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Henry George

America—Europe

By Jakob E. Lange

Although the *Hero* (in the Carlylean sense of the word) is high above the limitations and spiritual barriers of his country and contemporary society, he is nevertheless decidedly a child of his time and fatherland, his mind deeply and strongly stirred and moved by the life of the people. This is eminently true of Henry George. Although his leading ideas are universal, applying to the life of man in all ages and countries, they are thoroughly impregnated by the life and spirit of "The New World," America of his time.

To the superficial observer this is not immediately apparent. One might even think it rather strange that the Social Problem should particularly attract the attention of an American philosopher, nay, predominate his entire world of ideas. Was it not true that America in his time was much more of a land of freedom and equality, which did not show social contrasts nearly so glaring as the old countries of Europe, so that she might even not unjustly be called the "promised land" of the workers of all the world? Was it not to America that the multitudinous hosts of the oppressed and exploited had wended their way, realizing in their own manner the commandment of Karl Marx: "Proletarians of all countries, unite!"—not by combining internationally for the "war of the classes," but by marching, individually and jointly, in an internationally peaceful host for the conquering of a new world, not by the sword but by the plough?

But just at the time of Henry George the social problem did show its ill-boding face over the American horizon. While the decades after 1860 in Europe were for the common man a time of relative—even if slow—progress, due to a certain freeing of international trade, political emancipation, and facilitated emigration, America at the same time showed the first adumbrations of a widespread proletarization. To be sure, the country had entered into a period of marvellous and rapid progress; vast territories grew into new States; national wealth increased; railways joined the Atlantic with the Pacific across deserts and mountains. But for the working man, the main body of the progressive pageant, conditions gradually became harder. To the keen-sighted, every year made it more clearly discernible that the outlook for the common man was gradually becoming less hopeful, his independence was weakening, his self-sufficiency deteriorating.

This became particularly evident after the war between North and South in the 'sixties. And the situation, when perceived by an unbiased mind, would unavoidably be felt as self-contradictory in the extreme: Had not the people, staking its very existence through years of defeats and victories, expelled slavery from its strongholds in the southern States; and now the former slave-owning planters might mockingly point fingers at the conditions in the North, and not entirely without warrant proclaim that they had treated their slaves better—at least given them a crust and a hut to live in when disabled and old—while the " free " labourers of the Northern industrial States more and more became appurtenances of big capitalistic plants, practically reduced to cog-wheels in the machinery, unscrupulously dumped on the garbage heap when used up by incessant toil. The pioneers of the hosts of labour, who in a peaceful battle with plough and axe had conquered the continent, were now—like the world-conquering Roman legionaries—bereft of any part of the rich fruit of the harvest. And they had to see themselves gradually reduced to the degrading poverty of the proletariat of the Old World which they or their forbears had left behind them.

Not without good reason did Henry George choose the title *Progress and Poverty* for his epoch-making book. It was this absurd but very evident and apparently indissoluble correlation of victorious economic progress with a wide-spread and increasing deterioration of the conditions of the common man which had shaken Henry George's inmost self and made him see the solution of the social problem as the great object and task of his life.

But America not only presented the problem, it presented it in such a way that the explorer in the social wilderness was not led astray. A European reformer might easily be tempted to seek for the firm roots of poverty—in the midst of increasing wealth—in the ever more burdensome military armaments, the lavishness of princes and nobles, the covetousness of a hierarchic church, and to look at political emancipation as the sole and all-important means to put things right. But America knew neither princes nor kings, had neither a standing army nor a privileged church; and general suffrage was the law of the land.

