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# Henry George, Reconsidered

By GLENN E. HOOVER

AN OCCASION for re-examining the place of Henry George in the history of ideas offers several opportunities. We may properly seek to distinguish what was true and lofty in his conceptions, and separate what was eternal from what was only temporary or adventitious. We may even graciously avow what today seems to be erroneous in his thinking, and try in every way to profit both from his wisdom and from his mistakes. Surely it is in this way that he would wish us to honor him.

A somewhat inquiring and even critical study of the work of George, the economist, social philosopher and social critic of nineteenth-century America, is especially appropriate in view of the very modest achievements to which he and his followers lay claim. Albert Jay Nock, who, with John Dewey, believes George to be "one of the first half-dozen of the world's creative geniuses in social philosophy," does not hesitate to say that George "is pre-eminently the Forgotten Man of Anglo-American civilization; he is almost wholly unknown, un-remembered, save as a minor figure, more or less eccentric, in the public life of the last century."<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Nock, in his essay on George, attempts to explain why the reformer has had so little permanent influence on the world, but I am sure that Mr. Nock had so little confidence in the finality of his answers that he hoped others might continue the investigation. To explain the decline in the reputation of George is easy for his critics, but presents some difficulty for his followers. The critics may say that the passage of time has merely exposed George as a shallow utopia-monger or a glib charlatan, but his admirers can hardly accept this explanation.

## I

THE CASE OF GEORGE differs from those men of acknowledged greatness, such as the monk Gregor Mendel or Walt Whitman, who were relatively unknown while living, but whose statures increase with the decades. George was an international figure and his name was a household word throughout at least the English-speaking world before he had reached his fiftieth year. During much of this time he was in fact better known in the British Isles and in Australia than he was in his native land. His writings too, enjoyed a popularity surpassing those of any other writer in the

<sup>1</sup> Nock, "Henry George, An Essay," New York, Morrow, 1939, p. 200.

field of economics, yet his fame, as distinct from his real worth, declines with each passing year.

Mr. Nock is one of those who believe that George was essentially a philosopher who made the tactical mistake of dissipating his energies by participating in all the polemics and political controversies of his time, instead of devoting his great gifts exclusively to study and writing. By electing to engage in controversy with Herbert Spencer, the Duke of Argyll and the Pope, and by twice permitting himself to be nominated for Mayor of New York City, he achieved considerable fame, but, after his death, it faded with surprising quickness.

The publicity which George invited and received did not, however, spring from his vaingloriousness, but from his desire to remedy the injustices of which he was so keenly aware. Nock believes that George's greatness lay in the field of philosophy, but for some of us it lay in the field of ethical sensitivity. And George, like all who hunger and thirst after righteousness, was temperamentally incapable of remaining aloof from the struggles of his day—cost what it may in time, energy and ultimate reputation.

Perhaps, too, his reputation has suffered from certain weaknesses in those who claimed to follow him. The ultimate renown of every man of distinction is largely dependent on the qualities of those who are in some sort his apostles. The good causes for which George labored lacked the discipline of the Roman Church, so that any man might style himself an apostle of George, and perhaps some did who reflected little credit on their avowed master. Because of my limited acquaintance with self-styled "Georgists," and because of the obvious delicacy of the topic, I shall merely recall what Mr. Nock has said of the state of the nation during the last decade of George's life, and the unfortunate character of some of those who, after his death, professed to be his followers. Nock describes the America of George's later years as follows:

The decade 1887–97 was one of the most extraordinary periods in all the history of America's fantastic civilization; even the period 1929–39 can do but little more than match its bizarre eccentricities. No one can describe that period; when the philosophical historian engages himself with it fifty years hence, he will think—and with reason—that he has come upon a nation of Bedlamites. Every imbecile socio-politico-economic nostrum that inspired idiocy could devise was trotted out and put on dress-parade for the immediate salvation of mankind. Free silver; the initiative, referendum and recall; farmer-labourism, votes-for-women, popular election of senators, the Wisconsin Idea, direct primaries, Coxe and his army,

Carry Nation and her hatchet, Coin Harvey and his primer—the list is without end.

This incredible irruption of frantic fatuity had serious permanent effects upon the status of George and his doctrines. When it had spent itself and subsided, he was left as merely one more nostrum-pedlar among the many.<sup>2</sup>

Mr. Nock, after lampooning with such gusto the Gay Nineties, alias the Age of Nonsense, pitches into those erratics whom he holds responsible for giving the kiss of death to the Georgian gospel, a gospel, be it remembered, to which Nock most heartily subscribed. With the wrath and rhetoric which characterized his more lively moods, Nock said:

Another damaging effect of circumstances was that a good deal of society's "lunatic fringe" which the period had released and made articulate, fastened on George's doctrine and perverted it with various adulterations. They associated it with other matters which interested them—matters ranging all the way from proportional representation to dietetics and promiscuous love-making—and viewed this association as natural and logical. . . . An idea, like an individual, is largely judged by the company it keeps; and it was no recommendation of George's philosophy to hear it advocated by a professing single-taxer who was also a Bahaite, an interpreter of dreams and visions, a free-silverite, and who had theories concerning a nut diet and the mystical number seven.<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Nock may have been a bit severe with the more erratic followers of George but their influence must have repelled many who might otherwise have been attracted to his writings and his program. On the other hand, George was peculiarly fortunate in influencing some of the most thoughtful men of his time, such as George Bernard Shaw, Count Tolstoy and Cardinal Manning, to mention only a few of his distinguished foreign admirers. However, a single misguided advocate of a cause can do more harm than a dozen sound advocates can repair.

