

Land and Freedom J/F 1938

1937-10-31 Broadus Mitchell: Henry George The Economist

Remarks of Broadus Mitchell, Associate Professor of Political Economy,
Johns Hopkins University, at a Memorial Meeting in Honor of
Henry George, held at Princeton University, October 31, 1937.

This memorial meeting is one incident in the growing recognition of the permanent place of Henry George in the economic thought of this country and the world. Henry George always wanted, with a solicitude which did us too much honor, to be accepted in academic circles. But most of our universities and colleges did not give him while he lived or for years afterwards, even a fair hearing. It was as though we believed that our disapproval, due to befuddlement and fear, could really hamper the progress of a great idea. It is now our part, in repair of our self-respect, to learn of his life and opinions, and to try to impress them upon those who look to us for guidance.

Henry George was America's foremost contribution to economic insight. The next claimant after him, for very different reasons, would perhaps be Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton in most ways was a man of special circumstances. His thought sprang from a particular situation, and his proposals in turn changed this situation. This is not a detraction from the boldness of his conceptions, nor from the quality of his mental and moral capacities. It is simply a fact that it was Hamilton's business to take a confusion and make of it a country.

Henry George's analysis, and the applications which he drew from it, were as nearly as possible universal. They were more universal, in space and time, than the teachings of Adam Smith, and maybe more so than those of Karl Marx. This much said, I do not need to go further in mere praise of Henry George.

I would like, in this place, to do what I can to repel a persistent and pernicious statement that is made about him. It is not so much a criticism of George as it is an attempt to put him out of serious notice. It is a familiar device of the shallow, the timid, and the designing. It belongs to a great disreputable company of efforts to undermine a powerful influence. I refer to the allegation that Henry George was a brilliant crank. This charge met his first writings, followed him through life and has sought to attach itself to his followers.

If we leave aside the less worthy aspects of this comment it amounts to the belief that he was a poor mental workman, that with him infatuation took the place of inquiry that ardor stood in the stead of assiduity. It is said that in presenting a panacea he must be wrong. A panacea, it is declared, however justified by certain social phenomena, implies a neglect of other and probably contradictory areas of economic achievement and conduct. In short, George's generalization glitters, but is not gold.

Now his analysis may, in fact, fall short. That would not be remarkable, but with it I am not

concerned at the moment. I want to make the point that George did not content himself with a quick glance at the causes of social misery, arrive at a sudden explanation, and devote his life to shouting instead of searching. He was, on the contrary, a conscientious and well-equipped student. He read widely, he traveled more extensively than any other economist of his time. His varied personal experience was enriched and turned to account by his extraordinary knack of observation. He lived in economic environments of very different sorts the East, with manufacturers and nature, and the West, extractive and a frontier. In his early years he tried many ways of earning a living. He went from galling poverty to the acclaim of millions. He stood in the morning chill of a San Francisco street to beg of a stranger, and he later formed a plan for the economy of the world.

His glance was not hastily cast upon one environment nor upon several. Remember that when monopoly drove him from California to the East to seek out a way for independent enterprise, he was shocked at what he saw in the social contrasts of New York. He had come from what he still considered to be the classlessness of opportunity, from the democracy of the buoyant primitive. Still with nature's promise to man in his mind he drew back at what he discovered had been the result of social evolution in old settled communities. Here was such a great divide as he had not passed in his journey across the continent suffering on the one hand and surfeit on the other, the alley and the avenue. Profoundly as he was moved by this paradox, and solemnly as he promised himself that he would find its cause, he did not leap to a conclusion. There were to follow patient years of more observation, more reading, more thinking. The query constantly presented itself to all that struck his senses, but did not find its answer. It is worth while to remark that in this industrious scanning of his environment he did not recognize nor develop the implications of his own earlier inspiration. The complaints of gold-miners of falling earnings, the doubts of what the railroad would bring to the Pacific coast had retreated in his memory to the faintest echoes. He went on busily, talking with everybody, writing on many topics until, in the strawstack of his threshing, he really found his own sharp needle.

Some are apt to consider that George was more mindful of land than of capital, that he did not scrutinize industry. This was many times refuted, as it would be easy to show at length. It is enough to be reminded that "Progress and Poverty" was written in the midst of a great industrial depression, that the sub-title of the book declared this, and that the opening sentences gave such a picture of industrial lapse as few have penned.

And even when he had completed "Progress and Poverty" there was time for a passing fever of conviction to cool.

