

Henry George, Frederick Jackson Turner, and the “Closing” of the American Frontier

BY ALEX WAGNER LOUGH

Henry George and Frederick Jackson Turner launched their public careers amid economic panic and widespread fear about America’s future. The world had barely emerged from the Long Depression of the 1870s when, in 1879, George declared that private property in land lay at the core of the nation’s social and economic problems. “Everywhere that you find distress and destitution in the midst of wealth,” the California journalist wrote, “you will find that the land is monopolized.”¹ Industrial panic, unemployment, and unprecedented wealth inequality, George believed, resulted from the ability of landowners—a class that appeared to shrink with each passing generation—to exact huge sums from the wages of labor in the form of rent. “The ownership of land,” according to George, represented “the great fundamental fact which ultimately determines the social, the political, and consequently the intellectual and moral condition of a people.”² Turner, and much of the world, agreed.

When Turner first introduced his famous frontier thesis at a meeting of the American Historical Association at the World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893, the nation faced widespread economic instability and uncertainty. The stock market had just collapsed, saddling America with bankruptcies, layoffs, and a pervasive sense of doom among its citizens. Similar to George, Turner turned his focus to land—the nation’s relation-

ship with and dependence upon it—to explain the current economic meltdown. “The frontier has gone,” the young Wisconsin-bred historian declared, “and with its going has closed the first period of American history.”³ The existence of the frontier, Turner believed—that line “at the hither edge of free land”—not only defined the nation’s historical development, but also safeguarded American democracy by compelling its “institutions [to] adapt themselves to the changes of an expanding people.”⁴ For Turner, the disappearance of the frontier signaled the end of the era of American exceptionalism, largely defined by its independence from the class-based agitations facing Europe.

Although different in their intellectual orientation as well as their fundamental view about the importance of land to the future of America and its bounty, both George and Turner drew from the work of the same historians, economists, and philosophers to tackle the issues before them. Like his mentor Herbert Baxter Adams and “most post-Darwinian thinkers of the nineteenth century,” as Richard Hofstadter has pointed out, “Turner was fascinated by the idea of laying out the development of civilization in a series of distinct evolutionary stages.”⁵ But unlike Adams and other historians, Turner viewed that evolution of American development from West to East.



The allure and beauty of bountiful harvest in this Santa Clara Valley orchard suggests the national promise that enough free land existed in nineteenth-century America to provide every family its own homestead. By the turn of the century, however, many Americans believed that all of the land in the West had been settled and feared the consequences of the disappearance of the public domain. Addressing this “land question,” Henry George and Frederick Jackson Turner advanced critical theses that illuminated the economic, political, and social concerns of the era.

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“The United States lies like a huge page in the history of society. Line by line as we read this continental page from West to East, we find the record of social evolution,” he claimed. “It begins with the Indian and the hunter; it goes on to tell of the disintegration of savagery by the entrance of the trader, the pathfinder of civilization; we read the annals of the pastoral stage in ranch life; the exploitation of the soil by the raising of unrotated crops of corn and when in sparsely settled farming communities; the intensive culture of the denser farm settlement; and finally the manufacturing organization with city and factory system.”⁶

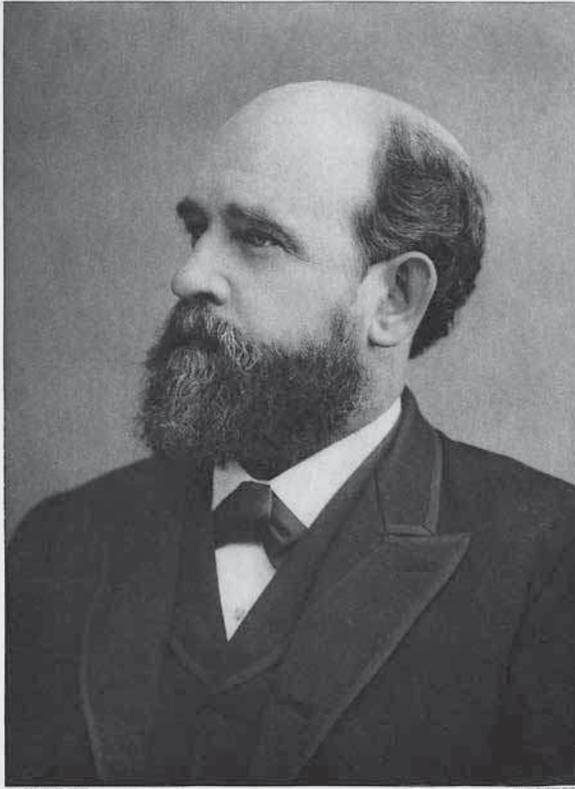
These stages repeated themselves on the western frontier where nature blessed America with a seemingly inexhaustible source of land. On Turner’s frontier, American society was reborn; “[t]his perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society,” Turner wrote, “furnish the forces dominating American character.”⁷ American social evolution depended on the advance of the frontier and, more importantly, the existence of free land on which to advance.

As Lee Benson and other historians have noted, the notion that society developed in direct relation to its land supply did not originate with Turner. A few years prior to the appearance of Turner’s essay, the Italian economist Achille Loria wrote that he believed that the history of the United States provided a near-perfect illustration of his “landed property system of political economy,” in which, Loria postulated, “the relationship of man to the amount of ‘free land’ available for cultivation holds the key to human history.”⁸ In addition to Loria, Ray Allen Billington also acknowledged Turner’s debt to John Stuart Mill, Francis A. Walker, and Simon H. Patten, from whom the essayist “distilled several concepts essential to his frontier thesis,” including the theory of

land rent.⁹ As did George, Turner believed that rent—the price of land—involved social as well as physical factors and that rent increased relative to a diminishing supply of cheaper, fertile land elsewhere.

George also drew heavily from Mill. In justifying his scheme to tax and redistribute land values, George built on Mill’s concept of the “unearned increment,” which recognized the role of society—not the individual landowner—in increasing the value of land. James’s son John Stuart popularized the concept by proposing in 1870 that the state take all future increases in land values, given that they were unearned by individual landowners.¹⁰ George went further. The state, George believed, should intercept the full rental value of land to support the activity of government as well as to fund public services and projects. Thus, George grounded his “single tax”—so called because he believed that a tax on land values would render unnecessary all other taxes collected by government—in the firm belief of the fundamental injustice of private property in land.

While Turner enjoys the title of arguably the most famous American historian, some believe his thesis may have failed to survive the test of history.¹¹ According to Patricia Nelson Limerick, Turner’s thesis suffered from “presentism.” “History was bound to go on,” Limerick wrote. “Any definitive statement on the meaning of the West offered in 1893 would soon show its age.”¹² Not only did western settlement continue to thrive after Turner’s frontier “closed” in 1890, Turner’s central argument—that throughout history, the frontier protected democracy by offering a “gate of escape” where laborers struggling in the crowded East could start over—also proved fleeting. As William F. Deverell has explained, “Laborers trapped by wage work could not escape westward regardless of the availability of free land. For one, it was hardly simple, or cheap, to travel west, especially during downturns of the economy (when a “safety valve” would be most needed).”¹³



Henry George

Henry George (1839–1897), one of America’s leading social thinkers, economists, and reformers and a towering national and international figure of his day, was a gold prospector, compositor, and eventually a journalist in California, where he witnessed and wrote about the consequences of land monopolization in the United States. His best-selling book Progress and Poverty (1879) excoriated private property in land, which he proposed accounted for the persistence of poverty amid economic and industrial progress.

