

THE PARADOXES OF GEORGE

by Clyde E. Reeves

The paradox is universally recognized as a powerful instrument of destruction. In its bite is an indictment. For exposing the sham, condemning the fraud, and castigating the unjust, it is without peer. And so from Sophocles to Shakespear, from Swift to Shaw, the paradox has been a favorite weapon of the social critic. Paradoxically, however, behind this broadly recognized destructive function lies a less-widely recognized but more fundamental constructive one--that of unification and reconciliation, for the most significant paradox is generally one that brings together into a harmonious relationship beliefs or positions that previously appeared completely incompatible. Few social critics of any worth are mere pessimistic destroyers. Most of them are optimistic designers of broad vision. They demolish the shams and fallacies only to clear the land for improved construction.

Progress and Poverty, the title of Henry George's major book and the theme of the main thesis that underlies all of his significant work is, of course, a huge paradox. As might be expected from this, in his speeches as well as his writings we find the paradox as one of his favorite and most frequently used devices and probably his most effective tool. Rare indeed is a speech of his, major or minor, and he made more than 800 of them, that does not soon confront the audience member with at least one large, glaring, ironic paradox, usually current or of recent experience in the hearer's own region or neighborhood, or at least within the reach of his imagination or recollection.

To an Irish audience he points out the irony of thousands of little, emaciated Irish children literally starving to death while thousands of pounds' worth of Irish-grown food are loaded upon ships and transported to England where there is no food shortage at all. He points to hundreds and hundreds of poverty-class Frenchmen, women, and children living in windowless houses, deprived of enough air and light for healthful living not because windows are particularly expensive in themselves, or scarce, or hard to come by, or difficult to install, but because there is a "window tax" they can't afford to pay. In Scotland he cites the pathetic case of a frail, half-starved little waif who, when finally found and

brought into a shelter-house and offered a tiny little plate of miserable food, first folds her hands and thanks the good Lord for his "bounty". He ridicules the architectural monstrosities, two-stories high in front and three in back, or three in front and four in back, that saturate Brooklyn because the assessment for taxing is based upon the view from the front only. And he derides "protectionist" James G. Blaine for issuing from Paris a call to Americans to buy and use only American goods made from American raw materials by American workmen while he himself is sleeping under foreign blankets made from foreign wool by foreign workmen, eating foreign loaves from foreign grain baked by foreign bakers and drinking foreign wine trod from foreign grapes by foreign feet.

He often "caps" these short anecdotes with an even briefer statement in the form of a simile that throws the essential paradox into sharp relief. For instance, in San Francisco in 1890 he focuses the attention of the audience upon the crowds of men and women then clustered around the borders of Indian Territories about to be opened up for colonization -- men and women who had traveled great distances under great hardship over huge tracts of unoccupied and unused land to get there, like, as George put it, "men swimming across a river to get a drink." Once, in response to a question as to his opinion of a late piece of what he considered "stupid" tariff legislation aimed at plugging a loophole in an earlier, broader, and even more stupid law, George replied that it was like a man who had sawed a large and a small opening in his house so that his large and small cats could come in and later plugged up the small hole in the hope of keeping out the small cat. Examples like this are legion.

In addition to these real, true, and factual paradoxes taken right from life, George also used the hypothetical or fictional paradox of his own invention to great advantage. One favorite of his was the paradox of the nomad tribe in the desert who, upon sighting a rich caravan approaching, turn down as both illegal and immoral the suggestion of one of them that they swoop down, seize the camels and the riches, take the women unto themselves and turn the men out into the desert with nothing to survive or die as best they can, and then adopt as both legal and moral the suggestion of another that they go on ahead to the only oasis in the desert, claim it as their private property, and when the caravan approaches in dire need of water for survival, making the men give them all of the camels, the riches, and the use of the women in exchange for just enough water to stay alive.

Another similar one is the paradox of Robinson Crusoe's position when he refuses to take Friday as his chattel slave, but then claims the island and all of the seas surrounding it and requires Friday to give up as rent everything he can produce except just enough for existence. Something similar, but a little different in purpose is his anecdote of bringing a savage aborigine, unsophisticated but experienced enough to have learned that material things of value come into existence only through the application of work to land, taking him on a tour of the most affluent residential areas and the most blighted slums of any modern city and then asking him in which he would expect the "workers" to be found to live. These were among George's favorites and he used them with slight modifications over and over again, but there were also many, many more. In his works, George was indeed the master of the paradox.

