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Henry George on Chattel and Wage Slavery: *The American Social Philosopher Condemned Both Forms as Immoral, Irrational Denials of Equality*

By E. SPRINGS STEELE*

ABSTRACT. In the writings of *Henry George* two types of *slavery* are mentioned: *chattel* (human) and *industrial (economic)*, or *wage slavery*. Greater attention is paid to the latter than to the former. In fact, chattel slavery was typically referred to only as an example or analogy in the analysis of issues that were of more fundamental concern to George: *wealth, property, land*, etc. Nonetheless it is possible to construct from these references a remarkably comprehensive critique of human servitude on three levels: practical, economic, and philosophico-theological. Practically, chattel slavery is inefficient and a hindrance to *technological discovery and production*. Economically, it does not increase the wealth of the political economy, the "Greater Leviathan." Philosophico-theologically, it denies the natural *equality* of human beings, and is based on erroneous assumptions concerning the rightful basis and nature of property. Economic (industrial) or wage slavery is worse, however. Chattel slavery is a dead or dying institution as George writes, whereas the more cruel and relentless industrial servitude is alive and growing.

FOR HENRY GEORGE there were two types of slavery: chattel (human) and industrial (economic), that is, wage slavery. The primary purpose of this paper is to offer a description of George's criticism of the former. A concluding section will, however, give some indication of his greater concern with the latter (economic servitude).

I

Chattel Slavery: Introduction

PROPERTY IN HUMAN BEINGS was an historical issue in the United States by the time of Henry George's first major work (*Progress and Poverty*, 1879). Nonetheless he often used the topic of chattel slavery in his analysis of industrial slavery. This is likely the result of his direct acquaintance with the passionate slavery debates of the mid-19th century. George was twenty-three when the

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Emancipation Proclamation was signed by Lincoln on January 1, 1863, and twenty-five when Lee surrendered to Grant on April 9, 1865.

It is clear that Henry George's view of chattel slavery was tied to his developing economic theory. At the age of seventeen (1856), according to the biography written by his son,

Young George soon after returning from sea showed a lively interest in the slavery question, and, although his father was a Democrat and inclined to support Buchanan, the boy independently took the anti-slavery side, which he discussed with his mother. In the interest of peace and "property rights," and doubtless supported in mind by what she regarded as the sanction of the Scriptures, she upheld slavery, not perhaps as a good thing in itself, but because of the great cost of disestablishment. The mother in repeating the conversation in after years to her son's wife said that in arguing she held that the hardships of slavery "were exaggerated," for, "while some of the slave owners might be brutal, the majority were not likely to be so," most of them doubtless being the same kind of "humane-disposed people" as she herself. The boy stoutly held to his position and answered that her argument rested "on policy, not principle"; that she spoke of what slave owners "seem likely to do," he of what they "could do"; "for if slaves were property, their masters, having the right to do what they pleased with their own property, could ill-treat and even kill them if so disposed." The argument seemed sound enough to the parents, but the boy was still a boy to them.¹

The only indication of George's position on the historical origin of chattel slavery is found in his earliest work, *Progress and Poverty* (1879). Therein he states that, "Chattel slavery originated in the capture of prisoners of war. . . ."² This is certainly true, generally, but there were other sources.³ George would likely have been aware of them insofar as origin theories were a topic of extensive discussion during his youth.⁴ Further, he would have been familiar with Biblical texts indicating that servitude could originate from debt, sale, and birth. Thus it seems that George was not interested in a detailed description or analysis of the historical origins of chattel slavery, although it is likely he could have given one had he felt the need.

In fact, the topic of chattel slavery itself was hardly ever a topic of primary interest for Henry George.⁵ Human servitude was typically referred to only as an example or analogy in the analysis of issues that were of more fundamental concern to him: wealth, property, land, etc. Nonetheless it is possible to construct from these references a remarkably comprehensive critique of slavery on three levels: practical, economic, and philosophico-theological.

