Henry George*

AM TO SPEAK to you this morning on Henry George, one of the half-dozen great Americans of the nineteenth century, and one of the outstanding social reformers of all time.

If we would understand Henry George, in the light of his achievements and his influence, we must recognize in the beginning that he represents an altogether extraordinary combination of contrasting qualities. He was a journalist, and a scholar; a scientist, and a seer; a philosopher, a prophet, and even a politician.

Thus, George was without question one of the leading economists of modern times—yet he was also a popular orator of amazing eloquence and power.

George was able to discuss such abstruse theoretical problems as wages, interest and rent in the best academic fashion—and then to give life to these dry bones by the quickening touch of ethics and religion.

George debated, on more than equal terms, with Herbert Spencer, one of the gigantic philosophical intellects of history—and then turned to the common people and stirred them to vast excitement in political campaigns.

George wrote a book which was a classic treatise on political economy—and saw this book become a best-seller in this and other countries. It is interesting to compare *Progress and*

---

* Preached on Sunday, March 18, 1945, one of a series of sermons on "Revolutionary Thinkers of Modern Times."

Poverty, which everybody read, with Karl Marx's *Das Capital*, which nobody read. Yet these books were unquestionably the two supreme revolutionary volumes of the nineteenth century.

As Karl Marx and Henry George were rivals in their day, and are rivals still today, the one with his Socialism and the other with his Single Tax, it may be of interest to compare, or rather to contrast, these two great men, and see how differently they fronted the paradoxical problem of peoples who grow poor in a society which grows rich. This will shed, perhaps, some additional light on what I said three weeks ago about Karl Marx, and will help, perhaps, this morning, in our appreciation of Henry George. Note, if you will, these points:

Karl Marx was a European. He lived on a crowded continent where everything was old. Henry George was an American, who lived in the vast spaces of a land that was new. It was easy for Marx to see things as coming to an end, as it was inevitable for George to see things as still in process of beginning.

Karl Marx was the product of a decadent feudalism; to the end of his days he had contempt for the common people, and no understanding at all of the workings of political democracy. Henry George was the product of a free society; he trusted the common people, and their ability to work out their destiny in terms of freedom. The conception of a dictatorship of the proletariat was as natural to the one as it was unnatural and abhorrent to the other.

Karl Marx spent more than half of his life, and all of the years of his productive activity, in an England which was the industrial leader of the world. England had been an agricultural country, and there came a time when there was a land question! The enclosure of the commons, as it is called, is one of the supreme tragedies of English life. But with the develop-

ment of power machinery came the industrialization of the realm. "England's green and pleasant land," to quote William Blake, was now begrimed with the smoke of belching chimneys; her lovely countryside was crossed and recrossed by clanking railways; her cities and even her villages were fetid with reeking slums. At the heart of the problem of this new and dreadful age, as Marx saw it, was the factory, and there could be no end of the world's misery save in the capture and use of the factory by the workers.

Henry George, on the other hand, was born and reared in a country which was still agricultural. He had seen the farmlands of the East, and the vast prairies of the West. He lived in California, which was the frontier of a nation possessed of boundless territories and receding horizons. Inevitably he read the problem of modern society in terms of land, and believed that in free land lay the all-sufficient solution of the ills that were threatening from the new industrial capitalism. Just as the factory question, in other words, was dramatized in England, so in the seventies and eighties of the last century, the land question was dramatized here in America.

In this contrast of scene and setting, we discover the weakness as well as the strength of these two men, Karl Marx and Henry George. Marx saw the menace of capitalistic monopoly; George saw the menace of land monopoly. Marx focussed his attention, primarily, on the factory, and only incidentally and accidentally on the land on which the factory was built; George focussed his attention on the land, and only incidentally and accidentally on the factory which stood upon the land. Marx never penetrated to the land as the source of all wealth; George never really followed through to the factory as an independent instrument of exploitation on the land however owned. Marx was not fundamental as George was fundamental. Henry

George was really getting down to the bottom of things! But the Single Tax will never be a complete solution of the industrial problem, as it has developed into our age of monopoly distribution, finance capitalism, international cartels, and imperialistic wars, until it reclaims from Marx such elements of Socialism as have long since been proved to be sound and good. Edward Bellamy saw this, however imperfectly, in his *Looking Backward*, which was the one great contemporary rival here in America of *Progress and Poverty*.