Even more than all these obstacles in the people's way to general prosperity, *over-population* loomed up in the mind of the European social philosopher. Here the real and fundamental cause of want and misery was to be found. This doctrine—which is generally termed Malthusian—the leading idea of which is that progress is unable to eradicate poverty, because the benefit of economic improvements is unavoidably swallowed up and neutralized by increasing population—has been the great bogy that time after time has impeded and fettered the champions of freedom by making them doubtful of the real value of progress, so that instead of raising the standard of economic freedom for the people they have talked thriftiness and precaution. But in America *over-population* as the key to the problem of ineradicable poverty was entirely irrelevant. The whole country thirsted for men. California, for example, dreamed day-dreams of becoming a multimillion-State like France, while its actual population hardly exceeded that of the Isle of Man. Yet unemployed men walked the streets of San Francisco, and the proletarization of the people had visibly set in.

Thus the conditions of America set aside the pseudo-scientific doctrines of the Old World. But more than that: They clearly brought out to light —to the eye of the unbiased seer—where the *real* fundamental cause of poverty was to be found.

What was it that had made America the promised land of labour? What had the disinherited multitudes of Europe sought—and found—in America which their homelands had denied them? The answer was unmistakable: The *land*. Man's field of activity, the natural source of wealth, was the new world's gift to her adopted children. The land was the powerful magnet which had drawn them across the Atlantic with irresistible force, overpowering the love of home, the ties of custom and habit, the invisible bonds of the mother tongue. Land-hunger was the motive force of this immigration, the greatest and most eventful of all. Access to the land it was that had transformed the incoming hosts of proletarians into conquerors.—Like a gigantic Antæus, labour had gained new strength and courage by planting its feet firmly on the ground.

To be sure, the struggle for life had been no child's play. No help or support was offered the newcomer, no protective care or advice from paternalistic authorities. The scant capital of the immigrant had as a rule been entirely swallowed up by the expensive passage. Interest on what little capital they could borrow was far higher than at home, conditions altogether new and unfamiliar, the language a foreign one to most of them. But all drawbacks were totally outweighed by this sole fact: The land, free and open to the active hands of man.

Yet now, at this very epoch, the time of Henry George's early manhood, this broad and firm foundation began to give way. Not that the land had become really scarce and overcrowded—far from it. But large-scale appropriation of the sources of wealth was rapidly increasing. Railway companies and others had discovered that by forestalling the advent of the pioneers of labour they could exploit them exactly as they had been exploited in old Europe, nay, even more unscrupulously. Often the immigrant, in going West with his team and wagon, had to drive for untold miles over virgin land before reaching the spot where he might start his plough without becoming a subject to toll-gathering—probably European—proprietors or their representatives. And land-speculation had set in and infected almost all. Not labour but pre-emption and monopolization of the opportunity to labour had come to be regarded as the main road to prosperity.

All this to be sure is a general aspect of all progressive communities with an increasing population. But here in America not only was it realized on a gigantic scale, the speculation fever raging all over entire States, while in Europe it did not generally overstep the boundaries of a town or the backlands of a new harbour; but everything was *new:* It was not an ancient class of landowning families which extended their wonted exploitation of the " lower " classes. It was not *Sir John Broadacre* who bled *Jack Pennyless* white, but simply *John* who by force of his newly acquired " title " to the land could compel *Jack* (who had arrived a day later) to promise to turn over half the coming harvest to him for the mere permission to work on " his " land. The appalling injustice of the case thereby became strikingly evident. It was no more the problem of an hereditary upper class against the people, of farmer

against farm labourer, but a general social problem, the fundamental problem of the right of all citizens, the right of man.

The thorough understanding of this problem, its extent and depth, its different aspects under varying conditions, was at the same time far easier and plainer for a man who, like Henry George, had had occasion to follow it all in contemporary society, than for a philosopher of the old world. Within the same people, within the same epoch, from West to East in America of his time, it was all brought to light as in a great section through a series of geological formations, from the gold-digger camp and the new settlement on the prairie to the metropolis with its steel barons and trust magnates. Thus did America unroll the land problem in its entire extension and depth to the keen eye of the social explorer, elucidating its absolute fundamentality for the condition of the people under all and every imaginable conditions, thereby also proclaiming the answer, the only possible answer : *Equal right to the land.*

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Equal right to the land. The answer is old, yet new, wider and deeper in its application than formerly thought of. To be sure, at all ages those who really had the people's sake at heart have wished to give land to the landless. The land laws of Moses are the oldest generally known example and at the same time the most daring attempt to prevent the formation of a landless—and therefore rootless—proletariat.

