

### **The Democratic Principle:**

Address of Henry George before the Crescent Club Democratic Society of Baltimore from "An Anthology of Henry George's Thought, by Kenneth C. Wenzler reprinted from The Standard, September 14, 1889

For what are we single tax men, as in this country we call ourselves, but republicans of republicans, in the original meaning of the word -- democrats of democrats! If you would follow the Jeffersonian standard, even, as you may think now, and if you would proclaim the Jeffersonian principles, even but a little, then, as far as you have gone in this direction count us with you first, last and all the time. We are with you and of you. For our belief is that of Thomas Jefferson; our aim is his aim and our hope his hope.

We believe with Thomas Jefferson that all men are created equal; that they are endowed with certain natural, inalienable, and God-given rights; that the only legitimate end of government is to preserve and secure these rights, and that when any government subverts them, then it is the duty of the people to alter or amend it. Our aim, as was his aim, is to make the government of this republic a government that will attain this end. Our hope, as was his hope, is not merely for national peace and prosperity, for national strength and true glory, but that the American Republic shall by her example enlighten the nations and lead the world to freedom and to peace. . . .

I have for years ceased to call myself a Democrat in the party sense. Nor have Democrats in the mere party sense cared to claim such men as me. But I know that in inviting me here tonight you have not expected me to preach the duty of voting the straight ticket, no matter what boss dictated it, what "little yellow dog" is put upon it, what league of corporate interests lies behind it; that you have not expected to hear from me partisan praise of one party and denunciation of the other. I care little for me, little for organization, much for principle. The only usefulness of parties to my mind is if they represent ideas and advance policies. And your adherence to democratic principle may often call you to scratch Democratic candidates as the best means of advancing principles. If you are really and truly a democrat and have no choice but between two protectionists, vote for the Republican protectionist -- you will get the simon-pure article. If you have no choice but between two tools of leagued corporations, vote for the Republican tool -- you will quicker break such influence in the party you prefer . . . .

Next year we take the census. It will show in our league of states not less than sixty-five millions of people. A people speaking one language, with hardly a variation, living under the same institutions and possessed of an assimilative power that quickly blends into the fiber and substance of their nationality the great immigration from Europe that continues to pour onto our shores. A people, all things considered, more intelligent, more alert, more enterprising, than any people of equal numbers on earth. A people having, on the whole, the highest standard of comfort. A people who have for their heritage the temperate zone of a vast continent, with practically illimitable natural resources -- a territory that even in the

present stage of the arts would support easily more than ten times their number.

Cast your eyes over Europe with its kings, its privileged classes, its dynastic jealousies, its smoldering traditions of national hatred, and its huge standing armies facing each other in a peace that is little less exhausting than war. Consider this young giant of the west, with its schools and colleges, its thousands of miles of railway, its mesh of telegraph wire, its vast tracts of fertile land which plow has never turned. Consider its freedom from dangerous neighbors, its superlative strength on its own continent, its wide separation from all the causes of quarrel that make Europe even in peace but a vast camp.

Consider the great fact that among us all law reposes, as its acknowledged source of the popular will; that every male citizen has an equal vote; that any male child born may aspire to be president; and that, in all its forms, our government is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

Ought not the heart of every American beat with joy and pride as he thinks of his country? Ought not the eyes of all the world be turned in hope and for example to the great republic beyond the western sea?

Great the American Republic is, greater still she must be -- great in numbers, great in wealth, great in arts, in arms, in power of all kinds; so surpassingly great in the century that little more than one decade will now bring us to, that to find a parallel for the promise of her relative importance ere it close we must go back to the time when the Roman eagles marked the boundaries of the civilized world.

But there is another side to the picture. The republic! Ah, that word should suggest more than great cities and large populations, more than material wealth and material power. And while we think of how great in all these things our nation already is, how greater still it must be, it is well that we should soberly ask ourselves how much in all that constitutes a true democratic republic we are in advance of Europe.

It was a belief of the enthusiastic republicans of Thomas Jefferson's day that by this time the example of the American Republic would have proved contagious, and that the effect of the rise on this side of the Atlantic of a great nation which exemplified the strength and the benignity of democratic principles would have shattered every throne in Europe and cast down every aristocracy. This is not the case. And why! Because we have not been true to democratic principles; because to Europe today the American Republic is not an example of the beauties and benefits of democratic government, but is rather a warning.

