



Taylor & Francis
Taylor & Francis Group

Progress Impoverished: Origin of Henry George's Single Tax

Author(s): Mark A. Lause

Source: *The Historian*, MAY 1990, Vol. 52, No. 3 (MAY 1990), pp. 394-410

Published by: Taylor & Francis, Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24448017>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



Taylor & Francis, Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Historian*

JSTOR

Progress Impoverished: Origin of Henry George's Single Tax

By
MARK A. LAUSE*

It disrupted the County Democracy, Tammany's Democratic adversary; it threatened the supremacy of Tammany Hall . . . it stirred the stagnant pools of conventional politics; it gave birth to the local Socialist Labor Party out of which the Socialist Party of America developed; it brought into general discussion the social doctrines and fiscal methods which Henry George had proclaimed through *Progress and Poverty*. Plutocratic society seemed on the edge of a political precipice.¹

—Louis F. Post, *The Prophet of San Francisco*

WITH these words a future assistant secretary of labor assessed the immediate impact on New York City politics of Henry George's mayoral campaign of 1886. The candidate of the United Labor party enjoyed international fame as the advocate of an exclusive tax on land, graduated so as to discourage ownership beyond what an individual or family could use. This Single Tax, he had long argued, would thwart the monopolization of land ownership and the growing inequalities of wealth and power in American life. Although his campaign did not materialize until October, it offered a rare opportunity for tens of thousands of working-class citizens to express their dissatisfaction with the two major parties, both at the ballot box and in the "tail-board campaign" in the streets. His son wrote that "never before in New York, and perhaps nowhere else in the country, had there been such a speaking campaign." George spoke from cart-tails and before street crowds, in the commercial districts and throughout the tenements. Sometimes he gave twelve to fourteen addresses a

*The author is Adjunct Assistant Professor of History at the University of Cincinnati.

¹Louis F. Post, *The Prophet of San Francisco: Personal Memories & Interpretations of Henry George* (New York, 1930), 74.

Henry George

day, filled with “a variety, strength, clearness, fire and human sympathy.” Many supporters labored for the ticket without food or pay from daybreak to sunset. “In size and enthusiasm,” recalled Post, “every one of George’s central meetings, whether in hall or street, were phenomenal.” In the end, the 68,000 Labor votes eclipsed the Republican candidacy of Theodore Roosevelt, although their potential as a catalyst for an ongoing, national political role for the labor movement faded.²

All serious scholarship on George and his proposal notes that concern about “the land question” in the 1880s was neither unique, innovative nor sporadic. Yet, a failure to explore the actual origins of the idea of levying a single tax on land has also led to its treatment as a more-or-less-unique set of solutions to the post-Civil War ascendancy of corporate business. So, too, the lack of a historical dimension precludes an appreciation of its appeal to urban labor organizations, making the entire campaign of 1886 seem but one of several impressively large but localized and short-lived outbursts of working-class political discontent.

The Single Tax, the central theme of George’s *Progress and Poverty* (1877-1879) and his other works, was not simply a contribution to political economy but a late-nineteenth-century echo of concerns deeply rooted in the American experience. A coherent, organized movement of antebellum American land reformers had raised similar issues in the 1840s. Their influence on the development of George’s thinking as a young man merits consideration, as does the presence in the United Labor party of some veterans of that earlier movement. In this light, George’s continued efforts to present himself as the originator of the Single Tax has serious implications for our appreciation of social reform in nineteenth-century America.

*

Forty-two years before the mayoral campaign of 1886, local newspapers commented on another “tail-board” campaign waged by some of the workingmen of New York City. The warm weather in the spring of 1844 spawned the National Reform Association (NRA), also known as the Agrarian League. Brandishing banners

²Henry George Jr., *The Life of Henry George* (New York, 1900), most recently published, with an introduction by Paul M. Gaston, as *Henry George* (London, 1981), 478-81. Post, *Prophet of San Francisco*, 76. For references to the “tail-board campaign,” see also: Peter Alexander Speck, “The Singletax and the Labor Movement,” published as *Bulletin of the University of Wisconsin*, no. 878 (Madison, Wis., 1917), 86, and Arthur Nichols Young, *The Single Tax Movement in the United States* (Princeton, 1916), 99.

The Historian

and circulating petitions, the members, mostly local craftsmen, organized impromptu street corner meetings, taking turns climbing into the back of a wagon used as a platform. Often changing the location of these meetings several times during a week, the National Reformers wished to ignite the hopes of the working classes not only in the city but throughout the country.³

From its inception, National Reform was a movement rooted in the experience of the American "common man," particularly the enfranchised, literate and articulate sectors of the urban work force. Its leader, the printer-newspaperman George Henry Evans, had been active since the mid-1820s, first as a member of a loose association of local freethinkers, some with ties to the early years of the century when an aging Thomas Paine had advocated a combination of democratic reforms, rationalism and what he termed "Agrarian Justice." Evans had been a leading force in both the short-lived Workingmen's party of 1829 and the subsequent "Locofoco" revolt which sought to establish an Equal Rights party in 1836. By 1844, when he organized the initial meetings of the NRA, he did so with others who had shared five, ten and even fifteen years of common activism.⁴

To some their ideas appeared as frighteningly straightforward as George's would later seem.⁵ Whether by the laws of God or of

³The best single source on National Reform remains Helene Sara Zahler, *Eastern Workingmen and National Land Policy, 1829-1862* (New York, 1941) and, on the city during this period, Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis: New York City, 1840-1857* (New York, 1981).