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Frederick Turner

The Wisconsin-bred historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861–1932), who argued that America owed its exceptional democratic character to the existence of a western frontier of free land, was influential in shaping popular and scholarly interpretations of the nation’s past. In 1924, he moved to southern California, where he helped establish the newly founded Huntington Library in San Marino as a renowned historical research institution.

FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER PAPERS, BOX 58 (27),
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George and Turner elevated public concern through the deliberate connections their theses forged between land and the future of American democracy. In the process, each helped redefine Americans' conception of this natural resource and their relationship to it.

Historians also have refuted Turner's belief that the frontier fostered America's "most striking characteristics," including: "That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom."¹⁴

On the contrary, "far from being the crucible of 'Americanization,'" as William Cronon and others have advanced, "the frontier was a region where racial and ethnic minorities remained significantly isolated from other communities."¹⁵ Finally, even Turner's assertion that the frontier promoted America's "rugged individualism" has been undermined as a result of Richard White's 1991 study, which revealed the federal government's extensive role in the development of the

American West. "More than any other region," White argued, "the West has been historically a dependency of the federal government."¹⁶ The frontier had neither closed by 1893 nor operated as a "safety valve." The resettling of the West by Americans did not solely account for the nation's democratic character any more than the disappearance of the western line of white settlement could explain all of the problems plaguing turn-of-the-century America.

While historians rightfully point out the flaws in Turner's frontier thesis, few emphasize how the lure and dominance of his ideas reflected turn-of-the-century Americans' obsession with finding an answer to the all-encompassing "land question" of what should be done about the shrinking public domain and what effects its disappearance would have on the future of American democracy. Furthermore, few have noted that George provided an alternative take on the American frontier's "closing" that held as much, if not more, sway among the public than Turner's. George, who ascribed to universal principles of justice and progress, pointed out similarities between America's land crisis and those that had beset Europe, while Turner emphasized the uniqueness of the American experience with land. It seems as though historians have equated the palpability of Turner's ideas, which appealed to America's sense of exceptionalism, with authority.

Like Turner, George occupies a paradoxical place in history. On one hand, historians credit the best-selling author and self-trained authority on the political economy for inspiring the work of well-known reformers and social movements on three different continents in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹⁷ Some even note that George's masterpiece, *Progress and Poverty* (1879), outsold every other book except the Bible by the close of the nineteenth century.¹⁸ On the other hand, historians also acknowledge the decisive failure of George and his followers to successfully socialize rent in the United States or,

for that matter, in any of the countries where the land reformer enjoyed the widest reception.¹⁹ As with Turner, George's ideas survived long after the author's sudden death in 1897, suggesting that the relationship of individuals and society to land constitutes a foundational field of study for understanding historical development, one in which both men laid cornerstones.

George and Turner did more than merely lament the diminishing supply of land in the United States; they elevated public concern through the deliberate connections their theses forged between land and the future of American democracy. In the process, each helped redefine Americans' conception of this natural resource and their relationship to it. In placing land at the center of national development, Turner gave it historical agency. He transformed the concept of the frontier from a *region* of free land at the western edge of eastern civilization to a *process* responsible for the production of responsible citizens and democratic institutions.²⁰ George highlighted the "land crisis" resulting from private monopolies and rising land values to excoriate America's system of private land ownership. Turner's work informed Americans' understanding of their history and the necessity of an American frontier—whether within the continental United States or overseas—to maintain democratic institutions. George used his study of land to explain the causes of industrial depression and the persistent poverty amid wealth. The work and ideas of both George and Turner must be explored to appreciate the centrality of the "question" to social and economic discussions occurring at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century.

THE LAND QUESTION

By the time Turner declared the American frontier closed, the land question represented one of the most prominent issues covered by the press.

To some, it addressed the growing concern that landlordism had taken hold in America. To others, it involved the assumption that all of the best land in America had been settled and the public domain no longer existed. Most, however, could agree that America's land crisis was not unique. "The fact is," Thomas P. Gill, commissioned by *The North American Review* to study and report on the conditions of tenancy and landlordism in America, wrote in January 1886, "America has refused to avail herself of one of the most vital advantages that she became heir to by virtue of her late entry into the family of nations. She has refused to benefit by the bitter experience of Europe in regard to the land question."²¹ Warning America of the recklessness of its land policy, Gill observed: "The soil of a country is like the blood: once it is badly vitiated it seems impossible ever to cleanse it, and the poison keeps constantly breaking out."²² To some, that poison came in the form of landlordism.

Landlordism, "the system according to which land is owned by landlords to whom tenants pay a fixed rent," had, by the late nineteenth century, received blame for the downfall of Rome and the French Revolution, as well as the lasting tension in Ireland where absentee British landlords owned and controlled the land at the expense of Irish farmers.²³ In essence, landlordism organized society around a rigid class system based on land ownership. As such, it could neither take root nor grow in America, many believed, because of the nation's historically large population of landowners, fostered in part by the founders' rejection of the Old World land policies, including primogeniture.

By the mid-1880s, however, Gill and others pointed to alarming statistics that revealed a shrinking landowning class and a growing tenant population in America. According to the 1880 Census, with more than a million farms operated

