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## SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

# Apprehending the Social Philosophy of Henry George

By CHARLES R. McCANN, JR.\*

ABSTRACT. It is the purpose of this essay to consider but three questions regarding the social philosophy of Henry George that have to now received insufficient attention: George's views with respect to the nationalization of land, the efficacy of socialism, and the place of the individual. One may conclude that George is ostensibly an individualist, who nonetheless declares an intent to limit individuality by social restraint; he cherishes the ideals of utopian socialism, while denouncing the directed order; he advocates the nationalization of land, but then is willing to accept private ownership (albeit without aggrandizement). Much is to be done in coming to terms with the fullness of the proposals offered by this social activist and radical philosopher.

Robert Andelson's impressive collection of critical appraisals of the principles and ideas of Henry George brings into focus nearly all of the major controversies surrounding George's masterwork, *Progress and Poverty*. That this single work, from a journalist, no less, a mere popularizer, whose knowledge of economic theory came through an appreciation of the writings of the classical economic thinkers and not through any formal academic training, should generate such intense international interest and no small amount of consternation is a testament to the power of the message, if not the messenger.

The Andelson collection stands as a testament to the grandeur of George's work. Many of the great economists of George's time (and

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since) contributed to the debate as to the substance of *Progress and Poverty* and the merits of the arguments therein developed. Francis A. Walker, John Bates Clark, Alfred Marshall, Richard T. Ely, Frank H. Knight, and F. A. Hayek are but a few of the eminent academics who felt it necessary to confront George on the issues addressed in his great book.

While the coverage afforded by Andelson is impressive, some few lacunae remain. It is the purpose of this paper to consider but three questions that have to now received insufficient attention: George's views with respect to the nationalization of land, the efficacy of socialism, and the place of the individual.

## I

**Argyll's Attack**

WE SHALL BEGIN by considering a quite serious charge leveled by the critic who perhaps took the greatest offense. In an acknowledged but otherwise neglected essay on *Progress and Poverty*, George Douglas Campbell, the eighth Duke of Argyll, presents an interpretation of George that is absolutely uncompromising in its ferocity and tenor. In "The Prophet of San Francisco" (1884), Argyll states in no uncertain terms his opinion of the works of George (not confined to *Progress and Poverty*): "Never, perhaps, have communistic theories assumed a form more curious, or lent themselves to more fruitful processes of analysis, than in the writings of Mr. Henry George" (Argyll 1884: 540).<sup>1</sup> George's depiction of the conditions of modern society is little more than "a picture only of the darkest shadows with a complete omission of the lights," a portrayal of the problems afflicting industrial society that one might more realistically expect to find in the pages of a Victorian novelist than in what purports to be a sober analysis of the circumstances of the working classes and the plight of the poor. This representation is the drama of a "Pessimist," who "has a theory of his own as to the only remedy for all the evils of humanity; and this remedy he knows to be regarded with aversion both by the intellect and by the conscience of his countrymen" (1884: 541). His solution to the ills of society, appearing to Argyll to call for a wholesale alteration of the

existing social order, commends him as a “Preacher of Unrighteousness,” a scourge of custom and tradition, and destroyer of those institutional structures that are essential to the stability of any society. This is highlighted in the fact that “he goes to the roots of things, and shows us how unfounded are the rules of probity, and what mere senseless superstitions are the obligations which have been only too long acknowledged” (1884: 548).

George's great Satan is Thomas Robert Malthus, the preacher *cum* economist whose theory of population George expends considerable space in criticism—specifically, he argues that the Malthusian philosophy requires a static vision of human progress and so is in conflict with development theories, such as those of Herbert Spencer. To Argyll, George is as all communists who seek to promote their peculiar theories of social development by condemning the conclusions of the Parson—in the present case, Argyll insists that George actually accepts the empirical evidence as to the validity of Malthus's theory, while stubbornly refusing to admit it the status of a law of economic development (Argyll 1884: 541–542).<sup>2</sup> The reason is clear enough: “it would not suit his theory to admit that this cause can possibly be anything inherent in the constitution of Man, or in the natural System under which he lives.” He dares not place blame or lay fault, nor even deign to allow a place to such a notion as desert. Acknowledging the validity of a “law” of population would then certainly be out of the question, as it would not serve the ends to which George wishes to direct attention, for to do so would compel him to address the question of the moral character of man—a question of central import to Malthus—and to acknowledge the inevitability of the outcome. Instead, he changes the direction of the debate, focusing the force of his attack on the observation “that in all nations individual men, and individual communities of men, have hitherto been allowed to acquire bits of land and to deal with them as their own.” In so doing, George opts for a *structural* explanation, absolving the individual from any complicity in his own condition (1884: 542).

