

A Whole Loaf, Half a Loaf, or No Bread?

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After an interval of years, I have been re-reading some of Henry George's books and other writings and also some books about him—older and more recent. The exercise has prompted furious thought about the validity of the cliché, "Half a loaf is better than no bread," in its application to radical reform movements.

GEORGE HIMSELF was in no doubt what he wanted for all the dispossessed people of the world—the restoration of their birthright, equal rights to land. The conclusion he came to at the end of the long enquiry into the cause of poverty in the first six books of *Progress and Poverty* was uncompromising: *We must make land common property.* The italics were George's own. In Book VIII of *Progress and Poverty*, George explicitly stated that it was not necessary for the State to take formal possession of the land, but he was not interested in the half-a-loaf philosophy which many of his followers came to regard as the realistic way to get land values collected as public revenue. His attitude was: "We already take some rent in taxation. We have only to make some changes in our modes of taxation to take it all." And he added that "we may put the proposition into practical form by proposing—*To abolish all taxation save that upon land values.*" If further evidence is wanted that George was not interested in half measures it is to be found in the names of the organizations formed in Britain to propagate his ideas after his speaking tour here in 1884. They were the English and Scottish Land Restoration Leagues.

We must suppose that those who, after George's time, took "land restoration" out of the titles of the Georgeist organizations and substituted "taxation of land values" must have believed sincerely that this toning down of the original message would make it acceptable to more people. Undoubtedly it must have made it more acceptable to some people, but were they the people who, when they got their half loaf of a partial tax on land values, would feel that they must work all the harder to get the other half loaf? Or were they the kind of people to whom half measures are second nature, who hate to come down on one side of any fence? And could this mild and innocuous presentation sustain the popular enthusiasm aroused by George's speeches and writings? The answers to these questions seem all too obvious when we compare the situation of the movement in 1894, when George could write, "The great work is not done, but it is commenced, and can never go back," with the situation today, when it is all too obvious that it has gone back.

No half-loaves for the Commonwealth Land Party

These thoughts are not original. In 1919, when it was clear that the momentum of George's campaigns of thirty years before was spent, the same ideas possessed

the small group, led by R. L. Outhwaite and J. W. Graham Peace, who founded the Commonwealth League. What is to be learnt from the story of their apparently abortive movement?

The Commonwealth League raised again the banner of land restoration, proposing that Parliament should make a formal declaration that the land of England belonged to the people and should then introduce a budget, which the House of Lords could not touch, providing for the collection of the rent of land and abolishing taxes. They attempted to get this policy adopted by the Labour Party, which at that time had no land policy, and obtained a good deal of support at local party level. However, when a resolution on land restoration was sent up to the Labour Party Conference in 1926, the platform succeeded in having it referred to the executive. The next year the executive came up with a diametrically opposite policy—nationalisation with compensation. Ramsay MacDonald is on record as saying that Labour's land policy "would put landlords in a better position than they are in today." The Commonwealth League therefore turned itself into the Commonwealth Land Party and set out on the forlorn task of getting direct representation in Parliament.

Peace ran the C.L.P. and its weekly paper *The Commonwealth* practically single-handed (Outhwaite had died early in the 1920's). He had a single-minded devotion to the cause equal to that of George himself, and devoted all his time to it at great personal sacrifice. He kept the paper going weekly up to about the beginning of the second world war, but politically never got beyond losing two deposits in a general election although securing several thousand votes. The contributions received from the small groups of his supporters and from a very few relatively wealthy people were never enough to ensure the C.L.P. more than a hand-to-mouth existence. They did not even permit Peace to seek legal redress when a wealthy landlord, whose political utterances Peace had criticized, calmly appropriated the name "Commonwealth" for an organization of his own with very different aims. The movement did not survive the second world war and the death of Peace.

Why did the C.L.P. fail?

I am inclined to think that the basic reason for the failure of the C.L.P. was that Peace was attempting to obtain political results by a method that had outlived its

usefulness. Eloquence, sincerity, persistence and a reasoned appeal to a less numerous electorate, had been sufficient, a century earlier, to enable Cobden and Bright to carry the repeal of the Corn Laws. They had sufficed, eighty years earlier, to enable Garrison to move the American conscience to the abolition of slavery, though it must be admitted that in both these instances there were vested interests, rivals of those attacked, which stood to gain from the reforms proposed. Fifty years earlier, the same resources and methods which had served Cobden, Bright and Garrison enabled George to make the land question a burning question throughout and beyond the English-speaking world. George was helped by the publicity resulting from his intervention in the struggles of the Irish Land League when he first came to speak in the United Kingdom in 1881, but this time there was no rival vested interest to be the ally of the reformer. Nevertheless, George succeeded in getting for the claims of the common people to the land a wider hearing than they ever obtained afterwards.

Between Henry George and Graham Peace, however, lay the birth of the mass media—not yet television, but the popular newspaper, confuser-in-chief of all but the strongest minds, breaking down the habit of connected reading and serious thought, developing the taste for trivia and sensationalism and developing the techniques of twisting facts to fit the theories of irresponsible newspaper proprietors. The cinema had developed into an addictive drug, sharing with football the functions of the circuses of ancient Rome. Commercial advertising had grown into a multi-million-pound hullabaloo in which the voice of a small and struggling weekly with a serious message could hardly be heard beyond its own office walls.