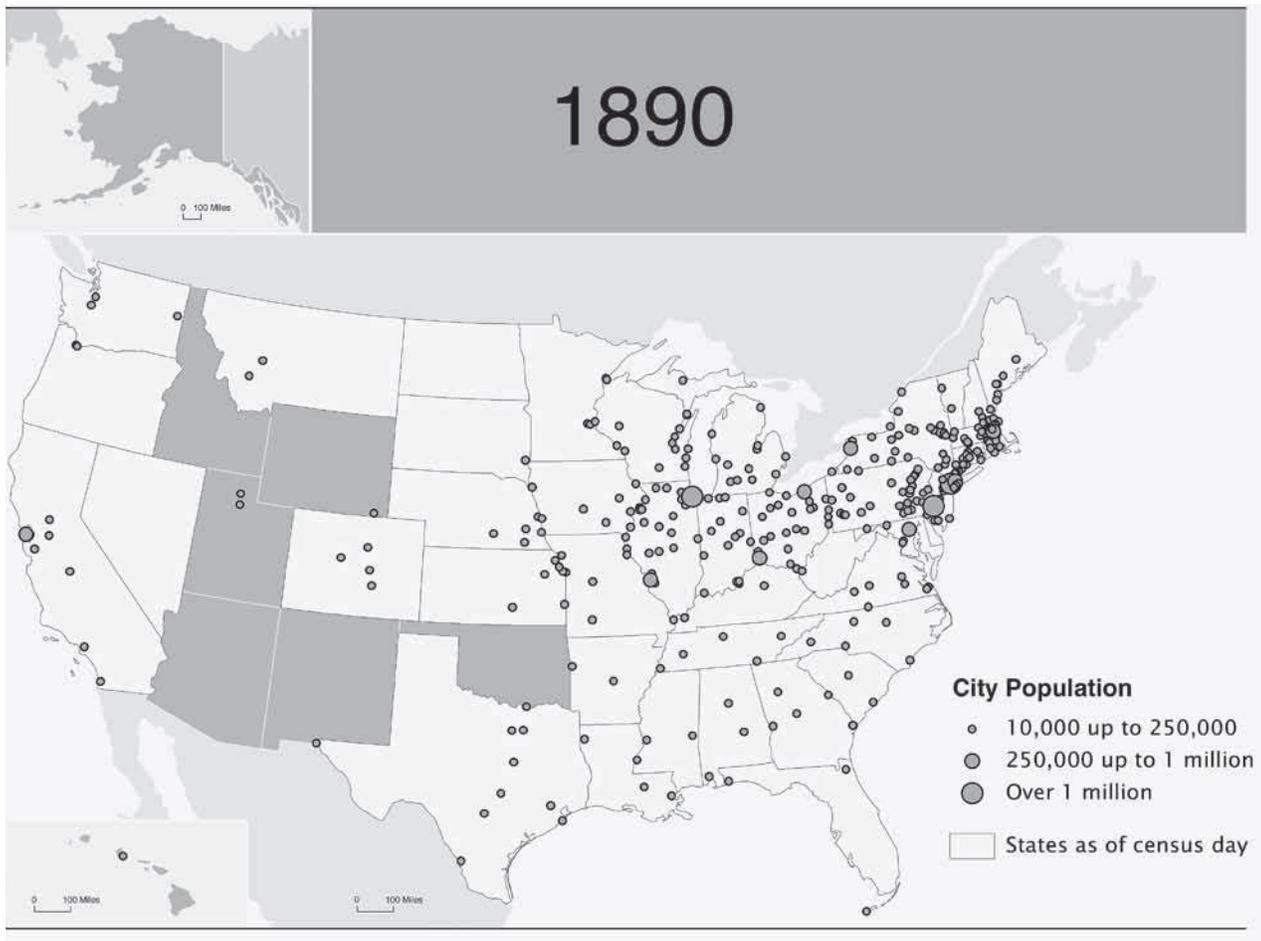
by renters, America possessed the largest tenant-farming population in the world—"a strange singularity for a nation," Gill wrote, "one of whose proudest boasts is that the old feudal institution of landlordism has obtained no foothold on her free soil!"²⁴ Gill blamed the premature disappearance of the public domain, coupled with a growing population, for the nation's trend toward landlordism. Like many others, he lamented the overgenerous land policies of the federal and state governments, which not only gave away "untold millions of fertile acres of the public domain" to railroads but also invited fraud and corruption.²⁵

During the 1860s, Republicans in the federal government implemented a new land policy intended to promote their "utopian capitalist vision of the world." According to Richard White, they imagined a new nation "wherein labor was rewarded, individual opportunity prevented class distinctions from arising, and progress and growth were the national destiny."²⁶ To that end, Congress passed the Homestead Act of 1862, promising 160 acres of free public land to any settler who paid a small filing fee and agreed to live on and improve the land for five years, at which point homesteaders could purchase the land for \$1.25 an acre. Additionally, Republicans approved the Pacific Railway Act and a series of land grants and loans to aid in the construction of a telegraph and rail line extending west from Missouri to the Pacific Ocean. Under these bills, the Union Pacific and Central Pacific—which later became the Southern Pacific—railroads received more than 25 million acres of land from the federal government.²⁷

Although intended to provide cheap and fertile land directly to settlers and their families, only a small fraction of the expanding population obtained farms under the Homestead Act. The reason, according to White, lay largely in the fact that by 1862, Congress lacked complete control

over lands in the West. Previous bills, such as the Morrill Act, granted western states 30,000 acres for each senator and congressional representative in exchange for their admission to the Union and provided land scrip to eastern states, where no unoccupied public land existed.²⁸ These states could sell their land or scrip to whomever they wanted, including speculators who held it off the market until they could fetch higher prices. According to John Opie, William S. Chapman, one of California's largest land speculators, paid cash for the 631,000 acres of mostly public land he owned.²⁹ Even land set aside for homesteaders often fell to ranchers, miners, and loggers who skirted the act's provisions by pressuring their employees to file claims with the federal land office.³⁰ Thus, by 1890, when the superintendent of the US Census reported that the frontier line—"treated as the margin of settlement which has a density of two or more to the square mile"—was gone, fewer than 400,000 farms had been claimed through the Homestead Act.³¹

Despite the stark truth that the public domain neared exhaustion at the end of the nineteenth century, not everyone believed that its disappearance necessarily translated into an increase of land tenancy. In response to Gill's January 1886 article, Henry Strong and David Bennett King wrote in March of the same year that landlordism could never take hold in America, in part because "there is no country in the world where the ownership and transfer of real property is so easy and simple as in America."³² The long-term tendency of landownership in America, Strong and King asserted, rather than toward landlordism or land monopolies, gravitated toward smaller farms occupied by a larger number of free-holders. Because every man could have his own stake in this earth, they believed, America would continue to be spared the social upheavals of Europe. "Every man who owns the land he cultivates," they wrote, "has given a pledge to sustain law and order; to resist and put down the despotism



By 1890, American settlement had reached the Pacific Coast, and San Francisco was one of the country's most populous cities. This 1890 map of population distribution helps to explain the Census Bureau's declaration that year that the western frontier was fast diminishing and was thus no longer worth measuring. Frederick Jackson Turner used this analysis as the starting point of his 1893 now-classic thesis, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," which proclaimed that the frontier was gone.

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of anarchy, whether it appear in the unmasked conspiracy of Catiline, or the less threatening but more dangerous guise of modern socialism.”³³ Similar to Turner and George, Strong and King recognized the power of Americans' direct experience with land to maintain order and foster self-sufficiency. But Turner and especially George also recognized the threat facing American democracy as a result of the public domain's consumption. Their definitions of land and its relationship to social progress helped illustrate this threat to the American people.

AMERICA'S STOREHOUSE

George based his proposal to abolish private property in land through the taxation of land values on a broad definition of the natural resource. Whereas Turner defined land in terms of its instrumentality to social development, George adopted a more essentialist view, arguing that it represented one of the fundamental building blocks of man. “The term land necessarily includes, not merely the surface of the earth as distinguished from the water and air,” he wrote,

“but the whole material universe outside of man himself, for it is only by having access to land, from which his very body is drawn, that man can come in contact with or use nature.”³⁴ For George, land included everything “freely supplied by nature,” including water and minerals, in addition to the soil.³⁵ Gifts of nature belonged to everyone; it was unjust, George believed, to treat land as the private property of individuals.

Though he considered private property in land a violation of humans’ natural rights, George did not support its confiscation or redistribution. Instead, he proposed to eliminate the privilege of private property in land by taxing its value. As he explained: “I do not propose either to purchase or to confiscate private property in land. The first would be unjust; the second, needless. Let the individuals who now hold it still retain, if they want to, possession of what they are pleased to call their land. Let them continue to call it their land. Let them buy and sell, and bequeath and devise it. We may safely leave them the shell, if we take the kernel. *It is not necessary to confiscate land; it is only necessary to confiscate rent.*”³⁶

Building on David Ricardo’s definition of rent as “that portion of the produce of the earth which is paid to the landlord for the use of the original and indestructible powers of the soil,”³⁷ George posited that rent was unearned and accounted for the reduction of wages despite increased productive power. By unearned, George meant that labor *on* or *to* land alone did not produce the increase in land’s price or exchange value. Instead, the natural richness of the soil, the growth of the surrounding community, and the proximity of land to railroads, canals, and other industrial developments determined the return individuals received for owning land. Like the earth, rent was not the product of one man’s exertion but the result of a combination of natural forces and the development of the surrounding community; as such, it rightfully belonged equally to all members of the

community. George believed that socializing rent through the taxation of land values would reduce speculation, monopolization, and, ultimately, the private ownership of land.

