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# T. H. Huxley's Critique of Henry George: *An Expanded Perspective*

By LAMAR B. JONES\*

*I conceive that the leading characteristic of the nineteenth century has been the rapid growth of the scientific spirit, the consequent application of scientific methods of investigation to all the problems with which the human mind is occupied, and the correlative rejection of traditional beliefs which have proved their incompetence to bear such investigations.*

*Aphorisms and Reflections From the Works of T. H. Huxley.*

*The intelligence required for the solving of social problems is not a mere thing of the intellect. It must be animated with the religious sentiment and warm with sympathy for human suffering.*

*Social Problems* by Henry George.

ABSTRACT. In 1890 *Thomas Henry Huxley* launched an extremely harsh attack against *Henry George*. The basis for the attack has until now remained unclear. The opening in 1959 of Charles Darwin's research journals, has led derivatively to reconsideration of Huxley's position as an advocate of *evolutionary biology* and proponent of science and scientists in Britain, and thereby offers new perspective on the roots of the Huxley-George controversy. The reasons for the conflict are to be found in Huxley's attempt to attract British workers to acceptance of *evolutionary science*, and to market scientists to employers as defenders of order and progress, who should be supported by the public and the public purse. The challenge George made was to appeal for *social reform* and fairer treatment for *workers* through more traditional, non-science based appeals. Thus, George accepted the concept of *natural order* and *religion* as valid. The heart of the science Huxley propounded had a *Malthusian* beat, but George, perhaps unknowingly, turned the primary argument of evolutionary science—Malthusian dynamics—against Huxley. George was not only a threat to Huxley personally but also to the enormous efforts Huxley had invested in attempting to professionalize science through the vehicle of having British workers accept the cosmic kaleidoscope and concepts of biological man. George, holding the older human self-image was triumphant in appealing to British workers since his message

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strengthened the quest of British workers for a better life. Huxley's attempt to portray science as the basis for a new *morality* failed in its contest with the morally infused political economy advanced by George.

## I

**Introduction**

JUST A BIT OVER A CENTURY AGO, Henry George, after a mid-summer visit to England in 1890, inquired of his long time friend Edward Taylor, "Have you seen Thomas Huxley's articles? What do you think of him as a philosopher? I am itching to get at him and will as soon as I can."<sup>1</sup> George had read T. H. Huxley's series of political essays which were printed in four of the early issues of the British periodical *Nineteenth Century*. As a group the essays represented a rather awkwardly written series wherein Huxley, who usually was quite clear in his prose, made an effort to vilify Rousseau and Henry George. Just how Huxley chose to focus his attacks against the vain, egotistical, quarrelsome Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the polite, courteous, mild mannered, and stable Henry George remains a matter for conjecture. But, as Paradis states, Huxley attacked Rousseau and George for their a priori defenses of "natural rights." In the attack, he also mounted a defense of property ownership on the basis of its legal sanctions; he rejected the principle of social laissez-faire, and he sought to emphasize the value of the communal effort and the advantages of a strong central government.<sup>2</sup>

In all likelihood, Huxley was the most prominent intellectual opponent ever to confront George, but, unfortunately, George never had an opportunity to directly respond to the attack.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, the healthy contribution of an exchange between George and Huxley was missed, and the question of why such a prominent scientist was piqued by George, rather than say Marx, or even the various Fabians, has never been satisfactorily answered. Roy Douglas's excellent contribution, written in 1979, represents the foremost effort to date to explore the Huxley-George controversy. Douglas's argument was that Huxley opposed George "almost in toto," with his opposition based in part on an interpretation stemming from evolutionary biology, although the attack was also founded on economic, philosophical, or quasi-historical grounds.<sup>4</sup> Roy is not incorrect in his analysis, but recently published works offer more information on the controversy and permit, as the following pages demonstrate, an expanded perspective.