This is, in compact form, the nature of the disagreement. It remains to delve into the specifics of George's philosophy to see whether there is any merit to the charges.

## II

**George and the Problem of Private Ownership in Land***A. The Setting of the Problem*

The avowed purpose of *Progress and Poverty* is to identify the source of increasing poverty in societies of great and increasing wealth and prosperity, a condition George takes to be endemic in the material progress of the modern industrial (read: capitalist, private property) economy.<sup>3</sup> Such high rates of economic growth and the increases of national income and wealth that result from the modern industrial order act to exacerbate and not to alleviate the suffering of the laboring masses languishing in intolerable conditions amidst luxury and opulence. The reason for such disparity is (for George, at least) patently obvious: The wealth resulting from material progress manifests itself not in the furtherance of social well-being, but in the amassing of great personal fortunes, leading to gross inequalities in the distribution of wealth and in continually worsening relations among members of the community (now divided by virtue of the formation of social and economic classes).

Capitalism and private property are, to George, the culprits. As one cannot rely on the institutions of the industrial order, left to their own devices, to provide the solution, George is led to consider six possible alternatives that had been regarded by others concerned with finding an answer as having potential—economy in government (restrictions on national debt and public expenditure), education of the workers (including the inculcation of habits of industry and thrift), unionization (as a direct means to increase wages and to protect labor), cooperation of labor and capital, governmental direction of the economy (socialism), and the redistribution of land. Each of these measures is deficient to the extent that each fails to address the “true” cause of poverty amidst wealth—that the wages of labor and the return on capital both decline in an advancing economy as a result of the inexorable increase in the share of the product of land rent (George 1879: Book VI, Ch. I).<sup>4</sup> Some more robust remedy must be offered.

With the problem thus stated, any proposed remedy must account for the fact of rent as an unearned and thus undeserved increment, and as such the argument to which our efforts must be directed redounds to the validity in terms of justice and morality of the private ownership of a common resource. It is almost axiomatic (for George) that there exists a “real and natural distinction” between the produce of labor and the “gratuitous offerings of nature,” the former being identified with the production of genuine wealth, the latter with the natural bounty of land (George 1879: 337). Only those things that have their source in human exertion may be granted the status of property; the true and rightful basis of property—the natural right of ownership—derives ultimately “from the title of the producer” and rests “upon the natural right of the man to himself,” and so possession by natural right and natural law is predicated *solely* on the existence of such title (1879: 334–335). As one can only legitimately claim ownership to the produce of one’s own labor, there is no moral basis on which to assert a “right” in nature to private property in land; land has “none of the moral sanctions of property” (George 1898: 265), and so all such titles are the creations of man, codified in law.<sup>5</sup>

It is with respect to *made* law, not *natural* law or natural right, that the sources of poverty and other of the social ills are to be found. Gross distortions in the distribution of wealth, in George’s view the very essence of injustice, are due to the monopolization of land, that is, with land being accepted in custom and law as the private possession of a select few instead of being regarded as the common property of the people as a whole (George 1879: 288). The vehicle by which this injustice has been allowed to occur is most clearly and evidently the very institutions of the State through which appeals are directed to the alleviation of the social maladies, although the ramifications of these arrangements were and are little appreciated and understood. Yet for George, the answer to the question of the source of social injustices is obvious: It is the disparity in wealth, brought about by institutional arrangements that have established private ownership in land, a system “which ultimately determines the social, the political, and consequently the intellectual and moral condition of a people” (1879: 295).

*B. The Remedy*

What is the solution to the problem as stated, that is, the “evil” of private ownership of a resource that must be understood as being a common asset? For George, the solution is not as simple or straightforward as one might expect. He accepts that the notion of restricting land ownership or redistributing land holdings is not one to which any serious consideration should be given, as “[a]n equal distribution of land is impossible, and anything short of that would be only a mitigation, not a cure, and a mitigation that would prevent the adoption of a cure” (George 1879: 327). Any such “cure” for the manifest inequity of the property arrangement must account for the development of the society as a whole, and be such as to remedy as well the great social evils brought about by the private holding of the common resource, including among those evils poverty, inequality in the distribution of wealth, the existence of class distinctions (the subjugation of the many by the few), and those social injustices associated with the fact of labor being denied the full value of its product. This latter “fact” is the great concern that motivates George in his quest:

