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The Culture of Political Economy: Henry George and the American Working Class

BY STEVEN J. ROSS

Few American thinkers have had such a profound effect upon their times yet have remained so anonymous to future generations as Henry George. As a lecturer, he succeeded in politicizing hundreds of thousands of workers and intellectuals throughout the world. As a theorist, he made political economy accessible to the masses, transforming it, as one working-class leader noted, from a "dismal science into a science radiant with hope."¹ As a politician, he spearheaded a mass democratic assault against the iniquities of industrial capitalism. As a writer, he struck chords so deep that his most important work, *Progress and Poverty*, outsold every other book in the nineteenth century except the Bible.²

More than any American political economist of his time, Henry George lived and spoke to the problems of ordinary Americans. Unlike many foreign-born radicals whose ideas and language often isolated them from American workers, George fashioned an economic theory and radical political language that operated within the context of American culture and values. He understood that the ideology that sustained capitalist rule could also be used to challenge it. In his writings and political campaigns, George appropriated terms which had been used by elites to dissipate working-class radicalism — God, country, citizenship — and used them as the basis of a radical attack against the forces of monopoly. Inspired by his writings, workers in cities and towns throughout the nation abandoned traditional party ties in the fall and winter of 1886/1887 and joined George in a political crusade aimed at restoring what they viewed as true democracy in the United States.

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The early life of Henry George mirrored the frustrations and thwarted dreams of his age. His radicalism was not engendered by years of formal study or training, but by first hand encounters with the promises and limitations of bourgeois ideology. Born in 1839 into a lower-middle class Philadelphia family, George came of age in an era whose dominant ideology, one deeply rooted in the Protestant work ethic, held that success or failure in life was a matter of individual fortitude: those who were hardworking, frugal, and sober would succeed, those who were not would fail. The ultimate goal of this middle-class ideology was not the accumulation of great wealth, but the attainment of modest economic independence — ownership of a small shop, business, or farm. Government, according to this view, intervened only to guarantee conditions that would provide all citizens with an equal opportunity for success.³

Despite his family's strict adherence to the guidelines which promised success, young Henry grew up in an environment where poverty, urban crowding, hunger, and dependency were everyday facts of life. His father, forced to accept a most tenuous and low-paid patronage appointment following the bankruptcy of his publishing house, bitterly discovered that hard work and virtuous behavior did not necessarily stave off financial distress and downward mobility. With his family in need of funds, young Henry quit school at the age of thirteen and spent the next several years working as an errand boy, clerk, foremast boy on a ship, and as an apprentice printer.

In 1857, frustrated by low wages and frequent quarrels with bosses, George set off for California in search of new opportunities. Like so many of his contemporaries, he ventured west confident that he was entering the American Eden. Westward migration, according to the popular ideology of the period, offered a cure, a safety-valve as Frederick Jackson Turner later described it, for the poverty and unemployment that occasionally beset eastern cities. When conditions got bad, workers were urged to move west, where abundant lands and a sparse population promised high wages, steady employment, and numerous opportunities for industrious men and women.⁴

Yet, far from finding the West filled with unlimited opportunity and prosperity, George discovered a land plagued by un-

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certainty, despair, and exploitation: railroads, land speculators, and other monopolists prospered while ordinary workers and farmers suffered. George spent the next several years tramping around the countryside, taking whatever odd jobs he could get — as a ranch hand, gold miner, farm laborer, clerk, and typesetter — and all too often begging for a meal and night's stay in a barn. The worst period in his life came shortly after the birth of his second child in 1865. Unemployed, his wife and children literally starving, George set off in a desperate attempt to secure funds to feed his family.

I walked along the street and made up my mind to get the money from the first man whose appearance might indicate that he had it to give. I stopped a man — a stranger — and told him I wanted \$5. He asked what I wanted it for. I told him that my wife was confined and that I had nothing to give her to eat. He gave me the money. If he had not, I think I was desperate enough to have killed him.⁵

This experience, George recounted in later years, led him to question the fundamental beliefs of his upbringing. How was it possible that in a land of such great prosperity an honest laborer could not earn a decent living? Was poverty simply the result of individual failings or were there some larger set of circumstances at work? George began writing articles and essays exploring these questions while working as a reporter and managing editor of several California newspapers between 1865 and 1875. George's career as a crusading writer and editor was abruptly ended by the bankruptcy of his newspaper in 1875 — a bankruptcy he attributed to the hostile actions of local railroad monopolists. Forced to take a job as a state inspector of gas meters, George devoted his evenings to the study of political economy, a discipline he believed would offer clearer insights into the disorders plaguing society. In January 1880, after several years of self-education, Henry George published his solution to the critical problems of the age: *Progress and Poverty*.

Although George never completely lost his faith in antebellum ideology, *Progress and Poverty* attempted to expose and resolve its limitations and contradictions. George was determined to explain and offer clear solutions to the "greatest enigma of our times . . . [the] association of poverty with progress."