⁴For information on the background to National Reform, see: Walter Hugins, *Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class: A Study of the New York Workingmen's Movement, 1829-1837* (Stanford, 1960); Edward Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians: The Radical Leaders of the Early Labor Movement* (Albany, 1967); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1780-1850* (Oxford, 1984). The deeper roots of the movement are discussed in Mark A. Lause, "The 'Unwashed Infidelity': Thomas Paine and Early New York City Labor History," *Labor History* 27 (Summer 1986): 385-409. On Evans, see James Stanford Bradshaw, "George Henry Evans," in *American Newspaper Journalists, 1690-1872*, ed. Perry J. Ashley, vol. 43 of *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Detroit, 1985), 184-88.

⁵The sources discussed above deal with the idea of National Reform, but older titles less concerned with ideology are often riddled with dated and erroneous interpretations. Browsing through the primary sources, particularly Evans' newspapers, the *Workingman's Advocate* of 1844-45 or extant copies of its successor, *Young America*, provides a better picture. In addition, see Lewis Masquerier's collection of his own writings, *Sociology; or the Reconstruction of Society, Government, and Property* (New York, 1877), and relevant pieces in *A Documentary History of American Industrial Society*, 2d ed., 10 vols., ed. John R. Commons et al. (New York, 1958), vol. 8. Other titles of interest include Commons

Henry George

nature, they argued, the earth had originally belonged to the entire human race. Paradoxically, civilization, economic development and technological progress meant the transformation of their common resource into private property. The need to have wealth in order to invest meant that land, property and capital tended to accumulate in fewer hands. Inheritance and inter-marriage further structured an elite capable of dominating the economic, social and political life of the nation. Furthermore, the Agrarians argued, these developments expropriated the modest property holdings of artisans and farmers, undermining their independence and creating an ever-growing class of people dependent for their livelihoods upon selling their labor for wages.

National Reformers were concerned with the dangers these developments posed to any promise of a democratic course for American development. They saw a relationship between the democratic diffusion of power and a wide distribution of productive wealth, particularly in the land. Land monopoly threatened the unique, democratic potential of the United States, with its vast expanses of land, the pliability of its institutions and the absence of a titled nobility. To reverse this polarization of wealth and power, National Reformers proposed a series of measures, such as: the exemption of small-scale family farms from liability to seizure and sale for debt; recognition of the right of landless citizens, especially those in the eastern cities, to occupy the public lands, together with a homestead law to provide a mechanism to make such a right practiceable; and a legal limitation on the amount of land an individual could own. Establishing close ties with various communitarian social experiments, they also organized cooperatives, trade unions, citywide federations of labor and reform groups, and annual national Industrial Congresses. In addition, National Reformers advocated women's rights and became increasingly involved in antislavery activities.

Accounts of this Agrarian movement center on developments in the eastern states and often ignore its spread into the Midwest.⁶

et al., *History of Labour in the United States*, 2d ed., 4 vols. (New York, 1946), 1: 522-35, 547-63, while major interpretative and occasional factual errors plague the following: Norman Ware, *The Industrial Worker, 1840-1860: The Reaction of American Industrial Society to the Advance of the Industrial Revolution* (Boston, 1924), 180-84; Philip S. Foner, *From Colonial Times to the Founding of the American Federation of Labor*, vol. 1 of the *History of Labor Movements in the United States*, 2d ed. (New York, 1972), 183-90; and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, 1945).

⁶Two notable exceptions are John G. Gregory, "The Land Limitation Movement: A Wisconsin Episode of 1845-1851," *Parkman Club Publication*, no. 14

The Historian

In the later-settled areas of Ohio, Illinois and Wisconsin, radical-minded professionals and workingmen had an even greater opportunity to translate National Reform measures into institutional policies aimed at the peaceful and gradual redistribution of land, wealth and power. The idea of a single, graduated tax on land emerged from reformers of that time and place.

Cincinnati, for example, had a National Reform movement capable of mobilizing a thousand residents for one of its "banquets." Such support sustained a number of local Agrarian publications, including *Herald of Truth*, edited by Lucius Alonzo Hine and dedicated to forging "a brotherhood of social and religious radicals." One of the region's leading voices for land reform and what he viewed as the related issues of women's rights and antislavery, Hine solicited contributions aimed at formulating practical legislation.⁷

Dr. Joseph Rodes Buchanan, a printer-turned-physician and a pioneering medical educator, offered just such a proposal in 1847. He saw serious obstacles to any effort to directly expropriate land and wealth, and suggested instead that the government "levy an *ad valorem* rent of the most moderate and reasonable character upon the soil alone, claiming no interest in the buildings and other productions of manual industry." He proposed that such a tax be

a uniform percentage upon the market value of the land in every part of the country, but varying progressively during the first sixty years of its establishment [and] so graduated to allow the lapse of at least two generations before the usufruct of the soil shall pass entirely into the possession of the people.⁸