Huxley was not noted for obliqueness in his thrusts against those with whom he disagreed. Indeed he was often brash and gladiatorial in attitude. But in the case of his attack on George there may be more than a smattering of disingenuousness and less than a scientific perspective. The newer evidence on the

Huxley-George matter emerges from the research conducted on Darwin, the vast bulk of which has originated from the 1959 opening of his research notebooks on the occasion of the centennial of the publication of *The Origin Of Species*. Huxley's well know advocacy of Darwin's views, which led to the sobriquet for him of "Darwin's bulldog," served to bring him into the expanded research on Darwin. By the late 1970s, re-examinations of Huxley's views and role in science and matters of public policy offered a less flattering view than traditionally has been the case.

The modified perspectives about Huxley suggest, rather strongly, that his differences with George were rooted in the more primal emotions of personal survival, including all that goes with it: jealousy, fear, and even, perhaps, an impending sense of failure, or at least serious challenge to position and status. In brief, George was more than just an intellectual threat to Huxley. Accordingly, Huxley responded with more than purely scholarly detachment.

## II.

### **Huxley's Promotion of Science and Scientists**

TO UNDERSTAND EFFECTIVELY the Huxley-George controversy, one must first look to the position scientists held in Britain at mid-nineteenth century, when Huxley was a young, struggling scientific investigator. Early Victorian science was not, as Paradis writes, an avocation in which livings were made. Rather than receiving recognition as a social, economic, and cultural service, science was regarded as the field of the amateur, the gentlemen researcher who could for years at a time divert attention toward investigation without regard for income from his scientific work. Darwin, born to wealth, is a clear example. But Huxley was not born to wealth, or even modest income, and his struggles reflect that fact. For example, in 1851, he wrote that:

To attempt to live by any scientific pursuit is a farce. Nothing but what is absolutely practical will go down in England. A man of science may earn great distinction, but not bread. . . . A man of science in these times is like an Esau who sells his birthright for a mess of pottage.<sup>5</sup>

Later, in 1852, with unabated bitterness about his income, Huxley wrote that "Science in England does everything—but *pay*. You may earn praise but not pudding."<sup>6</sup>

That Huxley would accordingly devote much of his life's efforts to the goal of professionalizing science is hardly surprising. His outbursts about science not paying income reflected the reality of experience, for he had known by 1868 or so a decade or more of financial worry and hardship. Moreover, as Desmond points out, Huxley had struggled against odds to secure a job teaching science, only to find that the job he found paid poorly and lacked prestige.<sup>7</sup>

To remedy matters, Huxley, and other young scientists such as Hooker and Tyndall, sought to achieve a linkage between science and social and technological salvation. "The implication," Desmond writes, "was that power and greatness lay in Truth, which meant in effect that the nation's health was materially linked to the well-being of the scientist."<sup>8</sup> In brief, Huxley wanted to market science. Since science and the scientists were hardly separable entities, by implication Huxley had to market Huxley. Certainly matters were never this crass, nor was Huxley a charlatan, far from it. But he was, as Michael Helfand wrote, a member of the middle-class before he was a scientist. And by the 1850s, this class had developed a cultural paradigm which assumed that progress was dependent upon economic competition.<sup>9</sup> And this allegiance to competition, itself so integral in Darwin's thought, is reflected in Huxley's work as he moved toward the study of morphology, to Haeckelian perspectives, to genealogy.

This particular analytical framework had, for Huxley, useful socio-political thrusts. As Desmond states, the years 1866–1870 were ones in which British workers had a rising interest in trade-unionism as well as demands for social reform, including the expansion of both the suffrage and educational opportunities. Huxley, very cleverly, seized upon this unrest and in a masterful stroke decided to open a series of lectures to workingmen of London, wherein he portrayed the "scientist" as a proletarian. As Desmond observed, for Huxley "The artisan and anatomist were labouring brothers, each having to grapple with often sordid reality at close quarters."<sup>10</sup> In Paradis's words, "For Huxley the idea of scientist had strong proletarian roots."<sup>11</sup> And he marketed, the term is not too strong, this theme to British workers. In short, he tried to ally science, scientists, and workers as part of a common cause. But just what was that cause? Certainly Huxley did have social commitment. In fact he told a university audience in 1874, Desmond writes, that he was "'a plebeian who stands by his order.'" And he did do this, He did make progress toward an egalitarian outlook, but as Desmond so perceptively notes, this was:

yet still only a part of the picture. While discussing worker education, he most often had in mind scientific and technical education; in other words he was spreading the scientist's power base to the classroom, and he was actually lobbying on behalf of the middle-class scientists. He recognized that with educated and articulate workers assuming positions of greater power, science itself would become a more formidable force, and its middle-class exponents better respected and valued. It also seems . . . that Huxley's essays were designed to appeal to bosses, and to persuade them to initiate workers into scientific modes of thought *for the stabilization of capitalist society*. In short he was wooing both sides from a middle position.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, as a new work by Desmond and Morris states:

