos, and thus, through seizure of power amid disaster, to control the future in their own interest. Henry George saw no need of catastrophe. He had a remedy for the sickness of this world. He had a program which would save it in time, and thus prevent the calamity of the passing of one more civilization, which he saw as clearly and terribly as his Socialistic rival. What wonder that, when he had written the last page of his masterpiece, "in the dead of night, when (he) was entirely alone, (he) fell on (his) knees and wept like a child. The rest was in the Master's hands." This was a feeling, he wrote, which never left him. "It has been to me a religion, strong and deep."<sup>4</sup>

## V

ONE FINAL CONTRAST between these two men—and this not in their characters but their fates!

The Marxian philosophy has had a chance to prove itself. "In the time of the breaking of nations," at the weakest point of the capitalistic-imperialistic system which was Russia, came revolution. The Bolsheviki, devout Marxians, were able at the critical moment in 1917 to seize power, and to use it to rear a Socialistic, or rather a collectivistic society. This society has now been in existence for thirty years, and has exercised supreme control during this period over a nation of 180,000,-

<sup>4</sup> Henry George, Jr., "The Life of Henry George," New York, Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1942, pp. 311-2.



000 souls. It has been able to do exactly what it wanted to, or, if thwarted or opposed, has hacked its way ruthlessly toward its goal. Everything has been changed from Tsarism to Marxism, yet everything remains strangely the same. Poverty still prevails, tyranny still rules, exploitation still is rife. The revolution, as a revolution, has failed—and all for the lack of what Karl Marx never recognized—namely, liberty! The Soviets have sacrificed liberty, we are told, for security—somewhat, perhaps, as the dog on the bridge over the brook dropped his jawful of meat, to grab the other and larger piece of meat he saw reflected in the stream. There is no liberty in the new Russia—and there is no security. For the simple reason that liberty is the only real security! We are safe—as safe as we can be on this uncertain globe, and amid the manias of men!—only while we are free. It is because the Russians are not free that they are the most suspicious, apprehensive, and fearful people in the world today, and have failed thus to win their goal. Marxism has been tried, and for lack of liberty has been found wanting.

Georgism has not been tried. Nor would George want it tried by any imposition of authority. Liberty is essential to its whole meaning. George would free the land that man may himself be truly free. The world awaits therefore not an abrogation, nor even abridgement, but rather an ultimate extension of democracy. No sudden, least of all violent, revolution will accomplish this end; only the slow fulfilment of the truth, like the rising of the tide. Arthur Hugh Clough has pictured the process:

For while the tired waves, vainly breaking,  
Seem here no painful inch to gain,  
Far back, through creeks and inlets making,  
Comes silent, flooding in, the main.

I think of the famous saying from “Progress and Poverty”

carved on the stone above Henry George's grave in Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn—

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. BUT IT WILL FIND FRIENDS—THOSE WHO TOIL FOR IT, SUFFER FOR IT, IF NEED BE DIE FOR IT. THIS IS THE POWER OF TRUTH.

*New York*