First of all, the manuscript went the dreary round of publishers unimpressed. There is no superior prescription for an author's disenchantment. In that manuscript, both copies of which are now the cherished possessions of two of our foremost libraries, he had invested not only a year of composition. He had confided to it the burning thoughts of an obscure man, like which there is no shorn lamb in the untempered wind of hostility or the rawer blast of mere neglect. If Henry George was to be disillusioned, now was the time. But he kept up his belief in himself while he

contrived a way to get the book printed. He moved to New York to await his success, but there ensued another trying period of pause. He did hackwork, even humiliating hackwork, for a living. Sales of "Progress and Poverty" at first continued to be slow, and reviews were uncomprehending. Still he did not revise the judgment he had reached. When notice came sudden, widespread, acrimonious, enthusiastic he was called, in lectures, newspapers, and more books, to the severe text of elaboration. He had to apply his principle to the thousand and one events of the passing scene. He must answer, in the impromptu of the platform, the considered, searching questions of some of the quickest minds of his time. He must convince the understanding and attract the loyalty of men of all kinds of interests. Few works have queried so many accepted doctrines and institutions as "Progress and Poverty," or lain so much in the cross-fire of economic and political controversy.

So this book, and the others so closely related to it, grew out of thorough inspection and were allowed to stand after full criticism. Many things have been said of the author of "Progress and Poverty" by threatened landlords, by selfish officeholders, by smug economists more pontifical than another critic in Rome itself but nobody, to my knowledge, ever said he was not honest. If he had come to believe there were faults in his work, that he had preached what he could never perform, he would have been the first to amend, to correct, or to disavow.

A thoughtful student of the history of economic doctrine said to me recently that Henry George the propagandist will tend to fade, while Henry George the economist will grow more distinct and distinguished with the years. This may very well be true, but I should like to make two remarks in connection with the observation.

One is that if George, the popularizer of a principle diminishes in perspective, we may hope the example which he gave of reforming zeal shall not be lost to present and future philosophers. This was where his moral courage and his unselfishness marched side by side with his mental acumen. The plague of our social sciences is inquiry that stops with inquiry, that does not find legs with which to walk about in the world of men. Economic investigation which treats insecurity, for example, as an element in an academic experiment is a degenerate performance. If we have something to offer for human betterment, we must do it eagerly and not be deterred because many call us rash or wicked. Nor should we ever forget that Henry George spoke, like a true political economist, for the public advantage. Particularly since the World War we have imported into our academic curricula many studies which, grouped under the head of "business economics," are often mere techniques of private acquisitiveness. They put personal gain ahead of common benefit. Henry George remained always in the great tradition of political economy by aiming to formulate principles of statecraft.

And if Henry George the propagandist is to recede relatively, I want, in the second place, to acknowledge the debt which we owe to his devoted disciples. Not a few of those present belong to this company. Has there ever been such a group for accepting the mantle of a lost leader? Their perseverance in thought, in the spoken and printed word, and in proper political activity has been an indispensable element in the preservation and spread of George's influence. Their

appeal, as his, has been to reason. How often we meet adherents of reform philosophies who have accepted a party name without being able to define or to defend their faith. I have never encountered a Single Taxer who did not know why he was a Single Taxer and who was not bent upon convincing rather than just converting. George was not least fortunate in the character of his followers.

Today we look back across forty years to the final scene of this man's career. The welfare of a great city was under fierce debate. And there we find, more striking than ever, what we always meet in Henry George's history a clear mind and an ardent spirit at the service of the human throng. He gave himself a ransom for many. His genius was not greater than his generosity.

APPROVES OUR EDITORIAL
EDITOR LAND AND FREEDOM:

Your editorial in issue just received pleased me very much. For several years my own expressed opinion that the rapid decadence of the present so-called civilization was apparent in the grotesque, not to say "rotten," productions in painting, drawing, sculpture, music and literature has received no response and scarcely even polite attention.

Art is crude, infantile and offensive to the eye, music a mere din and offense to the ear, and books so poorly and clumsily written that good material for an interesting story is so prosy as to be tiresome and almost unreadable.

I hope you are right as to "the questioning spirit of the young." My observation has noted either absolute indifference or interest only in the superficial nonsense and jargon of Marxism.

How can Broadus Mitchell express such appreciation of Henry George as he has in the article in your current issue and then speak over the radio such nonsense as "we must have production for use and not for profit" to solve our economic problems. The answer of course is probably the necessity of holding a job and the fact that probably Johns Hopkins, as is true of Harvard, Columbia and many of the Western State Universities, gets a large income from ground rents.

Boston, Mass. EDMUND J. BURKE.

WILLIAM R. WHITELAW of Toronto writes: "The article by Prof. Broadus Mitchell of the Johns Hopkins University, in your Jan.-Feb. issue, is a winner and conclusively shows the terrible discouragements which that great man 'Henry George' had to combat from both press and

pulpit in his earnest endeavor to solve both your and my economic problems. He was a brave man and a fearless fighter for the truth."