No American who mixes with our kindred on the other side of the Atlantic must feel this and feel it bitterly. Let him but venture to sneer at the empty forms and expensive pageantry of royalty, let him but venture to scoff at hereditary legislators and the still existing relics of class rule, and see how quickly he will be reminded of the corruption of American politics, of the bosses who bear sway in our cities, of the

rings that rule our states, of the corporation attorneys represented in our Senate, of the simple citizens who in wealth and power are greater than any British duke, of the buying and selling and intimidating of voters at our elections, of the organized lobbies of our legislatures, and judges placed on the bench for their services to powerful interests, of our strikes and paupers and tramps. . . .

What about the distribution of wealth? Fortunes such as the world never saw since the days when "great estates ruined Italy" are growing up in the American Republic. We have four or five men who are worth from one hundred millions to two hundred millions apiece, we have sixty or seventy whose fortunes are estimated at from twenty millions to a hundred millions, while as for simple millionaires, they are far too numerous to be counted. Consider what the possession of a single million means. Consider how long it would take an American mechanic or American laborer . . . after supporting himself and his family, to save a million dollars. How many lifetimes? For though he were to live to the age of Methuselah he could not save a million dollars. If you would get any intelligible idea of what these fortunes of millions, tens of millions, scores of millions and hundreds of millions really mean, figure up how many working men's incomes -- deducting of course the necessary subsistence of man and family, for even the slaveowner had to allow that to the slave -- it would take to make such incomes as these fortunes represent.

And look again. While these monstrous fortunes are gathering in the hands of a few, one has but to read our daily papers to see how familiar we are becoming with conditions that we once thought possible only in effete monarchies of the Old World, and could not exist in the free air of our democratic republic -- with tramps and paupers and beggars; with charities that show the need of charity, with destitution and starvation, with crimes and suicides caused by want, of fear of want; with a struggle for existence on the part of great classes of people that makes life hard, bitter, and ofttimes imbruting -- a struggle which grows not less, but more intense as these great fortunes go rolling up.

The gulf stream of European immigration still sets upon our shores, but in large sections of the country our natural increase is slackening. There are more and more men who are afraid to marry -- more and more who fear that they cannot support children. The gulf stream of European immigration still flows on, for social discontent is rife in Europe, and the conditions that are increasing social pressure here are being felt all over the civilized world. But what is most significant is the change in feeling toward this immigration. . . . [T]he European immigrant is met when he lands by officials, who, if he brings nothing but the power for labor, send him back again. Chronic paupers, criminals, the weak in mind and body are not desirable elements, but [there was a time] when we boasted that this was the country of countries for any one willing to work, and when we welcome the man who brought nothing but a pair of willing hands as an addition to national strength, a new recruit for the great army that was to overrun the continent and make the wilderness bloom. But now if the immigrant shows, or, rather, if it can be shown, that he has made arrangements to go to work, and has secured employment before

coming here, then is he not merely sent back, but the American who made the bargain with him is liable to fine or imprisonment. The trustees of a New York church are even now under sentence of the law for having imported a contract laborer in the shape of an Episcopal minister. It is only one step further to prohibit all immigration of men likely to work for their living. And this is the logical outcome of the system we have adopted. By elaborate laws we strive to keep goods out of the country in order, we have been told, to give Americans more work to do. It is but logical, then, to keep out workmen in order that there shall be fewer to do it. . . .

But what I wish to call attention to is the significance of this changed feeling toward European immigration. It tells, more forcibly than figures could, that with large classes it is becoming harder to make a living. It tells of the pressure of an unnatural competition which is forcing men to bid against each other for employment -- a competition in which they are leaning to look upon work as desirable in itself -- upon employment as a boon doled out from some superior class, if not as an absolute charity. . . .

I cannot fill in all the dark shades, but I have said enough to suggest them. This is certain, that, if present tendencies continue the democratic republic which the men of Jefferson's day thought they had founded cannot be preserved in anything worthy of the name. A king can never come -- not, at least, until we have run the cycle; as a king never came in Rome after the Tarquins had been expelled.<sup>11</sup> But just as under the single name of imperator there came in Rome tyrants to wield a more than kingly power, so in America may the ring and the boss come to rule through democratic forms as no European king of our time has dared to rule.

