

G.B. Shaw, *International Review*, August 1889

## The Hyndman-George Debate

---

**Source:** *International Review*, August 1889, p. 33-44;

**Transcribed:** by Ted Crawford.

---

Whilst reading these comments on the debate which took place between Mr. Henry. George and the editor of this magazine at St. James's Hall on the 2nd July, the indifferent reader will do well to bear in mind that they are offered in a spirit of extreme partiality. I cannot believe that an advocate of Land Nationalization who regards it as an alternative and a rival to Social Democracy comprehends either Land Nationalization or Social Democracy. In my prejudiced eye, he is foredoomed to confusion, in spite of the varying fortunes of platform warfare; since even a dialectical victory for him can only, in the face of the facts, be a *reductio ad absurdum* of his proposition. Consequently, from the moment in which Mr. George accepted such an issue as "Single Tax v. Social Democracy," he left me in a dilemma of which one horn was the conclusion that he is intellectually dishonest, and the other, that his economic formula is a mere academic fossil dug up from the Quesnay-Mirabeau stratum and scantily clothed in one of the crude misfits made by the earlier Ricardians out of the law of rent. Had I been ill-natured enough to choose the intellectual dishonesty view, the debate would have converted me to the other. Mr. George understands perfectly how the law of rent would operate in a community where naked Ishmaelites lived on wild blackberries, and each man appropriated his own bush; but of the intricate reactions and divers applications of this same law of rent in modern

industrial civilization; of interest or the rent of more or less favourable opportunities for investing capital; of profits or rent of opportunity for cultivating personal efficiency; of the obvious tendency of competition to evolve a series of more and more powerful survivors culminating in the Democratic State which, as irresistible competitor, must destroy competition; in short, of the entire real content of his formula, he seemed to have forgotten everything. What is wrong in society, he rightly argued, had its origin in private appropriation of land. Abolish private appropriation of land, he proceeded, and everything will come right again. This is exactly the reasoning of the peasant who believes that the infallible cure for hydrophobia is shooting the dog.

Mr. George's hosannas to competition as the ever-beneficent guardian of Liberty, his denunciations of monopoly as the arch enemy, and his solemn warnings against Social Democracy as the greatest tyranny ever threatened upon mankind, were to me, I confess, entirely insufferable. Their atrocious staleness, their tedium, their unvarying character of being either platitude or nonsense were really intolerable. Mr. George's study of Adam Smith has convinced him that it is better to let international trade "rip" competitively than to regulate it by a tariff, because competitive prices are lower than protected prices. But he also knows that in England it is better to establish a State monopoly of letter-carrying than leave it to competition, because State monopoly postage stamps are on the whole much cheaper than competitive postage stamps. Further, Mr. George knows that even "free" competition has to be regulated by the County Court and cognate institutions. "To abolish competition," cried Mr. George, "is to abolish Freedom"; but our courts abolish competition at a certain point by abolishing the freedom of persons who have carried it beyond the limits within which it is supposed to be beneficial to the community. Adulteration, as John Bright said, is a form of competition. So is burglary.

Perhaps the simplest and most natural form of competition is for two rivals in love to fight for a woman. The best seat in the pit of a theatre goes to the competitor who comes earliest, but not to him who is best able to pitch out the occupant neck and crop. Mr. George quoted, with approval, the old Mill-Spencer proposition that each man may do what he wills, provided he infringes not the equal right of any other to do likewise. If Mr. George excepts competitive acts from that limitation, he is not even an anarchist, but simply a lunatic. If he does accept it, his advocacy of unlimited competition may mean anything – that is to say, it means nothing. His fulminations against monopoly in the abstract, coupled with attacks on the Social Democratic State as a masterpiece of tyranny, were no less idle. If the power of a democratic State is State tyranny, then its property is State monopoly, which is exactly what Mr. George seeks to create as to land by his single tax. It is as vain to denounce monopoly in the abstract as it is to denounce competition. We give the sheriff a monopoly of the job of hanging murderers; but we do not give him a monopoly of the job of supplying London with bread; and there is no moral inconsistency between the two cases. Competition and monopoly are, in the abstract, as unmoral as moisture and heat. It must, therefore, be admitted that when a Social Democrat denounces competition, he can be misunderstood by anyone who is bent on misunderstanding him, since what he objects to is not competition in the abstract, but certain terrible effects produced by competition under existing circumstances. In the same way the man who rushes to Captain Shaw shouting “Fire! Fire!” does not speak by the card. My distinguished namesake, instead of instantly charging through the street shrieking and scattering cinders, might logically answer:- “Well, my friend, what of that? How can you possibly object to fire? Abolish fire; and you abolish comfort. Abolish fire; and you abolish cooking.” This would be quite as sensible as Mr. George’s replying by a eulogy of competition in the abstract to

Mr. Hyndman's cry for help for the victims of our competitive system.

