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HENRY GEORGE: THE REBEL WITH A CAUSE WHO CHALLENGED INEQUALITY - PART II

THE AGITATOR AND THE FAMILY MAN

1860—At the age of 21, Henry George met a 17-year-old orphan girl named Annie Cosima Fox. At the time, he was penniless and working as a journalist for a failing newspaper. Annie Fox was already engaged to a gifted and handsome young man. Her grandmother, with whom she lived, saw the attraction between Mr George and Annie. Fearing the worst, she said, 'Annie, Mr George is a nice young man, but I fear he is delicate and will die of consumption.'

Henry was persistent. One stormy evening, he drew a single coin from his pocket and said, 'That is all the money I have in the world. Will you marry me?' She agreed, and they eventually eloped and were married in a Methodist church. In the 1850s, courtship was formal: Romantic relationships followed strict codes. A young couple would typically only meet under supervision, especially in the middle and upper classes.

In the early years of their marriage, George's job was unstable, and he lost his savings in mining speculation, leaving the couple in poverty. Despite initial financial struggles, Annie emerged as a steadfast source of support. She wholeheartedly embraced George's intellectual curiosity and actively contributed to thought-provoking discussions about economic inequality, which would eventually become his lifelong passion. Together, they embarked on a transformative journey, navigating the pressures of poverty, ambition and fame. This resilient couple witnessed George's incredible evolution from a struggling printer to a distinguished economist and political theorist.

When Henry formed the Monroe League to spearhead an expedition for the Mexican patriots, men pledged their loyalty on a bare sword. Annie George stood out as the sole woman member.

1865—Annie was expecting her second child, Richard, and the family was facing starvation. With no income to buy food, Annie had to pawn her treasured jewellery and trinkets, keeping only her wedding ring, which had belonged to her grandmother. The situation was so dire that they couldn't even afford milk. Henry George later recounted:

I came close to starving to death. During this darkest time of my life, my second child was born.

Sixteen years later, he recounted his experiences to Dr. James E. Kelly, sharing poignant memories of begging on the streets to support his wife and children during a challenging period. He emphasised the crucial role that assistance played in his life, expressing that without it, he might have resorted to

violence. Henry used his experiences to illustrate how a person's circumstances can profoundly influence their life, actions, noting that extreme poverty can drive good individuals to engage in questionable behaviour. The two men forged a lasting friendship.

THE REPORTER AND WRITER

1866—The following year, Noah Brooks hired him as a reporter at *The San Francisco Times*. He started to gain recognition as a writer due to his fiery editorials on social issues. His direct involvement in land exploitation during the California Gold Rush strongly influenced the topics and gave credibility and authenticity to his articles. This was the year he wrote his spirited defence of free trade, *Protection or Free Trade*. The publication was significantly delayed due to the loss of the manuscript. Typically undaunted, George undertook the arduous task of rewriting the entire manuscript, which proved to be both time-consuming and exhausting; eventually, it sold over two million copies.

1867—Aged 28, he took charge as the paper's managing editor, marking an impressive ascent from the position of a humble reporter in just a year.

1868—'What the Railroad Will Bring Us.' In an article for the *Overland Monthly*, Henry George shared an insightful perspective on the imminent completion of the transcontinental railroad. He emphasised the significant artificial benefits it would bring to the awe-inspiring natural scenery. He wrote:

The truth is that the completion of the railroad and the consequent increase in business and population will benefit not all of us but only a portion...Those with lands, mines, established companies, and special abilities of certain kinds will become richer for it and find increased opportunities. Those who chance only their labour will become poorer and find it harder to get ahead, first because it will take more capital to buy land or to go into business and second because as competition reduces the wages of labour, capital will be more complex for them to obtain ...Our modern civilisation strikes broad and deep and looks high. So did the tower which men once built almost unto heaven (Babel!)

George's article investigated the potential and social impacts of America's expanding railroad network during the 19th Century. He accurately predicted California's future richness and saw railroads as a double-edged sword. During the early period, salaries and interest rates were elevated because the nation's natural resources had not yet been monopolised, and ample opportunities were still available for everyone. This marked the beginning of his theories on wages and interest, which he would later expand on in *Progress and Poverty*, published a decade later.

Wages depend on the margin of production or upon the produce which labour can obtain at the highest point of natural productiveness open to it without the payment of rent.