11 An Etruscan royal family who ruled early Rome and was driven out in 510 B. C.

But the great thing in any country is not the character of the government but the condition of the people. Democratic institutions are but a mockery to the man who must crouch and slave to live, and democrat of democrats though I am, I would rather be the subject of king, emperor or tsar, and be able to make an independent living than as a citizen of a so-called democratic republic to be oppressed with want and harassed with care; to be forced to feel that the fellow creature who gave me the chance of making a poor living by hard work was my benefactor and my master. "The greatest glory of America," said Carlyle,<sup>12</sup> "is that there every peasant can have a turkey in his pot." Alas, that glory is passing away and we are rapidly tending towards conditions in which the lot of the masses will be harder than it is in Europe.

12 Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), eminent British author, critic, historian and translator.

What is the cause of all this -- of this political corruption, of this rule of bosses and rings and corporate influences, of the widespread purchase and intimidation of voters, of the decay of our commerce, of the increasing intensity of the struggle for existence, of the growth on the one side of the millionaire, and on the other side of the tramp.

In Europe there are those who point to these things and say, "These are the results of your democracy. Popular government with you is a failure for the reason that it has always been a failure. The masses must work and cannot therefore think. They cannot rule and must always be ruled. Which is better, the rule of the aristocrat or the rule of the demagogues? Which is safer, the king by blood or the king by corruption? And there are those in our own country who think the same thought, even if they do not utter the words.

It is not true! Thomas Jefferson was not a dreamer of dreams; a mere doctrinaire imbued with the impracticable vagaries of Rousseau and the French Revolution, as some Americans now style him, and many more think him. He is the greatest of philosophic statesmen this country has produced; a man far in advance of his own time and yet in advance of our times. Nothing that the finger of scorn can be pointed to in this country; nothing that we may lament in our conditions, is due to an excess of democracy, but to a want of it. If we would preserve the Republic in anything more than a name, if we would have it fulfill its high promise, we must be, not less democratic, but more.

What shall we do?

Before going to deeper matters let me speak of some things which, for want of a better word at the moment, I will call the mechanics of our institutions.

One of our besetting sins has been a vanity which has led us to think that we have solved all political problems and that our institutions in all respects are the best that can be devised. The government when formed was a great advance over what then existed in Europe. But with that advance we stopped, though changing conditions have made devices which worked well enough in our earlier days, unsuitable for the present time. In essential respects the constitution of Great Britain is today more democratic than is ours. We have retained our copy of King, Lords, and Commons, in President, Senate and House of Representatives, in full force and vitality -- not only in the federal but in our state governments, whereas the slow but steady democratic advance in Great Britain has virtually done away with the House of Lords. We have a Supreme Court, which, by interpreting a written constitution, can check for a while at least the popular will. In Great Britain one representative body is all that need be secured to change any law or work any reform. Our type is not as quickly responsive to the popular will and does not as readily lend itself to the bringing of important questions before the people as does the type into which the existing British government has been slowly modified. . . .

Nor have we been true to the principle of local self-government -- the principle that alone makes possible this great league of states -- this nation that may cover a continent. I speak not of the reconstruction acts and carpet-bag rule in the south. That is gone. Nor do I speak of our conduct towards the Mormons, where we have really been carrying on a religious persecution. But this fashion of governing cities by commissions and boards, and special laws passed by legislatures is utterly violative of the democratic principle.

But beneath everything of this kind there lies as the vital danger to the republic the increasing inequality in the distribution of wealth. Let the forms and adjustments be what they may, democratic government worthy of the name is only possible where the personal independence of the masses gives root for the civic virtues, and every citizen has an interest in the well-being of the state. But where some are so rich that they need have no care how public affairs go unless in something that immediately concerns them, and when to get more or to defend what they have they can throw thousands and thousands of dollars into politics; and where others are so poor that a few dollars, a petty office, a week's work, even a free lunch and a few drinks are more to them than any public question, then democratic government rots at its very foundations -- then democratic government becomes not the best, but the worst of governments.

Look at the misgovernment and corruption of our great cities, at the robbery and jobbery of their administration, at their rings and their bosses. Bad political adjustments, and failure to regard the principle of local self-government, may have hastened this demoralization, but its deepest cause exists in the social condition of the people.