II

Henry George's Critique of Chattel Slavery

A. The Practical Level

For Henry George the major practical objection to slave-labor was its inefficiency *vis-à-vis* free labor.⁶ Although never an advocate of slavery, he did rec-

ognize that in primitive societies wherein population was sparse and land plentiful slave labor was relatively practical (though never moral).⁷ As population would increase and land become increasingly scarce, however, and social development pressure slave-owners into more responsibility for their chattel, slave labor would become increasingly impractical and inefficient. As George argued:

That each particular slave should be owned by a particular master would in fact become, as social development went on, and industrial organization grew complex, a manifest disadvantage to the masters. They would be at the trouble of whipping, or otherwise compelling the slaves to work; at the cost of watching them, and of keeping them when ill or unproductive; at the trouble of finding work for them to do, or of hiring them out, as at different seasons or at different times, the number of slaves which different owners or different contractors could advantageously employ would vary.⁸

On a more abstract level, yet nonetheless still a practical consideration, slave labor was inefficient because it hindered technological discovery, invention, and production. In an eloquent historical argument George makes his case:

That in the classical world slavery was so universal, is undoubtedly the reason why the mental activity which so polished literature and refined art never hit on any of the great discoveries and inventions which distinguish modern civilization. No slaveholding people ever were an inventive people. In a slaveholding community the upper classes may become luxurious and polished; but never inventive. Whatever degrades the laborer and robs him of the fruits of his toil stifles the spirit of invention and forbids the utilization of inventions and discoveries even when made. To freedom alone is given the spell of power which summons the genii in whose keeping are the treasures of the earth and the viewless forces of the air.⁹

Insofar as George was writing after the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil War, his criticism of slave-labor based on practical considerations was empirically demonstrable. In the two decades following emancipation there was no clamor among former slave-owners for a return to that form of labor. In point of fact it was the former slaves, if anyone, who had some desire for a return to the material benefits that some had enjoyed as slaves and now found difficult to obtain on their own.¹⁰ This had also been the case in other countries where slavery had been abolished.¹¹ As George points out, what the former slave-owners discovered was that all the benefits of chattel slavery could be theirs, without the responsibilities and attendant expenses, simply by owning the soil upon which the newly freed slaves must work.¹² Property in land is much more profitable and efficient than property in human beings. It also results in a servitude that George regards as *less* humane than chattel slavery.¹³ This last point will be developed below.

B. The Economic Level

Before describing Henry George's economic objection to chattel slavery it is necessary to explain his understanding of political economy. The appropriate place to begin is with George's use of Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan concept.

Leviathan was Hobbes' metaphor for the commonwealth or State. According to George there is a "greater" Leviathan, which ". . . is to the political structure or conscious commonwealth what the unconscious functions of the body are to the conscious activities."¹⁴ The growth and development of this "greater Leviathan" is a function of the ". . . laws inherent in human nature and in the constitution of things."¹⁵ The other name for this "greater Leviathan" is the "political economy."¹⁶ George also refers to it as the "body economic" or "body industrial," and to Hobbes' Leviathan as the "body politic."¹⁷

The basic unit of the political economy is not necessarily the individual, "but those so bound together by . . . needs . . . as to have, as our phrase is, 'one purse.'¹⁸ The development of the political economy (Greater Leviathan) is the result of these "economic units" coming together in a cooperative effort to satisfy material needs.¹⁹ The *science* of political economy is the rational attempt to determine the proper means by which the needs of this "body economic" (Greater Leviathan, political economy) can be met. Its proper object of analysis, therefore, ". . . can be likened to that system or arrangement by which the physical body is nourished."²⁰ Since according to George, ". . . what blood is to the physical body, wealth . . . is to the body economic," *wealth* is the proper object of analysis for the science of political economy.²¹

By using this analogy of the human body to explain his notion of the "body economic," George is able to more specifically define his understanding of the science of political economy. It is the rational, systematic analysis of the production and distribution of wealth, the "blood" of the Greater Leviathan.²² George clearly defines this wealth (in the political-economic sense) as, ". . . natural substances so secured, moved, combined or altered by human labor as to fit them for human satisfaction."²³ He also carefully distinguishes this economic wealth from individual wealth:

