

Progress And Poverty

BY NICHOLAS MURRAY BUTLER

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IT is a full half century since no inconsiderable part of the world was plunged into vigorous and often excited controversy over the thesis and the arguments of a book by Henry George. He called it "Progress and Poverty." The very title was abundant in challenge, and the argument of the book was more challenging still. Henry George pressed the question as to why it is that with all the vaunted progress that society has made and is making, there should still be so much poverty and want, and such apparently permanent lines of division between the great mass of those who prosper and the great mass of those who do not. While Henry George lived and met the public face to face upon the platform, his vigorous personality gained him many followers and made many advocates of his opinions. The years that have passed have set his economic analysis and economic teaching in due perspective and enable us now to consider them with a just sense of their permanent importance and with regard to the soundness of their underlying principles.

It may be said at once that so far as Henry George pointed to privilege as an unbecoming, unfair and indeed disastrous accompaniment of progress, his teaching has passed into economic theory everywhere. Sound economists in every land accept and support economic equality and economic opportunity as fundamental. Not many economists of high rank, however, accept Henry George's thesis that land-holding is the one particular kind of privilege whose limitation or destruction should be brought about. The tendency has been rather to look upon the inequality of conditions which arise from land-holding as only one factor, and perhaps a minor one, of the very serious and much larger problem to which Henry George so earnestly pointed.

Once again, therefore, as so often before in the history of thought, we find that a popular preacher and teacher has seized upon a fundamental fact of large importance and brought it with eloquence and zeal to public attention, but has not been able to convince men that he could point the way out of the difficulties and dangers whose existence he so clearly saw.

Today in every part of the world, and much more vigorously than a half century ago, this same question is being pressed upon the attention of mankind. Why is that progress in which we take such pride, so uncertain, and indeed so inconsequent, in meeting not only the hopes but the needs of so many human beings? Where are we to look for the cause and the cure of that distress which is so widespread in the world, for which poverty is only one name? Science and the practical applications of science have within a few decades revolutionized the practical conditions of life. They have almost destroyed the effects of distance

in space and time, and they have cast the interests of men, however remotely they may be placed, in a common mould. Yet immense masses of food material are produced, now in the United States, now in Argentina, now in the valley of the Danube, and no market is found for them, while not far away thousands upon thousands of human beings are in want of food. The material means with which to satisfy every human desire and to afford every human comfort can now be produced in quantities hitherto unknown and at costs most moderate, and yet so many of those who need these things desperately cannot possibly acquire them.

These are all familiar facts. They have been stated over and over again. The only possible reason for restating them is that nothing adequate or even earnest is being done in regard to the grave matters to which they relate. Repetition is perhaps the only way by which a sluggish, a self-centered and a somnolent public opinion can be stirred to look deeply into these questions before it is too late.

Too late for what? Too late to stem the tide of discontent, of disorder and of political and economic revolution. Great masses of men will not indefinitely sit quietly by and see themselves and those dependent upon them reduced to penury and want, while that which we call civilization has so much to offer, commands such stupendous resources and seems capable of accomplishing almost anything.

[EDITORIAL NOTE.—We are grateful to President Butler for his revealing pronouncement on Henry George and his teachings. An analysis of President Butler's statement fails to disclose anything to which we could take exception. We know it to be true that "not many economists of high rank accept George's thesis," but we should reply, just as Dr. Butler himself does, that "often before a popular preacher who has seized upon a fact of fundamental importance fails to convince men that he could point the way out of the difficulties and dangers whose existence" he not merely *thought* he saw but "clearly saw."

The Single Tax movement may well be congratulated on this statement from the president of Columbia, the greatest university in the world—a declaration which will open wider to us the doors of seats of learning the world over.—Editor LAND AND FREEDOM.]

THERE has been no prosperity. I have crossed and re-crossed this miscellaneous and scattered country of ours again and again during the last decade, and never have I seen a time when the man of the soil was not at a pinch. Never have I seen a time when there were not unemployed. Never have I seen a time when there were not people underfed, and poorly clothed; and, let any man ask himself how there can be overproduction when some lack the necessities of life.

CHAS. J. FINGER, in *All's Well*, Fayetteville, Ark.

WOULD it be a reasonable thing to ask kindergarten pupils to solve a problem in calculus? Then why demand an extra session of Congress to solve the unemployment problem?