When Huxley talked of his 'scientific young England,' he envisioned new standards, new status, new rewards: a science seized from the old clergy's hands and revamped—naturalized—

and made serviceable to new mercantile masters. The spider-stuffers, the 'old buffers,' the country parsons—all had to go. But the professionals still needed a new legitimating philosophy, a new competitive, capitalist sanction in place of Anglican Oxbridge paternalism; a dynamic biological science to replace the old static, creative hierarchy.<sup>13</sup>

And, of course, it was Darwin's *Origin of Species* which yielded the new analytical framework Huxley needed to promote his idea of a new order.

But there is more to Huxley's linkage of scientist and proletarian than just a search for more respect and higher value. In the relationship between laboratory and the crafts, Huxley emphasized "doing." In Paradis's words: "'Doing' was essential to scientific investigation, for the sciences demanded constant verification, and, like the craftsman, the scientist was required to remain in touch with the crude realities of daily experience." Moreover, this approach drew the line between Huxley and the humanities, toward which he had considerable antagonism. Paradis writes that Huxley "emasculated the liberal arts through stereotype: 'Mother Nature is serenely obdurate to honeyed words' " was an expression of Huxley's. Moreover, he claimed for scientists and craftsman "a higher sense of reality and therefore a greater power over nature." Huxley felt deeply the disdain intellectuals had for the grubby work scientists pursued in the laboratories and he was aligning the working classes; at least he was attempting to do so, with scientists against those who did not value manual skills. The facts of physical reality were, Huxley argued, just as compelling in their logic as any other form of man's imagination. And as Paradis observed, the British working classes and the scientists both dealt with physical reality logically. And for both the undertaking was a matter of survival, with their rewards lying in the increased awareness of physical reality.<sup>14</sup>

Huxley's numerous lectures to workingmen were genuine enough, though at the same time for him self-serving. Desmond argues that much of what Huxley was saying to his working class audiences was also of much comfort to the entrepreneurs and capitalists. Huxley equated a scientific education with a grounding in morality, in that understanding physical reality and the natural order taught men to value good conduct. "Thus the scientist was a guarantor," Desmond writes, "of social stability at a time of radical demands and widespread agitation."<sup>15</sup>

In truth, Huxley, and his fellow travelers, such as Hooker and Tyndall, were trying not only to "claw" more power for London's science lecturers, but also in doing so to gain a greater command over the public and the public purse as well. They felt terribly underpaid in comparison to the clerical naturalists at Cambridge and they bitterly resented it.<sup>16</sup>

The apprehension capitalists must have felt as workers expressed growing demands for fairer treatment played into Huxley's stratagem. Specifically, his

arguments about the connections workers and scientists had, combined with his view that training in science was insurance for good conduct, made investment in science by capitalists good business policy. “He was not,” as Desmond puts it, “ agitating for revolution, but *reform* in which the conditions of the workers would ameliorate as his own social group, the bourgeois scientists advanced.”<sup>17</sup>

Quite simply, science was the alternative to social instability; it offered a recipe, Huxley thought, for educated workers to rise above their station in life. Darwinism and Huxley’s use of Haeckelian interpretations of racial ascent suited his political purposes rather well, and, as Desmond points out, Huxley was quite proud of the bourgeoisie for being self-made. In fact he was himself doing quite well financially by the mid 1870s, despite the drawback of being a professional scientist. Desmond records Huxley’s earnings as over 950 pounds per annum by 1864, 2,000 pounds per annum by 1871, and 3,000 pounds per annum by 1876, of which about half came from his popular lectures. His books were almost mass-market items, even being sold in railway stations. Huxley’s writings were appealing because he was literally offering workers salvation in this life through evolution, which not only gave dignity to their circumstances of birth, it also gave scientific dignity to their parentage.<sup>18</sup>