In the one economy, that of individuals or social units, everything is regarded as wealth the possession of which tends to give wealthiness, or the command of external things that satisfy desire, to its individual possessor, even though it may involve the taking of such things from other individuals. But in the other economy, that of social wholes, or the social organism, nothing can be regarded as wealth that does not add to the wealthiness of the whole. What, therefore, may be regarded as wealth from the individual standpoint, may not be wealth from the standpoint of society. An individual, for instance, may be wealthy by virtue of obligations due to him from other individuals; but such obligations can constitute no part of the wealth of society, which includes both debtor and creditor. Or, an individual may increase his wealth by robbery or gaming; but the wealth of the social whole, which comprises robbed as well as robber, loser as well as winner, cannot be thus increased.²⁴

At this point Henry George's objection to chattel slavery on economic grounds can be understood easily. It is one of the means by which individuals can become

wealthy without increasing the wealth of the body economic.²⁵ “The enslavement of a part of their number could not increase the wealth of a people, for more than the enslavers gained the enslaved would lose.”²⁶

C. The Philosophico-Theological Level

There are three philosophico-theological objections to chattel slavery contained in the writings of Henry George. Human bondage is simultaneously a denial of the natural equality of human beings, the demonstration of an invalid assumption concerning the rightful basis of property, and the demonstration of an invalid assumption concerning the nature of property.

1. Slavery as denial of natural human equality

For Henry George the natural equality of human beings was indisputable, “. . . the ‘self-evident’ truth that is the heart and soul of the Declaration of Independence—‘*That all men are created equal.*. . .’”²⁷ The Declaration merely enunciates what for George is written into the natural order.²⁸ Insofar as slaveholding is a denial of that natural equality,²⁹ by implication it must be either a failure to perceive correctly the natural order, or a conscious willingness to pervert it.³⁰

2. Slavery as the demonstration of an invalid assumption concerning the rightful basis of property

Chattel slavery is based on the assumption that one may have property in human beings. Henry George clearly argues that this is an invalid assumption. The foundation of his argument is a threefold assertion that the rightful basis of property is “. . . the right of a man to himself, to the use of his own powers, to the enjoyment of the fruits of his own exertions.”³¹ As will become apparent, human slavery is a denial of each of these rights.

According to George the individual right of a person to him/herself is the only right from which exclusive ownership can be derived.³² If we do not “own” ourselves, how can we own anything else? But does such a right exist? George argues that it does, “. . . testified to by the natural facts of individual organization—the fact that each man is a definite, coherent, independent whole.”³³ Then, by derivation, “As a man belongs to himself, so his labor when put in concrete form belongs to him.”³⁴ Thus ultimately for George:

From what else, then, can the right of possessing and controlling things be derived? If it spring not from man himself, from what can it spring? Nature acknowledges no ownership or control in man save as the result of exertion . . . She recognizes no claim but that of labor, and recognizes that without respect to claimant.³⁵

Insofar as chattel slavery is essentially the compulsion of individuals to work and then taking from them the fruits of their labor with bare recompense, it is the “robbery of labor.”³⁶ As such it is the denial of the natural right of individuals

to what their own efforts have produced. Because this right is a part of the natural order, and the “. . . laws of nature are the decrees of the Creator,”³⁷ slavery is thus also ultimately a contravention of divine law.

3. *Slavery as an invalid assumption concerning the nature of property*

Throughout his writings Henry George maintains his claim that the only rightful basis for individual ownership is individual labor or production. We are rightfully entitled to only that which we have labored to produce (termed *wealth* by George)³⁸. There is no other valid basis for ownership.³⁹ As a result only that which can be produced, i.e. *wealth*, can be owned.⁴⁰ Insofar as *wealth* is defined by George as “. . . natural substances that have been so secured, moved, combined or altered by human labor as to fit them for human satisfaction.,”⁴¹ he can draw the following conclusion:

Whatever exists without man's agency, was here before he came, and will, so far as we can see, be here after he is gone; or whatever is included in man himself, . . . cannot be wealth in the fundamental or core meaning of the word.⁴²

The implication of this general conclusion concerning chattel slavery is clearly stated by George. Property in human beings is “. . . essentially different than property in things that are the result of labor. . . .”⁴³ It is “. . . a perversion of ideas to apply the doctrine of vested rights . . . to property in human flesh and blood.”⁴⁴ To claim title to the possession of a human being is “. . . a bold, bare, enormous wrong. . . .”⁴⁵ Human beings cannot be property.