If a man be rightfully entitled to the produce of his labor, then no one can be rightfully entitled to the ownership of anything which is not the produce of his labor, or the labor of some one else from whom the right has passed to him. If production give to the producer the right to exclusive possession and enjoyment, there can rightfully be no exclusive possession and enjoyment of anything not the production of labor, and the recognition of private property in land is a wrong. (George 1879: 336)

The private ownership of land cannot, in the end, be defended, according to George, by resort to arguments predicated on justice, as each has as equal a right to land as to air, that is, “a right proclaimed by the fact of their existence” (George 1879: 338). If, indeed, it is a “truth” that is beyond doubt, the acceptance of which is immediate once the facts are presented, “that there is and can be no just title to an exclusive possession of the soil, and that private property in land is a bold, bare, enormous wrong, like that of chattel slavery” (1879: 358), the most effective solution to the problems of poverty, inequality, and social injustice must be common

ownership of land. As land “rightfully belongs to no individual or individuals but to the community itself,” private holdings, unjustified on any moral ground, represent that very evil that is the root cause of these iniquities (George 1898: 265).

To extirpate poverty, to make wages what justice commands they should be, the full earnings of the laborer, we must therefore substitute for the individual ownership of land a common ownership. Nothing else will go to the cause of the evil—in nothing else is there the slightest hope. (George 1879: 328)

One simply cannot deny, declares George, what is by force of reason and empirical demonstration the great truth: “that the unequal ownership of land necessitates the unequal distribution of wealth.” With the problem thus identified, it remains only to effect a solution that is more than a mere palliative (as would, for instance, be the case with redistribution). As it is abundantly evident that

in the nature of things unequal ownership of land is inseparable from the recognition of individual property in land, it necessarily follows that the only remedy for the unjust distribution of wealth is in making land common property. (George 1879: 329)

George's first-best solution is, therefore, the confiscation by the State of all privately-held land holdings. It is to the State to ensure that the economic advantages accruing to those very few who have the great good fortune to hold title to the source of all wealth be, if only on moral grounds alone, imparted to all; fairness justifies any action that would lead to a more equitable result. By “abolishing all private titles, declaring all land public property, and letting it out to the highest bidders in lots to suit, under such conditions as would sacredly guard the private right to improvements,” one would “satisfy the law of justice” as well as “meet all economic requirements” (George 1879: 403). Thus does George seem intent on nationalization of land as the solution to those social disparities he takes great pains to identify. He even notes that, were people to become so incensed at the inequities engendered by the continuation of a system so blatantly unjust, they may very well take it upon themselves to nationalize land “in a much more direct and easy way than by purchase,” suggesting that his method would achieve the same end, while imposing a considerably lower toll (1879: 362–363).



A difficulty, however, presents itself in the means to the effectuation of such a program, not the least of the problems being that of compensation for those who would be dispossessed, and the questions raised as to the justice of such a plan. After some consideration (and considerable venting), George finally seems to acquiesce, to allow that, after all, it may be possible to continue to tolerate private ownership in land, as long as the fruits of that ownership are distributed in such a manner as they would were the land taken as common property. It is not land ownership, per se, that is the great evil.<sup>6</sup> It is the unjust and unearned increment to land owners, in other words, rent, which must be addressed. Land holders would be allowed to retain title to the land itself, and even to retain possession of improvements made upon the land as well as any and all personal property (George 1879: 367). But the *rent*, or the gain from the land that would ordinarily accrue to the title holder, would be completely appropriated by the State in the interests of the society as a whole. “We may safely leave them the shell, if we take the kernel. *It is not necessary to confiscate land; it is only necessary to confiscate rent*” (1879: 405; emphasis in original). The great transformation would then be from private *ownership* to private *possession*, with the distinction resting on the control of the unearned increment, that is, rent.<sup>7</sup> “Let the land owners have, if you please, all that the possession of the land would give them in the absence of the rest of the community. But rent, the creation of the whole community, necessarily belongs to the whole community” (1879: 365–366).<sup>8</sup> Thus is George prepared to accept a severely limited “revolution,” forgoing wholesale confiscation in the interests of a more immediate means to the equitable distribution of the product.<sup>9</sup>

### C. A Note on Nationalization

Despite George’s own testimony on the matter, some have suggested that he did not in fact advocate the nationalization of land. Jack Schwartzman (2003), for one, insists that George was actually *opposed* to a policy of land nationalization.<sup>10</sup> In addition, Schwartzman argues that George did not advocate “government aggrandizement,” and so his denial of socialist tendencies shows that, at least to Schwartzman,

