

Was George a Dreamer or a Realist?

Steven Cord's Book, Back in Print, Answers Marx's Taunt, Updates George's Ideas

By ROBERT J. RAFALKO*

ABSTRACT. The republication of *Steven Cord's Henry George: Dreamer or Realist?* makes available once more a work which dealt with insight and depth of analysis with the misconceptions, factual inaccuracies and offhand dismissals of the American *economist* and *social philosopher's* theories. Although he alienated many in the academic community, George attracted many leading *scholars* in it to significant *research* on *basic problems* of our times.

I

NOWADAYS, THE ACID TEST for a reformer or revolutionary is the ability to put one's words into practice. There was, perhaps, a time when argument, analysis and eloquence in pointing out an injustice was thought sufficient in social theory. For knowledge of an ill in society was a first step to correcting it, and a powerful first step at that. But it is interesting to see that since the early writings of one social reformer/revolutionary, Karl Marx, the word 'utopian' has taken on severely critical overtones. True, the term has always suggested elusiveness; its etymology has the rare good fortune of intended irony. But Karl Marx lashed out at his socialist contemporaries with that very word, and it is oftentimes a worry about Karl Marx himself that his theories are too "utopian" to put into practice.

This is an important issue; with respect to Henry George, Marx's younger contemporary, it is an inescapable issue, made so more by the force of undeserved reputation than by anything Henry George actually said or did or wrote. So, it is a matter of special importance that Steven Cord's insightful book, *Henry George: Dreamer or Realist?*, has been republished in a second edition under the auspices of the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation.¹

Henry George: Dreamer or Realist? is an excellent analysis of the Georgian ethical and economic system, and it is a serious endeavor to remain true to the spirit of Henry George, while at the same time bringing some of the theories up to date. But if the answers are there, as I think they are, some of the questions that need to be asked have to be reshaped. In order to see how

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sharp-edged are Cord's analyses and updating of George's theories, we might ask ourselves the question of how well Cord might have responded to a charge of "utopianism" in the Marxian sense of the word. As we shall see, as far as a whole host of criticisms and misinterpretations of George's theories are concerned, this question is quite a relevant one.

In what respect, if any, was Henry George a "utopian"—a dreamer—and in what respect, if any, was George a realistic critic of existing social conditions? That is the central question of Steven Cord's book. On the whole, Cord provides a thoughtful and powerful response. Yet, one passage from *Henry George: Dreamer or Realist?* proves to be intriguing. It is where Cord writes:

Generally, as previous chapters of this study indicate, the histories of economic thought have not been free from serious misconceptions concerning George and his ideas. Also, these histories give George much briefer treatment than one would think he deserves, considering the impact he made on his generation and the one that followed. For example, one of the most commonly used textbooks on the subject (by Eric Roll) is content with briefly paraphrasing Karl Marx's evaluation of George, although the source is not mentioned. (p. 240)

Unfortunately, Cord never tells us what criticism of George it is that Roll presents but fails to attribute to Karl Marx. But perhaps Cord refers to Eric Roll's description of George on p. 422 of *A History of Economic Thought* where he writes that George ". . . never really belonged to the wage-earning class which had already been formed and was rapidly expanded in his day. His connection with the working-class movement came from the outside; he presented it with a panacea." In other words, if I read this correctly, Roll has used the Marxian strategem of accusations of utopianism against George.

If this supposition is accurate, it is exceedingly ironic, as well as false in its particulars. For one thing, many biographies of George refer to the time when he worked as a foremast hand, a meterman for natural gas utilities and as a typesetter; much of the rest of the time, he was completely unable to find work. It is dubious in the extreme to group George, because of a few years as editor and as part owner of a newspaper, in the ranks of the "petty bourgeois," as Roll attempts to do. This is symptomatic of the slipshod research into the life and thought of Henry George that critics have displayed who have so casually dismissed the man and his ideas.² In one respect, Steven Cord's book can be seen as a clearing house of such misconceptions, factual inaccuracies and offhand dismissals on the part of George's critics. In the effort to come to understand why some of George's more worthy proposals haven't had much impact, it is essential to do what Cord has done—show the often unreasoned and poorly researched dismissals some academics have given George's theories.

It is a tribute to Steven Cord that he doesn't make light of the impact of these offhand rejections of George's proposals by some members of the academic community, and instead painstakingly documents them (and their relentless inaccuracies). Even more to Cord's credit, is that he goes to some pains to explain why the hostility emerged. If George's theories are indeed "utopian," that is largely a measure of the stridency of such attacks on Henry George from a quarter where George should have found some natural allies.

II

ONE OF THE REASONS George didn't make friends³ throughout the academic community, as Cord explains, is the fact that he often intentionally alienated potential colleagues. As Cord writes, "George indicated . . . a certain contempt for professors as the automatic defenders of the status quo that has characterized the Georgist movement even to the present day" (p. 29). Some of that disdain, as Cord explains, owes its origins to George's advocacy of stringent economic reforms, whereas most economists were exceedingly conservative on such issues. Another reason for this emerging alienation from part of the academic world derived from George's insistence on the value of self-education. Self-taught, George considered this fact a virtue and not a handicap. When George was given the opportunity to obtain a university professorship at Berkeley, he squandered the chance in his remarks by exalting his self-education, instead of tactfully bypassing the issue. If that wasn't enough, in the same talk he attributed the conservatism of fellow economists to "ignorance backed by interest, and made fierce by passions." Remarks of this sort, while they show fierce integrity, are ill-suited to the occasion of a job interview.

