

No Victory Without Compromise

By MARSHALL CRANE

A REFORMER must know neither cynicism nor despair. His work is a statement of his belief that social improvement is not only desirable, but possible too. His efforts however, are of little use unless he understands the nature of the material with which he is working and governs his activities accordingly. This is neither fatalism nor pessimism. Any signs of an unrealistic approach in any direction should put him on the alert for false premises.

Few books combine idealism and realism as well as *Progress and Poverty* by Henry George. Page after page is illuminated by his high purpose. He has left the world a basic principle and a practical expedient which are unique.

But how well do George's adherents follow his example? Exponents of great causes are often accused of being theoretical, utopian and unrealistic. It is true that they are apt to neglect the development of strategic policies, political techniques and organization. Experience shows that without these they face inevitable defeat.

A classic "lost weekend" is found in the case of the British Fabian Society. Some of the most brilliant of George's early enthusiasts were among its founders. They advocated the public appropriation of economic rent, but they forgot how futile this would be if human enterprise was shackled by any other force, public or private. Unwittingly they proposed to socialize the tools of industry. As a result the British Socialists now in power exempt vacant property from taxation entirely.

The Force of Truth

Nevertheless, the experience of having met truth face to face is thrilling. Both Bernard Shaw and Tom Loftin Johnson said later that their lives had been changed; the former by hearing George lecture, the latter by reading one of his books. I doubt if there is any Georgist who does not treasure the memory of his introduction to Henry George's works. Shaw responded by diving into the study of political economy. Johnson went to George and asked, "What can I do to help you?"

But what is the effect on the average student today? In the light of his new knowledge, he naturally deplors the present set-up, but there seems little that he can do about it. He talks enthusiastically to indulgent friends, but is often doubtful of the value of his mission. He tries to soothe his growing frustration by promising himself that he will support his new creed, when it appears on the ballot—a promise about as unrealistic as anything could be.

Evolution Must Be Gradual

For neither he nor any of his representatives will ever have the opportunity of voting for or against Henry George's economy, as such. Economic evolution reflects such varied interests that we must in all reasonableness expect it to be gradual.

Similarly, even those political changes which appear violent and drastic, are seldom as complete as they seem. The American Revolution freed this country from the British crown, but left it still governed by British common law, with its institutions almost unchanged. The Constitutional Convention of 1787, a four-months' dog fight, closed with the adoption of just seven articles, of varying lengths, mostly

couched in general terms. Only one, a brief sentence referring to ratification of the instrument, was passed without debate, intrigue and conspiracy. The other six were all compromise agreements. More than half of our present Constitution consists of amendments, many of which also are compromises.

Democracy Cannot Be Rigid

This is the democratic method. Its faults are obvious, but it has the virtue that it can, if the people wish, prevent government from becoming a malignant growth on the body of society.

To the Georgist, democratic processes suggest that the George economy will never emerge from the debating club phase unless he becomes a great deal more politically minded. He must consider the implications of the fact that such laws as he might wish to propose, would certainly be hammered into some very strange shapes by the opposition before they reached the ballots. In fact, their acceptance might be possible only after so many concessions had been made as to make their passage seem pointless. Success may come at last only to the connoisseur of compromise.

At present we face two foes: the burdensome system of taxation, and the planned welfare state with its galloping trend toward socialization and its concentration of political power. This second foe is surely the more dangerous to the social philosophy of Henry George. For of what benefit could land-value taxation be in an economy in which the laws of nature were hobbled? In the late war the Allied forces cleaned up the stronger enemy before concentrating their power upon the weaker. Good strategy, it would seem.

The Tax Program

Henry George's followers are sometimes called "single taxers," and it is true that the public appropriation of economic rent was the conspicuous point in the original program. Rent, having its origin in the existence and efforts of the community, Henry George believed it should belong to the community. Its full collection would prevent an accumulation of false titles to the wages of labor and capital, whose interests he considered identical.

He emphasized again and again that only natural forces, functioning freely, could distribute the product of labor fairly. He was depicting a real welfare state made possible through free industry—with free markets for goods and labor. His goal was of course, freedom of human institutions, labor, and enterprise. The tragedy is that not having known tyranny ourselves we imagine it has disappeared. Freedom, which already seems to us old fashioned, will again be desirable only after we have lost it. There are at least three uncensored serial reports on the Soviet State now being published, any one of which would convince us that tyranny is possible, and that it reappears regularly. It is knocking at our door now. If Henry George were alive could he arouse Americans to the danger? If so—how would he do it—what arguments would he use? Can we not produce a leader who will try to save our pitiful country—even if, like Abraham Lincoln, he is forced to compromise?