(Milwaukee, 1897) and Joseph L. Norris, "The Land Reform Movement," *Papers in Illinois History and Transactions for 1937* (Springfield, Ill., 1937). Of interest for the long-term impact of these activities, particularly in the Midwest, see Eric Foner's *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (Oxford, 1970) and his *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War* (Oxford, 1980). For an example of the persistence of NRA influences in this region see Lause, "Voting Yourself a Farm in Antebellum Iowa: Towards an Urban, Working-Class Prehistory of the Post-Civil War Agrarian Insurgency," *The Annals of Iowa* 49 (Winter/Spring 1988): 169-86.

⁷"National Reform Banquet," quoted from the *Cincinnati Daily Herald* in *The Harbinger*, 10 June 1848, 45-46. On Hine, see W. H. Venable, *Beginnings of Literary Culture in the Ohio Valley: Historical and Biographical Sketches* (Cincinnati, 1891), 95.

⁸Samuel Milliken, "Forerunners of Henry George," in the *Single Tax Year Book (quinquennial): The historical principles and application of the single tax philosophy*, ed. Joseph Dana Mills (New York, 1917), 336-37, and *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 76 vols. (New York, 1893-), 10: 277-78.

Henry George

National Reformers also gained considerable political influence in Wisconsin. Indeed, in 1851 Milwaukee Agrarians came nearer than their peers anywhere else in the country to securing "land limitation." There, too, the struggle for a legislative redistribution of land and wealth led directly to the proposal of a single, graduated land tax. A London-born tailor named Edwin Burgess had his argument published in the *Racine Advocate* and reprinted in other newspapers like Portland's *Pleasure Boat*, edited by Jeremiah Hacker, one of Maine's leading radicals. Burgess expressed his ideas in their most mature form in a series of letters and poems published in 1859 and 1860, later collected as a pamphlet for his 1864 visit to England. "Put all the taxes on the land, and then the landlord's rent will pay the cost of government, and keep the land at the lowest price forever," he advocated.⁹

Support for a single tax on land became characteristic of a current within an antebellum movement that enjoyed the support of thousands of men and women across the northern states. Indeed, Philadelphia, where George was born, raised and educated, became one of its most important centers. In 1855, after a lengthy education that included five months of high school and jobs as an errand boy, clerk and seaman, George, then sixteen years of age, entered an apprenticeship in the printing trades where articulate, literate, organized and politicized workingmen had earlier formulated, organized and led the National Reform effort.¹⁰ Yet, if such associations did not acquaint George with antebellum land reformers, he could not have escaped the Agrarian influences after his arrival in California in 1857.

*

Unique considerations shaped the American organization of land ownership in California. U.S. acquisition of these territories after the Mexican War, nine years before George's arrival,

Joseph Buchanan's "The Land and the People" appeared in *The Herald of Truth* 2 (September and October 1847), 169-81, 249-64. Lucius Hine, incidentally, regarded the single tax variation on National Reform as "entirely impracticable" and "supremely absurd." See his letter on "Land Reform—Statistics of Insanity," *The Nation*, 16 December 1888, 496-97.

⁹See Gregory, "The Land Limitation Movement." Young, *Single Tax Movement*, 13; Milliken, "Forerunners of Henry George," 241-42, citing *The Edwin Burgess letters on taxation, First Published in "The Racine Advocate," Racine, Wisconsin, 1859-60* (Racine, Wis., 1912). Young notes that these letters were reprinted in *The Standard* on August 5, 1891, and in *The Single Tax Yearbook*, 341-42.

¹⁰George, *Henry George, passim*, 1-50.

The Historian

required the translation as well as adjudication of legal claims, offering immense opportunities for fraud and speculation. Expectations that the American authorities would honor seven hundred Mexican land grants inspired the processing, within days of the war's end, of eighty-seven such grants, not counting antedated titles and forgeries. Moreover, the larger grants, intended for grazing cattle rather than farming, ran for miles, providing a stark contrast to the modest allotments in the East or Midwest. The subsequent discovery of gold drew to the state unprecedented numbers of prospectors, speculators and aspirants to small freeholds. They began settling on productive farm lands, often close to the yet unspecified boundaries of the large grants, placing improved land within the close reach of powerful claimants. Finally, land that changed hands on the basis of disputed claims created a tangled legal problem that haunted California for generations.¹¹

Those National Reformers among the newcomers offered a simple solution to this Gordian knot. At least a dozen men identified as veteran radicals, spokesmen and officers of Agrarian groups joined the Forty-niners. The most famous of these was James McClatchy, later the founder of the *Sacramento Bee*. A native of County Antrim in Ireland, he had emigrated to New York City just as the land reform movement began organizing nationally, and he soon attained sufficient stature to win a seat on the executive committee of one of the national Industrial Congresses. Employed by the pro-Agrarian *New York Tribune* of Horace Greeley, McClatchy set off for California in 1848 with the promise of five dollars for every letter to the *Tribune* on California events. Although by 1849 McClatchy had secured work with the daily *Sacramento Transcript*, he continued to send Greeley his essays.¹²

¹¹Paul W. Gates, "Pre-Henry George Land Warfare in California," *California Historical Society Quarterly* [CHSQ] 46 (June 1967): 122-23.