### III.

#### **Huxley’s Attack on George**

BUT NOW, in the late 1870s and 1880s Huxley had competition for “my workers” as he termed them, for his readers, his fans. George’s *Progress and Poverty* was proving to be enormously attractive, and was clearly wooing workers away from evolutionary science to something they understood far better—social injustice. Moreover, George was himself an appealing personality. The Webbs accurately portrayed the threat Huxley felt from George’s presence when they wrote the memorable words: “If we had to assign to any one event the starting of the new current of thought, we should name the wide circulation in Great Britain of Mr. Henry George’s “Progress and Poverty” during the years 1880–2.”<sup>19</sup>

Huxley had to have seen in George the potential for his own intellectual disenfranchisement. Not only was *Progress and Poverty* selling extraordinarily well, that was bad enough, but George was more than just a popular writer, he was also anti-Malthusian, an orthodox practicing Christian, and a man of letters rather than of science. Moreover, he believed in the natural order, not in evolutionism. The things Huxley abhorred George seemed to represent! Huxley’s own coin was being debased before his eyes, as George’s message seemed to be on the way to becoming the “currency” of choice among British workers.

A measure of Huxley's anguish about George and the vehemence he had within him toward his "enemies" is found in a letter he wrote in late 1889 to James Knowles, the publisher of *Nineteenth Century*: "Did you ever read Henry George's book 'Progress and Poverty'? It is more damnder nonsense than poor Rousseau's blether. And to think of the popularity of the book! But I ought to be grateful, as I can cut and come again at this wonderful dish."<sup>20</sup>

Huxley's "cut" came initially in his direct attack on George in the articles he wrote in 1890 for *Nineteenth Century*. As a general proposition these writings revealed Huxley to be a political critic whose fatal flaw, Paradis argues, was the absence of true political convictions or philosophy.<sup>21</sup> Certainly his attack on George in the essay "Capital—The Mother of Labor" was more an expression of personal anguish than an effective attack, as the following sentence indicates: "I propose to show that the error lies with 'Progress and Poverty'; in which work, so far as political science is concerned, the poverty is, to my eye, much more apparent than the progress."<sup>22</sup>

Huxley's convoluted passages were simply ineffective in the attempt to blunt or derail George's popularity. George's appeal grew, rather than lessened. Huxley's annoyance grew correspondingly. And in 1893, in a widely misunderstood essay, "Evolution and Ethics," Huxley tried another strategy for his attack on George, and others, including his fellow scientist, Alfred Russel Wallace. George and Wallace had significantly helped create in Britain an atmosphere by the early 1890s in which the scientific authority of Darwinism and its base of natural selection was under increasing intellectual bombardment. Malthusian population dynamics, and the laissez-faire economics which underlay it were crucial variables in Darwin's evolutionary mechanism. Now these linkages were being undermined by the currents of British political forces. Huxley was dismayed by it all, and in his famous 1893 Romanes lecture he brought George under attack, although it was not a direct one.

Huxley portrayed the lecture to Romanes, the sponsor, as one in which: There is no allusion to politics . . . , nor to any religion except Buddhism, and only to the speculative and ethical side of that. If people apply anything I say about these matters to modern philosophies, except evolutionary speculation, and religions, that is not my affair. To be honest, however, unless I thought they would, I should never have taken all the pains I have bestowed on these 36 pages.<sup>23</sup>

Romanes, concerned by Huxley's description, read the lecture and found it acceptable. But, as Helfand has written, the lecture was a masterpiece of concealed debate. Generally viewed as a lecture where Huxley sought to limit and depoliticize the authority of evolutionary science, in reality the lecture did just the opposite. Huxley's prime purpose, Helfand maintains, was "to deny the authority of evolutionary science to both the individualistic ethic of Spencer



and the land-socialist cause of George and Wallace, while using that authority to bolster the specific policies he supported."<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, Huxley used the Romanes lecture to briefly describe the centralized and paternalistic social ethics which had been a part of the various political essays he had written since 1888. "In all of these statements," according to Helfand:

