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Review of the book:  
Progress and Poverty, by Henry George

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One of the most important social movements in the world's history—the Single Tax idea—is everywhere and every day more and more absorbing the attention of thinking people, under the brilliant leadership of the author of "Progress and Poverty."

The discussion of the Single Tax question as a political movement, since the publication of "*Progress and Poverty*," has for the first time given the study of Political Economy, as a science of economic government, that impetus and prominence which its great importance in the domain of statesmanship so richly merits.

Political Economy had been too long neglected,—our Colleges and Universities merely skimmed it over in a meaningless and informal manner, to fill out their curriculums; but today, the newspapers, magazines and the people's representatives in their legislative halls, are everywhere vieing with each other in emphasizing its importance,—and last but not least, the common people in their workshops and homes, have taken an iron-handed grip upon the subject, by taking an active part in its discussion.

Being in full sympathy with the general principles involved, and having read with care all of Henry George's books and writings, in that frame of mind, including "*The Standard*," the organ of the Single Tax movement, from its first number, as well as other works bearing upon the subject, that came to my notice, together with many adverse criticisms upon the fundamental and practicable principles involved, I will attempt to present a concise review of the status of the discussion, as it strikes me at this time.

The reader will kindly bear in mind that the limits of an article like this will necessarily make the review of such a question very brief and unsatisfactory, and must assume a general knowledge, on the part of the reader, of the progress and discussion of the subject matter. Let us concisely examine some of the leading criticisms and objections thus far urged against Henry George's celebrated "Progress and Poverty."

Edward Gordon Clark, in the *North American Review* of January, 1887, makes a

most remarkable statement. He says: "Mr. George's 'Progress and Poverty' is so superb a work, so persuasively constructed, and so full of great, needed truth, that he has almost overwhelmed the very elect with one of the most glaring and disjointed non-sequiturs, that ever broke itself in two with its own logic." Is this so?

George Gunton, in "*The Forum*" of, March, 1887, essayed to demolish the same work. The gist of his argument was, that "the doctrine which will take possession of the 'unearned increment' in land, will justify the taking of increased values, not only of productive investments, personal property and improvements, but of personal service also, which would be fatal to all industrial and social progress." Is this analogy sound, or is it a "disjointed non-sequitur?" But of all critics, William Nelson Black, in the *New York Sun*, advanced the most wonderful and the most conclusive objection, to such as have faith in its soundness. He strongly insisted, that to make a tax of any value or use, there must be something to be taxed, and before a tax on land values could be collected, you must first have land values. Mr. Black proceeded to demonstrate that there is really no such thing as land values. It is referred to here as a novelty, and for the purpose of calling attention to the reckless drift of current criticism upon this important question.

It will be remembered that the Duke of Argyll, in the "*Nineteenth Century*," as long ago as April, 1884, attempted to ridicule and demolish "Progress and Poverty." The sequel is well known. But the learned Duke did not, even as "a very humble citizen in the Republic of letters," as he styled himself, claim to have discovered any "disjointed non-sequiturs." He admitted the work to be a "*logical reduction to iniquity*" as he called it.

Richard T. Ely, Professor of Political Economy at Johns Hopkins' University, has given some important contributions to this question, in the "*New York Independent*" and in "*The Baltimore Sun*." He shows with great force and clearness, the true character of economic rent, and its beneficial effects upon the whole people, if it were appropriated to public use, according to the principles of the "Single Tax Party," as advocated by Henry George. But his powerful voice falters just at the very point where it should be clearest and most articulate.

Prof. Ely says: "Why should not landlords lay down their titles for the common good? If it were really necessary, they ought to do it. But it is not necessary; consequently it is a needless hardship, consequently cruelty and injustice. We have not yet decided that private property in land is not, after all, the best thing. If we do so decide, any burdens which that decision may entail should be distributed among all the people." Let me ask, in what substantial manner is the equitable or the legal fight of compensation to landlords, any more valid than it was in the case of the slaveholders, when the slaves were emancipated by the President's

Proclamation?

To admit the equity and right of compensation would be an admission of the fundamental right of private property in economic rent; and so it would have been of the rightfulness of slavery, if compensation had been allowed. The rights and equities involved in Prof. Ely's objection were ably discussed and judicially settled, by the *Supreme Court* of the United States in a line of cases where the constitutionality of a statute law was called in question, because it did not make any provision to compensate dealers in spirituous liquors for losses occasioned by prohibitory laws, enacted by a State in its sovereign capacity. The rulings of the Supreme Court of the United States on the subject of the public health, also suggest an analogy which will help to such an understanding of George's views on land, as is required for their intelligent refutation, no less than for intelligently accepting them. It is now the settled law that the governmental power to make laws for the protection of the public health is inalienable, the reason as stated by the Court being, that such power is so "indispensable to the public welfare that it cannot be bargained away by contract;" (e. g. the exclusive right, within a designated area, to keep a place for slaughtering animals and preparing their meat for market), yet property so acquired, is held subject to the right of the Legislature to qualify or destroy it at will, according to its judgment of what the public interest requires, and without regard to investments that may have been made or calculations based on the action of a prior Legislature, even though such action took the form of a contract. In drawing the analogy between land and the liquor traffic, and the public health and kindred cases, the term "Legislature" should be used broadly, so as to include the people themselves when performing the supreme legislative functions of making or amending constitutions, as well as the particular bodies to whom legislative power under our system is delegated. These decisions from our highest court, have practically put at rest the moral and legal aspects of Prof. Ely's principal objection in whatever form he may state it. The greatest difficulties that the single tax idea encounters, do not lie in its moral, economic and legal aspects, but in its *practicability* and in getting even people who are in full sympathy with it, to clearly understand it; and to get such as do understand it, to unite and make common cause to put it in force or practice.