But the problem, as America states it, is greater and wider. It is not only the question how a localized country population can obtain and keep the strip of land necessary for each family's frugal support. It is the problem how admission to the source of all wealth can be opened to all, everywhere. Not the individual right to a certain homefield, but the untrammelled admission to use one's activity and ability in pursuit of happiness everywhere, all over the continent, was what such a nation of conqueror workers would naturally demand. And the land question is seen to be no mere *agrarian* problem : Mineral deposits, coalfields as well as the sites for skyscrapers are just as much land as the acres of the working farmer.

The solution of Henry George therefore necessarily had to be a general, all-comprising one : the annihilation of land monopoly. But the complete neutralization of private absolute property in land—if individual possession and unlimited rights to one's own working-place is to be upheld—can only be attained by making all ownership conditional on a payment of the full rent of the land.

In this way Henry George attained to the fundamental demand : a *general land-due*, to be paid into the common fund of the people, thus becoming the foundation for the public economy of the country. If this be done either party will get its due : The individual worker the *land*, unencumbered by any private claims ; the community the *rent*, for the benefit of all.

Thus did Henry George find the way to the liberation of labour by regaining the equal right to land. But he clearly perceived that in thus solving the land problem he had found more than he had sought for : that he had succeeded in pointing out the boundary line between *individual* and *common* economic right. For not only could no individual rightly claim any part of

the rent of the land—land value being a socially created value—but nationalization of the rent would make it practicable to abolish all taxes on labour and the products of labour, thus realizing the rightful claim of the individual citizen : *to labour its due.* " Suum cuique," rightly understood, would thus settle the entangled problem of *man* versus the *State*, individualism versus socialism.

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Such achievements would suffice to gain for Henry George a position as a social economist of world renown. But he did not stop there.

Henry George was a man of courage. Not only had he a courageous mind, never flinching from following his line of thought whither it might lead : his personality was courageous : no vested rights, no authority, living or dead, so all-powerful that he did not dare to challenge them.

Having established labour firmly on the land and having discovered how land monopolization was the fundamental cause of exploitation and degradation, he unhesitatingly set out to annihilate deeply ingrained superstitions which blinded the eye to the real facts. *Malthusianism* was the first and most world-wide of these. He slew it by focussing light upon it, by showing that at all times and places not " the niggardliness of nature " but monopolization of natural resources were at the root of apparent over-population.

But having attacked the great giant, land monopoly, he could not fail to see the other monopolies thriving in its shade, gaining power by the same kind of superstition as the Malthusian doctrine. Protection first of all was the object of his attack. Here he did not stand entirely alone. Free-traders had led the way, had in fact reduced protectionism to an absurdity and executed it in effigy. But in spite of all arguments protection was still strong and active, gaining ground in practical politics almost everywhere. He took up the fight where ordinary free-traders had stopped short, carried their logic beyond their arguments and showed how free trade as commonly understood could never carry the day, but that real free activity, not only untrammelled by custom-house barriers but unhindered by land monopoly, would bring about that emancipation of labour which was at the same time the goal and the foundation of democracy.