What sort of government would you have expected of Rome when the aedileship and praetorship and tribunate and consulate and the absolute command of provinces, and the license to despoil great kingdoms, were being bought of the Roman voters with feasts and games and gladiatorial shows? I will not speak of Baltimore, for I am not familiar enough with your city, but go to New York and see the Billy Muldoon associations, the Pat Divver clambakes; <sup>13</sup> note the gang of retainers that each ward and precinct leader rallies around him, and see if you cannot find a suggestion of Rome. It is nothing yet as compared to Rome. But the republic is still young.

<sup>13</sup> Muldoon and Divver were Tammany bosses. See note 24.

Make no mistake. Democratic government becomes the worst government when the voting power is in the hands of proletarians, and the patriot may soon sigh for constitutional monarch, or even an intelligent despotism. Make no mistake. A property qualification of the suffrage is not entirely devoid of reason. Every voter ought to have "a stake in the country."

Is this to condemn democracy? No; it is to say that in a true democratic republic every citizen would have an interest in the state.

Here, at last, we see that the problem of democratic government rests on something that we usually consider beneath our politics; that the social problem underlies all that we think of as political problems.

If mankind must be divided into the very rich and the very poor; if it is in the nature of social growth, of material advance, to increase the gulf between the rich and the poor, then indeed Jefferson was a dreamer; then indeed democracy can only exist in

new and poor countries; then indeed the poets have been right who have sung of liberty as loving the rocks and the mountains, and as shunning the great city and the crowded mart.

But consider. What is the cause of the growing disparity in the distribution of wealth that we see in this country?

First and foremost, the power of government has been deliberately and continuously prostituted to make the rich richer and the poor poorer.

Government has no purse of "Fortunatus." 14 It cannot give to one man without taking away from some other. Look how our "generous government" has made men rich by donations. Look at the subsidies from nations, states, counties, cities and towns. Look at Stanford and Huntington with their hundred millions apiece.<sup>15</sup> Look at the franchises which have built up so many great fortunes, at the surrender of the iron highways that have become the common roads of our time to private interests and corporate greed. Look at the Standard Oil Company, with its private fortunes of a hundred millions each; look at the dressed beef combination, at the rings and monopolies that have their efficient cause in the control of a public function given to private citizens, and the discriminations they have been allowed to make.

14 Fortunatus was the hero in a collection of late fifteenth-century German tales. He had an inexhaustible purse of gold and a wishing cap, which were the sources of his ultimate ruin.

15. Leland Stanford (1824-1893) and Collis P. Huntington (1821-1900) were well-known railroad barons in the West.

Look at our tariff. Here we see the power of the government applied directly, purposely, continuously, and unconstitutionally, to give some citizens an advantage over other citizens -- to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. Look at Mr. Carnegie, with his income of millions and his castle in Scotland; look at the men of whom he is the type; and then at their workmen, the poor, deluded creatures, who have been told that it is *they* who are protected; that this precious system of robbery is all for *them*.

No man, if he thinks of it, can be a democrat really and truly, and be also a protectionist. I know that Jefferson himself was not quite clear on this point; I know that there are expressions of his which protectionists quote with something like comfort. But the Jeffersonian philosophy is clear; the Declaration of Independence is clear. Jefferson was a great man, but still only a man. He grasped great truths and saw their relations clearly, as far as the conditions of his time called on him to look. But no man probably ever sees all the relations of a fundamental truth. It is in the nature of fundamental truth to grow and grow upon us, and, like all men who build on truth, Jefferson built better than he knew.

In his time protection in the United States had only made its first small insidious advances and his attention had never fairly been called to the question of

protection, just as there are today numbers of intelligent men in the United States who have not even yet fairly begun to think of it. But what was the little tender shoot of Jefferson's time has become the giant poisonous tree of ours. Instead of a modest entreaty for a little aid to infant industries, we have not the brazen demand of great rings and monster combinations. The little beggars have become sturdy vagrants.

The protection is utterly inconsistent with the democratic principle, we have but to think a moment to see. Government of the people, for the people, by the people. What does that mean? Not government for manufacturers, nor for farmers, nor for coal miners, nor for factory hands, not for employers or working men, but government for the whole people without favor or distinction. Now what is the protective system? It is simply an indirect form of the subsidy system. It has for its object the enrichment of certain citizens by compelling other citizens to buy at higher prices. This is the primary end and aim of protection. If a protective duty does not raise prices it has no protective effect. It can only protect, as it is called, by enabling certain sellers to demand of buyers higher prices than the free market would give them.