Even though the nineteenth century was "marked by a prodigious increase in wealth-producing power" observed George, "large classes are maintained by charity or, live on the verge of recourse to it; amid the greatest accumulations of wealth, men die of starvation, and puny infants suckle dry breasts; while everywhere the greed of gain, the worship of wealth, shows the force of fear and want. The promised land flies before us like the mirage."⁶

Who, asked George, was to blame for this shameful situation? Workers? Manufacturers? Was it possible that poverty was an inevitable consequence of technical progress? Disdaining the complex and confusing explanations offered by most political economists of his day, George located the answer in a single concept: monopoly. It was monopoly which prevented free market competition, denied equality of opportunity, and caused industrial depressions and urban poverty. And, of all monopolies, one stood out as more pernicious than any other: the monopoly of land. The inequalities of modern society, argued George, did not arise from the production process, but from the unequal distribution and private ownership of land and its resources. "From this fundamental injustice," he proclaimed, "flow all the injustices which destroy and endanger modern development, which condemn the producer of wealth to poverty and pamper the nonproducer in luxury."⁷

George's interpretation of and remedies for monopoly merged strands of antebellum petit-bourgeois ideology with two long-time tenets of working-class radicalism: the producer's ethic and the labor theory of value. George contended that the fundamental struggle in society was not between labor and capital, but between producer and non-producer, between those who created wealth and those who lived off the wealth produced by others — landlords, speculators, bankers, and professionals. Production, he explained, consisted of three main elements: labor, capital, and land. The first two were active partners, not enemies, in the creation of new goods and greater wealth. Land, however was a totally passive force which, while necessary, contributed nothing to the actual process of production. Nevertheless, land, or more precisely the landlord, received a share of the profits in the form of rent. The landlord was paid not because he created new wealth, but because he held a monopoly on the land.

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This was George's answer to the puzzling question of why, despite long hours of work, laborers' wages rose very little. Under the existing industrial arrangement non-producers were allowed to rob workers of the full value of their labor. As the population grew and the cost of land rose, George explained, the tribute to landlords increased while the potential gains of workers and manufacturers decreased. Any additional profits a capitalist or laborer might make through hard work and perseverance would simply be appropriated by the landlord in the form of higher rents. Surely, argued George, this was a new form of slavery. "As a man belongs to himself, so his labor when put in concrete form belongs to him . . . If chattel slavery be unjust, then is private property in land unjust."⁸

Land monopoly also assumed a second, equally destructive form: speculation in undeveloped properties. Under the existing system of taxation, nonproducers who kept land undeveloped hoping to make future profits, paid little or no taxes, while manufacturers and homebuilders were unjustly punished for their productive efforts by having to pay high taxes on developed lands. The government's tax policies, then, served to encourage greed and discourage productive enterprise.

George offered a seemingly simple yet radical solution to contemporary problems, the Single Tax, but he did so in a manner which belied its true radicalism. In order "to extirpate poverty," he explained, "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."⁹ Rather than urging the direct confiscation of land, a measure bound to be denounced as socialistic, George proposed that the government simply appropriate the profits derived from increased land values. Let the government, he suggested, impose a uniform tax upon all land regardless of whether it was developed or not. The Single Tax, as it later became known, was essentially a land-use fee that would be paid by the renter directly to the government rather than to landlords or speculators. Although the actual mechanisms of the Single Tax were never clearly delineated, George implied that the tax would be determined according to the prevailing market demand for property. In other words, the new property

taxes would be equal to the rental value that any piece of land could command. If, for example, a manufacturer was willing to pay the government \$10,000 for the use of a plot of land, then the original owner would either have to pay a tax equal to that amount or give up the right to the use of that property for a year.

The Single Tax, in effect, nationalized the ownership of land, yet it did so within a democratic context. Increased land values, George argued, while socially created by the growth and development of the *entire* community, were presently usurped by landlords and real estate speculators. The Single Tax would remedy this situation by transferring the unearned profits of rent and speculation back to the nation as a whole. The state would "become the universal landlord without calling herself so . . . and every member of the community would participate in the advantages of ownership." Citizens would still be left with the outward appearance of land ownership: "Let the individuals who now hold it still retain, if they want to, possession of what they are pleased to call *their* land . . . Let them buy and sell, and bequeath and divide it. We may safely leave them the shell, if we take the kernel."¹⁰

George envisioned the Single Tax as the great panacea of his age. "It would raise wages, increase the earnings of capital, extirpate pauperism, abolish poverty, give remunerative employment to whoever wishes it, afford free scope to human powers, purify and carry civilization to yet nobler heights."¹¹ Speculators, faced with the prospect of having to pay high taxes on non-income-producing lands, would be forced to sell or build upon their holdings. This, in turn, would eventually lead to the construction of more factories and homes, thereby alleviating the problems of unemployment and urban congestion. The elimination of usurious rents, argued George, would reduce production costs and thereby bring higher wages to workers and greater profits to employers. Moreover, the Single Tax would generate sufficient funds to end the need for all other taxes. Its revenues would meet the cost of government operations, then only 5 percent of the Gross National Product, and leave a surplus which would be returned to the people in the form of new railroads, telegraphs, schools, hospitals, museums, and parks.