¹²On McClatchy, see: R. R. Parkinson, comp., *Pen Portraits: Autobiographies of State Officers, Legislators, Provisional Businessmen and Professional Men of the Capital of the State of California; Also, of Newspaper Proprietors, Editors, and Members of the Corps Reportorial* (San Francisco, 1878), 106-107; Edward C. Kemble, *History of California Newspapers, 1846-1858*, ed. Helen Harding Bretnor (Los Gatos, Calif., 1962), 329; *Sacramento County and Its Resources: A Souvenir of the Bee* (Sacramento, Calif., 1894), 156-57; his obituary in the *New York Times*, 26 October 1883; and, for his earlier seat on the national executive committee of the movement, "Industrial Congress," *Voice of Industry*, 2 July 1847. Another prominent Californian with a background in National Reform and socialism was Pascal H. Coggins. Born in 1823 in Philadelphia to a Quaker background, he

Henry George

In July of that year, McClatchy reported that “through the agency of some New York Land Reformers of the ‘Young America’ school (or ‘Vote-Yourself-a-Farm’ men), the inhabitants are setting Capt. Sutter’s title aside and voting themselves any unoccupied lots.” Others saw this development quite differently, as the “mostly ignorant and uneducated” led by “agrarians, transcendentalists, higher-law men, and implacable visionaries” who seized land and defied “the threats and remonstrances of the rightful owners.” The philosopher Josiah Royce later wrote in the *Overland Monthly* that “the squatter association might easily have become the center of a general revolutionary movement” analogous to those in Europe during 1848-1849.¹³

Fears of agrarianism among the grant claimants and the authorities grew as National Reformers moved settlers toward a more general critique of land monopoly through the summer and fall of 1849. When the city council voted to develop some of the land occupied by squatters in December, its representatives dragged a sick man from his shelter and demolished it. The confrontation convinced many not only that “the land in California is presumed to be public land” but that the new citizens should organize to “protect any settlers in the possession of land

actively supported antislavery papers, became a leader of the American Union of Associationists—the organization of the followers of Charles Fourier—and represented it in the National Industrial Congresses of the land reform and labor movements. See: Commons et al., *Doc. Hist.* 7: 205, 8: 28, and the peculiar quasi-novel by Anna Coggins Dart, *Shining Cycles of Love* (Oakland, Calif., 1959), 43-44 and 48-52, with his portrait opposite page 49 and a mention of his friendship with the Fourierist engraver John Sartain on page 119.

Other radicals who went to California included: Warren B. Chase, a Yankee Fourierist and spiritualist; Thomas G. Spear, a printer who worked and was politically active in New York City and Philadelphia; John H. Keyser, a New York City stovemaker, early advocate of National Reform and member of the Brotherhood of the Union; Thomas and Maria Varney, two veterans of communitarian activities near Cincinnati; Samuel Detweiler, a leader of the Baltimore workingmen who died in California; Harvey M. Smith of the East Orrington, Maine, circle of the Brotherhood of the Union; Henry C. Graves of the Granville, Ohio, circle; and William R. Robinson, who organized the order at Sacramento. See in particular, the names of officers included in the roster of the brotherhood from October 1850 in the *Brotherhood of America Papers*, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

¹³McClatchy’s letter of 28 July in the *New York Tribune*, 22 September 1849. Charles Robinson, *The Kansas Conflict*, (Lawrence, 1898), 58; G. Walter Reed, *History of Sacramento County, California* (Los Angeles, 1923), 81. Josiah Royce, “The Squatter Riot of ’50 in Sacramento: Its Causes and Its Significance,” *Overland Monthly*, 2d ser., September 1885, 237.

The Historian

to the extent of one lot in the city, and one hundred and sixty acres in the country, till a valid title shall be shewn for it."¹⁴

McClatchy and other National Reformers played a prominent role in the campaign. In 1850, McClatchy launched the *Settlers' and Miners' Tribune*, providing further coherence for the sentiments of the newcomers. Terrified conservatives quoted him as declaring, "Let us put up all the fences pulled down, and let us put up all the men who pulled them down." Another squatter supposedly replied to news of the official U.S. acceptance of the large grants by declaring that he and his peers did not give "a fig for their laws; they have no laws." Squatters also began appealing to a "higher law" of nature and God, mandating human equality.¹⁵

In the second week of August 1850 an armed detachment of squatters clashed in the streets of Sacramento with the authorities. The latter, "in the midst of considerable excitement," placed the area under martial law. Arrests and shootings continued for days, replete with such well-publicized incidents as law enforcement officials cornering a Missouri squatter in his cabin and killing his bedridden wife. Only an outbreak of cholera that fall ended the repression that followed the "Squatters' Riot."¹⁶

