THE LUNATIC FRINGE

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HENRY GEORGE

who hated the bitch goddess

IN THE FIFTIES of the twentieth century Henry George rose from the dead in truly spectacular fashion. In 1897 they buried his ideas with his body, and for fifty years he remained little more than one of what Jefferson called "monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it." Jefferson indeed would have objected to the application of his words to George, for he was thinking of a different type; but the description corresponds to the view of this man generally held for half a century.

The resurrection is attributable in part to a pair of biographies published, one in 1950, the other in 1955, both notable books, although for different reasons.* One was the work of George's daughter, the other an evaluation by a professional historian not affected by any personal relation to his subject.

Filial piety was admittedly the inspiration of Mrs. de Mille's book, so as regards George's philosophy and influence in the world it carries no great weight of authority; but it is unusual in its presentation of a personality of extraordinary sweetness and charm. Henry George was not what is colloquially described as "a good provider"; on the contrary, he

* *Henry George: Citizen of the World,* by Anna George de Mille, 1950. *Henry George,* by Charles Albro Barker, 1955.

was a lamentably poor one as genius frequently is. But he won and held the adoration of his family, which is by no means characteristic of genius. The book therefore is authoritative in demonstrating the fundamental integrity that affected everything the man did.

Dr. Barker, on the other hand, approached his subject unemotionally, unless it is emotional to cherish a high admiration for an extraordinary mind. His judgments are cool, temperate and based always on the record, not on personal impressions; yet to a considerable extent, indeed to an astonishing extent, he supports what one would naturally assume are the more impulsive findings of the daughter. Together they leave the unbiased reader no room to doubt that Henry George's ideas are still influencing the trend of thought, which is to say, he is no tombstone but a dynamic force, intellectually very much alive.

Yet the books, of course, are but signal flags, responsible for our awareness of George, but not for his resurgence. A dead author who rises from the tomb always comes up under his own power, and always for the same reason, namely, that a later generation discovers that his ideas correspond to reality much more closely than had been supposed. It is not necessarily the reality of his own time; he may have been wide of the mark while he lived and therefore of little use to his contemporaries; yet the meanderings of the stream of history may bring him in line with the main currents of thought a decade, or a generation, or a century after he has departed this life. This seems to be the case of Henry George. Some of what he said—not all, by any means—has been much more useful to our generation when it was repeated by Keynes, or Laski, or Roosevelt, or Tugwell than it was when it was first enunciated by George himself.

This is not an insinuation that the moderns are low fellows addicted to plagiarism. If they have frequently quoted

George without credit it is because they did not, and humanly speaking could not know to whom credit was due. When he was most original George was seldom able to express his idea in the sharply vivid phrase that clings to the memory, as David Harum said, "like a burr to a cow's tail." So his best thought was often expressed in terms only partially comprehensible to his contemporaries but that acquired meaning from subsequent events, when most people had forgotten that George said anything on the subject. Thus he merged into the background and was lost for years; and when he emerged it was less as an individual than as an influence on the climate of opinion, like those Arctic hurricanes that determine the weather in the United States although Americans are not aware that they ever blew.

As late as ten years ago almost everybody who remembered George at all remembered him as the great Single Taxer, which is much like remembering Sir William Osler as the man who favored chloroforming people at forty, and Sir Isaac Newton as one who amused himself by watching apples fall. Henry George did advocate the single tax, but only as one of many expedients directed to the goal of equality of opportunity, and toward the end of his life he was annoyed by people's tendency to sum up his whole philosophy in this one expedient.

His career was remarkably variegated, yet remarkably humdrum. The latter statement may seem to be a contradiction in terms, but it isn't. Henry George had the faculty of taking the color out of things in a really remarkable degree. Born in Philadelphia in 1839 he was one of eleven children of a minor official in the customs service. His father at one time had been in the business of publishing religious books without any great success, but without calamitous failure; he returned to a salaried job about the time of Henry's birth.

The original George, Henry's grandfather, was an English sea captain who made some money, which his children were unable to keep. Henry's father married a woman of Scottish descent; both were devout Episcopalians and Henry was brought up in that faith, adhering to it all his life although he was never conspicuously pious.

His formal schooling ended before he was fifteen, but what there was of it seems to have been good. After a year in various clerkships he went to sea and made voyages to India and Australia, ending in California, where he learned the printing trade and graduated from that into journalism. His observation of what went on during the California land boom led to the writing of his one really famous book, *Progress and Poverty*. In 1880 he removed to New York. His book had attracted a good deal of attention in Europe where he made many valuable contacts and became interested in the Irish land question on which he wrote at length, spending much time in Europe organizing various tax reform groups.

