

# A REFORMER'S IDEAS GET RENEWED PUSH

## School Named After Henry George Asserts His Single-Tax Theory Merits Attention Today

By WILLIAM SERRIN

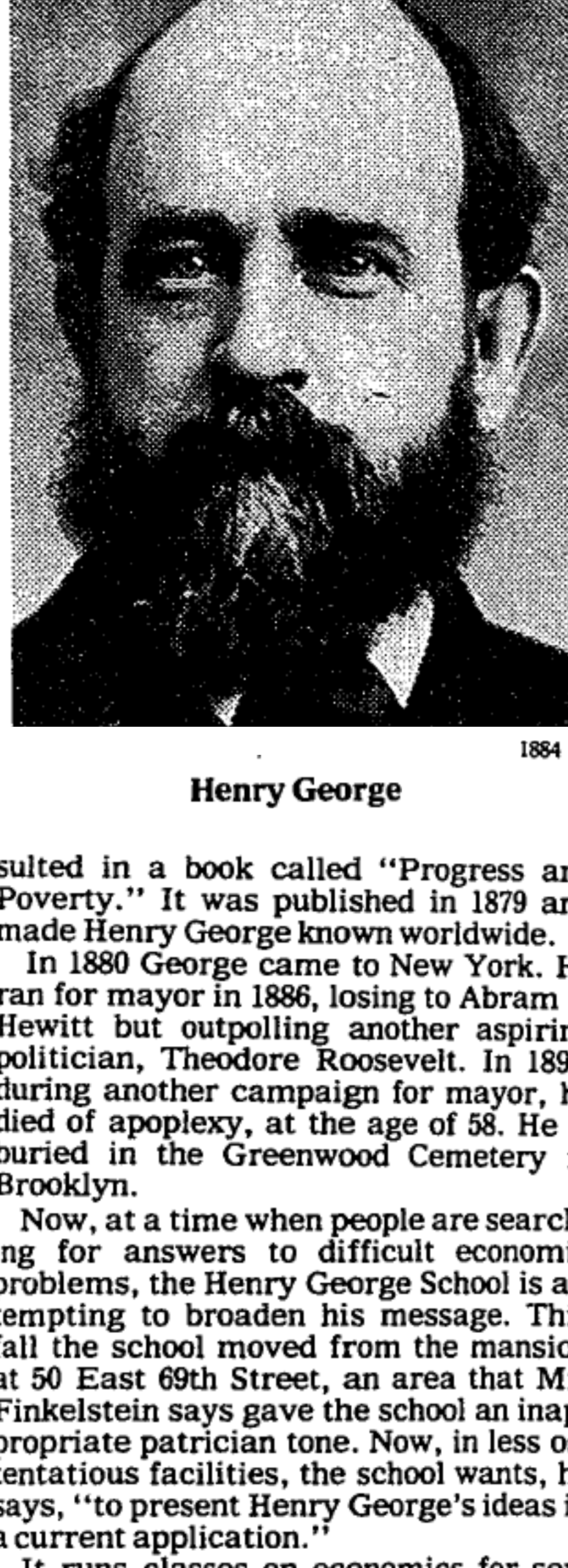
In a quiet office at 5 East 44th Street, five floors above the clamor of city commerce, Philip Finkelstein was talking of breathing life into a dead man, of making the name and views of a once-famous reformer known again.

"I want to demonstrate," he said, "that Henry George belongs in the mainstream of economic theory, not in some quaint byway where he has, unfortunately, been relegated."

It seems fitting that the Henry George School of Social Science, of which Mr. Finkelstein is executive director, should be in New York. The city, a home of causes and their advocates, has many places like the school, places where enthusiastic people, of all sorts of political and ideological views, believe they have the answers to society's problems.

Henry George — advocate of the single tax, a tax on land, rather than on buildings, or on anything else — was a man whose denunciations of wealth and lordliness had a profound effect on the American labor movement.

He was born in Philadelphia and for 20 years lived in California. But it was in New York, in the winter of 1868-69, that George observed, as Mr. Finkelstein says he could today, what he called the "shocking contrast between monstrous wealth and debasing want," a contrast that led him to a lifelong study of American economic conditions. This study re-



1884

Henry George

sulted in a book called "Progress and Poverty." It was published in 1879 and made Henry George known worldwide.

In 1880 George came to New York. He ran for mayor in 1886, losing to Abram S. Hewitt but outpolling another aspiring politician, Theodore Roosevelt. In 1897, during another campaign for mayor, he died of apoplexy, at the age of 58. He is buried in the Greenwood Cemetery in Brooklyn.

Now, at a time when people are searching for answers to difficult economic problems, the Henry George School is attempting to broaden his message. This fall the school moved from the mansion at 50 East 69th Street, an area that Mr. Finkelstein says gave the school an inappropriate patrician tone. Now, in less ostentatious facilities, the school wants, he says, "to present Henry George's ideas in a current application."

It runs classes on economics for several hundred students a year and publishes *The Henry George News*. Also at the school is the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, which keeps the author's works in print. The school also operates several centers around the country.

Henry George was born Sept. 2, 1839. He left school at the age of 14 and went to sea. Returning to Philadelphia in 1855, he worked as a typesetter and then, in 1857, sailed to California. He tried gold mining, but failed. Finally he obtained a job as a reporter, and for a year he was an editor.

In California, he hit on what he decided was the reason for "advancing poverty with advancing wealth." He believed that with the growth of population, land values grew, but that the value accumulated to the landlord, not to those who worked the land. This became a central theme of "Progress and Poverty."

### Urged Single Tax

Society, not the landowner, is responsible for the increase in land value, he asserted. He argued that the increase, which he called the unearned increment, should be taxed and thus returned to society. This single tax, a land tax, he said, would yield enough revenue to permit abolishing other forms of taxation. It would also, he argued, simplify the role of government.

Today no city relies exclusively on a land tax, although Georgists, as they call themselves, say several cities rely heavily on land taxes — Sydney, Australia; Singapore; Pittsburgh; Southfield, Mich., and Harrisburg, Scranton and McKeesport, in Pennsylvania.

Mr. Finkelstein contends that a single land tax would have a "very salubrious effect" on New York and other American cities, forcing the development of undeveloped land and, by lessening taxes on buildings, encouraging construction as well as improvements of existing buildings.

A 1980 study by the Center for Local Tax Research, affiliated with the Henry George School, asserted that New York City would gain an extra \$250 million a year by increasing land assessments to half their estimated value.

Despite his zeal for the Georgist cause, Mr. Finkelstein is aware of the difficulties of advancing it. He concedes that Henry George and his followers are often regarded as odd. One reason, he said, is that George appeared to have a single answer, even though he did not originate the phrase "single tax" and his followers made far more of it than he did. And people with single answers often are regarded as cultists, Mr. Finkelstein noted.

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