It is very clear, of course, that George's reputation was never enhanced by any support which he drew from academic circles. This was the occasion of some bitterness on his part which he did not attempt to conceal. It would be comforting to believe, as Louis Post reports, that "the academicians held aloof because George's appealing eloquence had spoiled his work for Harvard, and his irrefutable logic had put it beyond the comprehension of Yale," but this explanation is only partial.

It is undoubtedly true that George's more fervid passages are sometimes in a style that is now considered a little inflated. He wrote as he spoke,

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

and when faced with an audience which always warmed to the evident sincerity and sympathy of the man, he could employ phrases which, in cold type, seem a little over-done. And yet, after re-reading George rather extensively in recent weeks, I am convinced that the clarity and forcefulness of his style have had few rivals in any language with which I am familiar. Any defect in it could have contributed but very little to the decline in his reputation.

## II

HOWEVER, BEFORE ATTEMPTING to explain the decline in George's fame, we should carefully examine the nature of it. That fame never rested on a wide acceptance of his doctrines, nor even a wide understanding of them. It was rather due to the fact that all who came within his influence realized, as if by magic, that George was one of those rare spirits whose selflessness, love of justice, hatred of tyranny, and genuine sympathy for the oppressed, placed him so far above his fellows as to mark him at once as a kind of secular saint.

Men of this type are the rarest of the human species, but strangely enough, in spite of their rarity, when they appear they are immediately recognized; and the people, as in biblical times, hear them gladly. They are what the Hindus call "the great souled ones," and no ceremony of canonization is required to set them apart. They frequently attract an enthusiastic following, but the enthusiasm cannot long survive the death of the leader whose personal qualities inspired it. Little survives the labors of the saints but their names, and even these are frequently forgotten. Such seems to be the fate that has overtaken the fame of Henry George.

I hope that I have written nothing to discourage those who aspire to sainthood, nor anything that would even seem to disparage the character and achievements of Henry George. There is nothing of which the world has greater need than the untiring, selfless devotion to the cause of justice and human brotherhood which George manifested throughout his life. If human society can be held together at all, a passion for justice and a profound human sympathy are the stuff that will do it, and these George had in unsurpassed measure.

I have gradually and somewhat reluctantly come to the belief that if George's followers had stressed these traits of his character instead of insisting that he had made some remarkable discoveries in the field of economics, his light would not have been so quickly dimmed. He could approach any question of right or wrong with a deep insight and an inexorable logic, but he was not equipped by education, experience or training to trace the de-

velopment of our economic world, or to master the refinements of economic theory.

For instance, his attack on what is loosely called the Malthusian Theory fills about one-ninth of "Progress and Poverty." This attack is replete with acute observation and some eloquent scorn that is deservedly directed at those who would use the Malthusian Theory as an excuse for the perpetuation of injustice. However, the Malthusian Theory, when clearly stated and accurately understood, is still firmly buttressed both by reason and experience and George's attempt to discredit it is perhaps his most conspicuous intellectual failure.

To me, at least, his failure is explained by the fact that his genius lay in the field of ethics, and the Malthusian Theory is a compound of biology and economics. It deals with man's capacity for increasing his numbers, and the intensity of the drives, which, in the absence of interference, will accomplish such increase. George did not deny that experience has shown that human beings are capable of doubling their numbers in less than twenty-five years, but he quaintly assumed that the sexual urge, or what he calls "the tendency to reproduce," is positively correlated with poverty and toil rather than with comfort and leisure. This assumption is so contrary to popular tradition, that to avoid the charge of misrepresentation I should like to quote from his "Progress and Poverty":<sup>4</sup>

The facts cited . . . simply show that where, owing to the sparseness of population, as in new countries, or where, owing to the unequal distribution of wealth, as among the poorer classes in old countries, human life is occupied with the physical necessities of existence, the tendency to reproduce is at a rate which would, were it to go on unchecked, some time exceed subsistence. But it is not a legitimate inference from this that the tendency to reproduce would show itself in the same force where population was sufficiently dense and wealth distributed with sufficient evenness to lift a whole community above the necessity of devoting their energies to a struggle for mere existence.