III

Chattel Slavery: Conclusion

THERE ARE THREE CATEGORIES of criticism of chattel slavery that can be gleaned from the writings of Henry George: practical, economic, and philosophico-theological. Practically, chattel slavery is inefficient and a hindrance to technological discovery and production. Economically, it does not increase the wealth of the political economy, the “Greater Leviathan.” Philosophico-theologically, it is a denial of the natural equality of human beings, and is based on erroneous assumptions concerning the rightful basis and nature of property.

IV

Economic Slavery: A More Serious Concern

ACCORDING TO HENRY GEORGE, if chattel slavery (property in human beings) is unjust, then so is private property in land.⁴⁶ The reason is that “. . . the ownership of land will always give the ownership of men.”⁴⁷ George argues that this is the case in the following manner.

Given a country in which:

- 1). Land is divided among a number of individuals;
- 2). capitalists are specialized from laborers; and
- 3). manufacturing and exchanging are separated from agriculture;

what will inevitably occur with population growth and technological advance is an enslavement of the laboring class.⁴⁸ This will take place, given the aforementioned conditions, because the cost of using the landowners' soil (rent) will increase while the laborers' wages will decline to the point that:

. . . laborers, no matter what they produce, will be reduced to a bare living, and the free competition among them, where land is monopolized, will force them to a condition which, though they be mocked with the titles and insignia of freedom, will be virtually that of slavery.⁴⁹

This servitude is what Henry George calls economic or industrial slavery—wage slavery. He sees it as a problem of significantly greater concern than chattel slavery, for two reasons. First, chattel slavery at the time George was writing is essentially an historical issue, whereas the servitude that has as its basis private property in land is developing in all bodies politic wherein private ownership of land is an accepted principle. Chattel slavery has ceased to exist in most countries, but “. . . the condition of the masses in every civilized country is, or is tending to become, that of virtual slavery under the forms of freedom.”⁵⁰ Chattel slavery is dead, but economic slavery is alive and growing throughout the world.

The second reason George sees economic slavery as of greater concern is his view that “. . . of all the kinds of slavery this is the most cruel and relentless.”⁵¹ The laborer is robbed of the fruit of his exertions just as a chattel slave, but taskmasters are no longer human beings who can be moved by human sentiment to soften the conditions of servitude. Instead both laborers and their employers become driven by impersonal marketplace forces of supply and demand. As a result there is depersonalization and alienation to a much greater degree than was the case in the master-slave relationship,

. . . and even the selfish interest which prompts the master to look after the comfort and well-being of the slave is lost. Labor has become a commodity, and the laborer a machine. There are no masters and slaves, no owners and owned, but only buyers and sellers. The higgling of the marketplace takes the place of every other sentiment.⁵²

Henry George is therefore convinced that economic slavery is potentially (if not already in fact) a greater evil than chattel slavery ever was. He even goes so far as to say that:

Of the two systems of slavery, I think there can be no doubt that upon the same moral level, that which makes property of persons is more humane than that which results from making private property of land.⁵³

Thus the evils of chattel slavery, though certainly significant and never condoned by George, are seen as preferable to the insidious, pervasive, depersonalized horrors of the modern industrial State of the late 19th century. In George's own words:

If we must have slavery, it were better in the form in which the slave knows his owner, and the heart and conscience and pride of that owner can be appealed to. Better breed children for the slaves of good, Christian, civilized people, than breed them for the brothel or the penitentiary. But alas! that recourse is denied. Supposing we did legalize chattel slavery again, who would buy men when men can be hired so cheaply?⁵⁴

In sum, for Henry George chattel slavery was a great evil, but one eclipsed by an even greater, more pervasive, relentless, inhuman, contemporary servitude: economic slavery.

V

General Conclusion

THE PRIMARY PURPOSE of this paper has been to describe Henry George's threefold critique of chattel slavery. Briefly stated, George found this form of slavery practically inefficient, economically unable to contribute wealth to the "Greater Leviathan," and philosophically invalid and unethical. He had even greater concern with the more contemporary and serious issue of economic servitude. In regard to both, what George sought with the intensity of an Old Testament prophet was nothing less than:

. . . that our social institutions be conformed to justice; to those natural and eternal principles of right that are so obvious that no one can deny or dispute them . . . This, and this alone, I contend for—that he who makes should have; that he who saves should enjoy.⁵⁵

For these rights and this "social justice" Henry George was a most eloquent advocate.