His disgust with the corruption of the Gilded Age, and especially with the Tammany regime in New York led in 1884 to his nomination for mayor on a reform ticket, against Abram S. Hewitt, Democrat, and Theodore Roosevelt, Republican. Hewitt won with 90,000 votes, against George's 68,000 and Roosevelt's 60,000—such, at least, were the official figures, although how many votes Tammany stole for Hewitt is anybody's guess. If the number ran as high as 12,000, then George was actually elected, as his more ardent supporters believed. At any rate he returned to writing and lecturing, spending more time in Great Britain and making one tour through Australia. In 1897 he was persuaded to run for mayor again, against his better judgment, and seemed to be making a very effective campaign when apoplexy struck him down and he died within a few hours, worn out at the age of fifty-eight.

As one studies the record, especially Barker's book, which is by far the most exact and detailed account, a curious and almost unbelievable pattern emerges. Again and again Henry George was not defeated by the machinations of his enemies, nor by his own mistakes, but simply recoiled from success. In his early days in the west he had a good start in the mercantile business in British Columbia, but as soon as things were going well he quit. In San Francisco when he got into journalism, he and a partner, after a terrible battle in which they teetered on the verge of bankruptcy a dozen times, got a real foothold with a newspaper that commanded much influence and seemed in a fair way to dominate the Pacific Coast; but as soon as the going became easy and large success was in plain sight, George withdrew. Twenty years later he was urged to settle in England and it is almost a certainty that he could have enjoyed ease and influence there; but he would not. It was almost as if he feared success—an oddity indeed, since he certainly feared nothing else; but perhaps like William James, he saw success as a bitch goddess and simply did not like her company.

The result was to make his story dull, depressing and definitely irritating. In addition to the instances cited, at one time or another he held a dozen excellent jobs which he sacrificed by quarreling—sometimes sedulously picking a quarrel—with the boss. But this is a familiar picture. Many men, including some of the most successful, are temperamentally incapable of working under the direction of others. The singularity of George is that he was apparently incapable of working under his own direction once it became clear that his work was going to succeed. In a jam he was wonderful—bold, tireless, resourceful and imperturbable—but as soon as the going became relatively easy all the drive seemed to go out of him, and he faltered and usually quit.

So the common practice of describing him as a frustrated

man is questionable. A man who is denied the fruits of his own labor is frustrated; but suppose he rejects them of his own volition—is he then to be called frustrated? Common sense may reply shortly that there are no such men; but in that case, let common sense undertake to explain Henry George and see how far it gets.

Perhaps at this point we are coming close to the factor that is the essence of the Lunatic Fringe. Success, after all, is deployed in depth, and even common sense admits that a man content with small achievements is a small man; the great one is he who makes his final objective the point of critical strategic importance and goes for it, indifferent to the success or failure of the preliminary skirmishing. Yet if a man has vision capable of locating the strategic point far beyond the horizon at an unattainable distance, common sense discards logic, and instead of calling him the greatest of all, calls him a lunatic.

What Henry George really wanted his generation did not know, our generation does not know, and if the man himself knew he was incapable of putting it into words. Obviously it was not money and ease; every man of first-rate ability likes distinction and so did he, but he never confused it with notoriety; it is clear that fame in the world was not the goal of his aspiration. The prodigious labor of all his days was to understand, but to what end? If we could answer that, we might be able to explain not this man only but also many another character that at present baffles historians. We might grasp the true inwardness of the Lunatic Fringe—and be overcome with astonishment.

The genesis of his *magnum opus* he recorded precisely. Having taken to the hills for a breath of air one day he looked down upon a California valley at the other side of which a new town was expanding. Fields stretching from the foot of

the hill to the town were under cultivation, and George began to speculate on the destiny of the farmer. At the moment the value of his acres was measured by the value of the corn that his labor applied to the land would produce; but it was evident that in a few years the town would spread over the fields and then the land would be immensely more valuable, or at least would command an immensely greater price.

By what, then, would that price be measured? Obviously, by the presence of the townsmen, or by the values that the townsmen produced by their labor, not on the land, but in commerce and industry. Assuming that the farmer kept his land until this value had been created, he would grow rich, not by labor but by doing nothing. He would collect the value that the labor of others had created; and those who worked would remain poor. Progress, in short, was attended by poverty, and this struck Henry George as an absurdity.