George's "own mind was crystal clear" (Schwartzman 2003: 333). However, George's own words call into question this conclusion:

In this way [appropriating land rent through taxation] the State may become the universal landlord without calling herself so, and without assuming a single new function. In form, the ownership of land would remain just as now. No owner of land need be dispossessed, and no restriction need be placed upon the amount of land any one could hold. For, rent being taken by the State in taxes, land, no matter in whose name it stood, or in what parcels it was held, would be really common property, and every member of the community would participate in the advantages of its ownership. (George 1879: 406)

Schwartzman could then only realistically arrive at his conclusion by limiting attention to the second sentence of the above-quoted passage, while ignoring the first and the fourth, and, for that matter, much of the material in the book as a whole.

### III

#### George and Socialism

DOES GEORGE advocate socialism? Most modern commentators, it appears, answer in the negative,<sup>11</sup> while some consider him important to the cause of socialism in that he took them to the mountaintop from which they could view the promised land.<sup>12</sup> William Morris, the British poet, essayist, designer, and part-time political agitator, expressed his belief that, despite differences between himself and many of the other British socialists, on one side, and George, on the other, "we feel that his enemies are ours also, and that his end like ours is the winning of a due share of happiness and refinement for the workers of the world" (Morris 1884: 4). On the other hand, Karl Marx, who, in *The Communist Manifesto*, advocates the abolition of private property in land and the taking of all rents by the State for the public interest (Marx 1888: 74), nonetheless could not resist heaping derision on George: While *Progress and Poverty* "is significant in being a first, if unsuccessful, attempt at emancipation from orthodox political economy," it is yet obvious that George's program, as with all other such offerings affecting the appropriation of land rent, "is merely an attempt, tricked out with socialism, to *save the capitalist régime* and, indeed, to

*re-establish it on an even broader basis* than at present” (Marx 1881: 101; emphasis in original).<sup>13</sup> Marx’s alter ego, Friedrich Engels, continuing along similar lines, opines thus:

What the Socialists demand, implies a total revolution of the whole system of social production; what Henry George demands, leaves the present mode of social production untouched, and has, in fact, been anticipated by the extreme section of Ricardian bourgeois economists who, too, demanded the confiscation of the rent of land by the State. (Engels 1887: 438–439)

To examine George’s position with respect to the question of socialism, we must turn to a review of his presentation in *The Science of Political Economy* (1898). Here, George argues that socialism suffers from four major faults that prevent it from being a viable economic and political philosophy. First, it is not “scientific,” inasmuch as it denies the validity of natural laws. Hence, it cannot be regarded as within the scope of political economy. Second, it is anti-religious and atheistic, and so “more destitute of any central and guiding principle than any philosophy I know of.” Third, it has no concept of the individual and hence no mechanism for the protection of individual rights (George 1898: 198).

The fourth fault lies with the form of cooperation demanded of a socialist society. George identifies two forms of cooperation, *directed* and *spontaneous* (also termed *conscious* and *unconscious*).<sup>14</sup> The former type aims at a specific result, and so is ends-directed; the latter has no identifiable aim, but rather is the result of the uncoordinated actions of many independent individual wills, each acting in his or her own best interest (George 1898: 383). The latter form of cooperation is that seen in the workings of the free market; the former is the form of cooperation required of socialistic schemes for the regulation and direction of economic activity. Directed action has a place, but that place is within the narrow confines wherein such activities are controlled to a given goal. Carried beyond this limited field of endeavor, such regulation fails. This George sees as “the fatal defect” of socialism—“any attempt to carry conscious regulation and direction beyond the narrow sphere of social life in which it is necessary, inevitably works injury, hindering even what it is intended to help” (1898: 391).<sup>15</sup>

With the above stipulation as to George's attitude toward socialism, we must return to his proposals in *Progress and Poverty*. Is the underlying philosophy of this work really nothing more or less than an advocacy of socialism (or, as Argyll insists, communism<sup>16</sup>)? George himself seems to suggest as much, as he readily acknowledges that socialism is both "grand and noble," and even "possible of realization." Given such expressions of support, he is not, it would seem, opposed on principle to such a utopian social order. However, as George recognizes that socialism is not simply confined to the governmental control of the means of production, but is instead a "state of society," it is patently obvious, and is in fact so acknowledged, that such foundational structures as would be necessary for the realization of this ideal cannot be erected as superstructures upon an existing foundation to which it is of itself incompatible. A socialistic society cannot be "manufactured." Rather, as society is an organism, such changes as would be required for its realization must be the result of spontaneous order, such that from "the free and natural development of all the parts will be secured the harmony of the whole" (George 1879: 321).