The ironies continue to mount up. George had effectively distanced himself from the conservative academic community, and (as Roll's remarks indicate) from the political left as well. Cord is exactly right in noting that George "defies easy classification as either a liberal or conservative" (p. 243). That fact continues to be an obstacle to the promotion of George's proposals, since conservatives tend to regard him (mistakenly) as a socialist, or as advocating nationalization; and liberals regard him (mistakenly) as a laissez-faire economist of the old school.

Cord has us recall that the 1880s (the period in which most of George's writings appeared) was an era that viewed *all* taxation with suspicion. As Cord writes: "In our day, we have gotten used to confiscation by taxation, but even yet the argument has considerable impact" (p. 61). But Cord goes on to point out that George did not advocate the confiscation of *land*, only the confiscation of *rent*.

It is a fact that early proponents of the income tax faced exactly this sort of

opposition. Yet, they were to come to be successful in time, perhaps owing to the fact that the income tax had so much support among the very academic economists that George had already alienated.

III

GEORGE, A DEDICATED SPOKESMAN for democratic solutions, chose to bypass the academic community and take his cause to the people. This is one of the reasons for his flirtation with politics, and his heroic mayoral campaigns in New York. We must give Henry George some grudging respect for his disregard for the elite and its dogmas, and the success of his *Progress and Poverty* as a bestseller in its day indicates that he had some success in his appeals to public support. But, as the record proved, it was a mixed success, with mixed blessings.

Karl Marx is said to have remarked of his followers that they were "plus Marxiste que moi." We might judge, following the leads that Steven Cord has given us, that there could have been a time in Henry George's own lifetime when he reflected that his advocates were "plus Georgiste que moi." One of the factors that Cord suggests was responsible for George's undeserved reputation as a dreamer (in the pejorative sense of the term) was in fact the dogmatic excesses of his followers who claimed to represent George's views, but often distorted them. The alternative to the ideal state of calm reflection in academia is the tumult and pressures of grass roots political activism. Such insistent partisanship is too often inflexible and (another irony) tied to specific interests, so that distortions and dogmatic commitments often supercede the intrinsic worth of a proposal. George's well intentioned appeals to public opinion undoubtedly and unfortunately also gave rise to many of the misconceptions that came to comprise George's reputation as a dreamer. The same vagaries of politics which propelled the theories of Marx and Engels to world attention (in their admittedly distorted Leninist incarnations) had the opposite effect on the proposals and theories of Henry George, which for too long have been relegated to cursory mentions in textbooks as aberrant manifestations of populist "muddle-headed" thinking.

The greatest strength of *Henry George: Dreamer or Realist?* is Steven Cord's long-overdue attempt to obtain recognition for Henry George's proposals in a new era and before the academic court of appeals. It is a worthy project. For one thing, Cord does not offer weak excuses for Henry George when he judges that George was wrong, and he concludes that George was wrong in insisting on "the single tax" to the exclusion of other forms of taxation. Properly viewing the land value tax as a one instrument of social reform

existing alongside other necessary instruments (such as the income tax), Cord has restored our vision to calm analysis of a difficult subject. It is good to see his book returned to publication.

Notes

1. *Henry George: Dreamer or Realist?* by Steven B. Cord. New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 2d ed., 1984, 272 pp., \$10.

2. The attitudes of some of George's adversaries contrasted with that of distinguished academic scholars who welcomed his work on its appearance. Among them, of his generation, were Baron Émile de Laveleye, the Belgian economist; Alfred Russell Wallace, originator (with Charles Darwin) of evolution theory, Max Müller, the orientalist, and Léon Marie Walras, the French economist. In the next generation, it included no less than three of the great philosophers of the period, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell and John Henry Muirhead.

3. In recent years, of course, by superb and indefatigable research, leading academic scholars have done much to enlighten hostile critics; as, for example Harry Gunnison Brown, *Economic Science and the Common Welfare*, 6th ed. (Columbia, Mo.: Lucas Bros., 1936) and his *The Economic Basis of Tax Reform* (*ibid.*, 1932); George Raymond Geiger, *The Philosophy of Henry George* (New York: Macmillan, 1933); Ernest Teilhac, *Pioneers of American Economic Thought in the 19th Century*, trans. by E. A. J. Johnston (New York: Macmillan, 1936); Charles Albro Barker, *Henry George* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1955); Elwood P. Lawrence, *Henry George in the British Isles* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1957); Steven B. Cord, *Henry George: Dreamer or Realist?* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1965); Jacob Oser, *Henry George* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1974); C. F. Collier, "Henry George's System of Economics: Analysis and Criticism," Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 1976; Robert V. Andelson, ed., *Critics of Henry George: A Centennial Appraisal of Their Strictures on "Progress and Poverty"* (Teaneck, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1979); Terence Michael Dwyer, "A History of the Theory of Land Value Taxation," Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1980; John L. Thomas, *Alternative America*, (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1983); Richard W. Lindholm and Arthur D. Lynn, Jr., eds., *Land Value Taxation: The Progress and Poverty Centenary* (Madison, Wis.: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1980); see in it especially Kenneth E. Boulding, "A Second Look at *Progress and Poverty*;" Leland Yeager, "Henry George and Austrian Economics," address at St. John's University, March, 1982; Richard W. Lindholm and Hartojo Wignjowijoto, *Financing and Managing State and Local Government* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1979); Fred Harrison, *The Power in the Land* (London: Shephard: Walwyn, 1983). To be more adequate, this list, already much too long and still not quite complete for American studies, would have to include the work of other foreign scholars such as Michael Silagi, A. R. Prest and Yosisaburo Yamasaki.

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THE ASSOCIATION for the Advancement of Policy, Research and Development, which is interested in various areas of Third World concern, scheduled nine international conferences during 1985, seven in the U.S. or Canada. It solicited