Henry had recently discovered the pleasure of horseback riding, cherishing the freedom and solitude it offered for profound contemplation. During his regular excursions, he continued to seek to unravel the mystery of how wealth and poverty could coexist in progressive societies. This question had occupied his thoughts since childhood. Wherever his journeys led him, it was clear that the transcontinental railroad system significantly boosted land prices, creating new economic growth and development opportunities. On one afternoon's ride, he said:

Absorbed in my own thoughts, I had driven the horse into the hills until he panted. Stopping for breath, I asked a passing teamster, wanting something better to say, what land was worth there.

He pointed to some cows grazing off so far that they looked like mice and said 'I don't know exactly, but a man there will sell some land for over a thousand dollars an acre.'

In a flash, I realised there was a reason for the advancement of poverty with the advancement of wealth. With population growth, the land grows in value, and the men who work it must pay for the privilege. I turned back amidst quieter thought to the perception that came to me and has been with me ever since... I there and then recognised the natural order - one of those experiences that made those who have had them appreciate what mystics and poets have called the ecstatic vision.

FAIR DISTRIBUTION OF SOCIETY'S BENEFITS

George was passionately dedicated to implementing policies to distribute society's benefits fairly and equally among all its members. Money generated by and belonging to the community could facilitate funding such pioneering advancements.

LAND VALUE TAXATION WAS A MEANS TO AN END

For Henry George, experiencing the Franklin Institute as a child had provided exposure to free or affordable intellectual stimulation when such opportunities were scarce, especially for someone from a modest background. This profoundly influenced his later belief that society must invest in public goods — parks, libraries, community centres, and educational institutions — to ensure everyone, regardless of wealth, had a fair chance to develop their talents. The Franklin Institute played a crucial role in democratising education.

George valued the community highly. He admired Sparta's idea of public meals known as *Syssitia*. These were compulsory dining clubs where Spartan Citizens would gather to eat together regardless of individual wealth or privilege. All contributed to the meals equally. This egalitarian principle was central to Spartan society and fostered a sense of community and solidarity. However, George didn't consider this approach feasible in 19th-century America!

It is becoming evident that a core tenet of George's philosophy was that land is a gift from God and should not be privately owned. In *Progress and Poverty* he said:

The equal right of all men to the use of land is as clear as their equal right to breathe the air. God made the Earth for all men, not for a few.

His questioning of the prevailing economic model, which allowed landowners to reap immense profits from God-given natural resources while many struggled to make ends meet, was gaining momentum. Fuelled by his observations and Annie's unwavering support, George poured his energy into researching and formulating his economic theory: The Single Tax.

1869—The Sphinx was a mythological figure of great significance to Henry George. Its role was to protect the city of Thebes. In Greek mythology, Oedipus encountered the Sphinx, a creature with the body of a lion and the head, breasts, and arms of a woman. Perched on a rock outside the city, it terrorised inhabitants and travellers by posing a riddle. If you didn't solve the riddle, you were killed, devoured, or thrown down the rocks. The riddle is deeply symbolic, reflecting the stages of human life: 'What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs in the evening?' Oedipus answered: 'A human crawls on all fours as a baby (morning), on two legs as an adult (noon), and uses a cane in old age (evening).' However, Oedipus discovered that the obvious solution didn't satisfy the Sphinx.

George was aware of this mythology and the need to reflect on the stages of human life and the nature of knowledge. He was becoming aware of the complexities of human existence and the delicate balance between wisdom, ignorance, triumph and tragedy. For Henry George, the Sphinx's riddle represented economic issues' profound and perplexing nature. He drew many parallels between the Sphinx's riddle and the economic challenges of his time. The Sphinx's riddle symbolised the hidden truths of economic theory and how conventional theories failed to address the true causes and instead guarded the status quo.

In *Progress and Poverty*, George framed his project as a riddle or mystery, directly mentioning the Sphinx. At age 30, he had walked the streets of New York, observing, reflecting, and searching for answers. Here, he had seen the Sphinx of modern civilisation: extreme wealth on one side and the many huddled away in filth and poverty on the other. He refused to accept the edict of the 'House of Have', which teachers of learning and preachers of religion of the time sanctioned. There were several common themes to their edicts:

- **Moral and Spiritual Explanations:** Many church leaders believed poverty resulted from moral and spiritual failings. The prevailing belief was that poverty resulted from individual sin, idleness, or inability to save money. They emphasised that individuals must repent and transform morally to address this issue.
- **Divine Providence:** Some held that poverty was part of God's divine plan, suggesting that the poor were being tested and that their suffering had a spiritual purpose.
- **Social Order and Stability:** Some church leaders believed that a hierarchical society was divinely ordained and that poverty and wealth were natural and necessary for social stability.
- **Charitable Responsibility:** Over time, the church gradually acknowledged the prevalence of systemic societal challenges and its duty to confront them. It slowly adopted a perspective that held itself accountable for supporting the underprivileged. It started with operating soup kitchens, orphanages, and almshouses.