Another contrast! Karl Marx was a materialist, and based his whole philosophy upon the hard and fast doctrine of economic determinism, or "the materialistic conception of history." This attitude of mind was in part a reflex from Marx's strangely perverted hostility to religion, and partly the result of the materialism which was rampant in the thought of Europe in Marx's formative years. It led him to a complete neglect of the moral and spiritual forces which play so potent a role in the drama of human destiny, and thus persuaded him to surrender the historical process to the gaunt and grim necessity of a mechanistic fatalism. It is this also which helps to explain Marx's contempt for men, and his repudiation of democracy as the means of social advance.

Henry George, on the other hand, was a religious man. Reared under the training of a religious family, he preserved to the end of his days, and in all his activities, an intense and moving religious consciousness. This did not mean any particular devotion to the rites and ceremonies of the church—on the contrary, his attacks upon the church, for its failure to vindicate the law of righteousness among men, were as vigorous as they were unanswerable. Neither did his religion take any especial forms of pietistic practice or theological belief. With George, religion was a rule of life, and an utter devotion

to mankind. It was a recognition of and a reverence for God's will, a resolute determination that this will shall be done upon the earth, and high sense of personal responsibility that this determination should not fail. "The religious spirit," writes Mr. Geiger, in his remarkable study of the *Philosophy of Henry George*, "was to him always the crusading spirit. . . . He led the attack upon the land monopoly in almost the spirit of a holy war; his economic postulates were the sacraments of a religion that was to make all men brothers and God a father whose ways could now be understood." I know of nothing more touching, in all the range of our American literature, than that famous passage in *Progress and Poverty* where George seems to have completed his argument for the Single Tax. Through hundreds of pages he has made his way through the economics of rent, wages, interest, taxation, and at last has come to his conclusion. "My task is done," he writes. But it is not done! The pen sweeps on. "The thought still mounts. The problems we have been considering lead into a problem higher and deeper still." And George soars, in these last pages, like an aeroplane into the stratosphere, into a discussion of the meaning of life as "absolutely and inevitably bounded by death." *Progress and Poverty* is the only treatise on political economy I know of which ends with a statement of faith in the immortality of the soul. In this George found assurance of those "eternal laws" which must at last bring vindication to the cause of truth.

It was this religious aspect of George's nature which enabled him to bring a solution to the baffling problem of a society which produces poverty in the midst of abundant wealth. Karl Marx had no remedy for a sick world. He simply awaited the inevitable catastrophe which must overtake a capitalistic civilization, and tried to prepare the workers to take over the ruins, to become the heirs of chaos, and thus, through the

seizure of power, control the future in their interest. Henry George saw no need of catastrophe. He had a remedy for the sickness of this world. He had a program which would save it in time, and thus prevent the disaster which he saw as clearly as his Socialistic rival. What wonder that, when he had written the last page of his masterpiece, "in the dead of night, when (he) was entirely alone, (he) fell on (his) knees and wept like a child. The rest was in the Master's hands." This was a feeling, he wrote, which never left him. "It has been to me a religion, strong and deep."

This is Henry George, as I see him in contrast to that other great reformer, or rather revolutionist, of the last century, Karl Marx. So typical of his country, so characteristic of his age, and yet so unique in the transcendent qualities of his own distinctive manhood! Like Abraham Lincoln, a "new birth of our new soil"! And his life was the image of his soul.

Henry George was born in the city of Philadelphia on September 2, 1839. He was the second of ten children, and the oldest son. The family was in very moderate circumstances, and George's schooling never went beyond the elementary and grammar school grades. But this education was only the beginning of a self education, of the Lincoln type, which made Henry George in the end to be one of the best informed public leaders of his time. He early formed the excellent habit of reading and gathering books, and in due course had a library of over eight hundred volumes.