The idea, of course, had occurred to a great many other people, including the German philosopher, Karl Marx. But it did not strike Marx as an absurdity; it struck him as a law of human existence, and he had already elaborated it in his immense treatise, *Das Kapital.* George could not have read Marx because when George wrote only one volume of Marx's work had been published and there was not yet an English translation; but when he did learn of the book years later he was not impressed. The concept of utter idiocy as a law of the universe was one that he could not entertain.

But if George did not know Marx, Marx knew George, all right, and his wrath against the American was Homeric. *Progress and Poverty* he damned as "an attempt, decked out with socialism, to save capitalist domination and indeed to establish it afresh on an even wider basis than its present one." Marx admitted that the man was "a talented writer" but with the furious addition that "he has also the repulsive presumption and arrogance which is displayed by all panacea

mongers without exception." Including, conspicuously, Karl Marx.

It is true enough that *Progress and Poverty* contained a glaring fallacy in its overestimation of the value of rent. George assumed that if society appropriated rent the revenue would be sufficient for the purpose of government without the levying of any other tax, hence the phrase, "single tax," descriptive of his doctrine. A generation later it is plain that this is a more than doubtful assumption. But it does not invalidate the argument that the poverty attending progress is the effect, not of immutable law, but of a defective, indeed, an insensate economic organization.

The wrath of Marx is explained by the fact that this argument destroys the whole basis of communism. If the defects in a man-made economic system are the cause of our woes, then it is reasonable to suppose that a better man-made system might alleviate them. Only if one admits that men are in the grip of impersonal historical forces that they can neither oppose nor control does communist theory make sense.

In this argument George was the somewhat cynical realist and Marx the adherent of romantic mythology. Marx believed that capitalism, being the logical product of dialectical materialism, was logically bound to crash from its own inherent weakness, and then the proletariat would come into its own. George, believing that the defects of capitalism are attributable to human folly and crime, saw no reason to doubt that men, if they choose, can continue to be fools and criminals indefinitely, therefore release of the proletariat from oppression is by no means inevitable. If it is accomplished, it must be by their own efforts, and mainly by the use of reason. To him communism was a form of escape

from reality, embraced by those too lazy or too stupid to cope with the world they live in.

Without doubt both men were products of their environment. Two and a half centuries of American history weighed relatively lightly upon George, especially as he didn't know much of it, by comparison with the fifty centuries of Old-World history that bore down upon Marx, especially as he knew all of it. But they both undertook to be prophets, dealing with the future; and in the cult of prophecy too much knowledge of failure and futility in the past may be a handicap rather than a help. Certainly the three-quarters of a century since they published (Marx in 1867, George in 1877) has refuted more of the prophetical work of Marx than of George. Capitalism has broken where it was weakest, not where it was strongest, and the proletarian revolt has come in Russia and China, the last places that Marx expected.

As for George, his single tax idea has withered, but it has never been refuted, while his basic principle, that the survival of capitalism depends upon the creation of effective consumer demand, is accepted as axiomatic, not merely in the schools, but also in the executive offices of General Motors and United States Steel. Marx, however, was right in one thing—wittingly or unwittingly, George was promoting the establishment of capitalism on a broader and firmer basis than it had in his time.

Of course, most capitalists didn't believe it and for once they are hardly to be blamed, for the man himself never understood it clearly. George's reach greatly exceeded his grasp. He could adumbrate a highly original idea, but his power of logical analysis was not great enough to enable him to think it through and hammer it to an effective cutting edge. His thinking was always a little fuzzy, which betrayed the hasty and superficial into the delusion that it was essentially mushy.

Marx never made that error. He perceived instantly that the basic Georgian thesis was far deadlier to communism than the preachments of such economists as William Graham Sumner; so he hated George while he regarded Sumner with bland contempt.

Nor was the mistake made by such alert minds as those of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, George Bernard Shaw, J. A. Hobson, Henry M. Hyndman and Herbert Spencer. The last-named, indeed, credited George with having "quietly conquered Parliament" while Hobson's summation was that "Henry George may be considered to have exercised a more directly powerful formative and educative influence over English radicalism of the last fifteen years than any other man." That was written in 1897, so the fifteen years referred to covered the date of publication of the *Fabian Essays,* and therefore Hobson rates George's influence above that of the illustrious society.

Hobson's adjectives, "formative and educative," describing George's influence are worthy of note. He was recognized as a propagandist, not as a philosopher; but no propagandist ever flourished long by preaching a completely empty doctrine. This one's doctrine was far from empty, although its content was never fully exploited by the prophet.