The next spring, authorities established a special commission to resolve the legitimacy of the Mexican grants and to set their boundaries. This did little to diffuse discontent, however, for the commission permitted surveyors hired by the claimants themselves to set the boundaries, a process that enabled General John C. Fremont, for example, to extend his Mariposa grant into mountains then being mined for gold. The courts seemed even more eager than the Land Commission to validate similar claims, as in the counties of Marin, Sacramento and San Joaquin.¹⁷

¹⁴Robinson, *Kansas Conflict*, 37-38, 41. Robinson, one of McClatchy's allies, was among the squatters wounded and arrested in the wake of the "riot"; he later became the Free State governor of Kansas and described the California land struggles as "a prototype of the later conflict in Kansas, having points of resemblance and having been prosecuted by similar, and sometimes the same, characters." See also the account of his 1851 reception by the Philadelphia land reformers published in their *Monthly Jubilee*, an episodic publication from the early 1850s, bound without dating the specific issues into *The Jubilee Harbinger for 1854* (Philadelphia, n.d.), 134-36. See also Royce, *Squatter Riot of '50*, 239.

¹⁵Royce, *Squatter Riot of '50*, 239. See, too, Robinson, *Kansas Conflict*, 63, and Kemble, *History of California Newspapers*, 160-61, 351-52.

¹⁶J. D. B. Stillman, "Selling the Golden Fleece. III. 'War and Rumors of Wars,'" *Overland Monthly*, 1st ser., November 1873, 417-18, 421 and 421n; Reed, *History of Sacramento County*, 82-83; and, Robinson, *Kansas Conflict*, 40-41, 54.

¹⁷Gates, "Pre-Henry George Land Warfare," 124-29. See also Gates, "California's Embattled Settlers" and "The California Land Act of 1851," *CHSQ* 41

Henry George

Discontent over what many perceived as legally sanctioned robbery continued to fester. A Settlers' League, based in Sacramento and San Francisco, emerged to pursue the old National Reform strategy of mass organization that embraced nonelectoral as well as electoral activities. In 1861, when the authorities sent hundreds of deputies to evict residents on a large grant near San Jose, an armed force of about a thousand settlers turned them back. Such conflicts periodically arose in Monterey, San Mateo and Sonoma counties where, "driven to the verge of revolution," settlers resisted eviction from the large Satayome and Llano de Santa Rosa claims. As one historian noted, squatting remained endemic as late as the 1870s. Throughout these years, McClatchy's *Bee* and a loose federation of local settlers' associations sustained the agitation against the developing land monopoly.¹⁸

George's arrival coincided with a widespread, popular agitation of the land question in California. His initial experience produced grievances common to the landless migrant there. After a few bleak years in mining, he returned to the printing trades in 1860, as the foreman in the composing room of the *San Francisco Evening Journal*. The subsequent collapse of the paper brought the newly married George face to face with the grueling lot of landless laborers denied wages. By 1866, however, he secured a precarious place in California journalism when the *San Francisco Times* employed him as its Sacramento reporter. Two years later, he became the editor of the *Overland Monthly* and, after a short trip to New York, became the editor of the *Oakland Transcript*.¹⁹

During these years, McClatchy became George's political mentor. McClatchy, Hine, Hacker and other antebellum Agrarian newspapermen had closely studied each others' publications, and McClatchy had encountered ideas like those of Buchanan and Burgess. Conditions in California, no less than in Wisconsin or Ohio, demanded a practical, gradual means of securing land reform. A mutual friend later recalled that "it was James McClatchy who instilled in George those ideas antagonistic to land monopoly which were afterwards so brilliantly woven in *Progress and Poverty*. In fact, George insisted that James McClatchy should be the man to write that work."²⁰

(June 1962): 99-130, and 50 (December 1971): 395-430, respectively. Also of use is Gates, "The Adjudication of Spanish-Mexican Land Claims in California," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 21 (May 1958): 213-36.

¹⁸Gates, "Pre-Henry George Land Warfare," 131-40.

¹⁹George, *Henry George*, *passim*, 50-235.

²⁰Young, *Single Tax Movement*, 50n. See also George, *Henry George*, 173, 349, 407, and *Sacramento County and Its Resources*, 157.

The Historian

George began promoting their common idea of a single tax on the land while newspaper work continued to preoccupy the aging McClatchy. In 1871, George's book *Our Land and Land Policy* appeared, and from 1872 to 1875, while part owner of the *Daily Evening Post* and a reader of gas meters, he continued to work on his masterpiece, *Progress and Poverty*. Its publication in 1879 realized the hope that he and McClatchy shared of placing such observations and ideas before the American people. As one scholar noted, it emerged most directly from the experience of land struggles in California.²¹

George, however, had higher aspirations which he pursued in 1880 to New York City. With his reputation preceding him, George arrived in the city as a man with a mission. The following year saw both the publication of his *Irish Land Question* and his visit to Ireland under the auspices of New York's *Irish World*. During the next three years, he twice toured Britain on behalf of the Land Reform Union of England and wrote his *Social Problems* (1883).²² Soon the Single Tax grew from an idea into a movement.