Paradoxes not only abound in George's speeches and writings, but they seem to have surrounded the man, in his lifetime and ever since. Cecil B. deMille tells us in his autobiography that although he was very young at the time his recollection is that the living George was a highly controversial figure: People were either passionately for him or passionately against him, yet Anna deMille, George's daughter, notes from her own extensive personal experience that virtually every with whom he came in contact, friend or opponent appeared to respect and even to love him. In my own inspection of any number of commentators contemporary with George himself, I have yet to find a critic, however sharp, who does not render praise of one kind or another of the man himself, sometimes rather grudgingly, but generally quite willingly--a very paradoxical situation for a very controversial figure.

Geiger tells us with what seems like good sense, that considering what we know of George's intelligence and acuity, and his exceptional keenness in analyzing audiences and adapting to them, he could not possibly have unknowingly made the speech he did at the University of California if he really wanted the chair of political economy that he was applying for--a puzzling paradox.

He entered the field of everyday, knock-down and drag-out, practical politics, not once but a number of times, and at a number of different levels--a field in which in his day and ours, and every other day in recorded history, success and the retaining of personal integrity intact are anath-

ema to each other, yet he never to my knowledge sacrificed one iota of his personal integrity--a situation so paradoxical among politicians as to be unique. In fact there is another paradox in the almost ridiculous ease with which he seems to have turned aside, not only in his own time but for all time, all imputations against his integrity. It is almost as if the men who brought the charges didn't believe them themselves, and pursued them only half-heartedly at best.

There are others, many others. At a time when he was in perhaps the most dire financial straits of his life shortly after arriving in New York from the West Coast, he "contracted" for a potentially profitable series of speeches in behalf of the Democratic party, and then in the very first speech took a position for free trade diametrically opposed to the party line and lost the job. In '86 he is reported to have turned down a sure-fire, Tammany-guaranteed, seat in the U.S. House of Representatives in exchange for his withdrawal from the New York race for Mayor, and wound up with neither.

From his own day to the present George has been labeled as a Marxist, a socialist, and a communist by people who have not begun to comprehend the nature of what he was proposing. Following George's very first speech expositing "Georgism" as such in California, a newspaper, the Alta California, headlined the effort: "Bald Agrarianism-Henry George Preaches Communism in Metropolitan Temple," and as recently as a month ago a graduate student with a Bachelor's degree in political science informed me that George was a Marxist before he was a Georgist! Apparently those who called him a Marxist never bothered to find out that Marx himself labeled Progress and Poverty "the last ditch of captialism." Neither, appartently, have those who called him a socialist bothered to learn that the socialists of Great Britain, the United States, and everywhere, after going only a little way down the common pathway with George drew apart to go their own, individual, separate, collectivist ways.

On the contrary, as Albert Jay Nock, Charles Albro Barker, Anna de Mille, and any number of others tell us, George was probably the greatest champion of private property, in everything else but land and the other "natural monopolies" of his day, and perhaps of any other day. He wanted all wealth created through the labor or the genius of the individual to remain 100% and for all time individual in na-

ture and possession, and nobody, past, present, or future can be more "individualistic" than that. Beyond 100% we cannot go. At the same time, he wanted the wealth created by society itself, by the press of increasing population for the use of the land and the other natural monopolies to remain 100% that of the society, and nobody, past, present, or future could be more completely "collectivist" than that.

With his left foot planted further left than the most advanced collectivist, and his right foot further right than the most rugged of the rugged individualists, what, then, was George? The answer, it seems, is rather obvious. George was himself a paradox. He was the most socialistic-individualist the world has ever seen, the most spiritual-materialist, the most humanitarian exponent of "laissez-faire". In his honest concern for protecting individual rights and individual property his position was the most "isolationist", and in his land policy the most "internationalist". For the single human being as a small "one" he had as great and genuine an understanding and compassion as the most ardent personal-salvation evangelist of any religion or philosophy whatsoever, and for all mankind, as a large "one", as full and complete an insight as the most wide-minded anthropologist.

In George himself, then, we find the epitome of paradox, perhaps, to end all paradoxes. If George was indeed a paradox personified, his main function and utility may well turn out to be identical with the primary function of the paradox mentioned earlier, that of unification and reconciliation, of bringing together into a compatible relationship positions that appear irreconcilable. For he demonstrated in the most convincing and concrete way possible, by doing it, that it is possible, within one philosophical system and within one man, to bring together to work harmoniously toward goals that both ardently desire, those two most opposite positions which, in this world today, in the efforts of each to "bury" the other, seem about to "bury" the world.

If today, one hundred and twenty-five years after George's birth and seventy-five after Progress and Poverty, we can't find in the paradox of George the answer to our pressing "one-world" question, we can at least find there a reasonable hope of finding an answer.

Then let us to the work, with nothing more to say,
Together go, each his individual-collective way.