Henry George and the British Labor Movement

Author(s): John Saville

Source: *Science & Society* , Fall, 1960, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Fall, 1960), pp. 321-333

Published by: Guilford Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/40404717

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

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

is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Science & Society*

132.174.249.27 on Mon, 22 Jan 2024 17:25:28 +00:00

HENRY GEORGE AND THE BRITISH LABOR MOVEMENT

JOHN SAVILLE

THE contribution that Henry George made to the early development of the socialist movement in Britain is usually exaggerated. It is not that George was uninfluential —far from it—or that his vivid writing did not excite and stimulate many who later played a prominent part in socialist activity. This part of the story has always been well documented,[1] and there is no lack of contemporary evidence to illustrate the very considerable political impact that *Progress and Poverty* made upon British public opinion. George's writings and speeches helped many to cross the bridge from an advanced radical position to socialism. But much more than George himself or his later biographers realized, George was entering a political situation well prepared for anyone with an anti-landlord message, and it is the anti-landlordism of George rather than the nostrum of the single tax that appealed to British audiences. In the intellectual history of modern times there can have been few prophets whose words fell on such fertile ground. Historically speaking his timing was superb. Ten years earlier his impact would have been marginal; a decade later it would still have been considerable but not as powerful an influence as it proved to be in the early 1880's. George came to a Britain in which there had been an intensive discussion of the rights and wrongs of landlordism for over a decade. As a well informed but hostile contemporary critic wrote in 1884:

The most active leaven of the present social movement, however, is really the land question, the rapidly ripening conviction that our land system lies in one way or another very near the root of many of our social evils, and that little can be done for the permanent amelioration of the labouring class without a thorough-going reform of our agrarian legislation. That is the real meaning of the popularity of Mr. George. He met this movement as it was rising, and partly helped it up, partly rose with it. Nobody accepts his actual ideas—even those who appear publicly as his friends are careful to disclaim belief alike in his principles and in his nostrum; he produces no Georgists; nevertheless he is the vague representative of a kind of cause because everybody feels that he has laid his hand, however erringly, on a true seat of danger, and that much of the poverty that clings to us in spite of our wealth really does flow from the growing severance of the people from the soil.[2]

---

[1] For the opinion of some contemporaries: John Rae, "Social Philosophy", *Contemporary Review* February 1884, pp. 295-300; S. and B. Webb, *History of Trade Unionism* (1894 ed.) pp. 361 f.; J. A. Hobson, "The Influence of Henry George in England", *Fortnightly Review*, December 1897, pp. 835-844.

It is the failure to relate Henry George to the historical context in which he found himself that mars most discussions of his influence in Britain; and it is no paradox to pay full tribute to his immense powers as a propagandist and publicist, and at the same time to insist upon the economic and social forces that provided the background against which George's political influence must be properly estimated.

I

The Britain, then, in which *Progress and Poverty* was first published in 1881 (although copies of the American edition had been in circulation during the previous year) had a lively anti-landlord tradition of considerable dimensions. Or rather there were two traditions—of working class and middle class radicalism—that had come politically fairly close to each other in the 1870's. In the working class movement of the nineteenth century there was a belief in community and common rights in land whose roots went centuries back. The sturdy faith in the fuller rights of the people prior to the Norman Conquest, which expressed itself in the ideas of the Norman Yoke[3] was gradually subsumed in the nineteenth century by the development of the socialist movement. But the older tradition was a very strong one and it was underpinned by the long drawn out historical process whereby the laborer was divorced from the land. The ending of large scale enclosures was not far away in time from the men of the middle decades of the nineteenth century and the appeal of the lost rural community sustained a powerful response from working men until after the turn of the century. The politics of anti-landlordism were made specific by the new theorists whose writings coincided with the closing stages of agrarian change and the beginnings of industrialization in the last two decades of the eighteenth century. Spence (1750-1814), the originator of the single-tax, and Ogilvie (1736-1813) both regarded private property in land as the source of all evil.[4] Spence's writings were well known to the Chartists, and his lecture, *Meridian Sun of Liberty or Rights of Man* was republished by Hyndman in 1882. Ogilvie's *Essay on the Right of Property in Land,* first published in 1781, was reprinted for the Chartist movement in 1838. Two decades after the deaths of Spence and Ogilvie the *Poor Man's Guardian* was writing that "No personal liberty or happiness for the people can exist until at least there is no individual property in soil;"[5] and in the thirty years or so between the ending of the Napoleonic Wars and the decline of Chartism, agrarian radicalism is right at the centre of the ferment of these years. While the Chartist movement developed a highly sophisticated analysis of capitalist society, it was an essential part of their theoretical position that "the land-stealer's rents" were just as much the product of class relationships as the capitalist's profits. In the development of Chartist ideas after 1848, when social and economic objectives were joined with the political demands to form a comprehensive social democratic program, the Chartist convention of 1851 declared that "the land is the inalienable inheritance of all mankind; monopoly is therefore repugnant to the laws of God and nature. The nationalisation of the land is the only true basis of a national prosperity."[6]