Leaving school when he was not yet fourteen years of age, he went to work as an errand boy and clerk. But this left him restive and unhappy, and when he was sixteen, in April, 1855, he shipped before the mast on the old East Indiaman, the *Hindoo,* and sailed for Melbourne and Calcutta on a voyage which lasted well over a year. I have often wondered what in-

fluence this voyage, and a later one of five months 'round Cape Horn to California, may have had upon George's mind. Did it do anything in the way of developing his philosophy of the land?

Here, day after day, he stood upon the deck of his speeding ship, and gazed upon the sea, one of the two great natural elements of which the world is made. This sea belongs to everybody, and is used happily and profitably by everybody. George's captain could sail his ship in any direction; he could anchor her in any port; he could draw up any treasure from the deep — and no one could interfere. In every smallest hamlet on the shore, the residents may push out upon the ocean in their little boats, drop down their lines and nets and pots, and live upon what they catch which is their own. How different from the land, the other great element of which the world is made, and which belongs to this man, or to that, to the exclusion of all others. There are roads, to be sure, built by the state for public use, else we would not be able to get around at all. There are parks and playgrounds set aside for general enjoyment. There are state and national reservations which keep God's mountains and forests permanently out of private hands. But, aside from such exceptions, the land as such belongs to individual owners, duly protected against trespass. Land is no longer land, but real estate.

How did this natural element, the land, ever pass out of the common heritage of man, while the sea has remained free from Adam's day to ours? Is there any other answer to this question than the simple fact that while it is easy to seize and hold the land, there never has been found a way to seize and hold the sea? Man could put fences around the land and began doing so early, but how can you put a fence around the water, or any portion thereof? If there had been found a way, you may

be sure that the ocean would have been divided up into lots and parcels long before this? A people denied the sea would match a people denied the land. But "man's dominion," as Lord Byron reminds us in his *Childe Harold,* "stops with the shore." Thanks to the inherent nature of waves and tides, the sea is free—more than half of the total area of the globe is inalienably our own. Are we never going to find a way of reclaiming the land, and adding it to the sea as our rightful heritage.

It is doubtful if any such ideas as these occurred thus early to Henry George, for he was still only a boy when, in June, 1856, he returned from his voyage to the Antipodes. His concern now was not with thinking but with making a living. Like Ben Franklin, in Philadelphia, he took up printing, and became an expert type-setter. But he was restless—and welcomed an opportunity the next year to go to California, over which still hung the glamor of the gold-rush of '49. It was on December 22, 1857, that he landed in San Francisco, where he was to remain for a quarter of a century, and started to make his fortune.

Progress was at first discouraging. The great depression of 1857 was on, and jobs were scarce. He had his trade as a printer, of course, and this kept him alive. But by 1861 and the outbreak of the Civil War, he had lost the little money that he had brought with him to California, and had but a single cent to his name. It was at this time that he married—and the story has it that when he proposed to the young lady, Annie Corsina Fox, he showed this coin and gravely confessed that it was all the property that he had. But the girl was as gallant, or as rash, as her lover, and the two were joined, Annie eighteen and Henry twenty-two years old.

The next few years were filled with poverty and despair.

George was not getting anywhere, either in printing or in journalism. In 1865, he began to write—free-lance newspaper work, magazine articles, pamphlets. His writing at this time was crude, but he worked hard with his style, and was constantly reading and studying. His reward came when he obtained a steady position as a reporter on the San Francisco *Times,* and was later advanced to editorial writer and managing editor. But his hard experience had made an indelible impression upon his youthful mind. Why all this poverty which beset California in the financial crisis of '57, and why this desperate struggle to make a living? Here was a great and wonderful country, with vast areas of unoccupied land, with natural resources of incalculable value. Here were men eager to work, and here was the land on which to work. And yet poverty was everywhere. George could understand this, perhaps, in an old and crowded country of Europe, with its ancient cities, its feudal land tenures, its growing population in territories long since occupied. But he could not understand it in a country like America, where everything was new, and empty lands stretched endlessly to far horizons.