One is tempted to believe that if George might have taken from Marx and applied to himself about half of the harsh intellectual discipline to which the German was subjected, both might have been greater men, perhaps immeasurably greater men. Marx's rigorous intellectuality had ground out of him the capacity to perceive that the structure of the universe is basically illogical. Planck's constant had not yet appeared to set a question mark after all the laws of physics, and Marx was incapable of imagining that moral energy may be as discontinuous as physical.

George, on the other hand, had never been trained as a logician and the scientific process of testing a hypothesis step by carefully controlled step was alien to him. He was an incorrigible jumper at conclusions and sometimes was fantastically wrong; but it is significant that when he was wrong it was by over-shooting or under-shooting his mark, not by jumping in the wrong direction. Marx never jumped; he marched to his conclusion step by severely logical step. Yet by failing to allow for the illogical factor in human nature he marched on Germany but brought up in Russia and China.

Even so, as Barker demonstrates, the American had a much firmer grasp of fundamentals than some of his disciples. Henry George was not a peddler of a panacea, despite Marx's assertion; even in *Progress and Poverty* he did not make the single tax the be-all and end-all of economic theory, and, as his experience widened, its importance in his mind steadily diminished. No doubt to the end he laid too much stress on his theory of rent, but he was acutely aware that the theory was an expedient, not a philosophy. His philosophy rested on the belief that the economic system is a creation of the human mind, not the resultant of universal law. It follows that the system is subject to control by the human mind, and all the inevitabilities of dialectical materialism are as mythical as the amorous adventures of Jupiter and Apollo.

This perhaps is still denied by a small and diminishing Battalion of Death confined almost exclusively to the stuffier rich men's clubs and to the communist splinter party in America;, but in general it goes unquestioned, especially since the Hundred Days of Franklin D. Roosevelt, when we actually grasped the economic system and wrenched it around to proceed in a new direction. As Lewis Galantière has somewhat sardonically explained, many of the largest business corporations in America are, in practice though not in theory,

more socialistic than half the socialist governments of Europe. It would appal Grover Cleveland if he could know to how large an extent Social Security is now a condition and not a theory, but the average American is not appalled; he takes it as a matter of course because, to quote one who was the antithesis of Cleveland, "we planned it that way."

So when we turn to the record to see what it was that this frantic subversive, this crazy upheaver of civilization actually advocated, the result is rather flattening. The principal items were rent control, public housing (but only where strictly necessary), minimum wages, abolition of child labor, regulation of women's labor, a graduated income tax, regulation of railroad and utility rates, reduction of the 84-hour week then prevalent, old-age and unemployment insurance and, where it seemed necessary, public ownership of public utilities.

All of this has been so far accepted that today not those who advocate but those who oppose it are the oddities, suspected of not being quite right in the head. So it is a temptation to dismiss the whole matter by saying that Henry George was not radical at all and should be listed as a mild progressive, not as one of the Lunatic Fringe.

But it would be a mistake. Henry George was in fact a radical in his own day and the same kind of man is a radical in our day. It is no matter that the specific reforms that George advocated have been justified by the passage of time. Radicalism does not inhere in what a man advocates but in the fact that he advocates it before others have perceived its necessity. Radicalism consists in willingness to take the next step voluntarily, before we are rammed into it.

Check the list of the Georgian proposals and note how many of them gained final acceptance during the Hundred Days. The special session of Congress called by Roosevelt

immediately after his first inauguration—it actually sat for ninety-nine days, if you are determined to be exact—enacted a mass of social legislation unprecedented in our political history, not because the politicians making up Congress had reasoned it all out, but because holy hell was breaking loose all over the place and something had to be done. The banks were closed, the national economy was paralyzed, the national guard was fighting milk farmers and mobs were pulling judges from the bench to prevent foreclosures in the Middle West, and eighteen million unemployed faced the alternatives of revolting or starving.

As the event proved, the one program available was workable, so the tottering country righted itself and went on its way rejoicing. Let us not delude ourselves, however, by calling it a triumph of statesmanship. It was not. It was a triumph of one terror over another, the abnormal terror of utter collapse overcoming the normal terror of taking the next step, however obvious it may be.