Huxley introduced the fulcrum of the theory of natural selection, Malthusian theory, to justify his political position and to dismiss as unrealistic the socialist theories of George and Wallace, which challenged Malthus and the assumptions about class and race, which, for Huxley, made Malthusian theory realistic.<sup>25</sup>

Popularly understood to be an essay wherein Huxley dethroned the authority of evolutionary science, "Evolution and Ethics" was instead the application of evolutionary science as justification for the modified *laissez-faire* social policy which late Victorian Liberals proposed as a solvent for the problems of the "Great Depression" in the economy and the Irish nationalist movement. The strong implications of the lecture were against George, and others. Why George? For Huxley, Darwin was undermined if George was correct in his arguments about the invalidness of Malthusian population dynamics. Moreover among British workers, as well as other readers, Huxley saw George's argument against Malthus being well received. What George argued was that subsistence was not a fixed quantity or gift of nature. It was, instead, a creation of human labor. Furthermore, various technological gains and economies of scale resulting from larger populations proved, as George put it, that:

the returns which labor receives from nature in California is on the whole much greater now than it was in the days of unexhausted placers and virgin soil—the increase in the power of the human factor having more than compensated for the decline in the power of the natural factor . . .

in short, there are on every hand the most striking and conclusive evidences that the production and consumption of wealth have increased with even greater rapidity than the increase of population, and that, if any class obtains less, it is solely because of the greater inequality of distribution.<sup>26</sup>

What George had done with this argument, Helfand argues, was to establish an economic equivalent of Wallace's theory that the human brain changed the nature of the evolutionary process by its ability to create tools and alter the environment. George had argued that labor is the source of wealth, on grounds that "the richest countries are not those where nature is the most prolific; but those where labor is the most efficient."<sup>27</sup>

Huxley was quite alert to the fact that the primary argument of evolutionary science was being turned against him. Small wonder then that he regarded George as his most dangerous adversary. George attracted the very workers

Huxley had so ardently wooed and hoped to “level up” while he, and his fellow scientists went along with them. It must have been galling to find George so acceptable to workers, who sang “God Save The King” and meant it when they did, and who turned their backs on the idea they were lineal descendants of the great apes. Huxley’s life work was threatened by George. “My workers,” as Huxley termed them, left the “cosmic kaleidoscope” and concepts of “biological man” for humanly centered ideas of reason, ethics, and community, which George not only advocated but also represented so well. The human self image, which was so much a part of the old natural order did not change. George held to the old view and was triumphant in his allegiance, at least insofar as vast numbers of British workers were concerned.<sup>28</sup>

## IV

**The Outcome**

GEORGE, THE JOURNALIST-ECONOMIST, had bested the journalist-scientist Huxley in appealing for the hearts and minds of British workers. That the two were never able to debate is one of the great intellectual losses of the nineteenth century. In so many ways they were not dissimilar. di Gregorio’s writing portrays Huxley “as the kind of rebel who seeks to found his own new order.”<sup>29</sup> Certainly the same could be said of George. Roy’s description of Huxley was that “The winning of . . . immediate controversy became for him a more important matter even than the furtherance of the ideas which lay at the root of his social thought.” Accordingly, Roy goes on to write, “Huxley lost his war” with George, “because he entered a wholly unnecessary conflict through a mistaken understanding.”<sup>30</sup> But Huxley did not see matters as Roy portrays them. Instead he saw George as a serious major threat to his life’s work, his income, and his status. It seems best to accept Huxley’s actions as revealing of his true feelings about George. From his perspective, the actions against George were not “the wholly unnecessary conflict through a mistaken understanding” that Roy saw.<sup>31</sup> George was his enemy, professionally as well as personally. To judge matters differently is incorrect.

The impact of George’s success in appealing to the British worker was enormous on Huxleyian thought, for the success of the former rested on its ability to express what the life of British workers required. While the latter science was not serving man in the way Huxley had hoped for, George’s message did, for it was a working partner in the quest workers had for a better life. Huxley’s attempts to portray science as the basis for a new morality did not succeed. The reverence for traditional idea of self had far more appeal to British workers than evolutionary science. In the

end it was Henry George's basic decency, common sense, and clarity of expression that triumphed over notions of science as a liberating force for mankind. Moreover, the morally infused political economy George produced was then and is now a hallmark of what one man can achieve in the service of others, and, appealingly, George performed this service best by being quintessentially himself.