George’s discussion of land, property, and taxes in *Progress and Poverty* built on long-standing political traditions and Americans’ growing interest in curbing monopoly power at the end of the nineteenth century. Since the colonial era, tax revolts and crusades for land reform had served as two of the most prominent expressions of popular political and economic discontent.³⁸ The importance of land throughout American history derives, in part, from its connection to individual economic and political opportunities. As William Cronon aptly revealed in his 1983 study *Changes in the Land*, the perception of land as a commodity to be bought, sold, and traded has significantly influenced economic, ecological, and human relationships throughout North America since the colonial era.³⁹ European colonists viewed uncultivated land as useless and wasteful and implemented a system of enclosure and improvement in response to both God’s command to “subdue the earth” and the Lockean supposition that “As much land as a man tills, plants, improves, cultivates, and can use the product of, so much is his property.”⁴⁰ Fixed boundaries and improvements, thus, conveyed ownership of land and any wealth derived from its soil.

More than the perception of land as a commodity, however, the resolute belief in man’s natural right to use and cultivate land shaped American land policy and the various approaches that social and economic reforms took from the nation’s founding through the end of the nineteenth century. George’s proposal to discourage private property in land through the taxation of land values, as Mark Hulliung has pointed out, “was in reality a recapitulation of a century of American pronouncements on the inviolability of the social contract, the need to secure the rights of the next generation, and the natural right to the land.”⁴¹

Prior to the creation of governments, Americans believed, man had nothing but the uncultivated earth from which to provide for his sustenance. “Thus, in the beginning all the World was America,” Locke wrote, implying that nowhere was this fact more true than in the New World.⁴² In entering into a social contract and forming a national government, the founders claimed, individuals did not relinquish their natural right to the land but instead empowered government to protect and preserve that right for current and future generations.

Within a decade of the Constitution’s ratification, Thomas Paine reminded Americans of this commitment in a pamphlet titled *Agrarian Justice* (1796). As part of their contract with government, Paine observed, Americans submitted to the concept that “every person born into the world, after a state of civilization commences, ought not to be worse than if he had been born before that period,” and if a person was to be found in a worse state, provision should be made to aid in his comfort.⁴³ To Paine, land monopoly, the purchase and hoarding of large tracts of the public domain by private individuals, violated this principle of civilization. Similar to George’s single tax, Paine advocated that “landowners should pay both a lump sum and an annuity to all deprived of their birthright.”⁴⁴

In justifying his scheme, Paine differentiated man’s *natural rights* to land from those “artificially” created by society, such as the right to personal property. “Land, as said before, is the free gift of the Creator in common to the human race,” he wrote. “Personal property is the *effect of society*; and it is impossible for an individual to acquire personal property without the aid of society, as it is for him to make land originally.”⁴⁵ Personal property beyond what one man can produce, Paine concluded, was impossible without the aid of society and often occurred as a result of “paying too little for the labour that produced it.”⁴⁶ Paine’s proposal to support the poor and

George’s discussion of land, property, and taxes in Progress and Poverty built on long-standing political traditions and Americans’ growing interest in curbing monopoly power at the end of the nineteenth century.

landless from a tax on monopoly holdings of land did not amount to charity, the revolutionary believed. It represented the fulfillment of the social contract by recognizing every man’s natural right to the soil.

More than any other American issue, Richard White has argued, land policy—how to manage and distribute the public domain—occupied the central activity of the federal government throughout the nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century.⁴⁷ Unlike George, who might have interpreted this fact in light of man’s inherent dependence on access to land for sustenance, Turner argued in his famous essay that the national government’s handling of the public domain had developed its powers and helped safeguard America’s independence from the social problems plaguing Europe. As Turner wrote, “When we consider the public domain from the point of view of the sale and disposal of the public lands we are again brought face to face with the frontier. The policy of the United States in dealing with its lands is in sharp contrast with the European system of scientific administration. Efforts to make this domain a source of revenue,

Unlike George, Turner argued in his famous essay that the national government's handling of the public domain had developed its powers and helped safeguard America's independence from the social problems plaguing Europe.

and to withhold it from emigrants in order that settlement might be compact, were in vain.”⁴⁸

Unlike Europe, which more successfully kept squatters from settling on common land, the federal government lacked the resources, and often the resolve, to prevent individuals from taking up tracts of the public domain. For years prior to the passage of the Preemption Act of 1841, common practice protected the claims of squatters who made improvements, such as constructing a fence or planting crops, to “unoccupied” public land.⁴⁹ The act essentially legalized the practice by giving squatters first preference to purchase land they improved once it had been surveyed. According to Turner, the combination of a commitment to democracy and “the squatter ideal”—which he described as “the ideal of individual freedom to compete unrestrictedly for the resources of a continent”—accounted for the nation’s “growth and fundamental traits.”⁵⁰

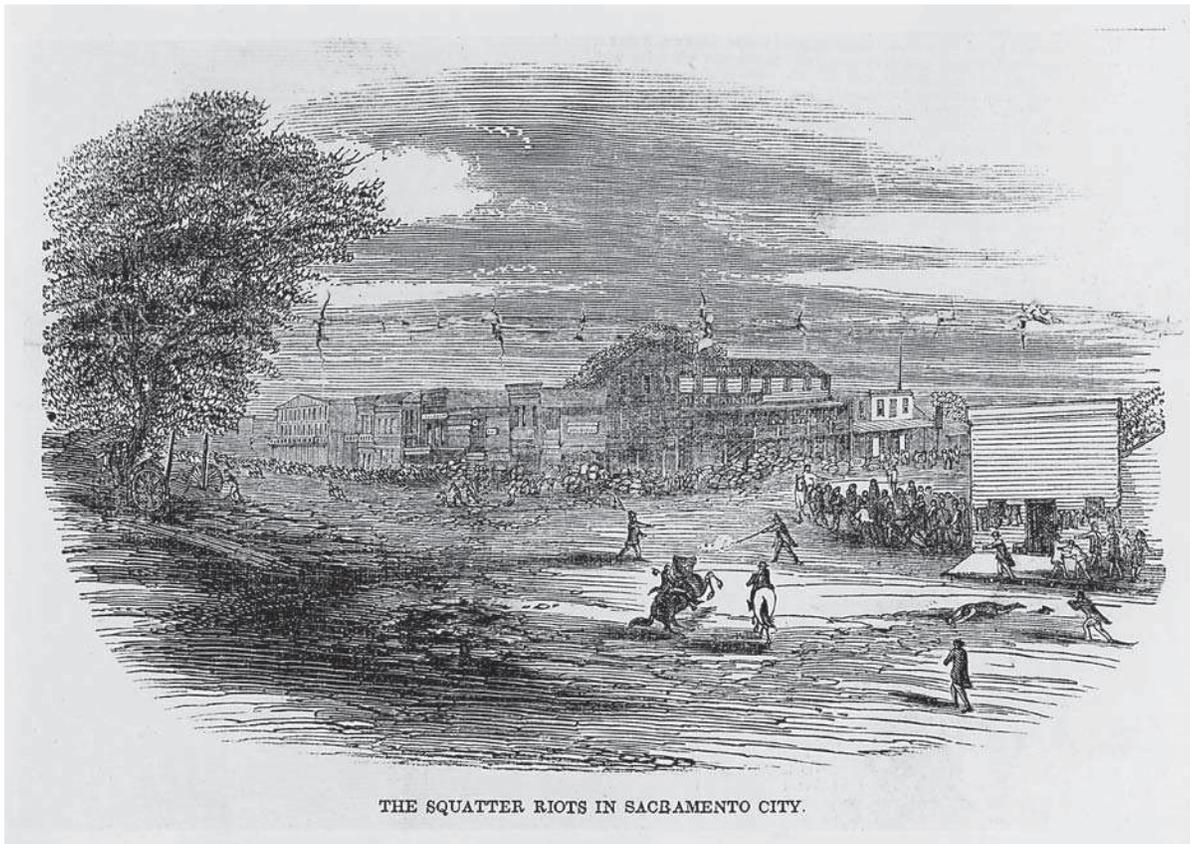
The squatter ideal, however, also accounts for some of the messiest land battles in the West and the growing agitation between farmers, settlers, ranchers, and railroads in the second half of the nineteenth century. For Turner, these battles and the federal government’s response to them rep-

