

The Meaning of Civilization

By Lancaster M. Greene

The reform associated with the name of Henry George—namely, the socialization of rent and the abolition of taxes—has been head-lined so effectively for sixty years that his other contributions to socio-economic thought have largely been overlooked by both laymen and scholars. This is unfortunate. For, if what his followers term the "philosophy of freedom"—which is an integration of his ideas on social philosophy, political economy and the "single tax"—were better understood, Henry George would, we believe, be properly placed at the forefront of American thinkers.

This is not to minimize the reform he advocated—which, by the way, was advocated by others before him. For the reform is the dynamic instrument for bringing about a social order based on justice rather than force. As a practical American he felt impelled not only to philosophize in the abstract, but to give us a method whereby the "best of all possible worlds" can be made a reality. But in the hands of his enemies and his misguided followers the instrument has been dramatized to such an extent that his real purpose has largely been lost sight of. It is the object of the Henry George School of Social Science to reverse this emphasis, to teach his economic theories merely as a basis for the appreciation of his concept of civilization.

George conceived society as a voluntary association of individuals. It was in the individual human being that he sought and found the fundamental impulse to all economic and social trends. In fact, his entire philosophy is based upon two fundamental, axiomatic principles of human action; namely, that man seeks to satisfy his desires with the least effort, and that man's desires are unlimited.

In an individualistic economy, one which can exist only in our imagination, every man would satisfy his own desires as best he could without intercourse with his fellow man. He would make his own clothes, provide his own food, shelter and entertainment. He would not trade. Obviously, the sum total of his satisfactions would be limited, since he could not specialize in any

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one endeavor. Such an economy would approximate the animal's condition of living.

But, somewhere early in his development man hit upon the idea of trade—the conscious giving up of a desirable thing to get something more desirable. As far as we know, the idea of trading is indigenous to the human being. He found that by specialization he could secure more and greater satisfactions, provided the opportunity to exchange the products were unhampered.

The association of individuals, therefore, must have arisen from the discovery of the advantages of specialization and trade. The primary satisfactions, or sustenance, however, form but a minor part of the complex desires of man. And it was through the interchange of services and ideas, even more than of goods, that original man found association highly gratifying. Thus came the development and exchange of cultural values.

The exchange of goods, services and ideas between individuals permits of greater specialization and greater satisfactions. It follows, then, that the less impeded these exchanges are the greater will be the satisfactions of all members of this association. And civilization—or the totality of satisfactions prevailing in any association of people—develops in proportion to the ease with which these exchanges can be effected. Thus, the highest form of civilization would be one entirely free of all obstructions to trade—thinking of trade not only as the exchange of goods and services, but also in ideas.

Association is the primary condition of civilization. But freedom is the motor force that brings it to its highest form. A condition of freedom, however, cannot prevail in an association where some of the component members have privileges which others are deprived of, and the possession of which gives to some the power to deprive others of the fruits of their labor. Therefore, the law of human progress, or the law of civilization, is: Association in Equality.

George does not use this phrase to justify any scheme for attempting to equalize the differences in abilities between individuals. Obviously, any such scheme must be predicated on some form of force, and force is the opposite of the freedom upon which civilization thrives. Association in equality is a condition in which instruments of oppression have no place, and in which justice, or equality of opportunity, is the highest law.

Civilization, therefore, is a cooperative enterprise. Cooperation for a common end may be directed or spontaneous. For instance, eight men in a shell, all doing the same thing, will make better progress if they submit themselves to the direction of one coxswain than if each decided for himself the number of strokes per minute. In this case the uniformity of purpose and the simplicity of the directive principle makes for progress. Here the eight men are mere automata; the coxswain is the only thinker. This is directed cooperation.

But the motor force of productive effort—and the purpose of cooperation is production—is thought. In such simple operations like rowing a boat, or log-rolling, or lifting a heavy thing, comparatively little mental power is involved; the cooperators merely add their physical strength to make, so to speak, one man as strong as all the men combined. But, the greatest satisfactions are not obtained by such operations. As desires become more numerous and diverse, in proportion to the size and variable components of a community, it is found that greater satisfactions are obtained by the diversity and complexity of occupations. Each member of the cooperative enterprise, in order to secure satisfactions for himself, endeavors to render services which his fellow-men desire. If he succeeds in so doing he gains their good will, or custom; if he fails, they turn away from him to his competitor. Thus, the desire to secure satisfactions for one's self results in taking thought of the needs or desires of others.