Earlier social economists—from Adam Smith to Karl Marx—when discussing production and its ways, always place the employer, " the capitalist," as the central figure in the picture, the initiative force, while the labourer to them is a more or less willing tool, a part of the total machinery or " mobile capital." It is easily to be explained that this false view-point should be adopted by men who got their impressions from a centralized industrial community with a more or less proletarized labour population, absolutely foreign to any ideas of independent initiative or self-support, always in search of a " boss." And naturally to all such social philosophers the main question will always be either what the *capitalist* can do for his labourers or what the *State* —in taking over his capital—can do for them. But the ideas of Henry George (born in America where the people was no such herd of passive proletarians but a nation of pioneers) naturally will come as a gospel to any nation of free men. Wherever longing after and striving for the building up of a new commonwealth of equal opportunity and freedom arises in the heart of men,

there the standard will be raised for the conquering of a new world, and there Henry George will be honoured and praised as the new Columbus who first set foot on the coast of the new San Salvador.

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The undaunted mind of Henry George could not stop at economics. His soul soars higher; beyond the fundamental problems of daily bread and economic liberation to the problem of the future of the human race.

The ruling idea of his time with regard to the law of human progress was that progress is a slow but steady process by imperceptibly small steps, improving individuals in generation after generation, while the struggle for existence which infallibly crushes out all those that lag behind in the race ensures the survival of the fittest. This evolutionary theory was a very comfortable one for the successful who naturally would feel themselves the real aristocracy with the indubitable preferential right to live, in contradistinction to lower types (at home and abroad) who were " born to die."

To Henry George this pessimistic-optimistic, mechanical evolutionary theory of human " progress " was utterly detestable. And as it was built up on the Malthusian theory—which he had demolished—it was felt to be untenable.

To be sure man is a " progressive animal." But history does not show his progress to be a continuous, imperceptibly stepped, steady advance. On the contrary the history of civilization is an endless tragedy of rises and falls, of progress and glory followed by destruction or petrifaction. Is not this also to be our fate ?—Henry George clearly perceived that now already the clouds were gathering, electricity brooding in the negative and positive tension between poverty and opulence, between privilege and exploitation, between mastery and slavery. Destruction might, sooner than anyone expected, be our fate. Dynamite and electricity were forces of annihilation more powerful than any former ones. And the disinherited, if roused from their apathy, might become the destroyers of a civilization rightly doomed—if it could not or would not read the signs of the times and solve the everlasting riddle of the Sphinx.

But what then is this solution, the true law of progress ? Certainly not the evolutionary theory as commonly understood : the gradual improvement of individual man by imperceptible steps and the survival of the superior types. In a stroke of flash-light Henry George elucidates the problem : Human progress is not a hereditary evolution. Even if we grant, for the sake of argument, that individual man in modern Europe be superior to a Confucius, a Buddha, an Aristotle—which may be doubted—the main point is not any hereditary superiority : While mighty temples were built in India, in Egypt, our forefathers were Stone Age savages. And poor, ignorant shepherds or fellahs now roam over wide desert countries where their forebears thousands of years ago founded empires.

The hereditary theory is clearly incongruous with historical facts. Not even " The blood of a hundred earls " is any warrant for the superiority of " Lady Vere de Vere." But whoever is not blinded by prejudice can read on every page of history that the mainspring and source of human progress is *co-operation*. Man is a social being. Standing alone he is utterly devoid of power, can hardly exist : in co-operation with his fellow-men he can surmount

any obstacles, become a creator, almost to the very limits of his imagination All civilizations have been built up on some kind of co-operation, have sunk when it turned to strife and exploitation. But co-operation, to be effective and lasting, must needs be mutually beneficial, must be rooted in at least a minimum of equality. This then is the answer to the Sphinx's riddle : Equality, Freedom, Justice, Peace—call it what you like, these are only different aspects of the same thing—these are the true life-giving elements of human progress, the real pillars of human society. Only as we succeed in carrying the standard of justice to the front are we true soldiers in the advancing host of man.

Followers of our great leader !

This then is the message to a world seemingly nearer its fall than even Henry George saw it, but also with a grander future in store for it, if true liberty and equality can be secured to call forth that true brotherhood of man which alone can be the foundation-stone of a new and higher, firmer universal humanity.

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