

CHAPTER I

Our Problem

SIXTY-FIVE YEARS ago appeared one of the most remarkable books of modern times, a book which many of us believed was bound to have an important effect in the years to follow. The author, Henry George, while well known in California, was practically unknown beyond the State's limits. No college had listened to his recitations and only for a short period had he received instruction in the Philadelphia High School. In the book of life he had studied as printer and sailor, and for a short period before his great publication—*Progress and Poverty*—had worked as a journalist of local repute in California.

Yet with this meager training his production was acclaimed in a manner indicating its great importance. The *New York Herald* declared that "*Progress and Poverty* is not merely the most original, the most striking and important contribution which political economy has yet received from America, but it is not too much to say that in these respects it has had no equal since the publication of *The Wealth of Nations*, by Adam Smith, a century ago, or, at least, since Malthus formulated his theory of population and Ricardo his theory of rent." A Washington paper pronounced it "one of the greatest books yet contributed to the literature of political economy, and one which no public man can afford to omit reading." Another reviewer said: "Every sentence is as clear as a sunbeam; every proposition

is as legitimately traced to its logical result as one of Euclid's." A California journal declared that "We believe this book marks an epoch in the discussion of political and social questions." The *Brooklyn Eagle* said: "The most solid literary success of the year is undoubtedly *Progress and Poverty*." The tributes could be indefinitely multiplied.

Those antagonistic to the positions of Henry George were swift to recognize the importance of the book. Said *The Churchman*: "No wilder theory was ever broached, yet we cannot but admire the earnest purpose." *Examiner and Chronicle* pronounced it "The most pernicious treatise on political economy that has been published for many a day." *The Boston Journal* thought that "wild and impractical as its conclusions appear it challenges respect by its power and earnestness." *Alta California* declared that "the literary ability displayed in this novel and original plan of communism makes it the more dangerous." And many more similar comments might well be quoted.

For some succeeding years the effects of this book were most marked. Shortly after its publication George moved to New York. The Central Labor Union there, recognizing the importance of the man and the theories he promulgated, asked him to be its nominee for the position of Mayor of New York. A contest of major political importance followed. However, he was defeated by Abram S. Hewitt, Theodore Roosevelt being a poor third. There are to this day many who believe that George was counted out and should have been declared victor. The following year he was the Labor candidate for Secretary of State of New York. His total State vote was about what he received as a candidate for the New York mayoralty. Thus again defeated, he never after sought public office as a means of furthering his doctrines save in the campaign which resulted in his death.

Meanwhile went on a very active campaign to spread the

doctrines of what came to be known as the Single Tax. In this Rev. Dr. McGlynn of New York took a very active part, particularly in what was known as the Anti-Poverty Society. His eloquent orations were eagerly listened to by many thousands of persons. Dr. McGlynn was the leading figure in what was given the name of the United Labor Party which in 1888 held a national convention at Cincinnati. This nominated Mr. Cowdry as a candidate for the presidency. Its vote at the polls was insignificant. A notable contest was inaugurated in Delaware, where, with the general public manifesting much approval of George's theories, the local men insisted on putting forward a State campaign for offices, meeting a rather ignominious defeat, and ending the effort.

While these events were taking place the Single Tax movement extended itself very actively throughout the United States and the speeches of Henry George met with hearty approval. Then followed the formation of organizations in Ireland, England and Australia to further his ideas.

The crusade of George attracted the attention and devotion of many young men of marked ability. They were ready to sacrifice themselves and their future to the cause. This was shown in the States named and many of the other states of the Union. W. S. U'Ren, to assist the movement in Oregon, advocated the Initiative and Referendum, and in the advocacy of such measures as a means of opening the door to the Single Tax, Dr. Hill of Missouri and Judge Alfred S. Niles and J. H. Ralston of Maryland and others of like ilk in Arkansas, Colorado and elsewhere pursued the same course. The fighting nucleus among the supporters of the Initiative and Referendum was ever the Single Taxers, though much support was found among others.

Meanwhile advocates were found among college pro-

fessors and men in public life who had not yet thoroughly learned the danger of such support but stood for George's doctrines anyway. All this led to putting forward measures calling for taxation constitutional changes in some states, resulting in a signal defeat in Missouri and later in Oregon where the tide had definitely turned. There, after gaining home rule in taxation for counties, all was lost in an attempt to bring about total statewide exemption of improvements from taxation. A practical gain for the future, although not a foundation for statewide present progress, was made through a constitutional amendment adopted in Maryland in 1915.

Notice should be taken of the Fels Foundation of 1907 and some years thereafter. Mr. Fels agreed to match contributions to the advocacy of Single Tax to the extent of \$25,000 a year for five years. A commission was formed of which Daniel Kiefer of Cincinnati was chairman and secretary, the additional members being George A. Briggs of Elkhart, Indiana (now of Los Angeles, California), Frederick C. Howe of New York (formerly of Ohio), Lincoln Steffens, and Jackson H. Ralston. The plan of action this committee adopted was that of aiding in the several states as far as possible whatever the local Single Taxers believed would be to the advantage of any campaign in their localities. The most lasting benefit which came from this was the assistance the Commission rendered to the Initiative and Referendum. This was really considerable in its effects, although criticized by some Single Taxers who regarded with disfavor anything they considered of a political nature. They did not appreciate the fact that only through politics could their reform be accomplished, and that the Initiative and Referendum opened a door of hope for them. (That it has not accomplished more is largely to be laid at the door of an error not appreciated in the beginning. Instead of setting a low fixed figure for the

number of petitioners for an initiative measure a percentage was selected, usually eight, a figure now fairly impossible of attainment because of expense due to natural increase in members of the electorate and the doubling of the vote through women's suffrage.)

From the times indicated to this present, save as to a campaign in California running from 1934 to 1938 following many years after several defeats of measures tending in the same general direction, there has been no notable effort in a political way to forward the ideas of Henry George. It is true that some useful educational steps have been taken through the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation of New York and the institution of the Henry George Schools in New York and various other cities.

The early fervor which Henry George inspired has almost entirely disappeared. For the most part the original enthusiasts have departed this life. Every Single Tax Conference marks the presence of a diminishing number of grayheads but no material accessions of younger men and women. With the general public Single Tax is either the object of pronounced aversion or at best a want of interest is manifest. For different reasons it would seem to be going the way of the old doctrines of the Physiocrats. These we only know historically. What is the reason for this apparent condition? In the opinion of this writer the fundamentals of *Progress and Poverty* are as valid and as imperative as ever. But until there is a thorough re-examination made of the situation, a searching of the heart by all Single Taxers, a real understanding of the fundamentals of the general theory they advance, a questioning in all details of the application of the remedy they favor, little can be done to get rid of the present lassitude which afflicts advocates of the most substantial reform ever offered for the consideration of the general public. This would involve a complete overhauling of many of the fixed ideas of those of

the faith. Such change of attitude will seem to them hard to assume but it is imperative if real progress is hereafter to be made.

In the following pages we shall undertake to make the re-examination we have just indicated. Its purpose will be to offer such an appeal to the public as may assist to bring about the reform for which the followers of Henry George struggle and as to which up to this time they have had, to say the most, very moderate success. Without action the theories to which we profess allegiance effect nothing. To breathe the breath of life into them we must study methods as never before, not ignoring but meeting the objections and criticisms addressed to our beliefs and our measures, making all necessary corrections of either of them, clinging only to the essentials.