The form of cooperation necessary to the direction of society must be of the spontaneous or unconscious variety, as noted. This should not, however, be taken as evidence against the allegation that George's utopia is indeed socialistic, his protestations to the contrary notwithstanding. It is merely indicative of George's belief that any such structural change cannot be confined to one aspect of the social order, but must instead be effected throughout—the transformation must be made wholesale through the political, economic, and social orders, and must be seen as a natural progression, not an imposition of an alien philosophy. Yet that socialism *qua* utopianism should *ideally* develop spontaneously does not prevent George from advocating its advance through directed means. The taking by the State of private property in land (whether the physical property or the factor product is quite irrelevant) will of itself effectuate great social change, which change may indeed be gradual and spontaneous. Under his proposal, the administration of justice, to take but one example, would be greatly improved, as land disputes would be all but eliminated. The reason for the elimination of such disputes is quite evident: The State would be "virtually acknowledged as the sole owner of

land,” and so those who occupied the land would henceforth be little more than “rent-paying tenants” of the State (George 1879: 454–455). The resulting simplification of the governmental function would also, in George’s mind, be consistent with the ideals of Thomas Jefferson<sup>17</sup> and Herbert Spencer,<sup>18</sup> in the sense that this would eventuate in the end of government “as a directing and repressive power,” while at the same time achieving a realization of his personal (and quite independent) ideal, “the dream of socialism” (1879: 455–456):

We should reach the ideal of the socialist, but not through government repression. Government would change its character, and would become the administration of a great co-operative society. It would become merely the agency by which the common property was administered for the common benefit. (George 1879: 456–457)

As if any further evidence were needed, one may review George’s statement on the subject elicited in a debate with the British Marxist Henry Mayers Hyndman:

I can understand how a society must at some time become possible in which all production and exchange should be carried on under public supervision and for the public benefit, but I do not think it possible to attain that state at one leap, or to attain it now. (George and Hyndman 1885: 377; also quoted in Morton 1898: 228)

So while George seems to evince a *disposition* to socialism, his reluctance to advocate its pursuit may be said to have been on pragmatic rather than dogmatic grounds.

Why, then, given his statements as to the desirability of achieving the socialist ideal, are so many reluctant to identify George with a philosophy to which, despite his overt protestations to the contrary, he clearly has such affinity?<sup>19</sup> Perhaps it is because his program for the amelioration of the conditions of the poor and the dispossessed in industrial society is not one of radical social change but a more nuanced approach to that of, say, Marx, one that focuses more on the proximate cause. Consider in this regard George’s understanding of land and capital and the significance of the distinction. Importantly, and critical to his appreciation by the Marxists, George does not equate land with capital, and therefore his call for the appropriation of *land* (by whatever means) does not imply advocacy of State control of the *means of production*, by which is typically under-

stood State ownership or State control of *capital*. Capital is, after all, “a term used in contradistinction to land and labor” (George 1879: 38), essentially being, as Marx observes, “stored-up labor” (1879: 164). It is “a tangible, material thing—matter changed in place, form or condition, so as to fit it for human uses, and applied to aiding labor in the production of wealth or direct satisfactions” (George 1898: 297).<sup>20</sup> This makes capital of a fundamentally different nature from land, land being a factor fixed and determined, the true source of wealth. The dispute we must consider, then, is not between capitalist and laborer, but between landowners and those dependent upon the land, this latter “class” including *both* capitalist and laborer.<sup>21</sup> Although land is defined especially broadly, as including “not merely the surface of the earth as distinguished from the water and the air, but the whole material universe outside of man himself” (George 1879: 38), it does not, insists George, include within its scope the unique resource of capital.

As land and capital are distinct, the nationalization of land (or the taking of its product) cannot be equated (at least in George’s mind, and to his supporters) with any advocacy of socialism.<sup>22</sup> In essence, George handles the tension between his tax initiative and the rest of his social philosophy by redefining the class in order to remove himself from it. He is neither a socialist nor a communist because he does not propose the public ownership of *capital*. In fact, he is rather consistent in his advocacy of free competition and individual enterprise, arguing that it is the monopoly of land holdings and not the monopoly of capital that is responsible for the immiseration of labor—were land more equitably divided, the workings of the free market would ensure the social progress of George’s vision, with the general attitude of *laissez-faire* making possible the realization of the socialist ideal (George 1879: xvii). Let George have the last word on this matter:

