New Englander and Yale Review / Volume 0046 Issue 205 (April 1887)
Progress and Poverty in Politics [pp. 335-346]

By Henry W. Farnam

Article HI.—PROGRESS AND POVERTY IN POLITICS.

Eight years ago Mr. George published his " Inquiry into the cause of industrial depressions, and of the increase of want with the increase of wealth," together with " The Remedy." Few authors have undertaken a more ambitious task. No man could set before him a more important problem or one the solution of which would be more likely to benefit the human race. If poverty could be abolished, and progress go on without it, little else would remain to be wished for in the way of temporal happiness on the earth. It is not surprising, therefore, that the author painted the results of his doctrine in glowing colors. " To remove want and the fear of want," said he, " to give to all classes leisure and comfort and independence, the decencies and refinements of life, the opportunities of mental and moral development, would be like turning water into the desert. The sterile waste would clothe itself with verdure, and the barren places, where life seemed banned, would ere long be dappled with the shade of trees and musical with the song of birds. Talents now hidden, virtues unsuspected, would come forth to make human life richer, fuller, happier, nobler. . . . Consider the possibilities of a state of society that gave that opportunity to all! Let imagination fill out the picture; its colors grow too bright for words to paint. . . . Consider these things, and then say whether the change I propose would not be for the benefit of everyone," (page 423.)

Yet the book was not entirely filled with rhetoric. It was a treatise on Economics. It discussed the laws which regulate wages, capital, distribution, population, and material progress. It was based in great part upon the doctrines of Ricardo and John Stuart Mill. The reasoning was abstract and often ingenious. The dialectical power of the author was fascinating and seductive. The scientific method of the book excited the attention of scholars, while its beneficent aim attracted philanthropists and dilettanti economists. Its glowing rhetoric exercised a fascination upon all who read it, whether they agreed with its conclusions or not

The book made its author suddenly famous. Mr. George was at that time forty years of age. He had been born in Philadelphia, where his father, a clerk in the custom-house, had struggled to give his large family the best opportunities that his scanty means would allow. Henry George, the oldest of the family, had at an early age gone to sea and worked before the mast on a ship bound to Australia and the East Indies. Upon his return home he entered a printing office, but in 1857 again shipped as an ordinary seaman to California. After his arrival there he first went to British Columbia with a party of miners, but being disappointed in the gold fields soon returned to California and again entered a printing office. Here he stayed until his twenty-first year, when he became a journeyman compositor. Seven years after that, in 1867, he was appointed a reporter upon a daily paper in San Francisco and in a few months became its managing editor. In 1868 he was offered the editorship of another paper but lost this position on account of his opposition to the great Pacific Railway corporation. In 1871 he started, in company with two friends, the San Francisco *Post*, but dissolved his connection with the paper in 1875. In that year he received an appointment to a state office, that of Gas Inspector, which has been described as being something

of a sinecure. Whether that was the case or not, it was during his incumbency of that office that he obtained time to write the book which first made him famous.

From the year 1879 to the present the doctrines of " Progress and Poverty" have been familiar to all who are interested in social problems. The book has been read by many to whom Political Economy is still "the dismal science," and it has been circulated in cheap editions by the thousand among the classes to which it holds out such an alluring prospect. " Progress and Poverty " has become a classic in labor literature. Its doctrines have been accepted, not only by many who see in them a means of personal rescue from distress and want, but by many others who are convinced by the reasoning of the author. Clergymen, in the Catholic as well as in the Protestant church, have become his disciples, and business and professional men have gladly sat at his feet.

After the publication of "Progress and Poverty," Mr. George traveled abroad, and took an active part in the Irish land agitation. He was known, however, simply as a man of letters, a theorist, an abstract thinker, until the fall of 1886. In that year he entered suddenly upon a new career. The philosopher, the man of the closet, was suddenly put forward as a candidate for the mayoralty of New York, and thrust into the heat of an active and vigorous political campaign. The man who was known only as the ingenious and eloquent originator of an economic theory, so radical and so contrary to existing interests and prejudices that any incorporation of its teachings in practical legislation seemed utterly chimerical, suddenly became the leader of a political party. It, therefore, becomes important to enquire what this party is, and what the tendency of Mr. George's teachings in practical politics has hitherto been. His economic theories, which have already been fully discussed, become of minor importance when compared with his influence upon the problems of the day.

