

Did Henry George Talk Nonsense?



by W. HARTLEY BOLTON

"Support for Henry George turns up in many places," said Robert Clancy, who noticed this article in *The Freethinker* (London, published, appropriately, on September 2nd—Henry George's birthday). It is a reply to Mr. H. Cutner.

WHEN, IN THE FREETHINKER, July 8th, 1960, I invited readers to comment on Book X of *Progress and Poverty*, where Henry George deals with the problem of Civilization and Decay, I did not anticipate that Mr. Cutner would side-step the question and drag in what smacks of a red-herring, namely: that Henry George "refused to acknowledge the pressure of population on the world food supply." It is strange how the ghost of Malthus still haunts so many of us and befogs clear thinking.

Henry George's case is briefly:

(1) That all subsistence is the product of the two factors: land and labor, as he defines them.

(2) That every normal human being is a potential producer of at least his own subsistence.

(3) That the whole globe sets the limit to the production of subsistence.

(4) That the limit of subsistence in any particular place is not the physical limit of that place, but the physical limit of the globe.

(5) That the power of any population to produce the necessities of life is not measured by the necessities of life actually produced but by the expenditure of power in all modes of production (e.g., today, we are expending incalculable productive power in the armed forces and on weapons of destruction which could be diverted to the production of necessary subsistence for many millions of people).

(6) That the danger that the human race may increase beyond the possibility of finding elbow room is so far off as to have no more practical interest than the recurrence of the glacial period or the final extinguishment of the sun.

(7) That every atom of food, and of all other things produced by man, and of man himself, will inevitably return to the earth.

Mr. Cutner states that Henry George "foresaw only a Utopia in which it would be easy to feed unlimited populations." Where, may I ask does Henry George use the word "unlimited"? I fancy Mr. Cutner has been context jumping.

Mr. Cutner quotes Henry George as saying "there was so much food in the world that if London—the City of London, be it noted, not the county—could house 1,000 millions of people, they could easily be fed." I suggest that Mr. Cutner should re-read that passage from which he quotes and he will find that Henry George does not say "there was so much food in the world"; what he does say is "subsistence increases as population increases." Mr. Cutner has missed the point. Henry George was referring to a potentiality not an actuality of subsistence and his purpose was to show that the people living on fifty square miles of London were in an entirely different position "so far as the limit of subsistence is concerned" from a smaller number of people who lived on fifty square miles of soil which could, if subsistence were drawn from within its own boundaries and in the then state of the productive arts, yield subsistence for only some thousands of people. The people of London draw

for their subsistence upon the whole globe, and the limit which subsistence sets to the growth of the London population is the limit of the globe to furnish food for its inhabitants. As to the seemingly fantastic figure 1,000 millions, from a point of view of logic it is perfectly valid if we take note that Henry George confines his argument to the condition "so far as the limit of subsistence is concerned" and that he is not then dealing with the question of housing or elbow-room. Every scientist is entitled to, and indeed must, abstract elements of his problem for special consideration and draw conclusions, provided that he relates these conclusions later to the other qualifying conclusions drawn from other elements of the same problem and this Henry George does in the rest of the context.

But Henry George's main point, which Mr. Cutner seems to have missed, is that before it can be accepted that an increase in population is the cause of poverty, it must be shown that there is no other cause to account for it and that every human being is not a potential producer of his own subsistence. Now, Henry George claims that every normal human being is a potential producer and that the only reason why some cannot produce subsistence is that they are not allowed free access to the natural resources, and this, he says, is the cause of poverty. Remove the cause which prevents potential workers from using the natural resources and you will solve your subsistence problem and, if you solve the subsistence problem, it can be no longer said that large families are the cause of poverty since each producer will be producing his own subsistence or its equivalent in exchange. Further, we need not be afraid that there will be no elbow-room on the earth because of such an eventuality. The opening up of all the world's resources by the single tax (which ap-

parently has Mr. Cutner's blessing) will open up other vistas besides that of subsistence. Man, having become secure in this respect, will not only want to, but will, satisfy his other frustrated desires: he will want quality and culture. His lower instincts will diminish in strength and his higher development and families will become smaller. Henry George rightly says: "That besides the positive and prudential checks of Malthus, there is a third check which comes into play with the elevation of the standard of comfort and the development of the intellect, as is pointed to by many well known facts. The proportion of births is notoriously greater in new settlements, where the struggle with nature leaves little opportunity for intellectual life, and among the poverty bound classes of older countries, who in the midst of wealth are deprived of all its advantages, and reduced to all but an animal existence, than it is among the classes to whom the increase of wealth has brought independence, leisure, comfort and a fuller and more varied life. This fact, long ago recognized in the homely adage, 'a rich man for luck, and poor man for children,' was noted by Adam Smith, who says it is not uncommon to find a poor, half-starved Highland woman has been mother of twenty-three or twenty-four children, and is everywhere so clearly perceptible that it is only necessary to allude to it."

In conclusion, since the time of Henry George, science and technology have developed more than in the whole of previous history and man no longer scratches the earth with his nails for subsistence. He has at his command the techniques resulting from the splitting of the atom, the know-how to increase and preserve crops, the biology of animal multiplication, the results of the laboratory work on the synthesis of sugar, the basis of life, which I personally, have seen demonstrated,

the accumulating results from the exploration of the oceans, and countless mechanisms which can bring subsistence to him thousands or millions of times more easily than ever before. Who will dare to forecast the limit?

But, perhaps Mr. Cutner knows the

exact amount of subsistence that may be produced and the exact number of the final population it will sustain? If he does, he will, no doubt, inform us and then we shall know whether what Henry George said was really unlimited nonsense.

Mr. Bolton is a local representative of a "rating reform campaign" now in progress in England.