We differ from the socialists in our diagnosis of the evil and we differ from them as to remedies. We have no fear of capital, regarding it as the natural handmaiden of labor; we look on interest in itself as natural and just; we would set no limit to accumulation, nor impose on the rich any burden that is not equally placed on the poor; we see no evil in competition, but deem unrestricted competition to be as necessary to the health of the industrial and social organism as the free circulation of the blood is to the health of the bodily organism—to be the agency whereby the fullest coöperation is to be secured. We would simply take for the community what belongs to

the community, the value that attaches to land by the growth of the community; leave sacredly to the individual all that belongs to the individual; and, treating necessary monopolies as functions of the state, abolish all restrictions and prohibitions save those required for public health, safety, morals and convenience. (George 1891: 61)

Thus does George appear not so much the utopian *socialist* as the utopian *capitalist*, who sees in both a spirit of cooperation born of moral nature, which impels individuals to advance the welfare of all.

#### IV

#### George and Individualism

THE ARGUMENT OF George's defenders seems to be that he cannot be considered a *socialist* because in his writings and speeches he consistently maintains a philosophy that may best be identified as *individualist*.<sup>23</sup> This, of course, leads one to consider the question as to whether George may *in fact* be classed as an individualist. The evidence in this regard is, to say the least, not such as to suggest a conclusive answer. As with much of George's commentaries, for every passage seeming to corroborate such an assertion, another can be found that may be construed otherwise.

We shall, nevertheless, attempt such a classification. George, at times, maintains that the individual matters only insofar as he or she is part of the whole, the community. One cannot acknowledge the *person* apart from the *society*. Here his rhetoric is quite consistent with the position of Spencer, to the extent that Spencer's social philosophy may be interpreted as being predicated on an encumbered, organic individualism (even though George may *appear* to hold to a *social* ontology).<sup>24</sup> As an example, George's position as to land reflects such a philosophy, his insistence upon a transcendent common good providing for him a more than adequate justification for his disquisition respecting the ethics of private holdings. Thus is George led, *with respect to the single question of the ownership of the common resource*, to disparage the individualist (and largely secularist) philosophy of *laissez-faire* as he promotes a more organicist (and ethically imbued) philosophy, such as that associated with communitarianism or conservatism.

Argyll, his most ardent critic, obviously concurs in such a judgment. He rejects the notion that George is an individualist, as to be such would be inconsistent with his organicist, “communistic” tendencies:

Like all Communists, he [George] regards Society not as consisting of individuals whose separate welfare is to be the basis of the welfare of the whole, but as a great abstract Personality, in which all power is to be centred, and to which all separate rights and interests are to be subordinate. (Argyll 1884: 546)

George himself, in more than one isolated passage, seems actually to substantiate such a conclusion, referring to *the good of the community*, and *the needs of the social organism*. Consider but the following commentaries from *Progress and Poverty* on the nature of man in his relation to society:

There are people into whose heads it never enters to conceive of any better state of society than that which now exists—who imagine that the idea that there could be a state of society in which greed would be banished, prisons stand empty, *individual interests be subordinated to general interests*, and no one seek to rob or to oppress his neighbor, is but the dream of impracticable dreamers, for whom these practical level-headed men, who pride themselves on recognizing facts as they are, have a hearty contempt. But such men—though some of them write books, and some of them occupy the chairs of universities, and some of them stand in pulpits—do not think. (George 1879: 464; emphasis added)

Man is social in his nature. He does not require to be caught and tamed in order to induce him to live with his fellows. (George 1879: 509)

Now the growth and development of society not merely tend to make each more and more dependent upon all, and to lessen the influence of individuals, even over their own conditions, as compared with the influence of society; but the effect of association or integration is to give rise to a collective power which is distinguishable from the sum of individual powers. (George 1879: 515)

And finally, consider the following from *The Science of Political Economy*:

But man is more than an individual. He is also a social animal, formed and adapted to live and to cooperate with his fellows. It is in this line of social development that the great increase of man's knowledge and powers takes place. (George 1898: 21)



It is in this social body, this larger entity, of which individuals are the atoms, that the extensions of human power which mark the advance of civilization are secured. The rise of civilization is the growth of this coöperation and the increase of the body of knowledge thus obtained and garnered. (George 1898: 21–22)

That George views man as inherently a social animal is not, of course, sufficient to reject the claim that he is also an individualist; Ludwig von Mises, to whom one would never think of denying the appellation, makes the same declaration in *Human Action* (1949). Yet Mises (and others similarly inclined) would not have deigned to declare that each should subordinate personal interests to the general interest, or even to acknowledge the validity of such a concept. Personal liberty and personal freedom are the *summum bonum* in this regard. For George, by contrast, the *summum bonum* cannot be identified with individual desires, but is more appropriately expressed in terms of the *bonum commune*. This is the source of the great ideological divide.