The campaign of 1886 undoubtedly had its rise in the labor agitations which were going on all over the country in the beginning of that year. In the spring there occurred the great strike on the Southwestern System; then came the horse car strikes in New York City, while all over the country labor organizations multiplied rapidly, and the boycott was frequently used as a means of industrial coercion. For a time labor organizations seemed supreme. It was difficult in many cases for the employers to resist the pressure which was thus suddenly put upon them, and the very novelty of the weapon used made it formidable. In July, however, some of the leading men engaged in the boycott of the the iss concert hall were sent to Sing-Sing and served there for 100 days before being pardoned by Gov. Hill. It was out of this and other boycott prosecutions that the Henry George campaign grew. As the author of the history of this campaign says, in speaking of the working men; " They had battled blindly in strikes and .boycotts, feeling the touch of a hostile hand they could not see; but the prosecutions came to them like a flash of light in the darkness, revealing the source of their oppression in the law and an all potent remedy in the ballot." * In other words, the labor organizations, finding that one of their most dreaded weapons was liable to be blunted and dulled by the law, determined to change that law, if possible.

* " The George-Hewitt campaign," compiled by L. F. Post and F. C. Leubuscher, p. 4.

The first steps in this direction were taken by the Central Labor Union, an organization made up of delegates from the various trades-unions of New York. This organization, on July 11th, 1886, appointed a committee on political action. This committee, in its report, recommended that a conference be held, to be attended by delegates from every trade and labor organization which had been in existence for six months prior to the call of the conference, the committee "believing that by united action on the part of the workers, honest men can be elected to administer the affairs of government, and the laws can be enforced for rich and poor alike."

The conference was held on August 5th, and was attended by 402 delegates, representing 165 labor organizations, claiming a membership of fifty thousand people. The conference, after expressing itself in favor of independent action, adjourned to August 19th, when it appointed a permanent organization committee of seven.

As soon as political action had been decided upon, Mr. George's name was suggested and received with great favor by the delegates. He was accordingly asked whether, in case he were nominated, he would contest the mayoralty of New York. In reply to this request Mr. George sent a long letter, dated August 26th, in which he stated that, though reluctant to enter the political field, he would nevertheless consent to stand, provided thirty thousand citizens should, over their signatures, pledge themselves to vote for him. More than the requisite number of signatures were secured and he was nominated for mayor on the 23d of September.

The platform which was adopted by the conference contained seven articles. The first, which is in the nature of an introduction, appeals to the statement made in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal," and condemns " the system which compels men to pay their fellow-creatures for the use of God's gifts to all." In the second section the party demands " the abolition of the system which makes such beneficent inventions as the railroad and telegraph a means for the oppression of the people," and declares " the true purpose of government to be the maintenance of that sacred right of property which gives to everyone opportunity to employ his labor and security that he shall enjoy its fruits." The third section deals mainly with local reforms, and demands that the people of New Tork shall have full control of their local affairs ; that grand jurors shall no more be drawn from a single class; that the procedure of courts shall be simplified, the officious intermeddling of the police with peaceful assemblages stopped, and the laws for the safety and sanitary inspection of buildings enforced; that direct employment shall be preferred to contract work, and that equal pay shall be given for equal work without distinction of sex. The fourth article introduces Henry George's land theory. It protests against the crowding of so many people into narrow tenements and demands the abolition of the taxes on buildings and their imposition upon land alone. The fifth section goes further and says that the enormous value given to the land of the city by the presence of a million and a half of people properly belongs to the community, and that it should be taken in taxation. This section also demands that the existing means of transit shall by lawful process be assumed by the city and operated for the public benefit. The sixth section favors a constitutional convention and a reform in the machinery of elections. The seventh section is simply an exhortation, calling upon " all citizens who desire honest government to join us in an effort to

secure it, and to show for once that the will of the people may prevail even against the money and organization of banded spoilsmen."

The platform, it will be noticed, adopts Henry George's theory *in toto,* but also advocates a number of other schemes, some of them of simply local importance and purely administrative in their character, others decidedly socialistic, as, for instance, the expropriation of the horse car lines. But nothing is said with regard to the boycott prosecutions, which, as already stated, were the original cause of the movement.

The nomination of Mr. George undoubtedly forced the nominations by Tammany Hall and the County Democracy of Mr. Hewitt, and by the Republicans of Mr. Roosevelt. Thus there was a triangular battle, but most of the fighting was between Mr. George and Mr. Hewitt, each of whom regarded the other as his principal opponent.

It is needless to enter into the history of the campaign in detail. A somewhat extended public correspondence took place between Mr. George and Mr. Hewitt, the former challenging Mr. Hewitt to a public debate and the latter declining it. Many speeches were made on both sides, and numerous out-of-door meetings held by the George party. The campaign on Mr. Hewitt's side was waged mainly on the line of opposition to the disintegrating and somewhat socialistic views of Mr. George, while the latter devoted himself in the main to the advocacy of his land theory. Frequent references were made to municipal reforms, such as a better control of the police force the promotion of purity and honesty in administration, etc., but most of Mr. George's speeches seemed to lay the principal stress upon the abolition of private property in land, a measure upon the execution of which the mayor of New York could, of course, not exercise the slightest influence.