Salvation of the republic came because at the critical moment Roosevelt had a program; but let no one think that he concocted it in his own head as of the moment. He was undoubtedly a great man, but not that great. He was ready with a program because men like Henry George had evolved it in the previous century, and the whole Lunatic Fringe had been yammering about it for fifty years. The yammering was to no purpose as far as its enactment was concerned, but it was by no means a waste of effort. It exposed the fallacies and weaknesses of the original schemes and afforded opportunity to correct the fallacies and eliminate the weaknesses, not altogether, to be sure, but far enough to make the program viable when the crisis compelled action.

Americans are pragmatists in their estimation of leadership. A man is great if his ideas work; otherwise he has bats in the belfry and none so poor to do him reverence. This

is, indeed, an attitude not devoid of reason, but to be wholly reasonable it should be accompanied by a certain temperateness in passing judgment, which it is not; hence the magisterial deliverances of the fathers are comic to the sons, or assuredly to the grandsons, for really original ideas are slow to come to fruition, and a man's true stature is usually revealed, not by his corporeal presence, but by his ghost.

Alexander Hamilton rose from the dead after the Civil War, and was entombed again about the time of the Second World War. Jefferson rose again with Woodrow Wilson, and after a short reinterment during the Harding-Coolidge-Hoover regime, achieved a third advent with Franklin D. Roosevelt. Wilson was obliterated for twenty years but burst his cerements when the guns of the Second World War dreadfully fulfilled his prophecy. The second Roosevelt at the moment seems to be drowsing in Barbarossa's cave, and one shudders to think what agonizing crisis may call him to life again.

Henry George, it is true, is hardly to be listed with any of these, but he, too, walks the battlements of Elsinore because harsh destiny has banged into our heads realization that he was in many respects remarkably right.

Factually and logically, that's that. Yet to say, "so much for Henry George," and drop him there is wretchedly unsatisfactory. It leaves a haunting suspicion that part of the Americanism of the man, and perhaps the most significant part, has been missed. We have heard what his daughter said and we have heard what Dr. Barker said, finding them in substantial agreement, although the daughter is emotional and the doctor is exact. The scientific method in history in such a case counsels us to stress what the exact man says above all else.

Generally speaking, it is sound counsel, but when the effort

is to place a man in his historical context rather than to chronicle his doings, a doubt arises. Was Henry George, for instance, more American because he was right, or because he was reasonable?

Some men have been right in their arguments, and yet such unconscionable swine personally that the thought of having to deal with them is repellent to ordinary human beings. The possibility that such men might obtain control of the country is not an idea that will soothe the fears of the faint-hearted because they would infinitely prefer to be ruled by a fallible human being, and pay the penalty for his errors, than live under a Draco who was invariably right, but who was also a monster of ice and steel.

The will of the majority, said Jefferson, "to be rightful must be reasonable," and the words express an attitude—a principle, or perhaps a mere preference, but certainly an attitude—that the American people have held throughout their history as a nation. We are imbued with a profound conviction that the reasonable way of going about changes in our system is the constitutional way, that is, by free choice of the people expressed in balloting uninfluenced by fear or favor, remembering always that "the minority possess their equal rights which . . . to violate would be oppression."

The mildness of spirit that made Henry George adored by his family also made it impossible for him to be a political philosopher of the stripe of Lenin, willing to crush humanity, if necessary, in order to sustain a dialectical point. This mildness may have been sentimentality; the theorists of the Kremlin have no shadow of doubt that it was. But, sentimental or not, it is certainly American. The blood purge is abhorrent to the basic principles of the American system; even the legally defensible hanging of Mrs. Surratt still gives us twinges, and Sacco and Vanzetti are names that we would willingly forget for their memory is scarifying.

So perhaps the thing best worth remembering about Henry George is not that so many of his ideas were right, but that his method was right from the beginning. He did not rely on some supposed inexorable operation of some supposed law of history to bring about the changes that he advocated. He relied entirely on the eventual triumph of the good sense and innate decency of the masses of men.

That is Americanism. The man who advocates reliance on strictly constitutional methods is thoroughly American, no matter what his specific proposals may be; for there is no idea that is un-American *per se* and whether or not translated into action, except the idea that government may derive just power from some other source than the consent of the governed.

So Henry George really supplies to anxious souls a convenient shibboleth by which they may try the quality of members of the Lunatic Fringe today and tomorrow. It is this: do they propose to attain their ends strictly by the means of persuasion and free election, or by some other means? If they propose to abide by constitutional means, they are not un-American. They may be madmen, certainly, but not un-American, no matter how wild their proposals may seem to contemporaries. It is legitimate to defeat them, but dangerous to suppress them; for the event may prove that the apparent madman is really as sane as Henry George.