---

[2] Rae, *op.* cit., p. 295. Later in the same year (1884) Rae published his well known *Contemporary Socialism,* in the preface to which he wrote, p. vi: " . . . I have introduced a chapter on Henry George although he is not a Socialist, because his doctrines are in many respects clearly allied with those of Socialism, and because he has done more than any other single person to stir and deepen in this country an agitation which, if not socialistic, at least promises to be a mother of socialism."

---

[3] Christopher Hill, "The Norman Yoke" in *Democracy and the Labour Movement* (ed. John Saville, 1954). A revised version of this essay is published in the author's *Puritanism and Liberty* (1958).

[4] For both Spence and Ogilvie, see M. Beer, *The Pioneers of Land Reform* (1920).

[5] Quoted in M. Beer, *A History of British Socialism,* I (1919), p. 279.

In the aftermath of Chartism, between the fifties and the eighties, the central fact of bourgeois society—the exploitation of wage labor by capital—was increasingly lost sight of by the politically articulate among the working class.[7] These are the years when socialist views are no longer heard and when, by default, the workers accept a mishmash of petty bourgeois ideas although their daily practice is often much in advance of their ideology. Certainly in the advancement of the trade union movement there are many positive gains to be recorded, without which later political developments would have been, in certain respects, more difficult to achieve. But there is no mistaking the increasing acceptance of liberal-laborism after the Reform Bill of 1867, and its pervasive influence within the working class movement was to prove a hindrance and an obstacle for many years to the emergence of an independent working class party.

What this acceptance of liberal-laborism involved, *inter alia,* was a bourgeois-radical emphasis upon the land question and the evils of landed monopoly to the exclusion of any analysis of property relationships in general. In the person of Ernest Jones this intellectual change can be traced most clearly, since Jones adhered to a left Chartist, near socialist position longer than anyone else. By the end of the fifties Jones had accepted the disintegration of the Chartist movement, and by the middle of the sixties he was adopting a left-radical program. Two years before his death in 1869, in a lecture entitled *Labour and Capital,* he wrote the following, and its emphasis upon landed monopoly as the central evil of capitalism is typical of the advanced radicalism of these years:

> The source and origin, I might almost say of all the evils that exist in the relations of Labour and Capital, are the monopoly and consequent misuse of the land . . . There are of course numerous disturbing elements that at times unsettle the relations of Capital and Labour—such as cotton

---

[6] John Saville, *Ernest Jones, Chartist* (1952) App. III, p. 259.