The result of the polls was to most people unexpectedly favorable to Mr. George, for it gave him 68,110 votes as against 90,562 obtained by Mr. Hewitt and 60,435 obtained by Mr. Roosevelt. The campaign was, as Mr. George expressed it, a Bunker Hill for the labor party. It undoubtedly did more for its success than a victory would have done, for it gave it all the prestige of being able to command an enormous vote, while relieving it from the responsibility of putting into operation any of the numerous reforms which it had advocated in its platform.

Steps were accordingly taken to make the organization permanent, and on the 6th of November, only four days after the election, a meeting was held for this purpose at Cooper Union. A central committee of three, consisting of John McMackin, the Rev. Edward McGlynn, D.D., and Professor David B. Scott, was appointed to act, until a national conference, to be called by it, should choose a permanent committee.

The platform was almost entirely taken up with the land question. To be sure, it reaffirms the principles of the New York labor platform and demands purity of elections; it also has a good deal to say about the brotherhood of man and social justice. But its pith lies in the section which says: "We hold that the value which attaches to the surface of the earth, by reason of the growth

of population, belongs to society at large, and we propose, therefore, to abolish all taxation upon buildings, improvements, and all other things of human production, and by taxation on the value of land alone to provide for purposes of common necessity and benefit" It also declares war on the system "which hands over public works to corporate control, and permits such beneficent agencies as the railroad and the telegraph to be made the means of robbing the producer, and of enabling railroad kings and stock gamblers to throttle business and dictate laws."

It will be noticed that, though the campaign really originated in the boycott convictions and in the aims of the labor organizations of New York, it gradually became detached from these issues under Mr. George's leadership, and spent its energy mainly upon the land question. The movement, however, is not over, though the polls are closed. One of the means of prosecuting the campaign was journalism, and two daily newspapers were established to aid Mr. George's contest for the mayoralty. One of these was called the "Day" and the other the "Leader." The "Day" went into eclipse at the end of the campaign, but the "Leader" still leads, and is apparently intended to occupy a permanent place among the dailies of New York. In addition to this, a small monthly paper, called the "Tax Reformer," is issued to popularize Mr. George's ideas, while Mr. George himself has begun the publication of a weekly newspaper called the "Standard," the first number of which was issued on the eighth of January of this year. Thus both Henry George himself and the leaders of his party have had occasion to express themselves frequently upon the issues of the day, and we have the means of ascertaining what attitude they take toward the practical problems that are constantly pressing for solution in the world of labor.

As regards the land question, there is no doubt whatever as to the practical measures which Henry George would adopt were he in a position to control legislation. That he has stated very distinctly in his book. His remedy for the poverty which exists is simple confiscation. In " Progress and Poverty " (page 864) he says, " What I, therefore, propose, as the simple yet sovereign remedy, which will raise wages, increase the earnings of capital, extirpate pauperism, abolish poverty, give remunerative employment to whoever wishes it, afford free scope to human powers, lessen crime, elevate morals, and taste, and intelligence, purify government and carry civilization to yet nobler heights, is to appropriate rent by taxation;" and again, in speaking of the claim of land owners to compensation, he says, (page 326): " By the time the people of any such country as England or the United States are sufficiently aroused to the injustice and disadvantages of individual ownership of land to induce them to attempt its nationalization, they will be sufficiently aroused to nationalize it in a much more direct and easy way than by purchase. They will not trouble themselves about compensating the proprietors of land." He does not go quite as far as Proudhon, who said, " property is robbery," but he does maintain that property in land is robbery, ne says, " It is a fresh and continuous robbery, that goes on every day and every hour. It is a toll levied upon labor constantly and continuously," (page 327).

The practical aims, therefore, of Henry George are simply,, in respect to land, to take the value of land in the form of taxation without giving any compensation to its present owners. This same idea is carried out in the salutatory article of the " Standard," in which he says: " What God created for the use of all should be utilized for the benefit of all; what is produced by the

individual belongs rightfully to the individual."

Though the "Standard" is published mainly to aid the theories of Mr. George, it is obliged also to take notice of questions of more immediate and practical value. In the second number of his paper, he denounced the conviction of Spies and the other Chicago anarchists and claimed that they were convicted "by a jury chosen in a manner so shamelessly illegal that it would be charity to suspect the judge of incompetency;" and he says further: "An opinion more dangerous to society than that men who teach unpopular doctrines may be silenced by illegal convictions of infamous crimes could hardly be conceived."

