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Progress and Poverty—a Paradox

By KENNETH M. JOHNSON

HENRY GEORGE intended the title to his book to state a paradox; however an additional paradox has developed. This is the fact that in none of the lists of important California books has the title appeared. One of the earliest and best known selective listing of California books is Phil Townsend Hanna's *Libros Californianos*; this was first published in 1931 and was reissued with additions in 1958. In neither edition is there any mention of *Progress and Poverty*. The same is true of *The Zamorano 80*, perhaps the most distinguished and critical listing of California books to date. The purpose of this article is to present the book rather than the author or his beliefs, and to indicate that *Progress and Poverty* is an interesting, valuable, and important part of Californiana as well as a statement of economic theories.

In the first place the book was written and printed in California by a Californian. In the library of his home at 417 First Street, San Francisco, Henry George, who had first come to California in 1858, began his book on September 18, 1877.¹ It was a culmination of years of economic study and observation, particularly of the California scene in the 1870's.

The eighteen-seventies are certainly one of the most interesting periods in the history of our state as well as of our country. They were years of strife, stress, and strain on the labor and political fronts; on the economic side there were panics and depressions. The Tweed Ring and Tammany Hall were at their strongest; corruption in high places was the expected thing. Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, Morgan, and Carnegie were laying the foundation of their fortunes. In California, it was the

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time of the rise of the Workingmen's Party, Dennis Kearney, and the peak of the anti-Chinese hysteria. It was a period of contrasts: millionaires were being created from the outpouring of silver from the Comstock Lode, and millions were being lost through uncontrolled gambling in Comstock shares. Mansions were being built on Nob Hill, but there was extensive unemployment. The Bank of California failed. Everyone knew that the Central-Southern Pacific group completely controlled state politics, but few knew that the *Colton Letters* were being written and would later show the same group buying and selling the members of Congress. Land was held by a few groups in tremendous acreage. The Central-Southern Pacific combination held over eleven million five hundred thousand acres.² California was forming a new constitution. The period in California has well been called the "Discontented Seventies." This then was the background against which George was writing.³

Writing proceeded slowly: each paragraph was discussed with a small coterie of friends. Among these were William Hinton, printer and publisher, John Swett, best known as the founder of San Francisco's school system, A. S. Hallidie of the cable cars, and Dr. Edward Robeson Taylor. Dr. Taylor appears to have been the closest to George and probably participated to a greater extent than anyone else. If anyone ever deserved the title of a Renaissance man it was Dr. Taylor: he was successfully a printer, poet, doctor of medicine, lawyer, mayor of San Francisco, and dean of the Hastings College of Law for many years. This group worked together to the end that every thought was crystal clear and stated in a simple direct manner so that anyone who could read could understand. The work was finished in the early part of March, 1879, a few days from the adjournment *sine die* of California's second constitutional convention.⁴

On March 22, 1879, the manuscript was sent to D. Appleton & Co. in New York; the reply was:

We have read your MS. on political economy. It has the merit of being written with great clearness and force, but is very aggressive. There is very little to encourage the publication of any such work at this time and we feel we must decline it.⁵

At least at that time publishers were fairly forthright in their rejections. In turn both Harper's and Scribner's were approached; all declined. George then decided to print the work himself, and Hinton

made his plant on Clay Street available. Type in part was actually set by George, Taylor, and Hinton. The work was commenced in May, 1879, and was completed in September. The biographers of George say five hundred copies were printed; Cowan in his *Bibliography* indicates that there were about two hundred copies; in any event the edition was quite small. Copies were sent to various publishers including Appleton & Co.; this led to a reply that Appleton would publish the book if given the original plates. The offer was accepted, and the first trade edition appeared in 1880.

After a slow start the book became a runaway best seller. It was serialized in *Lovell's Magazine*, a sort of *Saturday Evening Post* of its day. Translations both authorized and unauthorized began to appear. There have been German, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian, Bulgarian, Yiddish, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean editions. In 1960 the book was in print in English and eight foreign language editions.⁶ The Robert Schalkenbach Foundation (organized to promote the economics of Henry George) has tried to estimate the total number of copies printed but without success, except to ascertain that the number is in the millions. Alice Hackett in her *Fifty Years of Best Sellers, 1895-1945* indicates sales in excess of three million.⁷ *Progress and Poverty* entered the list of Random House's Modern Library in 1938 and has been selling regularly since.⁸ In 1942 there was a printing by the Classics Club (a book subscription organization) with a Foreword by John Kieran. The book is number 81 in the Grolier Club's *One Hundred Influential American Books Before 1900*. One can count on the fingers of one hand the number of treatises on economics printed before 1880 which are in print today; certainly it may be said that *Progress and Poverty* has had a wider circulation and a broader influence than any similar work.

The next questions are why is it important and why has it lasted. In partial answer to both questions it should be pointed out that in the minds of many there are certain misconceptions as to the book's nature and contents. It is far more than an argument in support of George's theories on taxation: it is a pungently written and searching analysis of the economic difficulties of the times. The classical economists are challenged and specific remedies proposed. California is used as an example with particular reference to the large land holdings; however George

goes further and considers the world as a whole and the histories of all times. The work is important because it represents original thinking and new approaches to old problems. However, its true importance is not the correctness or incorrectness of its theories, but the fact that it has led thousands to think about the economic facts of life and the problems of good government. In this book multitudes have met for the first time the terms capital, wages, rent, and interest in their economic sense; here other thousands for the first time have met the early stalwarts, Malthus, Mill, Riccardo, Quesnay, and Adam Smith. *Progress and Poverty* finds its real significance in the fact that it is a book which has provoked the minds of men.