[7] This was often remarked upon by contemporaries in the 1870's and 1880's. Rae, in the *Contemporary Review* article noted above, writes that "the agitation bears against landlords alone, not against capitalists" (p. 295); and A. J. Balfour made the same point at greater length in the opening paragraphs of the paper he read to the Industrial Remuneration Conference in 1885. See *The Report of the Proceedings . . .* (1885), pp. 336 ff.

famines, bad harvests, fluctuations of the money market, and others: but all these are merely ephemeral in their effects; though operating undoubtedly under fixed laws, their causes are far remote, and often of but transitory action: whereas, the landed monopoly is an ever present evil, ever being aggravated while it lasts, but one immediately accessible to the efforts of legislation.[8]

It is certainly one of the fascinating paradoxes of British working class history in the nineteenth century that in the country which was more proletarian than any other, and where decisive economic power was in the hands of those who controlled *la grande industrie,* political protest and social criticism were directed against the landlords and not the industrial capitalists. Nevertheless, with all its intellectual and political deficiencies, working class radicalism of the sixties and early seventies was vigorous and lively, and the campaigns of these years were a necessary part of the preparation for the socialist developments of the eighties.

During the sixties a number of factors combined to produce a situation in which working class radicalism developed a high level of political activity. The fifties had been a dull decade from the point of view of working class politics, and its positive achievements were in the slow unspectacular consolidation and expansion of the trades unions of the skilled workers. But the situation changes in the sixties. The Builders' Strike of 1859 had important consequences, of which the establishment of the London Trades Council and the founding of the *Bee-Hive* are the most notable. The American Civil War, and the political currents it generated inside Britain, had heightened interest in political issues and especially in franchise reform; and the political alignments within Britain had brought middle class radicals like John Bright in close working alliance with important groups of working class radicals. Both the Reform Union and the Reform League were formed during the years of the Civil War and the second half of the sixties provided a number of political issues of the first importance on many of which the alliance of middle and working class radicals could be further developed.[9] The Governor Eyre agitation is a good case in point. Here was an issue in which the middle class radicals took the lead and during the campaign they were able to consolidate the friendly relationships which had grown up in the early years of the decade when the main support of a reactionary cause was the same landed aristocracy.[10] Fenianism and the Irish question, the agitation for the second Reform Bill, the attack on trades unionism following the *Hornby* v. *Close* decision, the considerable unemployment of the last years of the sixties, all contributed to the upsurge of radical agitation and activity. Very much at the centre of political radicalism of these years was the anti-landlord agitation. Within a month of the Basle Congress of the First International (September 1869) which discussed landed property at length and had decided for communal ownership, the Land and Labour League was formed in London with nationalization of the land as the central plank of its program;[11] and in the next few years the advanced radical agitation against the landed aristocracy was considerable in its extent and scope. Nationalization was too strong a measure for almost all the middle class radicals and even Mill, whose Land Tenure Reform Association went further than most[12] was writing to Fawcett that he was glad on the whole that the Land and Labour Leagues had been started, since "The furious and declamatory violence of their resolutions and some of their speeches seems to show that they would have been a very intractable element in the other association, and that it is well rid of them."[13] Mill is here referring to the Land Tenure Reform Association, within which he played a leading role, and whose program put it on the extreme left of the middle class land movement. The celebrated demand for "the interception, by Taxation, for the benefit of the State, of the future Unearned Increase of the Rent of Land" was not one which most middle class radicals could accept; but a number of working class leaders joined the Reform Association, and together with the Land and Labour League, connected with the left radical and socialist movements of the next decade. When the mainly middle class Land Nationalization Society was established in 1881, Patrick Hennessey, a prominent member of the Land and Labour League and its first President, was a foundation member.

---

[8] Quoted in Saville, *op. cit.* p. 80.

[9] On the political developments of the sixties, and the *rapprochement* between middle and working class radicals, see F. E. Gillespie, *Labour and Politics in England, 1850-1867* (1927), Chs. 8 and 9.

---

[10] There is a useful account of the Eyre episode in W. Paul, *A History of Modern England,* III (1905), pp. 3-10 and 63-73. See also M. St. John Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (1954), pp. 464 ff; John Saville and E. P. Thompson, "John Stuart Mill and Eoka", *New Reasoner,* No. 7 (Winter 1958-9).

[11] R. Harrison, "The Land and Labour League," *Bull. Internat. Inst. of Social History,* 1953, No. 3.