In conclusion, it must be pointed out that although the basis for a remarkably comprehensive criticism of chattel slavery can be gleaned from the writings of Henry George, it was never a topic of primary interest for him. More often than not he used it merely as the basis upon which to attack what concerned him to a significantly greater extent: the economic bondage that had as its basis the private monopoly of land. A final selection from *Progress and Poverty* captures this most eloquently:

And so it has come to pass that the great republic of the modern world has adopted at the beginning of its career an institution that ruined the republics of antiquity; that a people who proclaim the inalienable rights of all men to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness have accepted without question a principle which, in denying the equal and inalienable right to the soil, finally denies the equal right to life and liberty; that a people who at the cost of a bloody war have abolished chattel slavery, yet permit slavery in a more widespread and dangerous form to take root.⁵⁶

Notes

1. Henry George, Jr., *The Life of Henry George* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1960), pp. 43–44.
2. Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1958), p. 349.
3. Supplemental sources were purchase, punishment, birth from slave parents, self-sale, and the sale of children. Cf., *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed. (1985), Vol. 27, s.v. "Servitude," pp. 226–27.
4. William Sumner Jenkins, *Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1960), pp. 117–21.
5. This should not suggest that George had not been concerned with the morality of chattel slavery. He used the slavery issue in a satirical attack on Herbert Spencer's about-face on the land question [*A Perplexed Philosopher* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1946), pp. 259–67]. It demonstrates his clear moral opposition to slavery based on deeply felt convictions. Had slavery still been a legal institution when he wrote, George certainly would have devoted more attention to it.
6. George, *Progress*, p. 149.
7. Henry George, *Social Problems* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1966), p. 150.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 150–51. See also *Protection or Free Trade?* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1940), pp. 270–73.
9. George, *Progress*, p. 526.
10. ———, *Social*, pp. 149, 157.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 149–50; *Protection*, pp. 270–73.
13. George, *Social*, pp. 159–60; *Progress*, pp. 353–57.
14. Henry George, *The Science of Political Economy* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1981), pp. 22–23.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, p. 272.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 276.
27. George, *Progress*, p. 545.
28. ———, *Science*, p. 256, makes this clear in a discussion of a different topic: "This attaching of value to land in special—that is to say, land in particular localities with respect to population—is not merely a most striking feature in the progress of modern civilization, but it is, as I shall hereafter show, a consequence of civilization, lying entirely within the natural order, and furnishing perhaps the most conclusive proof that *the intent of that order is the natural equality of men.*" (Italics mine).

29. ———, *Progress*, pp. 524, 526.
30. These implications are not explicitly stated by George, but are implicit in his analysis of nature and natural law in *Science*, pp. 11-57, 86.
31. George, *Progress*, p. 334.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 335.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 334.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*, p. 335.
36. George, *Science*, pp. 131-33, 152-53.
37. ———, *Progress*, p. 336.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 337.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 336; see also *Science*, p. 461.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 337.
41. George, *Science*, p. 272.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 275.
43. Henry George, *The Land Question* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1953), p. 51.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
45. George, *Progress*, p. 358.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 347.
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*, p. 348.
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*, p. 353.
51. *Ibid.*
52. *Ibid.*
53. George, *Social*, p. 159.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
56. George, *Progress*, p. 388.

The Influence of Exchange Rates on Trade

DR. ARTHUR B. LAFFER, Distinguished Professor of Economics at Pepperdine University and member of the President's Economic Policy Advisory Board, reports on his recent research on international trade in "Minding Our Ps and Qs: Exchange Rates and Foreign Trade," published in the Fall, 1986 number of *International Trade*, Laredo State University's new scientific quarterly.

An examination of interest rate patterns internationally suggests that the dollar's decline is not inflation induced, Dr. Laffer reports. Detailing the evidence, he finds that Europe and Japan have had supply-side revolutions of their own. The fall in the U.S. dollar appears to be the consequence of improved foreign economies and so the situation will result in improvements to the U.S. economy. "The rich will get richer," he says, "and so will the poor." W.L.