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The genius of *Progress and Poverty* lay in George's ability to draw upon traditional American values to justify and legitimize radical ends. The Single Tax, he repeatedly emphasized, was merely an attempt to honor and protect the fundamental rights of citizenship. Land monopoly, he explained, led to slavery, and slavery, be it chattel or industrial, was inconsistent with the principles of a free and independent citizenry. "In allowing one man to own the land on which and from which other men must live," George argued, "we have made them his bondsmen . . . and must soon transmute democratic institutions into anarchy."¹²

George also invoked the support of God on behalf of the Single Tax and land nationalization. He secularized religious thought and joined it with themes of monopoly and citizenship to create powerful political images. George belonged to the Christian and evangelical perfectionist tradition in American politics that insisted that Christians could not compromise with sin, neither the sin of slavery nor the sin of monopolizing God's gift to humanity. The Bible taught us that land was a "gift of the Creator to his common creatures, which no one had the right to monopolise." Moses saw with great clarity that the "real cause of enslavement of the masses of Egypt was, what has everywhere produced enslavement, the possession of a class, of the land upon which the whole of the people must live."¹³ Consequently, in demanding an end to land monopoly, George, like Moses, was merely following the will of God.

George also turned to political economy as a means of providing working-class readers with a "scientific" basis for his programs. Prior to George, political economy, a discipline which assumed a scientific aura in the 1870s and 1880s, was consistently used to defend the prevailing capitalist order. Heretofore, George explained in 1877:

The name of political economy has been constantly involved against every effort of the working class to increase their wages or decrease their hours of labor. This impious doctrine always preached by oppressor to oppressed — the blasphemous dogma that the Creator has condemned one portion of His creatures to lives of toil and what, while He has intended another portion to enjoy "all the fruits of the earth and the fullness thereof" — has

been preached to the working classes in the name of political economy, just as the cursed-be-Ham clergymen used to preach the divine section of slavery in the name of Christianity.¹⁴

George rejected the mystifications and untruths of bourgeois economics and advanced in its stead a radical political economy that presented workers with a very different vision of how the world could be. A national economic policy rooted in the Single Tax, he argued, would end the poverty, unemployment, and industrial depressions that bourgeois political economists claimed were the inevitable results of progress. George also used political economy to challenge the pseudoscientific ideology of social Darwinism and to present readers with an economic plan designed to secure the prosperity and "harmony of the whole," rather than of a few individuals.¹⁵ Through these interpretations of political economy, George offered the working class a new voice of truth and authority.

Though compelling in the simplicity of its solutions, *Progress and Poverty* was nevertheless a flawed and occasionally confused work of theory. Its most serious weakness lay in its limited view of monopoly and its belief that distribution, not production, was the critical factor causing industrial distress. George's belief in the harmony of the producing classes led him to ignore the class divisions and competing interests that characterized modern interactions between labor and capital. By focusing only on land monopoly, he failed to recognize the importance and increasingly monopolistic character of capitalist production. The private ownership of capital gave far greater power to small groups of individuals and constituted a much greater cause of economic inequality than the private ownership of land. Reforming land without reforming production would not have brought the major redistribution of wealth which George envisioned. It is highly unlikely that the Single Tax would have generated sufficiently higher wages, for George naively assumed that manufacturers, as fellow producers, would have gladly shared the reduced costs of production with their employees. Furthermore, it is unclear whether the Single Tax would have brought the kind of social progress George anticipated. Would a worker be forced off his land if a capitalist was willing to pay a higher land use tax?¹⁶

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Despite the problematic nature of its theories, *Progress and Poverty* achieved immediate fame and success. Hardback copies both here and abroad sold out within a few months of publication. Newspapers serialized the book and cheap workingmen's editions were distributed throughout the United States, England, Scotland, and Ireland. By 1886, *Progress and Poverty* had been translated into thirteen languages. Admired overseas, where he made several extensive lecture tours, George commanded even greater respect at home. No group greeted *Progress and Poverty* with more enthusiasm than the nation's workers. "Tens of thousands of laborers read *Progress and Poverty*," political economist Richard Ely noted with amazement, "who have never before looked between the covers of an economics book, and its conclusions are widely accepted articles in the workingmen's creed."¹⁷

Why did George's writings so fire the imagination of American workers? Why did they adopt George as their mentor rather than Lassalle or Marx? The answers lay in the convergence of the growing discontent and activism of American workers in the 1870s and 1880s, and the strong resonance George's theories had in working-class culture. *Progress and Poverty* came to prominence in the midst of a severe and prolonged depression that led many wage earners to question the fundamental promises of American life. Workers found their ambitions to achieve economic independence — to buy a home, own a small business — superseded by the more pressing problems of daily survival. Although many workers responded to the crises of the period by joining labor organizations in unprecedented numbers, before George's work there seemed to be little agreement over the primary causes of their distress. Some workers blamed overproduction, others underproduction; some blamed immigrants, some machinery, some the greed of capitalists. For most Americans, industrial capitalism remained a process shrouded in mystery.¹⁸

Progress and Poverty came as a welcome ray of clarity into a world of confusion. Henry George gave the working class a political economy they could understand and use. Like Marx, he viewed political economy not simply as a system of thought, but as a form of power that could be used first to demystify and

then to change the world. Through his use of simple language, powerful metaphors, analogies, and humor, George presented a portrait of a world that had gone awry. But it was also a world which men and women could set right. Poverty, low wages, and depressions, he explained, were neither natural nor inevitable, but the workings of human agency.