[12] Harrison, *op. cit.* pp. 172. f.

[13] H. S. R. Elliott, *The Letters of John Stuart Mill,* II (1910), p. 223.

After the early years of the seventies, the specifically working class agitation against landlordism is overshadowed by the middle class demand for Free Trade in Land. When the political situation changes at the end of the decade, the current of working class anti-landlordism runs as strongly as ever.

II

In contrast with the radical agrarian tradition of the working class movement, the middle class agitation on the land question was of recent origin and, in the form it had assumed by the time Henry George came to Britain, it dated from the time of Corn Law repeal. Before 1846 the middle classes were primarily concerned with the achievement of free trade in commercial policy and the extension of *laissez-faire* practices at home. Most of their representatives in business and politics fully recognized the pervasiveness of what Cobden described in 1848 as "the landlord spirit . . . dominant in political and social life," but after 1846 the unity which had been so spectacularly achieved in the Anti-Corn Law movement was never to be repeated. There was no program around which the middle classes could be encouraged to develop a broadly based movement. There were no longer any major economic grievances. Sectional groups campaigned on financial retrenchment, or the iniquity of the income tax, or on state trading but these were all matters which were peripheral and not central to their basic economic interests, which, especially after Gladstone's budgets in the fifties, were now well taken care of. And just as there was no economic foundation for a widely based middle class movement of opposition so there were no political aims that could provide a common meeting ground. The established Church, education, patronage and administrative inefficiency in the Civil Service, the opposition to imperial expansion, were all matters around which at different times considerable political opposition developed; but again they were not capable of being combined together into a coherent program. One problem was the growing conservatism of certain of the wealthier sections among the middle classes, as witness the rejection of John Bright himself by his Manchester constituency in 1857[14]. Another was the division between the middle class politicians on their attitude towards the enfranchisement of the working classes, many of whom were clearly potential allies in the political struggle against the aristocracy. Of all the issues which emerged in the thirty years following Corn Law repeal only the agitation against the land laws achieved any widespread and continuous response, and as is discussed below, the apparent unity of aims was in fact only a surface one.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century the English landowning system, and the laws which supported it, ensured the perpetuation of landed estates in the hands of their existing owners. The law relating to landed property was of such a character that families were able to secure the maintenance of their estates far into the lifetime of future, as yet unborn, generations. The right of primogeniture, perhaps the most distinctive feature of the English family system, was partly the creation of law, in that the rule of succession to landed property in the case of intestacy was inheritance by the eldest son, or, if no male issue, by the female heirs; and partly it was the result of custom, in that inheritance by the eldest male was almost universally accepted. The practice of entail, normally through the medium of strict settlements, was theoretically independent of the principle of primogeniture, in that it was possible in law to entail an estate upon any son and not the eldest; although, in fact, this rarely if ever happened. The power of entail, as already noted, was exercised through the use of strict settlements, and there was a difference between entail and settlement, since the latter extended to personality as well as to lands.[15]

What all this meant in practice was that on inheriting an estate, the head of the family was legally only in the position of a tenant for life. All the income from the estate was his, but he had no power to dispose of any part of his estate by sale. This is putting the situation at its simplest, for most settlements by the nineteenth century contained a provision whereby the settlement could be broken at least once in a lifetime, usually on the achievement of his majority by the heir. But the long term effect of what were immensely complicated legal procedures and settlements was that the family estate remained intact through many generations, and the high degree of concentration of ownership, characteristic of the English landed system at the beginning of the nineteenth century, remained unbroken throughout the next hundred years. It was the land laws that became the target for the radical reformers of the mid-century and the slogan of "Free Trade in Land" developed out of their recognition that only by a total recasting of the law relating to real property could land ever become a factor of production in the strict economic meaning of the term. What they wanted, that is to say, was a free competitive market in land.

---

[14] Naturally, Bright's opposition to the Crimean War was also an important factor. Bright's letter to Cobden, 16 April 1857, and Cobden's letter to Parkes, 9 August 1857; both printed in J. Morley, *Life of Richard Cobden* (various editions).