The economic, moral and legal phases of the question have been so fully discussed (and among the ablest contributions in this line I refer the reader to an article in "The Harvard Law Review" for January, 1888, by Samuel B. Black, Esq., of the New York City Bar), that we naturally inquire why so little has been said as to its *practicability*; or its actual workings when put into practice.

People generally are much more concerned in knowing how any given scheme will work in actual use, or how it will be likely to work, than they are interested in its abstract soundness as a theory or a principle.

In this connection an eminent authority like Prof. T. H. Huxley, cannot be ignored. In an article in the "*Nineteenth Century*," entitled "The Struggle for Existence," he forcibly says: "One of the most essential conditions, if not the chief cause, of the struggle for existence, is the tendency to multiply without limit, which man shares with all living things. It is notable that 'increase and multiply' is a commandment traditionally much older than the ten, and that it is, perhaps the only one which has been spontaneously and *ex animo* obeyed by the great majority of the human race. But in civilized society, the inevitable result of such obedience is the establishment in all its intensity, of that struggle for existence, the war of each against all, the mitigation or abolition of which was the chief end of social organization. So long as unlimited multiplication goes on, no social organization which has ever been devised, or is likely to be devised, no fiddling with the distribution of wealth, will deliver society from the tendency to be destroyed by the reproduction within itself, in its intensest form, of that struggle for existence, the limitation of which is the object of society."

I cannot refrain from suggesting that Prof. Huxley is recognized as one of the most profound thinkers and scientists of this or any other age; and if his opinion on the multiplication of the human race as above stated, is anything like correct, then the advocacy and practice of the Malthusian doctrine, would be far more important, and of greater utility and real value to the nations of the earth, than Henry George's plan of taxing land values, or Edward Bellamy's entrancing scheme of nationalism.

A writer of discrimination has recently raised a practical objection, in the "*Popular Science Monthly*," against the single tax idea, which in spite of my sympathy in favor of the single tax, I have not yet been able to answer to my own satisfaction.

He says: "A man will ordinarily undergo greater hardships, practice more self-denial, exercise more of the virtues which go to the upbuilding of the commonwealth, in order to secure a home, than to accomplish any other object. This is what his mind is first set on, and when he has gained it, his efforts are equally enlisted to keep it. The single tax threatens to profoundly alter the meaning of this word as we understand it. It is not consistent with the idea of home, that somebody should take it away from us by bidding at an auction. If it be said that no such auction would take place, but that the State would fix the tax at a rate previously ascertained as sufficient to take the economic rent, differing from the present tax only in amount, then we say that there is no means of ascertaining what the economic rent is. It would be possible to form an approximate estimate at the beginning, by taking as a standard the rents paid by individuals for the use of land as a matter of bargain. But the standard would only serve for the first renting. What about the second? Land values change. It is the aim of the single tax

to gather in the values that grow with the progress of society. A large part of Mr. George's argument is addressed to the coming time when all available land shall be appropriated. Renting by auction is the only process that will enable society to collect economic rent surely, equitably, progressively and scientifically."

It occurs to me that to this it may be pertinently added, that if we had a complete system of single tax laws in full operation, we would experience the same difficulty in getting Assessors to assess "land values" at their full value, as we now do in having real and personal property assessed at its true value, as provided by existing laws; unless human nature would change with the change in the law. But this suggestion raises a line of objections that I must leave to the reader to think out for himself.

In attempting to solve these objections, the intelligent thinker may conclude that whether the remedy proposed in "Progress and Poverty," or the fascinating scheme of nationalization in "Looking Backward." will ever become realities or not, the fact that tens of millions of thoughtful people, all over the world, are reading and taking a deep interest in the principles set forth in those celebrated books, must convince the most sluggish thinker that the process of governmental evolution has already practically leavened the whole people, and prepared them for some radical change from their present economic and social conditions. All thinkers must admit that amid advancing wealth, labor saving machinery, the highest development in the arts and sciences, in a social organization, on a high plane of civilization and under a system of government such as ours, *there is something radically wrong*, that will produce such an unequal distribution of wealth, with such unequal opportunities as everywhere stare us in the face. In the midst of the greatest wealth and progress, exists the deepest poverty. Must we confess that civilization can give us no practical remedy? Is it possible that the remedy proposed by Henry George will bring about that millennial happiness and remove from humanity that dreadful want and "*fear of want*" which he so ably argues that it will? He is certainly great, able and in earnest.

In the October number of the *North American Review*, in reference to the London strikes, he says: "The wheels of industry blocked, commerce paralyzed, perishable cargoes rotting, ships unable to go to sea, trade driven away, enormous losses going on, ordered armies of tens and scores of thousands parading, great bodies of men fed by public rations. Yet law and order reigned throughout. So has our civilization soared, that what happened in London when the sun was sinking, is told in New York ere the shadows have more than begun to lengthen. Think of what advances in the arts of production this suggests. Then think of what this London strike so forcibly brings out—that in the distribution of wealth we are in reality no further advanced than when barbarian fought barbarian. The lesson of all strikes, coming sharper and clearer as the years go by, is the lesson that the

social problem cannot be ignored."