



Books are usually written to solve the special problems of their times. A few reach out beyond their times to touch a great truth and so live on. Such books are Aristotle's **POLITICS**, Plato's **REPUBLIC**, Mill's essay on **FREEDOM**, Adam Smith's **WEALTH OF NATIONS** — and **PROGRESS AND POVERTY** by Henry George.

In this article, written specially for "NEW ERA," keeping in mind the needs of emergent Africa, you will probably meet for the first time, the momentous ideas of Henry George which roused the world.

# HENRY GEORGE & THE LAND QUESTION

By

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"I conceive that land belongs to a vast family of whom many are dead, few are living, and countless numbers still unborn." That is the way a Nigerian Chief expressed it.

The idea that the land belongs to all men is very widespread. Different people from different countries from the Arctic to the Tropics believe this. After all, it is natural to see that the earth was not created by man, and therefore he should not consider it as "his," although he may consider the house he builds as belonging to him.

As man has developed civilization, many good things have come with it. But some of the results of civilization have not been so good, and one of these is the weakening of the idea that the land belongs to all men.

While it is true that many countries recognize that the land is for all men, it is also true that most of the good land is in the hands of a few, while the majority of people are landless. It is not enough to acknowledge a principle — it must also be practised.

Even those thinkers and statesmen who have sincerely wanted to recognize the rights of all men to own land have been perplexed as to how to do it. Most of them have made plans to divide the land among the people. This usually means buying great estates (or sometimes just taking them) and making smaller plots of them to give to several people.

Sometimes there is a law preventing estates from being too large. But these systems do not work very well, for a number of reasons: regulations as to the size of land holdings are difficult to enforce. Besides, some people need more land for their business than others; and land varies greatly in value, so that you can't plan for people to have the same sized plot.

These difficulties were seen by an American economist, Henry George, and he thought of a way to solve the problem.

## HENRY GEORGE

Henry George was born in Philadelphia in 1839. When he was still in his teens, he travelled around the world, as a sailor, and was struck by all the poverty he saw, as well as all the riches. He joined the gold rush to California, but after trying mining, he became a printer, a newspaper reporter, and then an editor of his own newspaper. He saw the land of California being taken by large owners, and saw that this was wrong.

In 1879, George wrote his great book, *Progress and Poverty*, in which he showed that the poverty which comes with progress is caused basically by the private monopoly of land. But he did not stop there, nor did he propose as a remedy the division of land. George saw that the problem was one of *land rent* and *land values*.

## HIS IDEAS

As society develops, land becomes valuable, said George. The more populated or fertile the land is, the more valuable it becomes. This means that the owners of land can demand higher payments of rent from those who do not own land, but have to use it. The more rent is demanded, the less is left to the worker as wages. This situation is made even worse by the practice of owners demanding a higher rent than people can pay, and holding their land idle, confident that time is on their side. Usually, time is on their side, and the land goes up in value.

Poor land can be had cheaply. There is plenty of "free" land in the desert and the mountains. But land that is desirable because it is in a populous centre or is rich in natural resources — this is the kind of land for which people have to give up a large part of their earnings.

Let society take this land value as a tax, said George. The value of land is created by the people — let it be returned to the people in the form of public services. Then the government would not have to tax us on our earnings.

By this means, the equal right of all men to the land would be asserted. How so? Because since every holder of land would be paying society for the value of his land, no one would be at an advantage or disadvantage with respect to land. Everyone could secure land on condition that he pay the tax based on its value. Good-land would be easily and cheaply available. People could use as much or as little land as they needed.

After Henry George wrote *Progress and Poverty*, his ideas became widely known and discussed, not only in America, but all over the world. George wrote more books and ran twice for Mayor of New York as a people's candidate. The first time he was almost elected; the second time in 1897, he died a few days before the election.

But his ideas lived on, and his followers kept working to promote them. Some land value tax legislation was enacted in various countries, including the United States, Denmark, Australia, New Zealand — and even in Nairobi. But these partial measures, though helpful, were not enough to have the full effect. It will require a great educational effort to get this basic reform completely adopted. To this end, the Henry George School was established in 1932, and for more than thirty years, has continued its educational programme. It offers a free course in economics with *Progress and Poverty* as the text, both in class and by correspondence. The School now has a large headquarters in New York, many branches in the United States and Canada, sister schools in several other countries, and correspondence courses that reach around the world, in five languages.

When enough people understand the basic importance of Henry George's ideas, we may look forward to the day when they will be practised.

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## Kenya Calls

by K. B. SHARMA

"As a community realizes the conditions which all civilized communities are striving for, and advances in the scale of material progress, so does poverty take a darker aspect. Some get an infinitely better and easier living, but others find it hard to get a living at all." It seems that when Henry George wrote this he was writing about the conditions in East Africa during the colonial era. To a great extent, the countries developed economically, but this entailed dire suffering on the part of the indigenous people who graduated from a barter system to a modern economy.

East Africa experienced these troubles because the indigenous people with a low standard of living, face unemployment, and only a few have enough land to provide food for them. Undoubtedly land is the problem facing East Africa, where the best land was taken over by the Europeans for huge plantations on which to grow export crops. No doubt they developed and produced cash crops to replace subsistence farming, but many Africans were deprived of their most important asset—the land.

More than anywhere else in the world, the people here must be made to realize that land is the common property of the whole community. Thus emergent Africa must be told of the method by which this may be accomplished without bloodshed. Africa must be told about the ideas of Henry George *now* before it is too late. The young Africans whose thirst for knowledge is insatiable must be made aware of the great lessons that the Georgist philosophy holds for them, and the solutions it provides for their difficulties. This is an opportunity that must not be missed. On behalf of our future Georgist followers I appeal to Americans for help in showing Africa the path to progress and annihilation of poverty. We feel that the United States—the home of Henry George—owes it to Africa to light up this continent with the ideas of her great political economist.

Mr. K. B. Sharma of Nairobi writes that facilities for starting a Henry George School are available there at the New Era College, and that local personalities and institutions are ready to cooperate. An article on Henry George by Robert Clancy of New York recently appeared in the New Era magazine published by this college. Five thousand copies have been distributed and many readers mentioned the Henry George article as the feature which interested them most.