It is not necessary to discuss the evidence in the anarchist cases. Mr. George is perfectly right in demanding a fair trial, even for anarchists; but the interesting part of the article is that he alludes to people who confessedly advocated murder as "men who teach unpopular doctrines." There are strong words of condemnation for the haste and injustice of society, when alarmed by dynamite, but the open advocacy of murder is simply spoken of as " an unpopular doctrine."

Shortly after the "Standard" had begun its publication, there occurred the strike against the Old Dominion steamship line and the coal strikes, accompanied by the general strike of the longshoremen and freight handlers in New York. In speaking of these in the issue of February 5th, Henry George says: " I think it a fight in the dark ; the blind push of men squeezed beyond endurance. I think it the first passive form of a civil war which steel-clad forts and armor-plated ships cannot guard ns against—the kindling of passions and the arraying of forces that, aroused to full energy, may give cities to the flames and destroy our very civilization itself." In the issue of February 12 he says, on the same subject: "To be sure, third parties, who have no direct interest in the quarrel, suffer, and frequently the greatest sufferers are the men who thus go out to help their fellows, but if the strike be thus made more costly, its results, in causing employers to hesitate before engaging in another such contest, are likely to be more decisive and effective." " As for the morality of strikes," he says, " It is simply that of any other application of coercive force and again, "Admonitions are not wanting that in these industrial wars (for they are nothing else) there is a growing disposition to resort to more violent measures. And whether right or wrong, the growth of this disposition is natural." And in speaking of the right of strikers to coerce others into stopping work, he says, " When our forefathers struck against England, they not merely struck themselves, but compelled every one else they could to join them, first by " moral suasion," which amounted to ostracism, and then by such measures as tarring and feathering, harrying, and shooting."

It seems somewhat strange that, in view of such sentences as these, which seem to favor the violence of strikes, he should, in commenting upon the decision of Judge Brown, which refused to dismiss the suit of the Old Dominion Company against the Knights of Labor for damage to their business, say: "Judge Brown's opinion is, we are inclined to think, good law, and, what is still more important, it is certainly good sense." But he goes on to say, " It is perfectly true, as an abstract proposition, that no one ought to be permitted to interfere with the legitimate business of another, or by going out of his own right to inflict or threaten injury or loss as a means of

coercion. Yet it is also true that, under existing conditions, it is only by combining together to interfere with the legitimate business of others, and to coerce others by the fear of injury or loss, that workmen are at all able to resist the tendency to crowd wages down to the point of bare existence."

Throughout the whole paper Mr. George shows this tendency to bring all the water he can to his own mill. Thus while it cannot be said that he directly encourages anarchy or dynamite or even violence and coercion on the part of strikers, he certainly welcomes them as an argument in favor of his theory. One cannot help contrasting such utterances as these with the expressions used by some other men who are prominent in the labor movement Mr. Arthur, for instance, the Chief of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, distinctly denounces strikes and uses his influence against them, and has been the means, as is well known, of preventing the engineers from joining in many strikes in which other railroad men were engaged. This was notably the case during the great strike on the Southwestern System in 1886, when the locomotive engineers did their best to run trains in spite of the threats and violence of the Knights of Labor. One cannot help contrasting Mr. George's utterances, even, with those of Mr. Powderly, who, though not naturally so conservative as Mr. Arthur, and though at times yielding to the pressure of his own society, has nevertheless often denounced individual boycotts and strikes. Mr. George, during the whole period of the coal handlers' strikes, did not write a line to prevent them or to urge the men to adopt more reasonable and more profitable methods, but justified them by references to the Revolutionary War, while they were in progress, and, after they had failed, took them as a text for driving home his land theory. The "Leader" which is, as already stated, the official organ of the new labor party and calls itself the "Organ of Organized Labor" aided and abetted the coal strike to its utmost, and even claimed, when it was all over, and the men who had engaged in it were anxiously seeking employment in places that had already been filled by others, that the movement was on the whole a success.

It is, of course, too early to pass a final judgment either on Mr. George or on the labor party, but we can safely put on record the direction in which he seems to be moving at present. His connection with practical politics does not seem to have modified in any degree the predatory character of his land doctrine as advocated in his book. With regard to the contest between the labor organizations and the employers, which have been so numerous during the past year, his position is on the whole favorable to violence and to interference with the personal liberty of those who are outside of the rank of organized labor. His position is no longer that of a philanthropist, advocating with earnestness and sincerity an extreme measure not likely to be adopted; it is that of an agitator who, instead of exercising his powerful influence in the interests of harmony and good-will and self-restraint, as do many of the leaders of the better class of trades-unions, distinctly appeals to the more unruly and violent portion of his constituency.