*

A formal organization of George's co-thinkers emerged in 1883 in New York City. Resurrecting the memory of earlier Agrarian agitation, they called themselves the American Free Soil Society. In its short history, the society secured the endorsement of some veteran reformers from across the country, including McClatchy before his death in October 1883. One of the major meetings contained an address by Henry Beeny, an old National Reformer who saw the developing political labor movement around George's book as the culmination of at least forty years of agitation on the topic.²³

²¹George, *Henry George*, 234, 236-49, 300-301. See also Charles A. Barker, "Henry George and the California Background of Progress and Poverty," *CHSQ* 24 (June 1945): 97-115, and Kenneth M. Johnson, "Progress and Poverty—a Paradox," *CHSQ* 42 (March 1963): 27-32. Also of interest is the influence of John S. Hittell, a freethinker, economic writer and critic of land monopoly. Barker, "Henry George and the California Background," 107-108, 115, note 10, and E. M. McDonald, *Fifty Years of Freethought*, 2 vols. (New York, 1929-1931), 1: 474-75, 2: 208-209.

²²George, *Henry George*, *passim*, 345-411.

²³On the American Free Soil Society, see: *ibid.*, 406-407; Post, *Prophet of San Francisco*, 137, 147; Young, *Single Tax Movement*, 81 and 81n; John Swinton's *Paper*, 25 May 1884; and its own monthly publication, *The Free Soiler*, which appeared in March 1884 and lasted at least into November. Also of some use in discussing the prehistory of the 1886 campaign is Post's MS autobiography, *Living a Long Life over Again* (Washington, n.d.; original typewritten MS dated 1927). On Beeny among the Free Soilers, see *John Swinton's Paper*, 20 July 1884.

Henry George

These Free Soilers broke ground in preparation for the political upheaval of 1886. The story of the meteoric rise of the United Labor party and George's subsequent campaign has often been written about and it simply needs to be noted that he voiced the unarticulated but long-standing concerns of many working-class voters. Thousands took the opportunity that fall to invest their often scanty leisure time in the effort.²⁴

Their ranks included others, like Beeny, who had been active for almost half a century on behalf of land and labor reform. A former comrade of McClatchy's in the California squatters' movement was John H. Keyser, a retired stovemaker, first swept into action by the Flour Riot of the Locofocos during the Panic of 1837. An early adherent of the NRA and the secret Agrarian fraternal order, the Brotherhood of the Union, by the 1870s Keyser had attained a certain prosperity which he freely used to assist the organization of the unemployed during the depression of 1873, and to campaign for such third parties as the Anti-monopolist ticket of 1884. Suspicious of any exclusive panacea, Keyser encouraged a wide variety of reforms, and by 1886 he supported the Single Tax and was also organizing a National Limitation Association to agitate for a graduated income tax to achieve the same ends as Evans' old land limitation proposal.²⁵

²⁴Clearly, too, George's defeat at the hands of Tammany Hall involved a considerable amount of foul play. Although a loyal Democrat, Post later recalled how Tammany's representatives swarmed "through the tenement-house regions and into the slums with money to buy votes where votes were for sale and orders to intimidate where intimidation was possible"; Post, *Prophet of San Francisco*, 78. Indeed, our historical understanding of Tammany Hall needs reassessment if George's actual total was not higher than that reported. Henry George Jr. wrote that his father "believed at the time, and many circumstances afterwards confirmed his belief, that he had really been elected, but had been 'counted out'"; George, *Henry George*, 481. Speek also mentioned "many reports that Henry George won the election but was counted out, and that numbers of voters were bought," by the Democrats; Speek, "Singletax and the Labor Movement," 87. Young found "reason to believe that the vote counted did not represent the vote actually cast." He suspected that the Republican Roosevelt may have been "knifed" by counting many of his votes as Democratic; Young, *Single Tax Movement*, 102n. The Democratic margin of victory—22,442 votes—could have involved the shifting of 7-8000 Republican ballots and 15-16,000 United Labor ballots. In any case, the number of New Yorkers who actually voted Labor was higher, the achievement of the new party even greater and its collapse even more dramatic.

²⁵On Keyser, see: McDonald, *Fifty Years of Freethought 2*: 187. Masquerier, *Sociology*, 125. Zahler, *Eastern Workingmen*, 70n, 154; Ingalls, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian in the Fields of Industrial and Social Reform* (New York, 1897), 45, 48; *New York Daily Tribune*, 25 October and 6 November 1860; and *John*

The Historian

Aging National Reformers campaigned for the United Labor party. "Captain" George W. Loyd, for example, supplemented his speeches "both at open air meetings and in various halls" with campaign songs. Described as both "a veteran of two rebellions, Dorr's and the Southern States" and as "a veteran Greenbacker," Loyd lived for ten years in New Rochelle, where he had worked as the self-appointed caretaker of the neglected monument to Thomas Paine, built in 1839 by radicals later associated with the NRA.²⁶