In 1868, George went to New York, to secure a press association franchise for his newspaper. This was his first visit to a great city since his boyhood days in Philadelphia, and this question of poverty in the midst of plenty was again forced upon his mind. Here he walked on streets giving every evidence of wealth and power, and only a few blocks away were slums which were the haunts of misery. Years later, he wrote of this visit to New York—"I came to this city from the West, unknown, knowing nobody, and I saw and recognized for the first time the shocking contrast between monstrous wealth and debasing want. And here I made a vow from which I have never faltered, to seek out, and remedy if I could, the cause that condemned little children to lead such a life in the

squalid districts." It was on this same visit that he spoke of having "a vision, a call, give it what name you please. Every nerve quivered. And there and then I made a vow. Through evil and through good, whatever I have done and whatever I have left undone, to that vow I have been true."

He returned to California from New York, his head full of this pressing problem. And straightway he had an experience which seemed to open his mind as the heavens opened to Isaiah. He had been riding one day through a district where a land boom was under way, and the countryside was covered with land-offices and claim-jumpers. Pausing to look around, George asked a passing teamster what land was worth in this vicinity. "I don't know exactly," the man replied, "but there is a man over there who will sell some land for a thousand dollars an acre." Like a flash, writes George, "it came upon me that there was the reason of advancing poverty with advancing wealth. With the growth of advancing population, land grows in value, and the men who work it must pay for the privilege." This was a crisis in George's life. "In the East," writes Mr. Geiger, in comment on this episode, "George had seen the problem; in the West, he thought he had found the solution."

From this moment on, George was a dedicated man. He must settle this problem of poverty which was a disease at the heart of civilization—even of a new and healthy civilization like America. Continuing his work in the local newspaper field, he began feverishly to study his problem, reading widely in the classical economists. He published his first statement on the question of "advancing poverty with advancing wealth" in July, 1871, in a pamphlet on *Our Land and Land Policy*, which was privately printed. But it was eight years before he was ready to write his heart out on the subject. Meanwhile,

he went into politics, and in the Hayes-Tilden campaign of 1876 discovered that he was an orator.

It was on September 18, 1877, according to a note in his diary, that Henry George began the writing of his masterpiece, *Progress and Poverty*. He finished this great work just a year and a half later, in March 1879, after a period of intense and exhausting labor. He was consumed as though by an inward fire, yet lifted up as though by a vision of the apocalypse. He had difficulty in finding a publisher, and at last persuaded Appleton to sponsor the book, on condition only that George himself set the type and manufacture the plates. But the author never faltered in his conviction that he had found the truth and that it would be heard. Amazing was the accuracy of his prophecy, as set down in a letter to his father in Philadelphia. "It is with a deep feeling of gratitude to Our Father in Heaven," he wrote, "that I send you a printed copy of this book. . . . It represents a great deal of work and a good deal of sacrifice, but now it is done. It will not be recognized at first—maybe not for some time—but it will ultimately be considered a great book, will be published in both hemispheres, and be translated into different languages. This I know, though neither of us may ever see it here."

The argument of this famous book, which attracted little attention at first but later swept the world, is so familiar as to need no extensive statement:

The solution of our social problem, said George, lies in the land, which is the source, the raw material, of all wealth. "Everything is the product of the land. This flesh and blood of ours is but borrowed from the soil. . . . The whole structrue of society rests upon it. He who is master of the land is master of the men who must live upon it."

The remedy of our ills, therefore, is to free the land—to make it accessible to the multitudes of men who would gladly use it for their own support and the enrichment of society.

But how to free the land, which has been privately owned since the very beginning of civilization? Title deeds run back for centuries, and represent a tangle of interests as impenetrable as the roots of a tropical forest. To cancel and appropriate these deeds would be unjust—and would create a condition of chaos worse than the evil which we are seeking to correct. So impossible seemed this proposal that a man like Herbert Spencer gave up the land problem altogether.