#### Notes

1. Charles Albro Barker, *Henry George* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1955) 560–1.
2. James G. Paradis, *T. H. Huxley: Man's Place In Nature* (Lincoln: U. of Nebraska P, 1978) 181.
3. Huxley was caricatured as "Professor Bullhead" by George in his chapter "Principal Brown" in *A Perplexed Philosopher*, which was first published in 1892, two years after the attack Huxley launched on George. But the caricature was quite minor and since Huxley was not specifically identified, George's effort did not counter Huxley's attacks.
4. Roy Douglas, "Huxley's Critique from Social Darwinism," in Robert V. Andelson, ed., *Critics of Henry George* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1979) 37.
5. Leonard Huxley, *Life And Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley* (New York: Appleton, 1901), Vol. 1, 72.
6. Huxley, 108.
7. Adrian Desmond, *Archetypes and Ancestors Palaeontology in Victorian London 1850–1875* (Chicago P, 1982) 110.
8. Desmond, 110.
9. Michael Helfand, "T. H. Huxley's 'Evolution And Ethics': The Politics Of Evolution And The Evolution Of Politics," in *Victorian Studies*, Vol. XX, No. 1, Autumn 1976, 161–77.
10. Desmond, 159.
11. Paradis.
12. Desmond, 160.
13. Adrian Desmond and James Morris, *Darwin* (New York: Warner Books, 1991) 411.
14. Paradis, 31–32.
15. Desmond, 161–62.
16. Desmond and Morris, 431.
17. Desmond, 162.
18. Desmond, 163–64.
19. Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *History of Trade Unionism*, edition of 1911, 361.
20. Leonard Huxley, Vol. 2, 261.
21. Paradis, 181.
22. L. Huxley, "Capital—The Mother of Labour," in *Evolution And Ethics And Other Essays* (New York: D. Appleton, 1894) 170.
23. *Life and Letters*, Vol. 2, 375.
24. Helfand, 177.
25. Helfand.
26. Henry George, *Progress and Poverty*, (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1948) 146.
27. Helfand, 166–67.
28. Paradis, 195.

29. Mario di Gregorio, *T. H. Huxley's Place in Natural Science* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984).
30. Roy, 151.
31. Roy.

## **Rent**      *(Continued from p. 218)*

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The idea has spread to the State of New York (urged on by Albert Hartheimer, a Director of the Schalkenbach Foundation) which has just passed a law to allow the city of Amsterdam to try incentive taxation to alleviate its "development" problems.

As Professor Schultz says, there is far more to poverty than simple ratios. It may be that the value of California's farmlands was partly due to cheap (and often illegal) Mexican laborers. (Cesar Chavez was not beloved of California's farm landowners). Could it be that Mexico should have had some taxing power over these landowners? Had Mexico had such powers in the past, perhaps these workers could have, through the generations, acquired more human capital. The rule in economics, as in many other fields, should be, "Beware of simple relationships." One harbors the belief that Henry George understood this rule but also recognized general principles.

The rent George wanted to appropriate for public purposes was on land as defined, in the classical sense, to embrace all natural resources—it went beyond the simplicity of man-cropland ratios. These rents were created by the existence of the population and varied with its size and quality. Yet these rents, while created by the population, were paid to land owners. Indeed, a considerable portion of such rents were for the use of resources which the population had paid for or whose value they had enhanced by public improvements such as roads, sewers, dams, harbors, sewers, and subway systems. The public also paid for a stable, orderly government under whose control contracts could be made and enforced, production and distribution accomplished, and, unfortunately, this economic rent of land appropriated (with and without "color of right") by landowners.

It should be stated early that there was no advocacy in Henry George for taking revenue from landowners that was derived from improvements including structures which they had made or added to land. Capital and labor were to be encouraged, not discouraged, from their beneficent action in a free and competitive society.