The 'Christian charity' notion sparked a profound sense of duty in numerous compassionate individuals to support those facing



hardship. For the privileged, extending assistance to the less fortunate offered an opportunity to publicly demonstrate their commitment to Christian principles and their capacity to give while also deriving personal gratification from their benevolent deeds, potentially easing any pangs of conscience. This period of tension within Christianity eventually led to internal reforms and new approaches to addressing the poverty crisis. However, these were just alleviations and didn't address the causes.

Henry viewed the mythological Sphinx as a symbol of modern civilisation. He was determined to confront the present-day enigma (riddle) and resolve the profound societal question of how extreme wealth and poverty could live side by side. If the riddle wasn't solved, humanity would eventually be thrown headlong down the cliff edge!

A prodigious increase in wealth-producing power has marked the present century. ... And yet, in spite of the increase of wealth, in spite of the march of invention, and the diffusion of knowledge, in spite of the greater power of labour, and the greater independence of labourers, the evil of poverty deepens and spreads. The riddle which the Sphinx of Fate puts to our civilisation is the same which she put to the ancient city of Thebes: Solve me this, or be destroyed.

Society must solve the 'riddle' of economic injustice or risk destruction, just as Oedipus had to solve the Sphinx's riddle to save Thebes. George continued on his mission to find the natural order. Henry George did not need to go to books or consult the 'sages.' He knew it was all in view for anyone prepared to see.

There had been talk of appointing him to the new Chair of Political Economy at the University of California. Talk ceased after the academics heard him say:

For the study of political economy, you need no special knowledge, no extensive library and no costly laboratory. If you will, you do not need textbooks or teachers, but think for yourselves. All that you need is care in reducing complex phenomena to their elements ... All that paraphernalia of learning cannot educate a man... Unfortunately, many pass through the educational machinery and come out but learned fools, crammed with knowledge which they cannot use...all the more contemptible because they pass, with themselves and others as educated men.

In his address to the academics, he talked of 'Monkeys with microscopes and mules packing libraries as emblems of those who pass through the educational machinery.' This was too much for the university professors, and he heard no more of this possible appointment.

STATE INSPECTOR OF TAXES

1871—George's job ensured gas meter accuracy, protecting customers from overcharging while providing him with a stable income and freedom to pursue his intellectual pursuits. Although mundane, the job highlighted the inequalities during America's rapid industrial growth from the 1870s to the early 1900s, which was called the Gilded Age.

The Gilded Age was a period of economic growth and social change, concealing serious issues of inequality and corruption beneath its prosperous surface.

And so, The Gilded Age became known for:

feature

Economic Boom:

- A surge in industrial production fuelled by technological advantages
- Abundant natural resources and an abundance of labour
- Expansion of the railroads
- A plentiful supply of Steel, Oil and electricity

Robber Barons:

- Immense fortunes were amassed through monopolistic practices. Carnegie (steel), J. P. Morgan (finance), Rockefeller (oil). Rockefeller started his career as a lowly bookkeeper and commission merchant.

Inequality:

- The rich grew richer
- The working class faced harsh conditions, low wages, long hours, and dangerous workplaces
- Rise of urbanisation
- Increased immigration

Corruption and Change

- Widespread corruption at all levels of government
- Tammany Hall controlled elections and enriched themselves through patronage
- Unions emerged, leading to strikes and violent protests
- The women's suffrage movement gained momentum

DOMESTIC LIFE

1873— Domestic life was very dear to George. In 1873, the family settled in a cosy two-story house with a small garden. He remained devoted to his horse. Despite not being a church member or attending services regularly, he upheld a strong spiritual practice. His family would gather to recite prayers each morning and night and joyfully sing the hymns he remembered from his childhood. He was now convinced that it was not God's will that men suffered poverty but the violation of God's ordinance. He had turned from a religion that taught of Special Providence on the one hand or merciless fate on the other.

His beliefs and experiences profoundly influenced his holistic approach to education. He surrounded his children with books and discussions on political economy. He encouraged them to ask questions, discuss complex subjects, think deeply, and explore diverse subjects. His perspectives on education were considered forward-thinking during his era.