The book has lasted because it is readable; it is a book that one can browse in. George was writing for the masses and not for the college professors. Apt and sometimes homely illustrations are freely used to drive home points. However, all of this leads the reader to the most serious and intricate problems of economics, politics, and to a limited extent law. Following are a few quotations from the book which suggest its style and method:

There is a delusion resulting from the tendency to confound the accidental with the essential—a delusion which the law writers have done their best to extend, and political economists generally have acquiesced in, rather than endeavored to expose—that private property in land is necessary to the proper use of land, and that to make land common property would be to destroy civilization and revert to barbarism.

This delusion may be likened to the idea which, according to Charles Lamb, so long prevailed among the Chinese after the savor of roast pork had been accidentally discovered by the burning down of Ho-ti's hut—that to cook a pig it was necessary to set fire to a house.⁹

* * * * *

There is a lot in the center of San Francisco to which the common rights of the people of that city are yet legally recognized. This lot is not cut up into infinitesimal pieces nor yet is it an unused waste. It is covered with fine buildings, the property of private individuals, that stand there in perfect security. The only difference between this lot and those around it, is that the rent of one goes into the Common School Fund, the rent of the others into private pockets.¹⁰

* * * * *

Taxes which lack the element of certainty tell most fearfully upon morals. Our revenue laws as a body might well be entitled, "Acts to promote the corruption

of public officials, to suppress honesty and encourage fraud, to set a premium upon perjury and the subornation of perjury, and divorce the idea of justice." This is their true character, and they succeed admirably.¹¹

* * * * *

A corrupt democratic government must finally corrupt the people, and when a people become corrupt there is no resurrection. The life is gone, only the carcass remains; and it is left for the plowshares of fate to bury it out of sight.¹²

* * * * *

Political Economy has been called the dismal science, and as currently taught, *is* hopeless and despairing. But this, as we have seen, is solely because she has been degraded and shackled; her truths dislocated; her harmonies ignored; the word she would utter gagged in her mouth, and her protest against wrong turned into an indorsement of injustice. Freed, as I have tried to free her—in her own proper symmetry, Political Economy is radiant with hope.¹³

Some may urge that *Progress and Poverty* should not be included in any list of California books because it is neither descriptive nor historical. This is obvious; however it is only half true. The creation of the book and its contents subjectively reflect California of the seventies in a manner that pure description could never achieve. Also in a broad sense it is historical; it is a part and parcel of the times which has survived. Just as an old menu tells us what people were eating and the cost of living, *Progress and Poverty* tells why the seventies were called discontented.

The first edition is easily recognizable because it is the only one bearing the date 1879 on the title page and the only one showing Hinton as the printer. The book was originally bound in pebble grained cloth and has been noted in purple, brown, red, and blue colors. Two ornamental blind stamped bands run horizontally across the covers. Not all of the copies were bound at the printers. Certain of those sent to publishers were unbound, and this would appear to explain the fact that there are other bindings which appear to be original but depart from the binding described. The copies bound by Hinton have the words "Author's Edition" on the spine, and the other bindings seen have not had these words.

Except for a very few minor word changes, the first edition by Appleton was exactly the same as the author's edition. No change was made until the fourth edition when a preface written by George was added and a quotation preceding a chapter formerly credited to an

Old Play was given its true authorship, Edward R. Taylor. From this point on there were no revisions, although certain of the foreign printings were abbreviated.

If ever *The Zamorano 80* is supplemented (and life being what it is, it will be), *Progress and Poverty* can well be what it is in the Grolier list, number 81.

It seems fitting to close with a quotation from Dr. Taylor made shortly after George's death.

When *Progress and Poverty* was in process, as upon its completion, it occurred to me that here was one of those books that every now and then spring forth to show what man can do when his noblest emotions combine with his highest mentality to produce something for the permanent betterment of our common humanity; that here was a burning message that would call the attention of men to the land question as it had never been called before; and that whether the message was embodied in an argument of irrefragability or not, it was yet one that would stir the hearts of millions.¹⁴

NOTES

1. Henry George, Jr., *The Life of Henry George* (New York, 1900), p. 289. This work is by George's son; and, while it has the usual fault of a biography by a member of the family, it contains a lot of detail that otherwise would be lost.
2. Robinson, W. W., *Land in California* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1948), p. 157.
3. Robert Glass Cleland, *A History of California: The American Period* (New York, 1926), p. 402 *et seq.* Cleland's treatment of this period of California history is the best noted.
4. George, Jr., *Life of Henry George*, p. 307.
5. George, Jr., *Life of Henry George*, p. 315.
6. Charles Albro Barker, *Henry George* (New York, 1955), pp. 319, 423, 531, 596, and 627; also letter to the writer from the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation. The work by Barker would appear to be the definitive biography of George: it is well written and objective.
7. Alice Payne Hackett, *Fifty Years of Best Sellers, 1895-1945* (New York, 1945), p. 124.
8. Letter to writer from Random House.
9. Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (4th ed., New York, 1881), p. 357.
10. George, *Progress and Poverty*, p. 359.
11. George, *Progress and Poverty*, p. 374.
12. George, *Progress and Poverty*, p. 479.
13. George, *Progress and Poverty*, p. 503.
14. George, Jr., *Life of Henry George*, p. 308.