

Criticizing the Critics

A Book Review

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CRITICS OF HENRY GEORGE: A Centenary Appraisal of Their Strictures on Progress and Poverty. Edited by Robert V. Andelson. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1979. 424 pp. Cloth. \$18.00

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The task of reviewing Robert Andelson's latest work is an exciting and agreeable assignment, but as I approach it, it looms as an undertaking which in a way is almost as monumental as the book itself. I do not refer to the physical dimensions of *Critics of Henry George*, which certainly is not one of those huge tomes designed primarily to decorate coffee-tables. Indeed, considering the immensity of the substance its pages contain, it is remarkably compact. What is monumental is the author-editor's outstanding accomplishment in gathering so vast an amount of material within the confines of a single volume. But even this is a minor achievement compared to the skillful and effective job Dr. Andelson has performed in collecting, assembling, editing, evaluating, and presenting the impressive subject matter his book offers.

The term "scholarly" is unfortunately so mis-used and over-used that it has become trite. Yet no other word that occurs to me better describes the book and its producer. This is not faint praise, but profound gratitude for a magnificent contribution to Georgist thought, and hence to the furtherance of Georgist principles. The book reveals the gamut of criticism at a variety of viewpoints, from Marx's radical Left and Rothbard's radical Right, and in doing so, brings out the strength of George's philosophy—and its weakness, where weakness exists. Dr. Andelson bluntly makes clear that his purpose is not to repeat the homage George's devotees pay him. "Rather," he states, "on this centenary of George's magnum opus, I am convinced that the highest tribute we can pay his memory, and the one that he himself would cherish most, is to present as fairly as possible the arguments of his most significant critics, and to weigh them in the scales both of abstract reason and of empirical evidence." This aim is conscientiously advanced in *Critics of Henry George*.

Lev Tolstói's oft-quoted observation, "People do not argue with the teaching of Henry George; they simply do not know it," serves as a springboard for Dr. Andelson's "Prolegomena." (Incidentally, his introduction to the book is, as they say, alone worth the price of admission—as is his concluding chapter on the subject of "Neo-Georgism.") He points out that, though Tolstói's comment holds "a degree of validity," there have been those who "have argued with the teachings of George." This acknowledgement constitutes the *raison d'être* for the book. By my finger-count, twenty-eight specified "Critics" are cited, and their opinions discussed, in twenty four of its chapters. Obviously, commentators critical of Henry George are far more numerous, and many of them are named and quoted in Dr. Andelson's introductory chapter. A few were answered by George himself, and others Dr. Andelson deemed not significant or merely repetitive.

To consider, discuss, and evaluate the major critical stands, in addition to himself, Dr. Andelson has called upon thirteen well-qualified contributors, among whom (I am proud to say) are two of FRAGMENTS' editors, Jack Schwartzman and Oscar B. Johannsen. Others are (in the sequence of their appearance): Roy Douglas, Robert F. Hebert, Fred Harrison, George Babilot, Aaron B. Fuller, Steven B. Cord, Charles F. Collier, William Truehart, Mason Gaffney, James L. Busey, and C. Lowell Harriss. I am sure no one will quarrel with my describing all of them as well-qualified to evaluate criticisms of Henry George.

In his preface, Dr. Andelson discusses with engaging candor the quandary he faced in determining the arrangement of the many components comprising the book. Should it be topical, or ideological, or neither? Finally he opted for the format he calls "chronological-geographical," which, despite certain over-lapping, appeared the most logical. Accordingly, he has divided the evaluations into three categories: Nineteenth Century British and Continental Critics, Nineteenth Century American Critics, and Twentieth Century Critics. The choice of format has proved salutary.

Regrettably, it is not possible in this space-limited review to discuss all the critiques of the critics that appear in the Andelson work. I wish I could do so, for there is not one that does not merit quotation: but I cannot cite some and not others. Howbeit, I am prompted to refer to certain parts of the book. I have already alluded to Dr. Andelson's introductory and concluding chapters, both of which are informative, provocative, and more than worth the reading. A chapter titled "The Essential Henry George," by Louis Wasserman, is a splendid summary of Georgist economic principles and social philosophy, and is rather intriguing in that it includes some of George's own "replies to certain objections." An interesting device is found in Jack Schwartzman's article: a "table" in which George's doctrines are listed side-by-side with those of Nineteenth Century Anarchists, providing a kind of instant comparison between their respective positions.

In toto, *Critics of Henry George* is (I iterate) a magnificent achievement. Its contents are readable, edifying, and stimulating. Undoubtedly it will hold a permanent place as a highly esteemed reference work, not only among Georgists, but in the general field of political economy as well. The book benefits greatly from an unusually excellent index, which is commendably comprehensive and detailed. Footnotes following each chapter supply the reader with helpful sources and references. Dr. Andelson deserves profound appreciation both for amassing and collating the material for the book, and for the manner in which it has been conceived, designed, and produced.

Let me close with a personal aside. I note with sentimental pleasure that the book is "fondly dedicated" to that lovely lady we know as Vie Peterson. No more worthy recipient of this gesture could be found. Though many expressions of respect and admiration have been directed toward her, to my mind she has not been accorded the recognition and acclaim she has clearly earned. Dr. Andelson's dedication does much to make up for such remissness.