[15] From the considerable literature published in the 1870's and 1880's two books are recommended as an introduction to the subject: G. C. Brodrick, *English Land and English Landlords* (1880); Sir F. Pollock, *The Land Laws* (3rd ed. 1896).

There were, however, many different approaches among the middle class reformers themselves and some sharp divisions of opinion as to the expected consequences of freedom of trade in land. The *Economist,* representing the middle of the road of the middle ranks of society, wanted a free market in land on the grounds of agricultural efficiency. The *Economist* argued that the existing arrangements starved the land of capital and only when the trade in land was as free as the trade in Consols would the requisite amounts of capital flow into agricultural and allied developments.[16] The radicals proper, mixed group though they were, went further in their expectations. Cobden, for example, while rejecting free trade in land in its "political, revolutionary, radical, Chartist" meaning, expected two major results from the break up of the land laws. One was that the farmers would benefit since land would henceforth come into the hands of those with adequate capital resources, and given the nature of the relationship between landlord and farmer in Britain, the farmer would reap considerable advantages. Secondly, Cobden expected the resettlement of the laborer on the land and the establishment of a peasant proprietorship.[17]

---

[16] The *Economist* was consistent in its arguments through all the middle decades of the century. See, for examples, the issues of 27 July 1850 ("The Operation of Nominal Land Ownership") and 10 February 1872 ("Free Trade in Land") in the Agricultural Supplement).

The majority of middle class radicals accepted the Cobdenite approach, and it was this version of the campaign that developed so vigorously in the second half of the sixties and throughout the seventies. Mill, in his Land Tenure Reform Association, went further still, but as noted above, he represented the extreme left wing of the middle class radical movement. Most radical politicians used the Free Trade in Land argument as part of their general opposition to the Tories without worrying too much about the precise consequences of the legal changes. Joe Chamberlain, in the 1872 speech which Garvin picked out as heralding the "Unauthorised Programme" of the next decade, included Free Land among the major items of his new policy. His speech was given twelve days after the three Warwickshire laborers had called on Joseph Arch to enlist his help in the formation of a union;[18] and Chamberlain, not least because of his close friendship with Jesse Collings, was very much aware of the condition of the agricultural laborers, and sympathetic to their claims. Certainly for him the improvement in their living and working conditions was always one of the main reasons for the ending of aristocratic monopoly.

The flow of pamphlets and books on the land question threatened to become a torrent after the publication of what popularly was known as the New Doomsday Book. The Book was the result of miscalculation by the House of Lords, who, convinced that the widespread agitation against "aristocratic monopoly" of the land had little basis in fact, called for a count of landowners in England and Wales. The detailed *Return of Owners of Land* in 1874 and the *Summary Return* in 1876 hardly bore out their optimism, for although the statistics of landholding required careful handling, the broad picture was of a country in which about a quarter of the land was owned by 1200 persons and a half by 7400. The allegations of the land reformers were shown to have been too modest, and the case against the monopolists was correspondingly strengthened.[19]

---

[17] The most convenient summary of Cobden's views on the land question is in J. E. Thorold Rogers, *Cobden and Modern Political Opinion* (1873), Ch. 3.

[18] J. L. Garvin, *The Life of Joseph Chamberlain,* I (1932), pp. 148 ff.

[19] The New Doomsday Book is well summarized in Brodrick *op. cit.,* Part II, Ch. 3.

With the coming of what economic historians still call the Great Depression, the land question became of urgent topicality, especially in Ireland, where the economic and political consequences of declining prices of agricultural products brought about a revolutionary situation among large sections of peasantry. In Britain attention was focused upon the relationships between landlord and tenant, the economic condition of the laborers and the unique character of the English system with its almost total absence of a peasantry. Inevitably the political problems of landlordism received increased attention and the coercive Irish policy of the second Gladstone administration after 1880 was greeted with dismay and vigorous opposition by the radicals in Britain. The Irish question exercised an enormous influence on domestic politics in Britain and it was into this potentially explosive situation that *Progress and Poverty* was injected. No better reception could have been arranged.

