

PROGRESS AND POVERTY

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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 re-stating 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.

Somewhere and somehow there is a gap, a want of balance, in our social, our economic and our political system which we have not found ways and means to fill or to supply. There are, to be sure, those strong and determined devotees of doctrines very remote from the professions of principle which are ours, who have a quick answer to all these questions. That answer is substantially this: Let humanity be uprooted and let us begin civilization all over again on a different plane by diametrically opposite methods and without any of the encumbering traditions and ideals which have brought us to our present pass. These revolutionaries feel no need of property, of family, of faith, of God. They call only for the absolute negation of everything which for more than three thousand years has meant what we have called progress, the advance of civilization, the development of civil and political liberty and the upbuilding of popular government. Are these historic ideals of ours really futile

or false? Are social compulsions and prohibitions really preferable to liberty? Do true progress, justice, satisfaction, happiness, really lie in turning our backs upon the past and beginning all over again in a diametrically opposite direction? These are the questions which we are called upon to answer and in answering to give reasons by our acts as well as by our words for the faith that is in us.

If we are effectively to allay discontent and successfully to remove temptation to disorder and revolution, we dare not sit indefinitely in contemplative inaction. The challenge is too peremptory and too ominous. Faith in our underlying principles of social, economic and political organization must be testified to, and that quickly, by our works. Cool and detached contemplation will not do. Action is essential. We must be broad-minded and open-minded to suggestions of change and improvement, and we must make it increasingly difficult, impossible if may be, that either lust for power or greed for gain shall use these principles of ours to public disadvantage. Today progressive and enlightened liberalism is everywhere true conservatism. Stubborn resistance to betterment may well be the first step toward catastrophe.

Youth is always in the saddle, and just now the obligation and the opportunity of youth are literally stupendous. These can be no better described than in the sentences with which Disraeli, the fiftieth anniversary of whose death has just now been celebrated, ended his novel *Sybil*:

“We live in an age when to be young and to be indifferent can be no longer synonymous. We must prepare for the coming hour. The claims of the Future are represented by suffering millions; and the Youth of a Nation are the trustees of Posterity.”

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