Others also participated in Henry George's effort. Two once-prominent leaders of the National Reform Association, Lewis Masquerier and Joshua King Ingalls, brought vast experience and broad ties to the movement. One of George's leading spokesmen, Augustus A. Levy, was a local Democratic politician with a history of over thirty years on the fringes of Agrarian reform circles.²⁷

Children of the old National Reformers also embraced the Single Tax campaign. Charles C. Commerford was the son of John Commerford, a cabinetmaker who had organized a Brooklyn branch of the Workingmen's party in 1830 and been a founding member of the NRA. Charles followed his father's trade from time to time, but won considerable fame as a professional baseball player and was one of the many individuals credited with developing the box scoring of the game. The author of several tracts, including *Labor and Capital* (1874) and *Strikes* (1874), Charles Commerford became an active land reformer in his own right and a Connecticut officer of the American Free Soil Society.²⁸

Swinton's Paper, 20 September 1885. Keyser also wrote various tracts, beginning with his *Star in the East* in 1871, expressing ideas which he elaborated upon in both *The Next Step of Progress—How to keep prosperity: a limitation of wealth with graduated taxation upon accumulating and accumulated fortunes* (New York, [1884?]) and *How shall the surplus labor of the country be employed? The limitation of wealth and land the last hope of the republic. How to break monopoly* (New York, [1888?]).

²⁶*John Swinton's Paper*, 31 October 1886. McDonald, *Fifty Years of Free-thought*. *New York Daily Tribune*, 8 October 1850.

²⁷Accounts of local land reform rallies in New York which mention Levy's participation are in the *Daily Tribune*, 2, 7, 11 and 18, August 1852. On Masquerier, see his *Sociology*, 132-36, and his *Appendix to Sociology; or The Scientific Reconstruction of Society, Government and Property* (New York, 1884), 28-29. On Ingalls, see his *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian*.

²⁸On Charles C. Commerford, see: the 1850 U.S. Census for the Tenth Ward of New York City; his obituary in the *New York Times*, 7 February 1920; *The Town and City of Waterbury, Connecticut, from the Aboriginal Period to the Year Eighteen Hundred and Ninety-Five*, 3 vols., ed. Joseph Anderson (New Haven,

Henry George

Veteran Agrarians also influenced many other younger radicals after the Civil War. For example, as part of their efforts to reorganize in 1869, the elder Commerford wrote to the London headquarters of the International Workingmen's Association (IWA), formed five years earlier by a variety of European labor organizations and theorists including Karl Marx. Old National Reformers played important roles in the subsequent organization of American sections of the First International in New York and other cities. Alongside them had been younger men like Robert Blissert and John McMackin, both of whom became leading organizers of the United Labor party campaign of 1886.²⁹

In short, George and the other spokesman of the United Labor party like Blissert and McMackin were well aware that their historic municipal campaign of 1886 built upon half a century of political agitation. No oversight could have obscured their recognition of the historic dimension of the Single Tax or the United Labor party. They needed none of the public reminders by surviving National Reformers of George's intellectual debt. Ingalls, in particular, protested the "meager recognition" by George and his lieutenants of an agitation that had inspired "two generations of the people" prior to the appearance of *Progress and Poverty*. George's decision not to acknowledge the pedigree of his ideas reflected an assessment of social thought radically different from that of antebellum thinkers like Ingalls. The latter insisted that the "singular coincidence of thought" between George and a number of Anglo-American theorists entailed no plagiarism, for "ideas are not invented but grow."³⁰ By the 1880s,

Conn., 1896), 2: 170, 508, and 3: 966 and 1126; and his listing as a delegate to the Congress in *The Freesoiler* from March 1884. Copies of his *Labor and Capital: a Review of the Labor Question* (Waterbury, Conn., 1874), reissued in 1881, have survived. On his father, see Hugins, *Jacksonian Democracy*, 72-74.

²⁹For John Commerford's communication, see the August 31, 1869 meeting of the General Council reported in *The General Council of the First International 1868-1870: Minutes* (Moscow, 1966), 150, which also misidentifies him as a journalist on page 495. For some general background on the American affiliates of the IWA, see Samuel Bernstein, *The First International in America* (New York, 1962); James C. Mohr, *The Radical Republicans and Reform in New York during Reconstruction* (Ithaca, 1973); and David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans, 1862-1872*, 2d ed. (Urbana, 1981). For a somewhat different interpretation, see Lause, "The American Radicals and Organized Marxism: The Initial Experience, 1869-1874," *Labor History* (1991).

³⁰Ingalls, "Land Reform in 1848 and 1888," *The Truth Seeker*, 28 April and 5 May 1888, 258 and 278, respectively. For other examples of Agrarian reminders, see: Thomas Ainge Devyr, *The Odd Book of the Nineteenth Century*; or "Chivalry" in *Modern Days, a Personal Record of Reform—Chiefly Land Reform*,

The Historian

concepts in labor and progressive circles, as in the broader society, had become much more privatized.