With clarity came the possibility of action. As contemporary newspaper editor John Swinton testified, *Progress and Poverty* inspired its readers with a sense that they *could* change the course of history:

It came to the weary and heavy laden as the talismen of a lost hope. All their lives long they had been taught that poverty was a 'dispensation of Providence' needful to keep them humble and teach them patience, but if cheerfully borne, it would somehow contribute to their happiness in the dim beyond. 'Progress and Poverty' reversed all this, teaching that poverty is an artificial condition of man's invention, the result of unjust social conditions which compel one to toil that another may eat . . . Workingmen and women, learning all this, conceived the thought, 'if this be truth, then existence even here in this world may be something more than continued striving to supply the most urgent physical demands,' and immediately they commenced to wrestle with their chains.¹⁹

Not only did George simplify the world, but he did so in a language and with a series of ideas that had deep resonance in working-class life. Although George was not an original theorist, many of his ideas being drawn from the works of earlier classical and radical economists, no American thinker had ever presented these ideas with greater force or appeal.²⁰ Unlike many political economists who wrote with one eye fixed upon Europe, George rooted his works in American traditions and experiences. Marx did not succeed in mobilizing American workers, George suggested, because he wrote in a language that was outside the mainstream of American culture. American workers did not want to join in proletarian struggles, they wanted to avoid proletarianization. They wanted to escape the problems of Europe, not bring them to the American shores. George offered workers a language that avoided any mention of what were in fact the two leading characteristics of the 1880s: class

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struggle and the proletarianization of American labor. Instead, he spoke of citizens, not classes; of nonproducers and speculators, not capitalists; of democracy, not socialism.

Though George's more radical critiques labeled him a petit-bourgeois democrat, it was precisely his belief in the small-producer strain of antebellum ideology that generated his radicalism and enhanced his legitimacy among the working class. Throughout his life George remained deeply committed to a vision of work and community rooted in the world of artisans, shopkeepers, and farmers. This ideology, however, no longer accurately described a post-Civil War world dominated by industrial capitalism, monopolies, and corporations. Consequently, George struggled to create a new language of American radicalism which merged elements of petit-bourgeois ideology and artisanal radicalism to oppose the industrial order of the 1880s.

George's widespread popularity among workers soon sparked the beginning of a new phase in his life: political activist. In August 1886, at an extraordinary meeting in New York City, delegates from 165 labor unions and organizations — radicals and conservatives alike — asked George to run as their candidate for mayor on the newly created United Labor Party (ULP) ticket. George accepted the nomination, convinced that his candidacy would bring his theories "into practical politics and do more to popularize its discussion than years of writing would do."²¹ With George at its head, the ULP launched a political crusade devoted to the restoration of democracy and the elimination of monopoly and political corruption. The party platform, heavily influenced by George's writings, demanded radical changes in government's relation to the economy and the people. Among other things, it called for the nationalization of all means of transportation, communication, and natural monopolies (gas, oils, minerals, etc.) and for the institution of the Single Tax.

George's genius as a political candidate, like his gift as a writer, lay in his ability to fashion a radical party that operated within the context of everyday, seemingly conservative values. Appeals to citizenship, democracy, and God had long been

used by ruling elites to defuse working-class radicalism, but George understood that these concepts were not inherently conservative. They were values which formed an important core of American culture; values which, while often used for ideological ends, were not intrinsically ideological. During the mayoral campaign of 1886, George appropriated these terms and used them to attract supporters and legitimize the ULP's call to action.

By placing the land question, in the form of the Single Tax, at the head of the party platform, George was able to focus upon themes that were considered central to the preservation of democracy, independence, and prosperity. Indeed, there were few issues with greater resonance in nineteenth-century political culture than that of free land. American workers and politicians had long agreed that an abundant and accessible supply of land was crucial to the maintenance of a classless, democratic nation. Land and independence were synonymous; cut off the first and the latter would disappear. For workers, free land also served as a bulwark against the dangers of proletarianization. "When we cease to have cheap land," George wrote in 1868, "we shall realize the full tone of the social evils which affect Europe."²² Unless the forces of monopoly and speculation were controlled, they would drive vast numbers of landless farmers and immigrants into the already crowded cities. As a consequence, wages would drop, housing become even more scarce and expensive, and dependence upon nonproducers more widespread.