resent critical stages in the nation’s democratic evolution. George, on the other hand, saw land disputes and the antagonism they engendered among various classes as reflecting the nation’s backward land policy. To both, California epitomized the inherent tensions associated with the nation’s dual commitment to promote democracy and protect squatter rights.

THE CALIFORNIA STORY

Despite its wide readership and appeal, *Progress and Poverty* evolved from George’s observations and experiences living in California.⁵¹ By the time of its publication, the Philadelphia native had lived in the Golden State for twenty years and had observed significant transformations, including the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, the rise of the Workingmen’s Party in the early 1870s, and the ratification of a new state constitution in 1879. George’s acquaintance with James McClatchy of the *Sacramento Bee* helped open his eyes to the especially intense land battles between squatters and land monopolists around Sacramento throughout the 1860s.⁵² Besides squatterism, California courts also had to sort out conflicting claims between railroads and settlers as well as those arising from the partial breakup of Mexican land grants.

All of this, according to Paul W. Gates, made the California land situation among the most tense and complicated in the nation: “What makes the California story unique is that it involved Spanish and Mexican land law, interpreted in United States courts by American lawyers and judges who were not altogether familiar with it and who remolded it by the application of federal and state laws. In the process of Americanizing Spanish and Mexican land law, the rigidities of Anglo-Saxon common law with its deep respect for property rights untempered by equity clashed with frontier conceptions of settlers’ rights based on natural law.”⁵³ Finding few fences or other



*This drawing of the violent riots between squatters and landowners in Sacramento in 1850 reflects the fierce competition for land between landowners and those who lived on and improved land in the owners' absence. Such scenes of violence, the philosopher Josiah Royce wrote in *The Overland Monthly* in 1885, "form but a small part of the real story" of the riots, which, he observed, "is significant, not because bloodshed was unknown elsewhere in California land quarrels, but because nowhere else did any single land quarrel come so near to involving an organized effort to get rid, once for all, of the Spanish titles as evidences of property in land."*

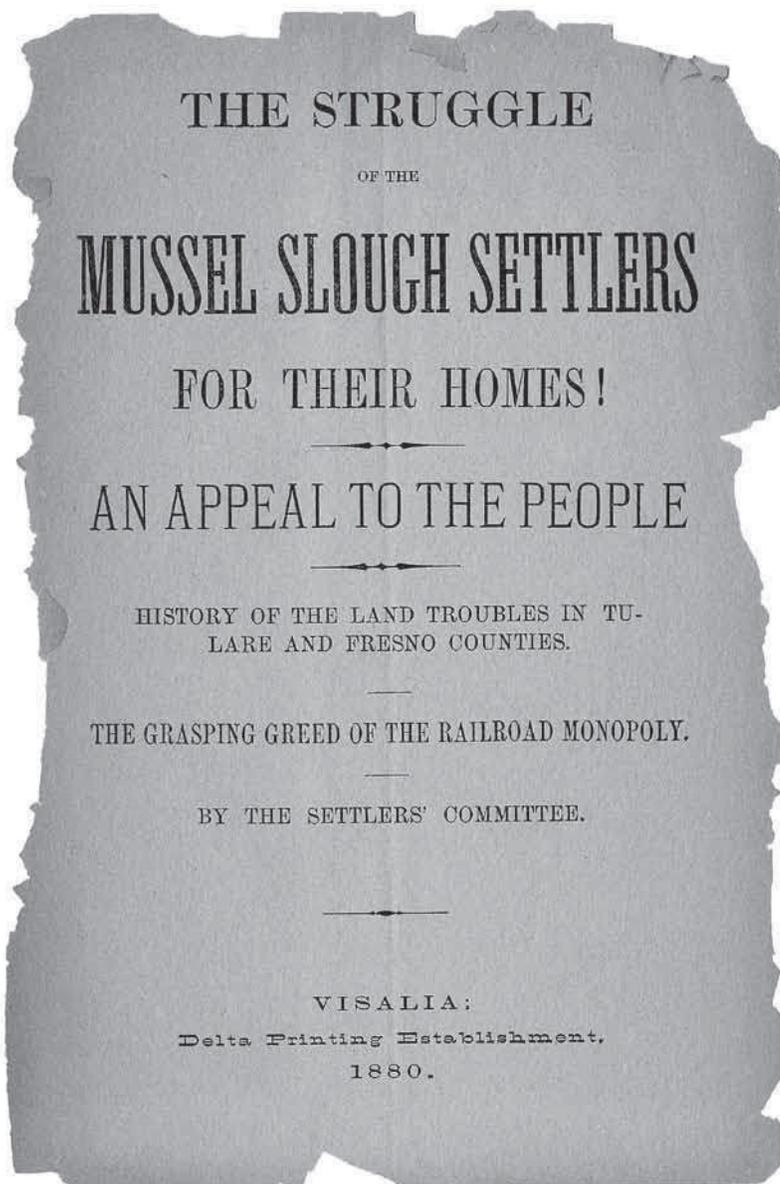
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indications that the land had been claimed, Gates explains, California settlers "felt safe in searching out vacant and undeveloped land, moving upon it and devoting months, even years, to its improvement."⁵⁴ California, the state of gold and opportunity, also became the state of violent clashes, court appeals, settlers' leagues, and angry squatters who never hesitated to defend what they viewed as their natural and private right to the land.⁵⁵

Among the most violent and highly publicized land disputes occurred between the small farmers of California's Mussel Slough country and the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1880. The clash stands out not only for the involvement of the federal government and deaths of seven par-

ticipants, but also because it contained a lethal combination of the particular elements found in many California land battles. The land in dispute, which included portions of Tulare and Fresno counties, had experienced a nearly four-fold increase in value since 1870 as a result of a planned railway and the construction of two irrigation canals—the Lower Kings River and the People's Ditch.⁵⁶

Many of the evicted squatters had lived and farmed on the land for nearly a decade, evoking sympathy among supporters of preemption. Furthermore, the clash involved the Southern Pacific Railroad, which by 1880 had become one of the most notorious symbols of monopoly power



In 1880, following an infamous shootout on May 11, settlers in the highly contested region of Mussel Slough in the Tulare Basin of the San Joaquin Valley published pamphlets such as this one to garner support in their eviction fight against the Southern Pacific Railroad. When the farmers refused to vacate the area legally claimed by the railroad, the shootout broke out and seven men were killed. The Battle of Mussel Slough resulted from a decade-long challenge to the Southern Pacific's titles to government land grants.