*

Henry George offered an outstanding and original description of the social costs of “progress” in the greater impoverishment of the people. That *Progress and Poverty*, well past the centennial of its appearance, is still read beyond scholarly circles is a tribute to his literary skills and journalistic ability. Perhaps it offered its most original insights in a closing chapter warning that a political democracy which embraced hierarchy in its economic life would degenerate into a decadent and corrupting despotism drawing a special strength from its ability to wield power in the people’s name. The list of men and women influenced by George’s work would be a “Who’s Who” of turn-of-the-century progressive movements.

George’s most original contribution to reform lay beneath his articulate critique of industrial capitalism, his advocacy of land reform or his formulation of the Single Tax; the implicit claim of originality itself was innovative. George and his circle cited examples of individual forerunners as instances of discrete intuitive insights, rather than as manifestations of a pre-existing coherent and widespread movement. The very concept of ideas in terms of proprietorships and patents superseded the views of old radicals.

George’s heyday coincided with an unprecedented transformation of American life through specialized technological innovations. In the Gilded Age a social thinker might relish the respect due an idea capable of illuminating the social issues of his day. Single Taxers likened their proposal to a mechanical device, the fulcrum of economic, social and political change. Prisoners of their own logic, they would argue that recognition of this new breakthrough in social technology should set the boundaries of their movement. In the wake of the impressive campaign of 1886, they expelled socialist participants, rejected collaborative over-

for the *Last Fifty Years* (Greenpoint, N.Y., 1882), xv-xvii, and the open letter to Henry George from Shaker Elder Frederick William Evans, the surviving brother of George Henry Evans. So completely did George’s reputation overshadow that of the antebellum National Reformers that early labor historians often identified their leader as “Henry George Evans.” Similarly, the few newspaper accounts of the activities of the surviving Agrarians often defined their ideas in relation to those of Henry George. For references to Lewis Masquerier, see “Dedicating His Own Tomb” and “Peculiar Dedication Services” in the *New York Times*, 6 June and 11 June 1887, respectively.

Henry George

tures from the Union Labor party formed primarily by discontented farmers and reduced the United Labor organization to a hard core of Single Taxers. In the end, the tiny remnant lost George, McMackin and others eager to work within the major political parties; only a handful of survivors sustained themselves long enough to field a presidential ticket in 1888 before finally fading away.³¹ If George's mayoral campaign seems to have been a flash in the pan rather than a beacon for an ongoing, mass political movement, it is due to his own introduction into reform circles of a purism that presaged the self-destructive sectification and paralysis that has often crippled political action by the American labor movement, leaving the United States alone among modern industrial nations without a mass working-class political party. Clearly, in political as well as industrial processes, the mechanisms can remake the users.

In retrospect, George and his successors might have fared better had they assimilated more from antebellum agrarianism than the single proposal on which he rested his claim to fame. The old National Reformers never saw fit to mingle their program with claims of originality, and their writings indicate that they found a certain solace in the historic rootedness of their politics. Similarly, they waged a struggle broad enough to advocate a wide variety of land reform proposals and many other related measures, such as trade unionism, cooperative production, womens' rights and antislavery. In 1888, as the United Labor, Union Labor and Socialist Labor parties each prepared to field presidential slates,

³¹After the 1886 campaign, the Land and Labor Clubs (also called Henry George Clubs) organized to promote the movement. They survived long enough to be absorbed into the Anti-Poverty Society which struggled for life from 1887 into 1888 and saw the founding of both a Single Tax League and a national United Labor party. In 1890, a Single Tax League of the United States began, lasting for several years. The late 1890s saw the founding of both the Women's National Single Tax League and the Henry George Lecture Association, both of which still functioned in 1912. A Single Tax Information Bureau also worked to promote the idea among early twentieth-century Progressives and an American Single Tax League organized in 1907 sustained itself much better than its predecessors. Young, *Single Tax Movement*, 104, 130-31, 136-37, 247-48 and notes; George, *Henry George* 484, 492-96 and notes, 499, 500, 506, 512-13, 540-41, 559-60. Post, *Prophet of San Francisco*, 52-53, 82, 86-87, 89-90, 95, 141-42. George, meanwhile, capped the campaign with further tours of Britain in 1888 and 1889, and of Australia in 1890. He also later published an *Open Letter to Pope Leo XIII* (1891), *A Perplexed Philosopher* (1892) on Spencer, and his own *Science of Economics* (1897). He ran yet another campaign for mayor of New York but died unexpectedly on October 29, in 1897, three days before the election. An estimated hundred thousand people passed by his bier.

The Historian

Ingalls recalled how, forty years earlier, the rise of Free Soil politics had fragmented, then “absorbed and swamped” the promising movement of 1848, driving many of its adherents from the political arena or into conservative parties. “Are we to have a repetition of this consummate asinine stupidity in 1888?” he wondered.³² An ahistorical radicalism could only repeat old errors.

Henry George’s greatest innovations shaped his movement into a prototype for a long succession of American radicals. Existing in the political culture of an eternal present, it required no coherent past and, as a consequence, had no real future. As their visions of a social progress without poverty drew thousands of working-class voters to the insurgency of 1886, their leaders had already begun to embrace an idea of progress that had itself been impoverished.

³²Ingalls, “Land Reform in 1848 and 1888.”