George's focus upon land, coming at a time when land reform was already being agitated by a number of groups, won him the support of a broad spectrum of working-class and middle-class organizations. The ULP's land nationalization program brought the endorsement and considerable energies of the city's socialists. Although they regarded George as a confused bourgeois theorist, they still viewed the ULP as a progressive working-class movement and its attacks on private property in land as a major step toward socialism. The land plank also attracted the support of a group often considered the city's most conservative workers, the Irish. While Irish voters generally shied away from participation in radical working-class parties, preferring instead to channel their energies into promoting the

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cause of Irish nationalism and land reform, they warmly supported George — a man who had consistently spoken out on behalf of the Irish crusade against English landlordism. Similarly, George's call for land reform and his close friendship with Grand Master Workman Terence Powderly, earned him the backing of the nation's most powerful labor organization, the Knights of Labor. George also picked up the support of moderate reform organizations such as the Greenbackers, Free Soil Societies, Anti-Monopoly Leagues, and Land and Labor Clubs.²³

While the land question succeeded in attracting potential supporters, George was still confronted with the need to legitimize his party and its course of action. Throughout the nineteenth century, workingmen's parties had been effectively denounced as agents of class conflict and foreign ideologies. This suspicion of labor parties grew even more pronounced in the wake of the Haymarket Riots of 1886 and the ensuing conservative backlash against anything smacking of "radicalism." Indeed, during the early days of the campaign, hostile newspaper editors and politicians attacked George as a "revolutionist," and his party as "hordes of anarchists" and breeders of "mob violence."²⁴ How, they asked, could the ULP possibly justify the Single Tax, a program which clearly raised the dreaded specter of socialism?

George allayed these suspicions by drawing upon the same concepts he had used so effectively in *Progress and Poverty* — citizenship, country, God, and science. He appealed to workers to act not as members of a particular class, but as citizens fighting to save the republic from corruption and dissipation. It is "our duty as citizens," he avowed, "to address ourselves to the adjustment of social wrongs."²⁵ Land monopoly threatened the very fabric of American life, therefore republican principles demanded that citizens act to abolish this evil.

Responding to critics who labeled his party and its platform as "socialistic," George declared: "We are Democrats and believe that political power should emanate from the people, and that in all matters that do not invade the inalienable rights of man the majority should rule." George chided his opponent, Abram Hewitt, for defaming the democratic character of the ULP:

You have heard so much of the working class that you have evidently forgotten that 'the working class' is in reality not a class, but *the mass*, and that any political movement in which they are engaged is not that of one class against other classes, but as an English statesman has happily phrased it, a movement of 'the masses against the classes.' The men who earn their bread by manual toil are in this, as in every community, the vast majority. Their interests must be the interests of the community at large.²⁶

George skillfully linked class interests with the rights and obligations of citizenship. The ultimate benefactor of the Single Tax, he argued in true republican fashion, was not the individual worker, but the American state. "The interests of the state," he wrote some years earlier, "are the interests of its citizens — the greater the rewards which labor receives, the higher the estimation in which it is held, the greater the quality of distribution of earnings and property, the more virtuous, intelligent, and independent are the masses of people, the richer, and the nobler is the state."²⁷ By pursuing the interests of the "masses," the ULP acted on behalf of *all* members of society.

George also used concepts of citizenship, Christian obligation, and political economy to justify and legitimize the ULP's call for nationalization. He condemned laissez-faire government as inconsistent with the modern needs of democracy and insisted that the people required an active state which, acting in accordance with the designs of God and the Founding Fathers, would directly involve itself in furthering the interests of the majority of its citizens. To this end, George contended that the State was obligated to assume ownership and control over all natural monopolies and institutions vital to the public interest: land, railroads, telegraphs, and so forth. Once again, George justified these radical demands within the context of familiar American democratic principles:

The primary purpose and the end of government being to secure the natural rights and equal liberty to each, all businesses that involve monopoly are within the necessary province of government regulation, and businesses that are in their nature complete monopolies become properly functions of the state. As society develops, the state must assume these functions, in their nature cooperative, in order to secure the equal rights and liberty of all. That is to say, in the process of integration, the individual

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becomes more and more dependent upon and subordinate to the all, it becomes necessary for government, which is properly that social organ by which alone the whole body of individuals can act, to take upon itself, in the interest of all, certain functions which cannot safely be left to individuals.²⁸

George's campaign attracted the attention and enthusiasm of workers throughout the United States. Letters of support poured into the offices and appeared in the columns of *John Swinton's Paper*. "We are looking to the Henry George movement," wrote G.M. Clover of St. Louis, "with the greatest of interest. Let your hero break the ice, and its goodbye old plutocracy." From Muscatine, Iowa came a letter exhorting New York workers to "Follow your Moses, and serve God by electing Henry George." One Newport, Kentucky man, summing up the hopes and expectations of countless others, wrote: "I assume that if Henry George is elected Mayor of New York City, it will bring the working people together all over our beloved country."²⁹

On November 2, with an anxious nation looking on, New York voters went to the polls. Though the ULP was unable to overcome the political organization of the Democratic machine and the opposition of capitalists and their allies, they shocked the political establishment by finishing a strong second. Abram Hewitt, the Tammany-backed candidate, received 90,552 votes to George's 68,110, and 60,435 went to Republican Theodore Roosevelt. Despite his defeat in New York, George's campaign precipitated a massive upsurge of working-class political activity throughout the nation. Grass roots organizations sprang up in Connecticut, Vermont, Ohio, Illinois, Minnesota, and dozens of other states. Influenced by the teachings of *Progress and Poverty*, these parties united an unprecedented array of workers in a common struggle to forge a more democratic nation.³⁰

