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"Progress and Poverty"

by Alfred H. Henderson

To economic pagans any one article on the Single Tax, confined to some particular phase, must necessarily appear to often beg the question, and be dogmatic. In a limited space it is impossible to give a satisfactory outline of the George philosophy, just as a minister can not present the entire plan of salvation in a single short sermon. So I would admonish the politico-economics dilettante, as full of ignorant objections to the Single Tax as an egg is of meat, to first search the scriptures of this great religion of humanity as found in "Progress and Poverty," before rushing into print or upon the rostrum, and I venture to say that he will find every point covered and every objection met.

"Obtain a description of the thing which is presented to you," says Antoninus, "so as to see distinctly what kind of a thing it is, in its substance, in its nudity, in its compelte entirety, and what value each part has with reference to the whole. It certainly is not unreasonable to ask a painstaking study of such a book as "Progress and Poverty." It has been translated into all the principal languages and the greatest intellects of the age have testified to its surpassing merit. Then think of the magnitude of its promises and the increasing numbers of its proselytes.

To read it understandingly you must read it through. Its foundations are laid with care, with accuracy and skill, and rise by "cold gradation and well-balanced form" from the corner-stone of statement to the domed conclusion. It is earnest, logical and intense. Titanic in denunciation, rich in illustration, prodigal of comparison, abounding in facts, and chaste and eloquent in diction. In order to whet the appetite for this great feast of reason I shall attempt a very brief synopsis of its contents.

"Progress and Poverty" as its title page states, is an inquiry into the cause of industrial depressions, and of the increase of want with the increase of wealth, and the remedy. The work is divided into a preface, an introduction, ten books subdivided into

chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction is devoted to a statement of the problem — why we find where population is densest, wealth greatest, and the machinery of production and exchange most highly developed, the deepest poverty, the sharpest struggle for existence, and the most enforced idleness. This problem exhibits itself in the tendency, everywhere recognized, of wages to a minimum.

Mr. George first shows that political economists from Adam Smith downward, have adopted an erroneous starting point, through making their observations in a state of society in which a capitalist generally rents land and hires labor. The capitalist therefore appears to be the first mover in production, and capital a necessity before labor can be employed. Our author points out that this is not the natural sequence of the elements of production. There must be land before labor can be exerted, and labor must be exerted before capital can be acquired. Labor is the active and initial force, and is therefore the employer of capital. Capital assists labor, but there is no need for it to employ labor, for when land is free the laborer will employ capital himself, paying interest for it. It is only when land is monopolized, and rent has to be paid for its use that the laborer, unable to obtain land to exert his labor upon, is forced to work for wages for the capitalist who hires the land; and then wages may be forced by the competition among laborers to the minimum at which laborers will consent to live. Natural opportunities being open and equal, the more laborers the more wealth.

This conclusion conflicts with the Malthusian doctrine, that population tends to increase faster than subsistence. The completeness with which this doctrine is broken down makes it certain that the horrid libel on nature will never again be seriously advocated. The inquiry is thus narrowed to the laws of the distribution of wealth whose necessary correlation and co-ordination is demonstrated. Mistakes regarding spurious capital and profits are removed, and the laws of interest, rent and wages elucidated. Three parties divide the product of industry, the laborer, the capitalist, and the land owner. If with an increase of production, the laborer and capitalist get no more, it is a necessary inference that the land owner reaps the whole gain, and it follows that the old idea, so prevalent still among workmen, that capital and labor are antagonistic, is a mistake. Both alike suffer from the common enemy — the land owner. And the facts strictly agree with this conclusion. For though neither wages nor interest anywhere increase immaterial progress goes on, yet the invariable accompaniment is the rise of land values, and the increase of rent. And it is everywhere observable that where the value of land is highest, luxury and destitution appear side by side. To see men in the most abject poverty you must not go to the backwoods or the unfenced prairies, but to the great cities where the ownership of a

little patch of ground is a fortune.

Considering the effects of material progress upon the distribution of wealth, an examination of the cause of recurring paroxysms of industrial depressions solves the problem. This is found in the fact that in all progressive countries there is a constant tendency in the speculative advance of rent to overpass the limit, where production ceases. The insufficiency of remedies currently advocated is demonstrated, and the true one that land must be made common property announced. The injustice of private property in land is first shown by the *a priori* method, then by induction, and finally by the historical method. Not only on grounds of equity but also of expediency is private property inland condemned, since it is inconsistent with the best use of land. What is necessary for the use of land is not its private ownership, but the security of improvements. It is not necessary to say to a man, "this land is yours," in order to induce him to cultivate or improve it. It is only necessary to say to him, "Whatever your labor or capital produces on this land shall be yours."

How shall the remedy be applied? Not by the state owning the land and renting it out. This would involve a needless shock to present habits of thought. Great changes can best be brought about under old forms. Let us abolish all taxation save that upon land values. The government would become the universal landlord without calling itself so, and without assuming a single new function. No owner of land need be dispossessed, and no restriction need be placed upon the amount of land any one could hold. The proposition is found to be sound when tried by the accepted canons of taxation, since it bears lightly on production, would be certain, easy of collection, and fall equally upon all. The effect of the remedy is given upon the production and distribution of wealth, upon individuals and classes, and the changes it would work in social organization and life. The monopoly of land gone there would be no fear of large fortunes, for when every one gets what he fairly earns, no one can get more than he fairly earns. Society would be morally elevated, and its intellectual activity increased.

The current theory of human progress that it is a slow race development is refuted, and differences in civilization explained. The true law of human progress is association in equality, and unless it is maintained our civilization will decline. The central truth is the identification of social life with the great moral law of justice. This ends the inquiry. The conclusion is devoted to the problem of individual life.

Other books by Mr. George are: "The Land Question;" "Social Problems;" "Property in Land," being a controversy with the Duke of Argyll; "Protection or Free Trade;"

"The Condition of Labor," being an open letter to Pope Leo XIII;" "The Perplexed Philosopher," being an examination of Herbert Spencer's various utterances on the land question; and his yet unpublished "My Political Economy." In these works he throws the sunlight of his genius into the dark places of the dismal science. It was the boast of Augustus, that he found Rome of brick and left it of marble. But how much nobler could have been Mr. George's boast that he found political economy a sealed book, and left it a living letter. Other men have been more learned in the curriculum of the schools, other men have vaguely hinted at the truths which he makes so clear, but it remained for Henry George to take the forbidding skeleton of political economy, to clothe it with flesh and endow it with beauty, to breathe into it the breath of life and send it out into the world to enlighten the ignorant, and give hope to the heavy of heart.