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Fragments — A Critique

by OSCAR B. JOHANNSEN

HENRY George is subject to some rather penetrating, albeit friendly, analysis in the long overdue issue of *Fragments*, which has finally seen the light of day.

For those unacquainted with this little insouciant publication, it should be pointed out that it has made its mark among some of the world's intelligentsia not only because of its generally high literary quality but because of its piquantly individualistic vignettes on current affairs. Lately it has made a point of publishing issues devoted to such prominent libertarian thinkers as Henry Thoreau, Albert Jay Nock and Frank Chodorov, so it was inevitable that Henry George would eventually make the list.

Characteristically, the paper features George's stirring eulogy on Liberty from *Progress and Poverty*. This excerpt is offered as a tempting appetizer to the uninformed reader in the confident hope that it will elicit his favorable reaction to George. His interest is then further whetted by nine essays on various aspects of Georgism by the contributing editors and others. As most of them are Georgists of long

standing, though none are afflicted with any blind worship of George, the articles are a bit more authoritative than would ordinarily be the case.

Jack Schwartzman, an irrepressible Russian expatriate, whose beliefs can be as wild as the Stokowskian white mane crowning his head, has a way with words which lulls the unwary reader into much too willing acceptance of his views. In his article he arrays George the activist, against George the philosopher. It is the time-worn dispute, which will probably be fought ad infinitum, as to whether George should have entered politics or should have sheltered himself in some ivory philosophic castle from which would emanate from time to time the works of the master. Schwartzman believes "the greatest mistake made by Henry George was to sacrifice his fiery and dynamic genius at the altar of reform; to change from a high-ranking general of thought into a lowly private of action."

Well, maybe so, but then each man must be true to himself—and possibly for George the political arena was a natural. Certainly the stately halls of

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academe were not for him for he was not of the establishment, and so the academicians looked upon him with disdain. It was the people whose hearts were inflamed by his rhetoric even if they but vaguely understood the profundity of his philosophic speculations. They sensed that he stood for something which was for their good. He was not a cold, remote scholar. On the contrary, he was a living, breathing, dedicated man fighting for an ideal. That was something they understood — that was something they wanted.

Sydney Meyers, an urbane and amused spectator of men's foibles, whose articles almost invariably evoke a chuckle from the reader, this time attacks the tiresome claim that George's ideas are "archaic, old fashioned, obsolete and inapplicable to current economic conditions." The case he makes is convincing. For example, he points out that we do not reject the geometric theorems of Euclid because of their antiquity, so why dismiss George because he wrote in the 19th century. Logic is one of Mayer's strong points, but possibly had he followed his usual strategy of poking fun at inconsistencies, while it might not have made a stronger case, it would have had more appeal for the reader.

Among the essays is one by the late Frank Chodorov on "Henry George and Natural Law." It brings to mind David Hume and his revolutionary assertion that it is impossible to demonstrate that any cause and effect relationships exist in nature. Chodorov avoids the dilemma raised by Hume, however, by indicating that all we observe in nature is "the constant recurrence of certain sequences, and because of that constancy we ascribe to the sequences a cause-and-effect relationship in words or symbols, which

we call natural law." It is doubtful if Hume could have objected to this interpretation. Chodorov's definition is pertinent for the Georgist, for modern thought emphasizes probability over constancy, whereas George's work is based on the validity of natural law. An understanding of the subtle nuances in Chodorov's concept of natural law will enable the Georgist to continue to rest his case on such natural laws as those of rent, wages and interest, but with a clear recognition that natural law is merely a shorthand description of the sequence of events which man observes in nature.

Herbert Roseman, a teacher, whose studies of anarchism and anti-statist literature bid fair to make him an authority on the subject, discusses what he considers to be "Henry George's Dark Side." It has to do with the deplorable "Haymarket Affair" which resulted in several men being executed in Illinois in 1887 for their presumed complicity in throwing a bomb in Haymarket Square in Chicago during a riot between the police and labor unionists, which caused the deaths of a number of people. George at first believed the men to be innocent, but after their conviction had been unanimously confirmed by the Supreme Court of Illinois he accepted the judgment and so stated in his paper, *The Standard*. Roseman questions whether, as George was then running for the office of Secretary of State of New York, his changed view was based on political expediency. But Charles Barker, in his biography of *Henry George*, finds "no evidence to convict him of any form of corruption." There is no doubt in this reviewer's mind that George might have been gullible, but he was not venal and would never have stooped to do anything as contemptible as trying to obtain political or other advantage at the expense of other men's deaths. Roseman does make the point, which

cannot be over-emphasized, that judges are men and that they should never be exempt from the same critical evaluation accorded others in public life.

The late Judge John R. Fuchs, who was a prominent student of Georgist philosophy, analyzes it from the viewpoint of "The Rule of Law." He believes the basic wrong is that "in our Constitution and by our laws, land — Mother Earth — is treated as personal property. He inveighs against "the large majority of economists, lawyers, legislators and religious-minded people [who] feel a compulsion to warp economics, law and religion to justify and continue this unholy concept and social error" that land is personal property. But is it true that these people deliberately warp their respective disciplines to justify error? It appears more likely that they simply do not appreciate the truth, and are merely defending what they believe to be correct. Fuchs is a bit too hard on those who have not seen the light.

The current Fragments issue contains also articles by Robert Clancy, Erick Hansch, Leonard Kleinfeld and even this reviewer. Clancy feels the key to George is revealed in the fact that "The laws of the universe are harmonious." The great truths which dovetail into one another, when understood, show the way to "justice, liberty and human progress." Hansch proposes a "Resolution for Peace in the Viet Nam War" based on the fact that

in Viet Nam "most of the people live and work on land which they do not own." He feels "a decent, practical and pervasive land reform program is the best solution for the free Southeast Asian countries."

Kleinfeld, an authority on Henry Thoreau, compares the two Henry's of the 19th Century — Henry George and Henry Thoreau, claiming that Thoreau stressed the "I, or individual," whereas George stressed the "We, or society groups." Kleinfeld unfortunately does not know George as well as he knows Thoreau, for while George did not neglect the societal relationships of men, he centered his work on the individual, as evidenced by the last chapter in *Progress and Poverty* — "The Problem of Individual Life."

As for this reviewer, he dared to attempt the impossible task of condensing George's philosophy into a short essay. Whether he has succeeded in capturing "The Essence of Georgism" will be left to the reader to determine. Probably it will be derided as instant Georgism. If so, the judgment will be accepted with equanimity.

It is well worth while for those interested to get this somewhat different view of Georgism. The annual subscription for Fragments is \$3 (2 years for \$5) and should be sent to FRAGMENTS, INC., 248-47 Jamaica Avenue, Bellerose, N. Y. 11246. Subscriptions entered now will bring the Henry George issue post haste.

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