Although the United Labor Party experienced an initial period of success, electing candidates to office in cities and towns throughout the country, by the end of 1888 it had collapsed. Why did a party which showed such great initial promise and support die so quickly? The party's demise stemmed largely from its decision to pursue middle-class voters rather than to strengthen its support within the working class. In the months

after November, George became convinced that the election had been lost because Democrats and Republicans were able to portray the ULP as a class-based party. In fact, the ULP *was* a class-based party. Although George received some votes from small manufacturers, merchants, and professionals, the bulk of his support came from the working class. Instead of moving to solidify and expand his support among workers, however, George argued that the path to future political victory lay in broadening his appeal and acceptance among the middle class.³¹

George's decision to court middle-class voters was not simply the misguided strategy of one individual. It expressed a dilemma that haunted his party and the nineteenth-century labor movement as a whole: how to sustain commitment to radical principles and at the same time gain power through electoral politics. This tension was manifested most dramatically in the split between ULP liberals and radicals. Although they maintained a united front during George's initial campaign, their uneasy alliance broke down under the strain of charting a future course of action. In the summer of 1887 when party socialists pressed for the nationalization of all instruments of production, George, fearful of antagonizing moderate voters, responded by expelling them from the organization.³² Party liberals quickly endorsed George's actions, readily agreeing that the path to political success lay in winning middle-class support. Angered radicals, insisting that they were "fighting only for a grand principle, not for public office," left the ULP and formed a new labor party.³³ Despite its optimistic expectations, the ULP was unable to replace the departed socialists with middle-class voters, for the latter still perceived George and his party as too radical.

The pressures that brought about the party's collapse were not purely internal. George's organization faced the combined opposition of mainstream parties, clergy, and capitalists. Democrats and Republicans, in New York and elsewhere, responded to the threat of a new third party by pooling their forces to defeat ULP candidates and moving to co-opt party leaders and moderate party demands into their own organizations. George also found his party under assault by the Catholic

Church. The Catholic hierarchy of New York, undoubtedly concerned about the spiritual well-being of their parishioners and the safety of their considerable land holdings, denounced the ULP and its platform as "unsound, unsafe, and contrary to the teachings of the church."³⁴ When such warnings proved insufficient to dissuade parishioners and clergy from joining the party, Catholic leaders persuaded the Pope to excommunicate George's chief party lieutenant, Father Edward McGlynn. Fearing the worst for themselves, Irish voters, sympathetic clergy, and important party leaders like Patrick Ford, editor of the influential *Irish World*, abandoned the ULP and sided with the church.³⁵

The ULP's naive faith in the nature of the republican state hindered its efforts to combat these external forces. Deeply rooted in antebellum ideology, George and his supporters perceived the state as belonging to the people and they believed that a united citizenry would be able to take over the reigns of government and institute policies that would limit the power of antidemocratic forces. While such a scenario was possible, George and his party severely underestimated the power and ability of capitalists to suppress radical movements. By 1886 the state could no longer claim to be a neutral agent. The repeated use of local and federal troops to suppress labor strikes in the 1870s and 1880s demonstrated that the state had fallen under the influence, if not the control of capitalists and their allies. No matter how reasonable George perceived his party to be, many others viewed its attacks on private property and laissez-faire government with grave concern.

Whatever the shortcomings of his movement, George left behind an important legacy. His campaign directed workers toward an assault upon the very foundations of industrial capitalism. By calling for the nationalization of railroads, telegraphs, and all natural monopolies, George challenged the most sacred principle of capitalism: the sanctity of private property. Although he steadfastly denied any intentions to nationalize industry, the radical implications of his programs were clear to most capitalists. If the state interfered with property rights in one sector of the economy, it ultimately could do so in other sectors. But what must have been most frightening to capitalists

was that the proponents of this movement did not perceive it as socialism or communism, but as Americanism.

The ULP campaign also helped breed a new generation of activists. Samuel Gompers, president of the American Federation of Labor and a supporter of the ULP, reflected some years later that the party's campaign "united people of unusual abilities from many walks of life" and "proved a sort of vestibule school for many who later undertook the practical work for human betterment."³⁶ In the years following 1888, party liberals moved toward Progressivism, while party radicals became involved in Populism and socialism.