This note on the intensity of the biological urge is based on the unscientific belief that with the prolongation of schooling and the spread of enlightenment, there will come, in some automatic and mysterious way, a decline in the birth-rate. The implication is that by reading, for example, *The Atlantic Monthly* instead of the funnies, there will ensue some diminution in the mutual attraction of the sexes. I doubt if the spread of this notion would increase the sale of *The Atlantic Monthly*, and I am sure there is not a scintilla of evidence to support it. It is one of the errors

<sup>4</sup> New York, Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1944, Book II. chapter II, p. 103.

which, strangely enough, George shared with his distinguished antagonist, Herbert Spencer. It is distinctly Nineteenth Century and is regarded by modern *scientificos* as an intellectual curiosity. The admirers of George who seek to perpetuate it are doing George and his program a distinct disservice.

The unfortunate part of the whole anti-Malthus crusade was that the refutation of Malthus was in no way essential to establishing the equal right of every child to the earth on which it is born. That right results from the child's entrance into the human family and is not dependent on the existence of either progress, poverty, whatnot or whatever. Professor Harry Gunnison Brown, a leading advocate of George's plan for the socialization of economic rent, writes in his latest book, as follows:

Population in general needs to be limited as well as population in special groups in order that average prosperity and happiness may be high. This may necessitate for low birth rate countries restrictions on the too free immigration from countries whose inhabitants multiply with little regard to economic consequences.<sup>5</sup>

Dr. Brown sees nothing incompatible in recognizing the evils of overpopulation and at the same time striving to socialize economic rent. He sees no incompatibility because there is none to see.

### III

THE CONTENTION is sometimes made that the failure, or at best the very modest success, of the Georgist program is due to the fact that its advocates have not somehow hooked it on to the tail of the union labor kite, which now soars so high in the ideological breezes. We who advocate the socialization of rent, of course, should welcome support from every quarter, but to be of value in the long run it must, I believe come from those who share the philosophy of freedom, for this remains the essential core of George's doctrine. Those who have lifted themselves up by exacting a monopoly price for labor are not likely converts to the unselfish program of Henry George.

George, it will be remembered, was not only an advocate of the socialization of rent, but was a thoroughgoing free-trader who elaborated his views in a masterly book entitled "Protection or Free Trade." The intellectual and ethical distance between George and some of our most powerful union leaders is clearly revealed by an article in *The United Mine Workers Journal*. There we find the following:

<sup>5</sup> Basic Principles of Economics," Columbia, Mo., Lucas Bros., 1939, p. 416.

Stripped of the political patter and "come on" stuff, Wallace's speech boils down to the same old pleas for international free trade that the Wall Street bank circulars have been printing every month for 25 years. It's the same old malarkey that Richard Cobden and John Bright peddled to the British 100 years ago. They fell for it and got low wages and the vilest slums in the western world. . . . As for international free trade, the people who cry for that really hope for a wage standard based on the lowest common denominator of the world labor market—Hindu labor at 7, 10 and 14 cents per day, according to which locality it is hired.<sup>6</sup>

It is interesting that the economic ignorance which the above quotation reveals should be accompanied by the grammatical atrocities of its final sentence. It is difficult to say which would offend George the more.

The sad fact is that the organized labor movement in the United States is led chiefly by economic illiterates, whose plight is the more hopeless because so many of them are distinctly anti-intellectual. Only a few harbor those generous and liberal impulses which alone can ensure peace and justice, whether in the realm of economics, or in the field of international relations. For we suffer not alone from the darkness of our minds, but also from the hardness of our hearts, and before the leaders of American labor can do much for the establishment of any regime of which Henry George would have approved, they must repent and be born again.

The selfish appeals which labor leaders make to those who benefit from monopoly power are totally incompatible with the spirit and philosophy of Henry George. Labor leaders who pride themselves on being hard-boiled would merely scoff at the following advice from Henry George:

to begin and maintain great popular movements it is the moral sense rather than the intellect that must be appealed to, sympathy rather than self-interest. For however it may be with any individual, the sense of justice is, with the masses of men keener and truer than intellectual perception, and unless a question can assume the form of right and wrong it cannot provoke general discussion and excite the many to action. And while material gain or loss impresses us less vividly the greater the number of those we share it with, the power of sympathy increases as it spreads from man to man—becomes cumulative and contagious.<sup>7</sup>

The belief that knowledge is enough has been, perhaps, the supreme folly of our age. Our blind faith in education has largely supplanted the equally blind faith which prevailed in the centuries of religious dominance. Was it for lack of knowledge that Germany, twice in a generation, broke

<sup>6</sup> *Loc. cit.*, Aug. 1, 1943.

<sup>7</sup> "Protection or Free Trade?" New York, Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1944, p. 317.



the peace of the world? The literacy rates in Germany and Japan are unexcelled, but where is there less worth the reading, or less time in which to read it?

It was to the everlasting credit of George that he presented his programs to the world with the ardor of a crusader. He urged their adoption not by appealing to the envy and cupidity of men, nor exclusively to their economic interests, but primarily to those fundamental principles of right and justice without which no world society, no nation, nor even any tribe can long survive. If the world's leaders had persevered in George's high ethical approach to the problems of our common humanity, we might have had not only peace but prosperity in our time.

*Mills College*