Thus, if one is to insist that George's philosophy is individualist, one must also accept that he is not an individualist of the libertarian variety, nor even an individualist in the liberal tradition. Yet at the same time, one is loathe to attribute uncritically to him an ontology that denies individuality and thus asserts an independent community interest, as one may find, for example, in the communitarianism of Alasdair MacIntyre<sup>25</sup> and even to a lesser extent in the conservatism of John Kekes.<sup>26</sup> George's variant of individualism is more attuned to that of John Dewey<sup>27</sup> or Michael Walzer,<sup>28</sup> both of whom emphasize *individuality* over *individualism*, in effect an "individualism" enveloped by a communitarian frame. This at once allows us to place him with Spencer, whose individualism seemed to find a peaceful coexistence within the social order.

## V

### Conclusion

The meaning of the title of this essay—"Apprehending the Social Philosophy of Henry George"—should now be apparent. This has been an attempt *to grasp* (if not fully *to comprehend*) the intent of Henry George's social prescriptions and to place them in philosophical perspective, not an effort at consolidation or reappraisal.

For all that has been written on his social, political, and economic thought, Henry George remains something of an enigma. He is ostensibly an individualist, who nonetheless declares an intent to limit individuality by social restraint; he cherishes the ideals of utopian socialism, while denouncing the directed order; he advocates the nationalization of land, but then is willing to accept private ownership (albeit without aggrandizement). Still, much is to be done in coming to terms with the fullness of the proposals offered by this social activist and radical philosopher.

### Notes

1. Argyll is not alone among contemporaries in his characterization of George as a communist. See also the American educator and philosopher William Torrey Harris: "Karl Marx announced the pessimistic doctrine that under the existing conditions the rich are growing richer and fewer, the middle class fewer and poorer, the poor poorer and more numerous. It was this view, apparently, that led Mr. George to devote his attention to the subject of progress and poverty" (Harris 1887: 440).

2. "[L]ike all Communists, Mr. George hates the very name of Malthus. He admits and even exaggerates the fact of pressure as applicable to the people of America. He admits it as applicable to the people of Europe, and of India, and of China. He admits it as a fact as applicable more or less obviously to every existing population of the globe. But he will not allow the fact to be generalised into a law. He will not allow this—because the generalisation suggests a cause which he denies, and shuts out another cause which he asserts. But this is not a legitimate reason for refusing to express phenomena in terms as wide and general as their actual occurrence. Never mind causes until we have clearly ascertained facts; but when these are clearly ascertained let us record them fearlessly in terms as wide as the truth demands. If there is not a single population on the globe which does not exhibit the fact of pressure more or less severe on the limits of their actual subsistence, let us at least recognise this fact in all its breadth and sweep" (Argyll 1884: 541).

3. "This fact—the great fact that poverty and all its concomitants show themselves in communities just as they develop into the conditions toward which material progress tends—proves that the social difficulties existing wherever a certain stage of progress has been reached, do not arise from local circumstances, but are, in some way or another, engendered by progress itself" (George 1879: 7–8).

4. That this is not the case, and, in examining the empirical evidence, was not the case even at the time George wrote, see George Gunton (1887), and Harris (1887). A prominent corporate attorney and acquaintance of George,

Thomas Shearman (1889), offers an unconvincing defense. (Shearman, by the way, is credited with having coined the term “Single Tax.”) On Harris’s attacks, see Charles Collier (2003).

5. “Since natural law can take no cognizance of the ownership of land, they [the political economists] are driven in order to support this pre-assumption to treat distribution and property as matters of human institution solely” (George 1898: 460–461).

6. Leo Tolstoy, however, does see private ownership of land as a great evil, and credits George with such an understanding as well: “I think Henry George is right that the removal of the sin of property in land is near, that the movement evoked by him was the last birth-throe, and that the birth itself is imminent—the liberation of men from sufferings they have borne so long” (Tolstoy 1905: 305). Yet while Tolstoy’s recommendation for the Russian Slavs is for the abolition of private ownership in land, he recognizes that George did not, in fact, require state ownership, but only a tax on land value (1905: 286).

7. Such a characterization may be found in John Pullen (2005). Pullen reads George as advocating *abolition* of private ownership, when he requires only *restrictions*, and so George is said to be confused in distinguishing ownership and possession. Yet a careful reading suggests George accepts that his second-best solution is indeed a restriction, not a wholesale abolition.