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and corruption in California. According to Richard Orsi, many of the Mussel Slough squatters “from the beginning, took up their claims with the intention of defeating the railroad’s title and acquiring the land free of charge.”⁵⁷ To Orsi, the Mussel Slough affair, which is believed to have inspired Frank Norris’s novel *The Octopus* (1901), characterized the railroads’ ongoing struggle to remove and prevent squatters from claiming the land granted to the railroads by the state and federal governments. The level of violence and publicity, however, also corresponded to the intensity of public outrage to the extravagant gifts of public land to railroads. In total, the federal government granted railroads more than 11.5 million acres of land in California, representing roughly 11.4 percent of the state’s entire area.⁵⁸

In the lead essay of the October 1868 issue of *The Overland Monthly*, George reflected on the meaning of these immense land grants and the nearly completed overland rail route in an essay entitled “What the Railroad Will Bring Us.” Along with the many benefits of the transcontinental line, including increased trade and wealth, George predicted that Californians would see wages fall, land prices rise, and diminished opportunities for those who did not own land. “The truth is, that the completion of the railroad and the consequent great increase of business and population, will not be a benefit to all of us, but only a portion,” he wrote. “Those who have lands, mines, established businesses, special abilities of certain kinds, will become richer for it and find increased opportunity; those who have only their own labor will become poorer, and find it harder to get ahead—first because it will take more capital to buy land or to get into business; and second, because as competition reduces the wages of labor, this capital will be harder for them to obtain.”⁵⁹

Unlike the congressional supporters of the Pacific Railway Act, who hoped rail construction would promote rapid settlement, George

understood, as William Deverell has noted, “that the overland railway could not exist in a social, cultural, political, or economic vacuum.”⁶⁰ The transcontinental railroad would affect critical relationships between labor and capital, technology and the environment, the state and federal government, and, most significantly to George, individuals and the land.

George’s anxiety toward the completion of the transcontinental line formed largely around his belief that intense land speculation preceded every major economic panic of the nineteenth century. He was right. According to William Cronon, “the most intense land speculation in American history” occurred in the mid-1830s, right before the Panic of 1837. “Believing Chicago was to become the terminus of a major canal,” he explained, “land agents and speculators flooded into town, buying and selling not only empty lots along its ill-marked streets, but also the surrounding grasslands which the Indians had recently abandoned.”⁶¹ Eventually, prices came down, banks recalled loans, and “people who had counted themselves millionaires teetered on the edge of bankruptcy.”⁶² Within months, the nation found itself in the midst of a full-fledged economic panic. A similar event occurred in 1873.

Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, speculators borrowed large sums of money to purchase land just beyond the line of western settlement in the expectation that its value would continue growing. According to Paul W. Gates, between 1854 and 1858, “the peak years of speculative purchasing,” 65 million acres of public domain fell into the hands of land agents and town planners.⁶³ And, as expected, western land prices soared, especially in areas around a planned railroad route. Like speculators, railroads relied on the promise of increased land values to attract investors who could supplement the loans received from the federal government for rail construction.

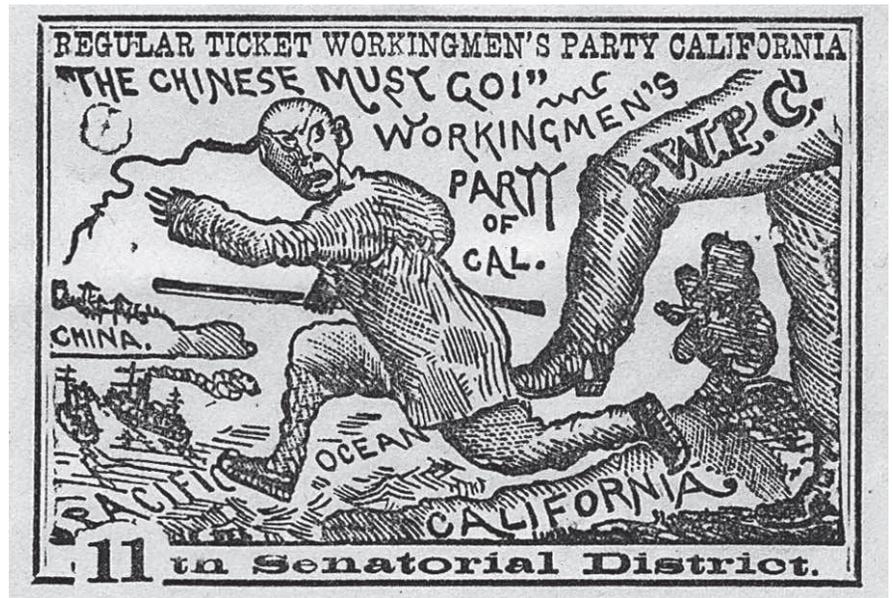
One investment house in particular, Jay Cooke and Company, took the risky nature of railroad financing to a new level in 1870 when it agreed to sell \$100 million in bonds to fund the construction of a Northern Pacific railway route.⁶⁴ So long as land prices continued to rise, Cooke had no trouble finding investors. By 1873, however, Cooke’s bonds stopped selling. In September of that year, his banking house collapsed, triggering a nationwide panic that temporarily shut down the stock market and caused a string of bankruptcies and bank closings throughout the country, including the Bank of California in 1875.⁶⁵

The federal government’s decision in 1873 to stop minting silver coins exacerbated the panic by making it harder for farmers and small businesses, especially in the West, to secure credit. Bishop Gilbert Haven nicely summed up the situation in California when, in October 1879, he wrote: “The storm did burst on California. The elements were ready for the cyclone. They were nowhere so ready as here in all America. This is the land of monopolies. Three of these include and control all the rest—the railroad, the mining, and the land monopoly. People East have no idea of the extent and force of these powers.”⁶⁶ The rest of the nation soon learned of the dire situation in California.

In the wake of economic turmoil, workers and farmers joined Denis Kearney and the Workingmen’s Party of California in protesting the power and privilege of the railroads. They attacked railroads for monopolizing land, hiring cheap Chinese labor over that of Americans, and charging high rates to travel and transport goods on their lines. Railroad workers also lashed out against their bosses for lowering wages and instituting massive layoffs after the Panic of 1873. In the summer of 1877, workers on the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad in West Virginia initiated a forty-five-day strike supported by workers across the country. The strike ended only after President

At the height of antirailroad sentiment in California, American workers targeted Chinese immigrants, many of whom were employed by the railroads, blaming them for taking jobs and driving down wages. These workers, led by Denis Kearney, formed the Workingmen's Party of California, whose platform was represented by the popular slogan "The Chinese Must Go!" The workers organized violent raids on Chinese-owned businesses and residences and railed against monopolies—especially the railroads—and capital.

