

The History of Progress & Poverty

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As I recall the event, the theme of the last New York World's Fair was "A Century of Progress." Anno Domini 1979 having attained calendar status, we may well observe the centennial of Henry George's major opus by paraphrasing that epithet into "A Century of Progress and Poverty." For a hundred years now the book has been in print, in a variety of editions and versions. Fortunately, these include the original, as composed by the first Georgist. It remains unmatched by any adaptation.

Progress and Poverty has been translated into numerous foreign tongues, blue-penciled for publication in condensed form, and rewritten by several authors in a curious endeavor to update its delicious Victorian flavor for a contemporary readership. It has been amplified (if not enhanced) by the inclusion of prefaces, marginalia, appendixes, and other more or less pertinent addenda, and Bible-like, has engendered a comprehensive concordance of its expressions. Encased in blue cloth, buckram, leather, paper, or plastic binding, the work (thanks to its many variations) has been widely circulated, in places as disparate as Taiwan, Tel Aviv, and Toledo. I saw a copy once in a cabin in Georgia fronting on the Okefenokee Swamp; another on the desk of a Sephardic rabbi; a third displayed on a bookshelf in a British barrister's office.

One might ramble on thus indefinitely, offering a tasty melange of informational tid-bits pertaining to this famous text. Though neither novel nor profound, such trivia are somewhat diverting, and could tend to awaken interest, possibly to encourage perusal. (There is no doubt that Progress and Poverty, more than ever, needs to be "perused" during the current soul-trying times.) In any case, a book can be written about a book, qua book, and no better subject could be found than the inspiring volume its devotees fondly call "P & P."

Its genesis in the mind of Henry George surely is material for an intriguing study; its political and social effect when first published places it in a category shared by few other books, and its continued recognition as a valid treatise after so many years demonstrates its lasting educational value in the spheres of economics and philosophy. For all these reasons and others, the history of the book, simply as a publication, would be well worth the effort required to put it between covers. In 1905, Henry George, Jr. revealed "how the book came to be written." Perhaps there should be an up-to-date sequel, revealing how it has fared since its inception.

But this is a chore I do not propose to undertake. The statistical, geographical, and historical experiences of Progress and Poverty since its appearance in 1879 do not excite me. Much as I esteem George's brilliant conception, development, and exposition, I do not feel constrained to dwell on the intrinsic. These aspects of the work I commend to those stalwart Georgists to whom it is a vade mecum. It is another facet of the book that seems important to me.

In my opinion the most urgent question to be determined on this the hundredth anniversary of the basic Georgist manual is: what impact has it made? As Samuel F. B. Morse might have put it: what hath Progress and Poverty wrought? As we acclaim the book and revere its author on this celebrative occasion, it

seems concurrently appropriate to try to ascertain whether, a hundred years and millions of copies later, there is in fact anything to celebrate. A candid appraisal of its actual effect indicates that there is scant reason for blaring trumpets, waving banners, or bombastic oratory in the premises. It is a magnificent book, meriting every encomium we may bestow upon it. A century ago it almost shook the world. But as we carping cynics are wont to ask, what has it done for us lately?

It may be that a turning point has been reached...

George's development and exposition of the nature, source, and destination of economic wealth tower like intellectual mountains. His clear logic and persuasive argumentation apparently should result in convincing and attracting countless adherents. Yet the labor of his mountainous effort has brought forth no more than mouse-like progeny. In number they are pitifully few; in influence they are distressingly weak; in accomplishing the radical reforms proposed by George, their achievements have been picayune at best.

A hundred years of Progress and Poverty, and we still see economically little of the former, with an agonizing continuation of the latter. We repeatedly proclaim that "our time has come," but our confident proclamation is delivered to each other, while no one else seems to listen. The tangible results of George's noble teachings are sadly sparse: a scattering of tiny pseudo-Georgist enclaves in obscure locations; small cities in one American state slowly scratching out a few percentage points of landvalue taxation; a partial application of economic rent collection in far away Australia, and the like. It is not a list of accomplishments one can point to with pride.

Perhaps my findings are excessively negative, and my reaction unduly pessimistic. After all, five thousand years of the Old Testament and two thousand of the New have not yet brought consistent peace on earth or widespread good will among men. I daresay my bitterness stems from deep disappointment, as I consider on one hand the glorious road George has paved for us, and, on the other, how stubbornly the world has refused to follow it to the promised land.

What (or who) is to blame for the exiguous harvest realized from the seed that was sown? Is the fault in our stars or in ourselves, or in some circumstance that until now we have not recognized? These questions demand and deserve cogent answers. It is not enough for those to whom Progress and Poverty is The Word to concentrate their celebration of its centenary into mere pomp and fanfare. Having duly sung "Happy Birthday," and having reaffirmed faith in the philosophy of Henry George, the celebrants (especially those pretending a position of "leadership") ought very diligently to do their best to find answers to the simple queries I have presented. If this challenge is not met, then the sesquicentennial of Progress and Poverty's publication, and the bicentennial thereof, et cetera, will mark no more progress and no less poverty than now prevail.

It may be that a turning point has been reached, where a decision must be made: whether to treat the study of George as a monkish search for esoteric knowledge, or to encourage it widely among all with a will to learn, as an inspired and inspiring intellectual pursuit with a practical and beneficial goal in mind.