Even more serious, perhaps, was the deterioration in political conditions throughout the world. Little though communism has in common with the Georgeist philosophy, it did destroy vested interests. After the Russian revolution, vested interests, more widely organized internationally and more conscious of their dangers, were not going to risk another revolution. Big business in Germany put the Nazis into power as a means of defeating communism, not realizing that they would be unable to control them, and the Spanish civil war served notice that, if democracy elected a government of which



important vested interests were afraid, democracy would be destroyed. This lesson has been reinforced more recently in Greece.

Graham Peace never quite took the full measure of

the world. In the middle 1930's he could write that, if land rent had been the sole source of public revenue in Manchuria, there would have been no profit in holding land there and therefore the Japanese would not have



invaded the country! Peace's thinking was based on the implicit assumption that democracy could be made to work strictly by the rules: persuade a majority your ideas are right, elect representatives who will put those ideas into effect—and the minority will abide by the decision of the majority. If only . . .!

The deterioration of political and public life which was already apparent to George, and which has gone much further in this century, was interpreted perfectly correctly by him, in the final chapters of *Progress and Poverty*, as indicating that our civilisation was turning from progress to decline. To re-read George's eloquent plea to his contemporaries to trust Liberty fully, while there was yet time, and to reflect on the developments of our own day whilst reading his sombre forebodings of where the trends of his day would lead, is to wonder whether we are not already well past the point of no return. Is there any hope? That is the question I want to discuss in the last section of this article.

Is there no bread for any of us?

The weakness to which enthusiasts for a great cause are most liable is unjustifiable optimism—especially about developments in some far corner of the world. The South American Committee for the Single Tax, whose edition of Lamas' book on Rivadavia I mentioned in a recent article, showed, in their introduction to that book, that they were still greatly encouraged by the Liberal land valuation proposals in Britain in the previous decade. Yet these, as we know, were stillborn. Similarly, although Georgeists in Britain and America tend to take comfort from the adoption of a measure of land-value taxation in, say, Canberra, it would be unwise to assume that a majority of, or even very many of, the citizens there really understand the underlying philosophy. Indeed, recent reports from Canberra suggest the contrary—that, to most, land-value taxation is just another tax. A tax which might just as well be reduced or abolished as any other, and is likely to be, with an important vested interest pressing hard to ensure that it shall be.

And can we, if we stand back and look at the matter objectively, really persuade ourselves that a measure of municipal taxation on land values, introduced as a help

in curing "urban blight," bears much relation to George's, "It is not enough that men should vote; it is not enough that they should be theoretically equal before the law. They must have liberty to avail themselves of the opportunities and means of life; they must stand on equal terms with reference to the bounty of nature. Either this, or Liberty withdraws her light! Either this, or darkness comes on, and the very forces that progress has evolved turn to powers that work destruction. This is the universal law. This is the lesson of the centuries. Unless its foundations be laid on justice the social structure cannot stand?" We are especially likely to conclude that there is no relation at all when we learn, from Cord's comprehensive review¹ of Georgeism since George, that many advocates of taxation of land values as an aid to urban renewal think it harmful to their cause to mention George's name!

Are we to conclude, then, that there is no hope? That the decaying carcass of civilisation must be fought over by the vultures of financial and property interests on the one hand and the communist and trade union jackals on the other, until such time as the planet is sterilized by a nuclear war? It is tempting to conclude that, since land restoration would "only" benefit everybody, and not any well-knit vested interest, it is unlikely to win out in competition with the two main contenders: conservatism, tending towards fascism when it feels sufficiently insecure, and socialism, tending towards communism as conservatism becomes more reactionary. If this is really the situation, the best that can be hoped for is that a major nuclear war should be avoided whilst capitalism is collapsing under its own inherent contradictions and that, after five or ten centuries of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the spirit of liberty should again gradually emerge.

It is, I say, tempting to conclude that something like this is now a realistic forecast. But there is just one new factor in the present situation, and that is the existence of a significant proportion of the present rising generation which rejects the values of our society and sets no store by the acquisition of wealth and position. Many of these young people show more concern about the lot of the less fortunate members of society than most of their elders. It seems that most of them do not know *why* the society in which they find themselves is so rotten but, if they could be shown, they might find their own ways of doing something about it. The same spirit which has led some of them to squat in unoccupied houses in protest against the inadequate efforts of authority to solve the housing problem might, for example, lead to a new Digger Movement in unused but monopolized acres. This would do more to bring the relations between labour and land and the health and prosperity of society dramatically before the public than any amount of more decorous propaganda. Perhaps the best service that could be rendered by an older generation which has kept George's fire alight, though heavily banked up, would be

to use it to kindle a spark among this section of youth.

I am not suggesting that propaganda aimed at professional people concerned with urban renewal should be discontinued, but I seriously doubt whether this is the way to avert the decline and fall of our civilisation. It is still true, as John Stuart Mill remarked², that "When the object is to raise the permanent condition of a people, small means do not merely produce small effects, they produce no effect at all." What I do suggest is that we should devote more effort to enlightening the younger generation which, as always, carries humanity's hopes for the future.

¹ Steven B. Cord (1963), *Henry George: Dreamer or Realist?* Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press (and Oxford University Press, London).

² John Stuart Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, Book II, Ch. 13.