8. Gunton notes that such a plan “is a violation of his [George’s] fundamental proposition. To be consistent with his own definition he must insist that taxes shall be equally levied upon all values except labor, because all values except labor are land values. . . . Why should one class of land be discriminated against in favor of another?” (Gunton 1887: 25).

9. In a debate with Henry Hyndman, George expresses his position quite clearly: “I advocate the recognition of equal rights to land. As for any particular plan of doing this, I care little; but it seems to me that the only practicable way is to take rent for common purposes” (George and Hyndman 1885: 369).

10. Roy Douglas (2003) offers a similar argument.

11. Including Leland Yeager (2001) and James Busey (2003), to name but two.

12. Such is the perspective of George Bernard Shaw, a leading Fabian socialist: *Progress and Poverty* “was the work of a man who had seen that the conversion of an American village to a city of millionaires was also the conversion of a place where people could live and let live in tolerable comfort to an inferno of seething poverty and misery. Tolstoy was one of his notable converts. George’s omission to consider what the State should do with the national rent after it had taken it into the public treasury stopped him on the threshold of Socialism; but most of the young men whom he had led up to it went through (like myself) into the Fabian Society and other Socialist bodies” (Shaw 1928: 468).

13. Marx also allows a personal aside: "He [George] also has the revolting presumptuousness [*sic*] and arrogance that is the unmistakable hallmark of all such PANACEA-mongers" (Marx 1881: 101).

14. The reader will note here the "influence" (unattributed) of Adam Ferguson.

15. In addition, George observes that socialism "fails to see that oppression does not come from the nature of capital, but from the wrong that robs labor of capital by divorcing it from land, and that creates a fictitious capital that is really capitalized monopoly. It fails to see that it would be impossible for capital to oppress labor were labor free to the natural material of production; that the wage system in itself springs from mutual convenience, being a form of coöperation in which one of the parties prefers a certain to a contingent result; and that what it calls the 'iron law of wages' is not the natural law of wages, but only the law of wages in that unnatural condition in which men are made helpless by being deprived of the materials for life and work. It fails to see that what it mistakes for the evils of competition are really the evils of restricted competition—are due to a one-sided competition to which men are forced when deprived of land. While its methods, the organization of men into industrial armies, the direction and control of all production and exchange by governmental or semi-governmental bureaus, would, if carried to full expression, means Egyptian despotism" (George 1891: 60–61).

16. After all, Marx himself notes that "Communism deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society; all that it does is to deprive him of the power to subjugate the labour of others by means of such appropriation" (Marx 1888: 70).

17. In his reply to Argyll, George quotes Jefferson approvingly: "I hold with Thomas Jefferson, that 'the earth belongs in usufruct to the living, and that the dead have no power or right over it'" (George 1884: 138–139).

18. George offers agreement with Spencer's argument as presented in *Social Statics* that land may, in accordance with "moral law," be appropriated by the State (George 1879: 404). This position Spencer later repudiated, for which George roundly criticized him in *A Perplexed Philosopher* (1892).

19. Notes Shaw: "George actually felt bound to attack the Socialism he had himself created; and the moment the antagonism was declared, and to be a Henry Georgite meant to be an anti-Socialist, some of the Socialists whom he had converted became ashamed of their origin, and concealed it; whilst others, including myself, had to fight hard against the Single Tax propaganda" (Shaw 1904: 477).

20. "Capital is simply wealth (that is to say, the material products of human labour exerted upon land) applied to assist in further production" (George and Hyndman 1885: 374).

21. Although, as Gunton observes, if indeed we accept George's notion that land "necessarily includes not merely the surface of the earth . . . but the whole material universe outside of man himself," it must include all materials formed therefrom, as man can do no more than give utility through change in form to these offerings of nature (Gunton 1887: 23–24).

22. Cf. V. I. Lenin: "Confusing private ownership of land with the domination of capital in agriculture is a characteristic mistake of the bourgeois land nationalisers (including Henry George, and many others)" (Lenin 1907: 401).

23. Yeager (2001: 18–20) and Schwartzman (2003: 332) make this claim.

24. On this aspect of Spencer's philosophy, see McCann (2004).

25. See especially his *After Virtue* (1981).

26. See especially *The Case for Conservatism* (1998).

27. Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* actually reads as George *sans* natural law and theism.

28. Walzer's communitarianism differs from that of others within the "communitarian movement" in advancing an *individualist* ontology.

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