George thought traditional education placed unnecessary pressure on children and diverted them from their inherent curiosity and the pleasure of acquiring knowledge. He discouraged rote learning at home and emphasised the value of leisure and play. He aimed for his children to form their own well-reasoned opinions. He was against the idea of burdensome homework assignments.

In September 1877, a third child was soon to be born. During this time, George formulated his ground-breaking ideas on land reform and economics, leading to the publication of his influential work, *Progress and Poverty: An Inquiry into the Cause of Industrial Depressions and of Increase of Want with the Increase of Wealth; The Remedy*. This is usually reduced to *Progress and Poverty*.



Initially, George couldn't find a publisher for *Progress and Poverty*. Not to be disheartened, he personally affected the typesetting and self-published the first 500 copies. These quickly sold; unsurprisingly, the publisher, D. Appleton and Co., who had previously declined to publish it, reappeared and was happy to take the plates and the profits.

1879—*Progress and Poverty* was published. This marked a turning point. The meticulously researched and eloquently written book became a global phenomenon, selling hundreds of thousands of copies and being translated into numerous languages. It resonated with readers across social classes, sparking debates and igniting a movement for economic reform. George's newfound fame increased the demands on his time as a writer. Alfred Russel Wallace described it as "the most remarkable and important work of the present century."

Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913), was a British naturalist, explorer, geographer, anthropologist, and biologist best known for independently conceiving the theory of evolution through natural selection, which he jointly published with Charles Darwin in 1858. While Darwin is more widely recognised, Wallace was a prominent and respected figure in his own right, and his contributions to evolutionary biology and biogeography were substantial.

Unlike Darwin, Wallace developed strong interests in social reform, spiritualism, and land nationalisation. He was a deeply committed social thinker who took up several causes of economic justice. Wallace was concerned about inequality and the social effects of industrial capitalism. He promoted equitable land distribution, which would have impacted city development and public space allocation. This is where his connection to Henry George was significant.

1880—George moved to New York. There, he became involved with the Irish National Land League, which Michael Davitt (1846-1906) had established in 1879. Davitt's family had been evicted during the Great Famine. He received a prison sentence for his revolutionary activities.

THE GREAT FAMINE AND THE IRISH LAND QUESTION

The Great Famine of 1845 to 1852 was a defining catastrophe in Irish history. While it is remembered for the immense human suffering it caused, with over one million deaths and another million forced to emigrate, the famine also laid bare the profound inequalities of the Irish land system.

Before the famine, land ownership in Ireland was concentrated in the hands of a relatively small number of landlords, many of whom were absentee and based in Britain. In many areas, the potato was the only viable crop for subsistence. Landlords held immense power over their tenants. Rents were high, leases were insecure, there was little legal protection, and eviction was common.

The Famine exposed the system's cruelty. When the potato blight struck in 1845, the effects were immediate and devastating. As the crop failed year after year, starvation and disease spread rapidly.

Yet, even at the height of the famine, Ireland continued to export food, particularly grain and livestock, to Britain. The fact that food left the country while the rural poor starved underscored the inhumanity of a system that prioritised rent and profit.

Understanding the Irish Land Question requires acknowledging how the famine revealed and amplified injustices. For many, the recollection of hunger and compulsory emigration was deeply personal and political. Henry George's ideas and actions significantly influenced Ireland's land reform movement. This was when George wrote *The Irish Land Question*, later titled *The Land Question*.

Their collaboration highlighted the transatlantic nature of the land reform movement. In 1882, Michael Davitt invited George to visit Ireland to witness the agitation first-hand. His visit included public speeches and meetings and helped bolster the intellectual credibility of the Land League demands.

George was now a prolific contributor to many publications. His articles published in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* were collected and published in book form as *Social Problems*. Frank Leslie (1821-1880) was an English-born publisher and illustrator. George embarked on lecture tours across the United States, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand.

Annie, ever the loyal partner, managed his affairs and raised their three children. She understood the importance of his work and ensured a stable home base for him to return to. His life after marriage was a testament to the power of intellectual partnership. Annie's unwavering support allowed him to develop and advocate for his revolutionary economic theory.

Throughout the 1880s, George remained a prolific writer and speaker. He founded several newspapers to promote his ideas and challenged political leaders to embrace his proposed reforms. In addition to his economic theories, George held progressive views on several issues. He advocated for women's suffrage, believing in equal rights for all. He also championed public education, public libraries, and state pensions. These ideas would become increasingly relevant in the years and beyond his lifetime, for which he is never acknowledged. 📌