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Rutherford B. Hayes sent federal troops to the striking cities to restore order. In San Francisco, where unemployment reached nearly 25 percent by the mid-1870s, the Workingmen's Party successfully lobbied for a convention to revise the California Constitution in an effort to regulate railroads and improve conditions for ordinary workers.⁶⁷

NATIONAL PROGRESS?

As a representation of the nation's commitment to motion, energy, and expansion, Turner would have viewed the completion of the overland railway as an expression of progress and the essential role of the frontier in promoting American development. Like most nineteenth-century Americans, Turner defined progress in terms of material growth and the incorporation of the nation's vast wilderness into industrial society. In reflecting on the "final rush of American energy upon the remaining wilderness," he marveled at the remarkable output achieved by America's manufacturing sector in the first decade of the twentieth century, writing in 1911 that "the extension of American settlement, production and wealth have increased beyond all precedent."⁶⁸

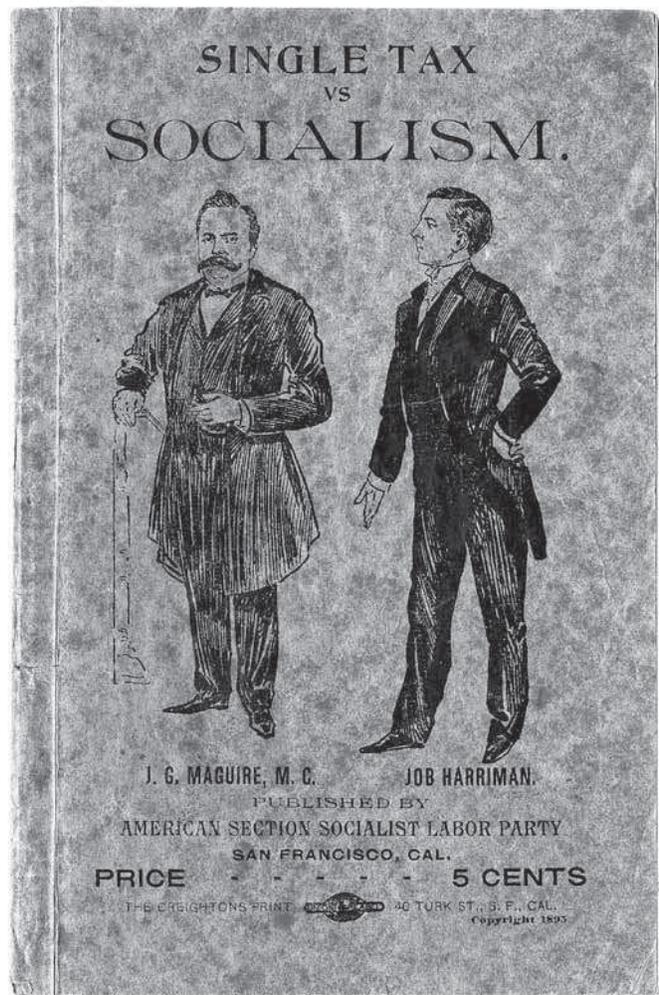
Although Turner acknowledged the nation's increased growth after the frontier's supposed

closing, he also recognized the increased class tension and regional antagonism as a result of the diminishing supply of land in the West. As George believed that the "potent charm of California" lay in the "general hopefulness and self-reliance" of its people, Turner saw the value of the West not only in the opportunities it offered to cash-strapped laborers but also in the way it "reacted as a check on the aristocratic influences of the East."⁶⁹ The frontier's closing cut off this release valve. As he explained in the September 1896 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*: "The free lands are gone, the continent is crossed, and all this push and energy is turning into channels of agitation. Failures in one area can no longer be made good by taking up land on a new frontier; the conditions of a settled society are being reached with suddenness and confusion. The West has been built up with borrowed capital, and the question of the stability of gold, as a standard of deferred payments, is eagerly agitated by the debtor West, profoundly dissatisfied with the industrial conditions that confront it, and actuated by frontier directness and rigor in its remedies."⁷⁰ The Populist movement, in full swing by the publication of Turner's frontier essay, provided one of the most accessible channels of expression to disgruntled farmers and laborers in the West.

Until recently, historians have viewed Populism as largely a rural-based movement of small farmers who decried the passing of the old, agrarian ideal and resented the new, industrial economic order.⁷¹ Charles Postel's 2007 award-winning *The Populist Vision*, however, reveals that in contrast to the traditional view, Populists lived modern lives committed to commercial and intellectual growth.⁷² Rather than the backward-looking simpletons of previous studies, Postel argues, Populists "embraced the notion of progress [and] wielded the concept as a weapon of reform."⁷³ In addition to free silver, many Populists supported land-reform schemes, including George's single tax on land values, as a promising way to level the playing field between small and large farmers.

The Farmers' Alliance, which began first in Texas before spreading into several other western and southern states, provided the organizational structure of the Populist movement. Its members included not only lifelong farmers but also part-time agricultural workers, full-time businessmen, and many women committed to using "education as a weapon to break the corporate stranglehold on business 'intelligence' that left the farmer at a commercial disadvantage."⁷⁴ In California, the alliance successfully organized large-scale cooperative agricultural enterprises to better compete with corporate-owned farms and orchards. Among the more successful cooperative ventures in the state was the Santa Clara Fruit Exchange, where hundreds of local farmers met to discuss prices, standardize grades, and experiment with "collective marketing."⁷⁵

Both Turner and George viewed Populism as a symptom of social imbalance caused by the disappearance of free land rather than as a legitimate conduit of reform to the nation's problems. To George, any proposal—including greater education, market regulation, or the organization of labor—short of the abolition of private property in land could serve only to mitigate, not solve, society's underlying dilemma. "For every social wrong there must be a remedy," he claimed.



Henry George's solution to the nineteenth century's economic morass was a single tax on the value of land that eventually would lead to landownership as common, rather than individual, property. Critics equated the single tax with Socialism because it attempted to abolish private property in land through the socialization of rent. This pamphlet—which records the debate between James G. Maguire and Job Harriman on June 16, 1895 in San Francisco—draws distinctions between Socialism and Social Democracy in the single-tax controversy.

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"But the remedy can be nothing less than the abolition of the wrong. Half-way measures, mere ameliorations and secondary reforms, can at any time accomplish little, and can in the long run avail nothing."⁷⁶ While many Populists, including Jerry "Sockless" Simpson and Hamlin Garland, championed the single tax, most of the movement's leadership "refused to accept the single tax as the 'universal solvent'" for the problems facing the nation.⁷⁷

As George believed that the “potent charm of California” lay in the “general hopefulness and self-reliance” of its people, Turner saw the value of the West not only in the opportunities it offered to cash-strapped laborers but also in the way it “reacted as a check on the aristocratic influences of the East.”