Yet, while many others continued the political crusade, George, disillusioned and disappointed with the collapse of his party, abandoned the political arena and turned his energies once again toward writing and lecturing. During the following decade, he traveled throughout the world speaking on behalf of the Single Tax and his new cause, Free Trade. In the fall of 1897, George, in ill-health and looking "like a racked and wounded saint," ignored the warnings of his physician and decided to run for mayor of New York City as the candidate of the newly formed Party of Thomas Jefferson. Echoing the same themes he had sounded eleven years earlier, he called upon voters "to rise up in the land of liberty" and support the "principle of true Democracy . . . the majesty of human rights and boundaries of government by the people."³⁷

George's campaign, however, came to a premature end. In the early hours of October 29, just four days before the election, Henry George succumbed to a fatal stroke. At the urging of friends and admirers, George's family allowed his body to lay in state at the Grand Central Palace, where, on October 31, some 50,000-100,000 people passed before the bier of their fallen hero. "Not even Lincoln," wrote novelist and reformer Hamlin Garland, "had a more glorious death than this humble man who died fighting for the real interests of his countrymen."³⁸ Memorial services were also held in cities throughout the nation and Europe to celebrate the life and mourn the death of the man who, as one journalist noted, had carried the "doctrines of justice and brotherhood to the remotest corners of the earth."³⁹ George's tombstone, erected by friends to honor his memory,

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was inscribed with the words from *Progress and Poverty*: “The truth that I have tried to make clear will not find easy acceptance. If that could be, it would never have been obscured. But it will find friends — those who will toil for it; suffer for it; if need be, die for it. This is the power of Truth.”

Despite his failings, Henry George deserves renewed attention, and his experiences provide us with a number of critical insights into our own times. George recognized the importance that language and culture played in building a mass movement among the working class. He understood that economic crises in and of themselves would not necessarily succeed in mobilizing the labor force. Workers required theories to guide them, and theory, to have force in the world, had to treat the culture of its audience in a serious manner and speak to them in a language that had resonance in their daily lives. George understood that workers’ partial immersion in bourgeois ideology did not necessarily prevent them from initiating mass democratic movements. He demonstrated that American workers could use the dominant beliefs, sentiments, and aspirations of their culture as the basis for launching a radical assault against the antidemocratic forces of their society.

Yet, as George sadly learned, culture and language were not in and of themselves sufficient to sustain a radical movement. A theorist also had to provide theories which were adequate to solving the problems of the time; theories which would, in George’s own words, get to the *root* of contemporary crises. While one could avoid using European terms, any successful theorist had to come to grips with the fact that the main problem confronting the working class of late nineteenth century America was capitalism, not land monopoly; production, not distribution; class struggle, not class harmony. Although George learned from his culture, he was ultimately unable to offer real solutions to its problems.

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NOTES

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¹Arthur Nicholas Young, *The Single Tax Movement in the United States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1916), p. 79.

²Jacob Oser, *Henry George* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1974), p. 68.

³This ideology is most fully explored in Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Daniel T. Rodgers, *The Work Ethic in Industrial America 1850–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

⁴The promises and limitations of westward expansion are discussed in Ray Allen Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), pp. 24–46; Foner, *Free Soil*, pp. 27–39; Edward Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jack-sonians: The Radical Leaders of the Early Labor Movement* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1967), pp. 72–75; Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), *passim*. An interesting discussion concerning the importance of the West and its relationship to the development of American working-class consciousness can be found in Frederick Engels, "Preface to the American Edition," *The Condition of the Working-Class in England*, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On Britain* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962), pp. 6n–7n.

⁵Henry George Jr., *The Life of Henry George* (New York: Doubleday and McClure Co. 1900), p. 149. The following works are useful in tracing George's background and the genesis of his theories: Charles Albro Barker, *Henry George* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959); Edward J. Rose, *Henry George* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1968); Oser, *Henry George*; George Raymond Geiger, *The Philosophy of Henry George* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933).

⁶Henry George, *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Causes of Industrial Depressions and of the Increase of Want With Increase of Wealth . . . The Remedy* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1955), pp. 3, 8.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 340–341.

⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 334, 347.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 328.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 406, 405.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 405–406.

¹²*Ibid.*, pp. 548–549.

¹³Henry George, *Moses* (New York: The International Joseph Fels Commission, 1918), pp. 20, 14. George first delivered "Moses" in June 1878. The relationship between religion, politics, and the labor movement during the 1870s and 1880s is explored in Herbert Gutman, *Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), pp. 79–118; Eric Foner, "Class, Ethnicity, and Radicalism in the Gilded Age: The Land League and Irish America," *Marxist Perspectives*, 1 (Summer 1978), 6–55; Henry May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), *passim*; Jean Quandt, "Religion and Social Thought: The Secularization of Post Millennialism," *American Quarterly*, 25 (October 1973), 391–407.

¹⁴Quoted in Oser, *Henry George*, p. 29. This speech was first delivered at a Berkeley job interview. George did not get the position.

¹⁵George, *Progress and Poverty*, p. 32. The changing nature of political economy during this era is discussed in Dorothy Ross, "Socialism and American Liberalism: Academic Social Thought in the 1880s," *Perspectives in American History*, 11 (1977–1978), 7–79; Charles F. Collier, "Clark and Patten: Exemplars of the New American Professionalism," in Robert V. Andelson, ed., *Critics of Henry George: A Centenary Appraisal of their*

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Structures on "Progress and Poverty" (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 1979), pp. 261–272; Sidney Fine, *Laissez-Faire and the General-Welfare State. A Study of Conflict in American Thought 1865–1901* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), pp. 47–95, 198–251.