But George had an idea! The land, every foot of it, has social value—that value which is created not by man—the owner of the land, or any other—but by society? "The value of land," said Henry George, "increases with the growth of society," and therefore is created by society. A piece of land on a western prairie is worth a few dollars an acre, while a piece of land on Manhattan Island is worth hundreds of dollars per square inch. What is the difference between the two if not the fact that the former is located in a vast stretch of unoccupied territory, while the latter is located in the midst of a population of seven million souls? It is New York which has created this value, and not the owner of the land at all. Here is a plot of ground in upper Manhattan which was worth practically nothing a hundred years ago. Today it is worth not less than a million dollars. What has happened? Why, the greatest city in the world has grown up around this land, and people are piled up twenty and thirty stories high upon its area, and all about is the expensive machinery of civilization. The owner of this land has done nothing to improve his property, but all this time has simply sat there, so to speak, watching its value grow. This is what is known as

the "unearned increment," or the social value of the land. Society has created it, and to society, therefore, it properly belongs.

It was at this point that Henry George laid his axe to the root of the tree. Why not appropriate not the land, but the social value of the land? This can be done justly, since it will leave titles untouched, and return to society only what is its own. It can be done effectively, and without confusion, by the simple device of taxation. Let society tax the rental value of every piece of landed property. This will accomplish two things. In the first place, it will relieve the people of all other burden of taxation, since this single tax will be adequate to every public need. Hence the famous phrase, "the single tax"! In the second place, it will return the land to cultivation and other profitable use. Land will no longer be held idle, but will become immediately active in production. And this will be the end of poverty—and that supreme paradox of the ages, "progress and poverty."

This is in essence the doctrine of Henry George. The ultimate solution of our problem of poverty, I believe, is not quite as simple as that. But it is as fundamental as that! George went to the bottom of our ills, even if he did not compass their utmost range. As for the origin of the doctrine, it was not strictly his own. In his main contention he was anticipated by Quesnay and the Physiocrats in the eighteenth century, and by Mill, Marx, and Spencer in the nineteenth century. But he did not know this when he began his work, and thus was himself original. What is important is what Henry George did with his thesis when he found it. For he added to it, as his unique contribution, ingredients which transformed it from an academic theory into an outstanding public issue of thought and life. Three things Henry George did for and with the

Single Tax! He welded it into an argument, both deductive and inductive, which was unanswerable. He suffused it with an eloquence, passion, and even poetry, which was irresistible. He organized it into a political movement which, under his inspired and inspiring leadership, swept with wild currents of agitation not only this country but Great Britain. These were the distinctive gifts of George's genius, and so potent were they that they made the Single Tax as definitely his work as Socialism was the work of Marx, or evolution the work of Darwin.

The remainder of George's life was one long and valiant crusade for the freeing of the land. He labored untiringly with voice and pen. The collected edition of his works in my library numbers eight large volumes, all written after 1878. He entered the lecture field in the wake of the great success of *Progress and Poverty*, and traveled in a few months all over the United States and Canada. He went to Ireland, and joined in the Irish Land Movement. He crossed the channel to England, and conducted a campaign which can only be compared to Henry Ward Beecher's famous campaign at the height of the Civil War. He entered, at this time, and later, into tremendous controversies with the Duke of Argyle, Herbert Spencer, and the Pope of Rome. He plunged into the political maelstrom here in America, especially on the issue of the protective tariff.