III

The most recent attempt to estimate George's position in British politics is the volume by E. P. Lawrence, *Henry George in the British Isles,* published by the Michigan State University Press in 1957. Mr. Lawrence makes clear the assumptions on which his work is based when he writes, on the first page of his text, that "Henry George, not Karl Marx, was the true catalyst of Britain's insurgent proletariat. . . . The British working class movement ceased to be quietistic and took on a vigorous life with the coming of George and the recognition of him as someone with something vital to say."

These are not statements that can be accepted, and indeed it would not be unfair to remark that such opinions are wholely misleading in their sweeping simplification of an immensely complicated historical situation. The break with radicalism on the part of small but significant minorities in the early 1880's was the product of deep-rooted social forces, of recognition of which, not to say understanding of which, Mr. Lawrence is evidently innocent. This failure to appreciate the complex of causes which brought the revival of socialism in Britain in the last two decades of the nineteenth century leads Mr. Lawrence to accept impossible arguments. Because he sees Henry George as the intellectual catalyst in the upsurge of radical-socialist thinking and activity, he pays no attention to the long tradition of anti-landlordism that has been the subject of this paper; he greatly simplifies the influence of George upon such a crucial figure as Chamberlain and he grossly exaggerates George's part in the vigorous interest in "the condition of England question" that was such a notable feature of the eighties. The list could be considerably extended. Mr. Lawrence has assiduously read his contemporary material, but he has begun his reading at 1880 instead of at least half a century earlier. He has taken at their face value the comments of such contemporary observers as the Webbs and Bernard Shaw, and they have misled him. But mostly he has misled himself. His treatment of Tom Mann is a case in point. There is in his text the well known quotation from the *Memoirs* where Mann pays a warm tribute to George's book, and Mr. Lawrence's later references to Mann all suggest an influence on Mann by George that is at variance with the picture that we have of him. Dona Torr's biography brings out admirably the general and particular influences working upon the young Mann before he became a socialist and makes it clear that within these Ruskin was an important source of inspiration. No one indeed can begin to discuss the early socialist movement in Britain without an understanding of the intellectual influence that Ruskin exerted upon both middle class and working class radicals.[20] *Fors Clavigera* finds no place in the index to Mr. Lawrence's book and his analysis is all the more inadequate for its absence. But Tom Mann, until the Dock Strike of 1889, was not among the leading figures of the young socialist movement in Britain and nor, for that matter, was Henry George's most famous near-convert, Bernard Shaw. But Hyndman and Morris were, and neither passed through the George school although Morris read him carefully in 1881 or 1882, and always spoke generously of George until the latter's attitude in the Chicago anarchists' case in 1887; and then, rightly, Morris damned him.

This is not the place to write an account of the socialist revival in Britain; [21] nor is it my intention to deny George's considerable influence. It is worth emphasizing again the impact that his immensely readable and lively book had upon many, and that his superb gifts as a propagandist were an important though not perhaps an essential cause of his success. Given the recognition of the historical context within which George found himself when he came to England in the early eighties, a balanced appraisal of his influence upon contemporary British politics can then begin. Mr. Lawrence's book cannot be taken as the starting point.[22]

---

[20] "*Unto this Last* made me a socialist in all but name, and when shortly afterwards, I came across pamphlets by William Morris and Edward Carpenter, I knew what I was without any doubt": F. W. Jowett, *What Made Me a Socialist* (n. d.). Jowett was the leading figure in the Bradford I. L. P. in its early years.

University of Hull

---

[21] For an excellent example of the subtle and many sided analysis that is required to explain the origins of the early socialist movement in England, see E. P. Thompson, *William Morris* (1955); and the same author's essay, "Homage to Tom Maguire" in *Essays in Labour History* (ed. Asa Briggs and John Saville, 1960).

[22] The full scale biography of Henry George by C. A. Barker (New York, 1955), is also weak in its sections dealing with George and British politics.