Can anything be more clearly opposed to the democratic principle than this governmental favoritism -- this use of the law making power to enrich the few at the expense of the many? This is the system that has driven American ships off the ocean; that is so handicapping our manufacturers that they cannot export. This is the system that has placed a great nation of 65,000,000 people -- a people so intelligent, so active, so inventive, so prompt to use all labor-saving devices, that all they need ask anywhere is a fair field and no favor -- in the pitiful attitude of crying for a baby act, and actually believing that if a paternal government did not keep its officers at every port to levy blackmail upon goods brought into the country, the wicked foreigners would swoop down and American industry go to the "bow-wows."

Look at the indirect effects of this system. It has corrupted our politics from the primary to the Senate. It has given to enormous moneyed interests a selfish interest in our politics. It has been the fruitful cause of extravagance and waste and demoralization. The depreciation of our currency during the war resulting from the repudiation of the greenback by the government which issued it, the gold speculations, the strangling contraction, the whole fiscal system worked as a potent engine for enriching the few at the expense of the many -- springs from the protective idea. The monstrous surplus wrung from poor people by the most onerous taxation, to be piled up in treasury vaults, is another of its results. The spectacle of the American people being taxed two millions of dollars per month to dig silver out of certain holes in the ground in Nevada or Arizona in order to plant it in other holes in the ground in New York and Washington, is another of its results. And so in every direction has it brought reckless expenditure and profligate waste. Thanks to the protective system, the difficulty with us is a so-called democratic republic has not been to impose taxes upon the people, but to abolish taxes upon the people. Whenever any motion has been made to abolish or reduce one of these protective taxes, Congress has been surrounded by a clamorous lobby ready to beg,



to buy, to cajole, to logroll, to bulldoze, to do anything to prevent the repeal of that tax; and when, as in the last Congress, a Democratic House did succeed in passing a poor little reduction bill, a Republican Senate stood firm against taking off one penny of the taxes of the people. What has been, and is today, the effort of the party in power, aided unfortunately by many so-called democrats, but to keep up expenses and to make profligate appropriations in order to prevent any reduction of this taxation?

The whole system which has, and is costing so dearly, is diametrically opposed to the democratic principle, is diametrically opposed to the Declaration of Independence. The right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Does it not clearly include the right of every man to freely exchange his own productions -- to sell where he can sell best, to buy where he can buy cheapest?

But it will be said public revenues must be raised, and taxes must be levied. Very well. But the democratic principle requires at least that the public revenue shall be raised without unduly and disproportionately burdening any citizen. Protective duties do unduly and disproportionately burden some citizens and do so for the avowed purpose of enriching others.

And though not so wantonly and not so outrageously, all tariff taxes have this effect. These taxes finally fall on the consumer -- they fall on men not in proportion to their means but in proportion to what they use, on the poor far more heavily than on the rich. And being passed from hand to hand, increasing as they go, they cost the ultimate payers far more than they yield to the treasury.

Thanks to that clause in the Constitution which prevents the levying of tariff duties by our states, we do enjoy free trade within the limits of the Union, and it is unquestionably the greatest of the blessings which the Union has given us. But the taxation of our states also tends in the same bad direction. The attempt to tax capital and personal property everywhere results in putting the heaviest burden upon the poor and letting the rich escape.

And all this taxation is in great degree taxation against prosperity -- taxation which punishes enterprise and fines industry and thrift. In any of our states let a man improve a farm or build a house or erect a factory or do any other thing that adds to the real wealth of the community, and down comes the tax assessor and fines him for adding to the wealth of the state.

Is that wise? Is it right? Is it in accordance with the equal right of men to pursue happiness?

Now public revenues can be raised without punishing industry, without repressing thrift, without employing hordes of tax gatherers, and without the fraud and corruption and injustice that attends our present system of taxation. There is one tax by means of which all the revenues needed for our federal, state, county, and municipal governments could be raised without any of these disadvantages -- a tax

that instead of repressing industry and promoting inequality in the distribution of wealth, would foster industry and promote natural equality -- a tax that is only a tax in form, and that in essence is not a tax, but a taking by the community of values arising not from individual effort, but from social growth, and therefore belonging to the whole community. That is the tax on land values. A tax not on land, be it remembered, but a tax upon land values, irrespective of improvements.

That is the tax in favor of which we single tax men would abolish all other taxes. . .

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