The larger the community becomes the more multitudinous the number of satisfactions that express themselves. To give conscious direction to the eight men in the shell

requires but simple knowledge. To attempt to direct the myriad of desires that men have—from food to operas, from yachts to postage stamps, from lip-stick to kitchen stoves, from tobacco to Spanish lessons—would require an omniscience that mortal man can hardly lay claim to. Any such attempt must be compared to a conscious control by the brain of the many functions of the human body. If the heart could not beat, the blood could not course through our veins, the lungs could not contract or expand, until directed to do so by a detached brain, it is obvious that life would cease. So with the social organism. It is through unconscious or spontaneous cooperation that the greatest satisfactions are obtained, that new desires find birth and are gratified. And the mental power that is necessary to production finds a new avenue of expression with every new desire, expressed or discerned.

Any attempt to regulate, plan or chart cooperation must result in the restriction of the trade upon which civilization thrives. For the regulator, being human, is limited in knowledge. Having assumed the job of regulating it is necessary that he limit the expression of desires to his plan. His blue print cannot be so large as to include every desire, nor so flexible as to include all the changes to which human craving is subject. Every desire begets a new desire; every day a new want is born; every change of weather, style or fancy begets new problems of production. No planner can cope with the kaleidoscopic desires of insatiable man. Therefore, in order to make any sort of plan work he must of necessity limit or control desire. All desire arises in thought. It is obvious then that the control of the mind is essential to a blue-printed society. And, as we have seen, this is the conclusion to which all planners have come, consciously or by the force of events. The suppression of thought—even to the extent of wholesale murder of dissident elements—is a prerequisite to any attempt at a planned economy.

Directed cooperation is, further, a denial of the free exchange of goods, services and ideas necessary to the development of civilization. Direction has for its primary purpose the control of production, and exchange is part of production. Therefore, the object of civilization—the exchange of goods and services, resulting from specialization, for the greater satisfactions of the individual—is frus-

trated by planning. The inhibitions inherent in direction must therefore result in a decline of civilization.

But, direction or planning is not the main threat to civilization. The very idea of a blue-printed economy is merely a misguided altruism, arising from more fundamental interferences with free exchanges. It must be remembered that the world, or what we know of it, has never enjoyed an absolute free economy. Therefore, we have never had the highest civilization.

The restrictions upon production—and exchanges—are as numerous as human ingenuity can invent. Taboos, tariffs, banditry, monopoly privileges, taxes, ransom, the spoils of victorious armies, chattel slavery, reparations, patents, extra-territorial rights, tithes—it would take a book to merely list the many ways that men have devised to deprive themselves of the products of their labor. Man is the only animal that can shape his environment to his needs; he also seems to be the only animal that has deliberately enslaved himself.

Of all the instruments of slavery that he has devised none is so vicious as his system of land tenure. The fact that from land he derives all the satisfactions which he craves, that without land he cannot live, makes the giving to a few the privilege of determining the terms on which the rest of us may use the land an almost inexplicable human phenomenon. In the parlance of the day, it just does not add up.

The privilege inherent in the private ownership of land is the power of collecting rent. Rent is a part of production. It is a part which is determined by the needs of society. A growing or productive population, increasing its desires by its very ingenuity of production, presses more and more upon the available natural resources. From the earth comes the raw material which man fabricates into wealth; on it he needs must build his home and his factory. The more enterprising he is the greater grows the rent exaction which he must pay for the privilege of working. Those to whom this privilege is given anticipate the future needs of society by holding out

of use large portions of the land, so that they may exact a higher rent, or larger share of production.

Rent is a continuous charge on the production of man. Yet, it is an unavoidable charge. For it results from the very presence and productivity of man, and increases with every increase in the power to satisfy desires. It is the reflection and measure of his climb to a higher civilization. It is a fund which he creates, not as an individual, but as a society. It is a fund which, apparently, was intended to be used for the needs of that society. But, by a legal taboo, it has become a charge against society for the benefit of a few of its members. Thus, what should be a benefit to society has become a drain on production—and thus an interference with the freedom which is a prerequisite for civilization.

The rent fund, which both logic and ethics point to as the natural payment for social services, being diverted to private owners who render no services in exchange, it then becomes necessary for producers to deprive themselves of a part of their production to pay for these social services. Thus, we have the institution of taxes. This instrument is placed in the hands of government, where it becomes a means of waste and repression. "The power to tax is the power to destroy."

Every interference with production tends to destroy production. Every tax or levy on wealth immediately is reflected in a diminution of wealth-producing power of labor. If you take from labor all that it produces, save enough to provide sustenance, you have slaves—and slaves are not very productive. If you levy on capital goods you discourage the storing up of labor in new capital goods. Depriving labor and capital of what it produces does not affect the existing store of wealth, but it stops the wheels of production. Which is, of course, even more ominous.

Thus, we see, the private collection of rent and the public collection of taxes both destroy the incentive to civilization—the free exchange of goods and services. Both are impediments in the path of progress.

The simple expedient of abolishing all taxes and socializing the rent of land would free mankind of the two most powerful instruments of slavery. The effect of this change on government and on the distribution of wealth are not germane to this paper, but that there would be important effects must be evident.