George’s unwavering faith in the single tax emanated from his confidence that justice and progress followed natural laws discoverable by any individual and applicable to any society at any time. Unlike Turner, who viewed history and defined progress from a particular, national point of view—the sea-to-shining-sea story—George embraced universalism, believing that individual, social, and national development more or less followed the same path and could be measured by universal truths and common standards of justice. At a time when policymakers had begun to lean more heavily on social science to guide reform, George relied on Christian ideals to find truth and inform action. “Political economy and social science cannot teach any lessons,” George wrote, “that are not embraced in the simple truths taught to poor fishermen and Jewish peasants by One who eighteen hundred years ago was

crucified.”⁷⁸ While George’s religiosity appealed to members of the Social Gospel and Christian Socialism movements, it allowed his critics to label him as a hackneyed idealist and dismiss his ideas as impractical.⁷⁹

Although many of George’s disciples did not share his steadfast commitment to the eradication of private property in land, most recognized the centrality of the land question to all other social, economic, and political questions. Some of his followers, including the Populist author Hamlin Garland, believed that land reform promised to improve the health of art and literature in America.⁸⁰ “It is the increase in the value of theatre sites which makes the production of a new play each year more difficult,” Garland wrote in 1894. “The single-tax idea, applied to theatres, would release the theater from tax, but would tax the land value. More theaters would be built.”⁸¹ Similarly, J. Bellangee argued in the February 1894 issue of *The Arena* that by “seek[ing] to secure equal distribution of benefits,” the single tax supported the aim of a wide variety of progressive reforms, including voting rights for women, the initiative and referendum, as well as the direct election of senators.⁸² The reason for these connections, social reformer and editor Louis F. Post explained, lay in the fact that “[t]he land question is essentially a question of the rights of living men as against the exactions of one another.” In other words, Post continued, “It is really the ‘man question’ rather than the ‘land question.’”⁸³

A TAX TO SAFEGUARD DEMOCRACY

While Turner failed to comment directly on George or the single tax in his writings, the historian would have viewed the proposal as a “substitute for that former safeguard of democracy” America had enjoyed in the frontier.⁸⁴ Unlike George, who emphasized the universal nature of the individual life and its connection to land,



In a retelling of the Little Red Riding Hood story, this 1884 political cartoon—published in the satirical Puck magazine—personifies Socialism as the wolf carrying George’s Progress and Poverty in his coat pocket while Red Riding Hood safeguards the “wages” in her basket. A poem published below the drawing warned the laborer of Socialism’s dangers, a result, perhaps, of the increased interest in Socialist doctrines as formulated by George in his 1879 seminal work.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; ILLUSTRATION BY SIR JOHN TENNIEL

While Turner provided turn-of-the-century Americans with a national history they could be proud of, George offered a vision of the future free of poverty, depression, and industrial panic. Their experiences and observations of the American West informed both men's narratives.

Turner viewed American history and development as inherently unique due to its “gift” of free lands, which enabled frontier expansion. The existence of free lands, he wrote, “promoted individualism, economic equality, freedom to rise, democracy” and “differentiated the American democracy from the democracies which have preceded it.”⁸⁵ However, instead of finding a way to make land “free” in America, as George proposed by socializing its value, Turner believed that America’s natural “energies of expansion” would, instead, be directed toward the achievement of a more “vigorous foreign policy, for an interoceanic canal, for a revival of our power upon the seas, and for the extension of American influence to outlying islands.”⁸⁶ Without a frontier of expansion, Turner believed, America risked losing its exceptionalism.

Although Turner did not address George or his proposal in his own work, Turner’s biographers have noted the similarities of their ideas and have speculated that *Progress and Poverty* informed

Turner’s frontier thesis. While a student at Johns Hopkins, Turner had read and carefully studied George’s ideas; one of the final exam questions for a course he took from Professor Richard Ely asked him to “Compare Turgot, John Stuart Mill, and Henry George on Taxation.”⁸⁷ Furthermore, Ray Allen Billington has pointed out that a note among Turner’s papers from the period before he had formulated his frontier thesis included a reminder to record a passage from page 349 of *Progress and Poverty*, which “contained several helpful ideas.”⁸⁸ In this passage, George had written: “The general intelligence, the general comfort, the active invention, the power of adaptation, and assimilation, the free, independent spirit, the energy and hopefulness that have marked our people, are not causes, but results—they have sprung from unfenced land. The public domain has been the transmuting force which has turned the thrifless, unambitious European peasant into the self-reliant Western farmer; it has given a consciousness of freedom even to the dweller in crowded cities, and has been a well-spring of hope even to those who have never thought of taking refuge upon it.”⁸⁹

Despite the striking resemblance of these ideas to Turner’s frontier thesis, Billington has suggested only that George’s ideas “bolstered Turner’s realization that a connection existed between free land and the frontier characteristics [Turner] was isolating.”⁹⁰ That George not only shared but also informed Turner’s understanding that democratic development depended on individual access to land presents a more accurate conclusion regarding the significance of this passage noted by Turner.

While indicative of the importance Americans attached to land, that Turner and George both studied and wrote about this invaluable resource to explain the crises facing the country at the end of the nineteenth century is not coincidental. The success of both authors hinged on their ability to explicate America’s relationship to and depen-

dence on cheap land. Both men showed that the land question did not merely represent a “western problem” or rural concern; both Turner and George reminded the public of land’s historic and universal importance to individual and social development.

A critical difference, however, existed in their visions of American progress, in which land represented the crucial and contingent factor. Whereas Turner believed America’s best days lay in the past, George envisioned a future in which private property ceased to exist and was filled with peace and prosperity. Each year since the closing of the frontier, Turner wrote in one of his final essays, America had lost some of its exceptional democratic character. “We are more like Europe,” he declared in 1925, “and our sections are becoming more and more the American version of the European nation.”⁹¹ Without a buffer of free land, he continued, “We, like the European nations, are approaching a saturation of population” that threatened America’s social equilibrium.⁹² To avoid disunion, he concluded, “We must shape our national action to the vast and varied Union of unlike sections.”⁹³

George described his ideal vision of the future in which private property in land no longer existed as resembling all of the glory of a Socialist society without the loss of individual freedom that such a system, as then proposed, entailed. With the revenue from the taxation of land values, George wrote, “we could establish public baths, museums, libraries, gardens, lecture rooms, music and dancing halls, theaters, universities, technical schools, shooting galleries, play grounds, gymnasiums, etc. . . . We should reach the ideal of the socialist, but not through government repression. Government would change its character, and would become the administration of a great co-operative society. It would become merely the agency by which the common property was administered for the common benefit.”⁹⁴

Turner and George believed America’s response to the land problem promised to alter its social, economic, and political structures. To both, the disappearance of the public domain provided the opportunity to redefine the nation’s treatment of and relationship to land. Without a large public domain, America could no longer afford to treat land and its value as private commodities. Nor could the federal government ignore the fact that its handling of the nation’s bounty had enabled the monopolization of land and was responsible for bringing landlordism to America.

While Turner provided turn-of-the-century Americans with a national history they could be proud of, George offered a vision of the future free of poverty, depression, and industrial panic. Their experiences and observations of the American West informed both men’s narratives. For Turner, Americans’ direct relationship to unoccupied land accounted for the development of their best features, including a steadfast commitment to expansion and self-sufficiency. The frontier’s closing forced Americans to realize their dependency on land and to redirect the nation’s “nervous energy” toward finding alternative outlets capable of safeguarding democracy. George offered Americans such an outlet through his proposal to tax and redistribute land values. All of the problems plaguing modern industrial societies, he wrote, sprung from the unnatural and unjust system of private property in land. Neither America nor any other advanced nation could continue to develop unimpeded by the evil effects of land monopoly. Harnessing land’s value for the public, as George prescribed, might have gone a long way toward assuring and advancing the continuing prosperity of the nation, as well as finally achieving—or at least coming closer to reaching—for all Americans the nation’s founding ideals of equality and justice.

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