Something like a climax in his career was reached when he was invited by the New York labor unions to run for Mayor of the city in the fall campaign of 1886. This seemed to be a wonderful opportunity to "bring the land question into practical politics." He hesitated, however, until told by a New York official that he could not be elected, but that his running would "raise hell." To which George immediately

replied, "You have relieved me of embarrassment. I do not want the responsibility and work of the office of Mayor of New York, but I do want to 'raise hell'." So he entered the contest, which was one of the most exciting in our history. His opponents were Abram S. Hewitt, Democrat, and Theodore Roosevelt, Republican. Henry George led the campaign from the start. His magnificent oratory was heard by vast and enthusiastic crowds. But the party system was against him, and he was damaged by vile slanders of revolution and terror directed against his name. The vote resulted in his defeat by Mr. Hewitt, with Mr. Roosevelt running third. What made the campaign impressive was its revelation of George's hold upon the common people, especially the workers. They admired his sincerity and courage. They were convinced by his arguments. Above all, they recognized his utter devotion to democracy and the freedom of mankind from want. America had seen no such man as this since Lincoln, and they rallied to him by the thousands.

With this historic campaign, the best of George's work was done. He went to England in 1889, for an extended speaking tour. He journeyed to Australia in 1890, and in that country and New Zealand, through a period of more than three months, addressed enormous throngs. But on his return he was suddenly stricked with aphasia, and was obliged to enter upon a prolonged rest. He was only fifty-one years old, but already was worn out by his intense activities.

Then came the heroic and tragic drama of the end!

In 1897, the year following the sensational presidential campaign of William Jennings Bryan, George was asked to run again for the Mayoralty of New York. It seemed as though the great vote for Mr. Bryan indicated a propitious time for

George to carry his message once more into politics. But Henry George was ill, and he consulted a physician.

"Tell me," he said, "if I accept, what is the worst that can happen to me?"

"Since you ask," the physician replied, "you have a right to be told. It will most probably prove fatal."

"Dr. Kelly says the same thing," said George. "But I have got to die any way. How can I die better than serving humanity? Besides, so dying will do more for the cause than anything I am likely to be able to do in the rest of my life."

In his acceptance speech, delivered when he was scarcely able to stand upon his feet, George said:

"I believe . . . that to the common people an honest democracy would bring a power that would revivify . . . the world. No greater honor can be given to any man than to stand for that. No greater service can he render to his day and generation than to lay at its feet whatever he has. I would not refuse if I died for it. What counts a few years? What can a man do better or nobler than something for his country, for his nation, for his age?"

He began the campaign with vigor. The thrill of the contest seemed to quicken both body and mind. For three weeks he carried on the fight. Then came the night of Thursday, October 28th, five days before the election. George had spoken four times that evening. When he returned to his hotel, he complained of feeling ill. In the early hours of the morning, his wife arose and found him "standing, one hand on a chair, as if to support himself. His face was white, his body rigid like a statue, his shoulders thrown back, his head up, his eyes wide open, as if they saw something, and one word came,

'Yes', many times repeated." When the doctor arrived, George was quite unconscious. "A thread in his brain had snapped," and he was soon dead.

The election was forgotten in the city's grief. A nation, and not merely the city, mourned. On the Sunday following the passing of Henry George, his body lay in state at the Grand Central Palace, and a hundred thousand persons filed by his bier. Another hundred thousand, unable to gain admittance, stood silent in the streets, and wept. The vast funeral procession that followed the body down to City Hall and across the Brooklyn Bridge to Greenwood Cemetery was unprecedented in the city's history.

In the face of such a life, and such a death, details of economic theory became insignificant. Here was a man who loved his fellow-men, who rebelled against their subjection to want and woe, who sought justice for the poor, and fought for freedom for the oppressed. Henry George was one of the world's great prophets of emancipation. His mind conceived an immortal truth; his heart touched this truth with the fire of supreme conviction; his soul lifted this truth as a banner in a great crusade for God and his kingdom of the right. His whole life was a dedication to a cause which shall some day prevail upon the earth.

On the stone above the grave of Henry George, across the river, are carved these appropriate words from *Progress and Poverty:*

"The truth that I have tried to make clear will not find easy acceptance. If that could be, it would have been accepted long ago. If that could be, it would never have been obscured. But it will find friends—those who toil for it, suffer for it, if need be die for it. This is the power of Truth."