¹⁶For more indepth critiques of *Progress and Poverty*, particularly George's Single Tax idea, see Andelson, ed., *Critics of Henry George*, pp. 15–393; Geiger, *Philosophy of Henry George*, pp. 79–161; Will Lisner, "On the Centenary of *Progress and Poverty*," *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 38 (January 1979), 1–16; also see Henry George, *The Single Tax. What It Is and Why We Urge It* (Cincinnati: The Joseph Fels Fund of America, n.d.), pp. 1–12.

¹⁷Young, *The Single Tax*, p. 79.

¹⁸Contemporary working-class perceptions of the causes and effects of industrial depression are most dramatically detailed in the *Report of the Committee of the Senate Upon the Relations Between Labor and Capital, Testimony Taken By the Committee*, 5 vols. (Washington, 1885). For a brief overview of the period see John A. Garraty, *The New Commonwealth 1877–1890* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1968), pp. 1–129; Jeremy Brecher, *Strike* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1972), pp. 1–151; Gerald A. Grob, *Workers and Utopia. A Study of Ideological Conflict in the American Labor Movement 1865–1900* (Chicago: Quadrangle Paperbacks, 1969), pp. 34–118.

¹⁹John Swinton's Paper, October 24, 1886.

²⁰Many of George's theories were articulated nearly half a century earlier, though with far less successful results, by American radicals such as Thomas Skidmore and George Henry Evans; see Pessen, *Most Uncommon Jacksonians*, *passim*.

²¹Henry George to Dr. Edward R. Taylor, September 10, 1886, Henry George Collection, Special Collections Department, New York Public Library.

²²San Francisco *Daily Times*, June 2, 1868; also see sources in note 4, *ante*.

²³Morris Hillquit, *History of Socialism in the United States* (New York: Russell and Russell, Inc., 1965), pp. 251–254; Foner, "Class, Ethnicity, and Radicalism," *Marxist Perspectives*, 1 (Summer 1978), 6–55; Terence V. Powderly, *Thirty Years of Labor* (Columbus: Excelsior Publishing House, 1889), pp. 169–202; Peter Alexander Speek, *The Singletax and the Labor Movement* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1917), pp. 24–87.

²⁴George Jr., *Life of Henry George*, p. 476.

²⁵Louis F. Post and Fred. C. Leubuscher, *An Account of the George-Hewitt Campaign in the New York Municipal Elections of 1886* (New York: John W. Lovell Co., 1887), p. 29.

²⁶John Swinton's Paper, October 24, 1886.

²⁷San Francisco *Times*, August 9, 1867.

²⁸Henry George, *Social Problems* (New York: Doubleday and McClure Co., 1898), p. 104. This was first published in 1883.

²⁹John Swinton's Paper, October 31, 24, 1886.

³⁰For a more thorough account of George's campaign and the ULP's local and national growth see Speek, *The Singletax*, pp. 24–108; George Jr., *Life of Henry George*, pp. 459–481; Post and Leubuscher, *George-Hewitt Campaign*, pp. 3–178; Leon Reynold Fink, "Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor in Local Politics, 1886–1896" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1977), *passim*; Steven Joseph Ross, "Workers On the Edge: Work, Leisure, and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1830–1890" (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1980), pp. 540–624.

³¹Post and Leubuscher, *George-Hewitt Campaign*, pp. 155–170; George Jr., *Life of Henry George*, pp. 500–501; Speek, *The Singletax*, pp. 81, 92–95.

³²George defended the expulsion by insisting that there "was no alternative other than to have the movement ranked as a socialistic movement or to split with the socialists. Although this lost us votes for the present, I am perfectly certain that it will prove of advantage in the long run." Henry George to C.D.F. Gutschow, November 25, 1887, Henry George Collection, Special Collections Department, New York Public Library.

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³³Cincinnati *Enquirer*, July 3, 1887. The demise of the ULP is discussed in Speek, *The Singletax*, pp. 94–150; Young, *The Single Tax*, pp. 118–131; Ross, “Workers On the Edge,” pp. 588–609.

³⁴George Jr., *Life of Henry George*, p. 477.

³⁵At the time of McGlynn’s excommunication George was still confident that the “great masses of Catholics in this city will stand behind him in spite of all the excommunications that can be leveled against him.” However, several months later he sadly lamented to his friend C.D.F. Gutschow: “You are right about the Catholic Church, its whole force was exerted directly against us and unquestionably hurt us greatly.” Henry George to Richard McGhee, June 6, 1887; Henry George to C.D.F. Gutschow, November 25, 1887, Henry George Collection, Special Collections Department, New York Public Library.

Also see George Jr., *Life of Henry George*, pp. 465–501; Post and Leubuscher, *George-Hewitt Campaign*, pp. 128–149; Barker, *Henry George*, pp. 482–507.

³⁶Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor*, 2 vols. (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1925), I: 316.

³⁷George Jr., *Life of Henry George*, p. 604.

³⁸Quoted in Rose, *Henry George*, p. 151.

³⁹George Jr., *Life of Henry George*, p. 609.