I must not convey the impression that Mr. George had no more to say for himself than this. He drew the logical skeleton of his single tax plan plainly enough; but as to getting the flesh of life and history, facts and figures on it, it did not seem to occur to him that any such proceeding was at all called for. The State, he said, is to discontinue all taxation except a single tax on land values to the extent of the full economic rent. He estimated the economic rent at from 150 to 200 millions, thereby shewing that he has not as yet grasped the fact that the 250 millions paid annually to idle persons under the heading Interest (not including profits or any form of "wages of superintendence" or "rent of ability") is just as clearly of the nature of economic rent as the 200 millions which appear, in Schedule A of the Income Tax, as rent of land. Moreover, if we accept his 200 million estimate, the very first question that occurs to anyone who knows that the gross public revenue and expenditure of the kingdom is 90 millions (surely not a very recondite article of information), is: "What will the State do with the 110 millions annual surplus which this operation, if successful, will leave in its hands?" Mr. George never seems to have got as far as this first step in the practical application of his principle. He gave us no reason to suppose that he had ever inquired what the revenue was; and as to the economic rent, he was so far from being sure of his figures that he half hesitated to contradict a quite extravagant slip on the part of Mr. Hyndman, who gave the 60 millions agricultural rent as including town sites. The old economists, when they cried *laissez-faire*, at least knew that if the organization of industry and the accumulation of capital were to be left to private competition, the spoils must be left to the competitors to accumulate from. Mr. George proposes that the State shall lay hands on exactly 10 millions a year *more* than the 100 millions estimated by Mr. Giffen as the entire amount now set

aside for investment out of the annual plunder by the appropriaters of rent; but the State, he implies, must not do anything with the money, since that would be an application of the principles of Social Democracy. With the single exception of a suggestion I once heard made to pay the whole rent of London to the City Corporations as at present constituted, I cannot recollect anything quite so unsophisticated as this notion of Mr. George's.

The circumstances of the debate were, I think, very favourable to Mr. George. For the particular purpose of the discussion, Mr. Hyndman, instead of being the strongest presentable representative of Social Democracy, was the weakest. Social Democracy is not to him merely a state of society in harmony with his intellectual convictions, it is his idol, his darling, his mistress. When it is attacked, all his judgment, his acuteness, his *aplomb*, his knowledge of the world fail him. You see him inwardly making good resolutions: he will be calm, careful, and considerate, as becomes a thinker and a student; wary, vigilant and vigorous as becomes a combatant; but never forgetting that, as a gentleman discussing with a gentleman, he must keep his temper. He rises with his coat carefully buttoned, and begins with dignity and fluency in a fine voice, produced, one suspects, in accordance with a carefully matured private theory of elocution. And all this lasts – not two minutes. At the first genuine grapple with the scorner of Social Democracy, dialectics and deportment vanish together; and the real man rages out, vehement, intolerant, jealous, indignant, exacting, unreasonable, everything that a debater ought not to be, everything that a passionate Social Democrat cannot help being when he thinks, not of his immediate business, but of all he knows. Now and then he strives to recover himself, conscious that he is breaking all his good resolutions – that his wilfulness is defeating itself from the artistic point of view. But he is swept away again by a round of applause from the toilers

in the gallery? Theirs is not the artistic point of view: it is to the middle class men in the stalls – the damned middle class – the cynical, indifferent, selfish middle class – base, bloody, and brutal Whigs, O'Connell called them – it is to them that the artistic point of view belongs. Then perish the artistic point of view, and speak out the uppermost invective and the innermost aspiration, though Mrs. Hyndman had received fifty promises of perfect calm, and is visibly concerned as they prove false as dicer's oaths. The result is, much intense championing of Social Democracy, but no debate. Sometimes the right question "How will the single tax restore the rent to the labourer?" bursts out; but it is not followed up, save by denunciations of "the capitalist," a term characteristically used, without regard to modern economic distinctions, as of purely objugatory significance, specially applicable to mammoth Hebrew financiers.

Meanwhile, Mr. George was not in the least convinced – what debater ever is? He was immensely game, rather too game, if anything; for he at last forgot his cause in his determination, to stand aggressively by the least palatable of his generalizations. He spoke well, taking out in emphasis and breadth of effect what Mr. Hyndman, who had much more to say, took out in speed. The single-tax speeches, too, *looked* well. Mr. George is not so slender as he once was; but he has grace of movement and gesture, his arms being of such perfect length and proportion that he cannot move them awkwardly, and his hands quite the handsomest pair now before the public. He was just nervous enough to keep him up to the mark; and if he had had any real case against Social Democracy, there would have been a debate. As it was, however, when he had once nailed the single tax on to a crude explanation of the law of rent, he had nothing more to say except that Social Democracy is a large order, and that it would be the greatest tyranny ever known.

For my own part I am sorry the debate took place. Single tax levied by Unsocial Democracy is about as possible as watering the streets without wetting them; and if this is not at once apparent to a gentleman hailing from a country which in many points of industrial development is just where England was in 1840, nothing worse can come of his blindness than a considerable surprise for himself later on. Besides, in persuading those Liberals who have Christian Socialist leanings, and who, with their respectability, their votes and their Bibles are, whilst the weekly wage earners remain comparatively apathetic and disorganized, still among the most formidable progressive political forces in the country, Mr. George is likely to get on all the faster for not seeing whither his taxation of rent must inevitably lead. If he can induce them to dip the hand of the State into the landlord's pockets he is heartily welcome. We avowed Social Democrats cannot very well assure them that if they send the tax collector round for the rent, nothing else will happen except the millennium. Even if we did dishonestly tell them so, they would not believe us as they would believe a Single Tax man; for we smack of brimstone in spite of ourselves: among those of us who are most prominently before the public in London as Out-and-Outers, we can shew nothing nearer to a belief in miracles and inspired revelation than the conversion of Mrs. Besant and Herbert Burrows to theosophy; and the public announcement of that has notoriously set all the rest of us dancing with rage lest we also should be suspected of worshipping the Thibetan oracle. This is why most of my Fabian colleagues thought it better to let Mr George alone, and not hamper him by pointing out that upon his plan, if a man owned and farmed a hundred acres, and kept a butler out of the economic rent, the result of taking that rent by taxation would be that the butler would get the sack; the land would remain exactly as before; and the proprietor would be in a position to explain that Single Taxocracy is a state of things in which the Government collars his butler; whilst the latter, on

his way to the relieving officer, would explain it as a state of things in which the Government collars his wages. In short, Mr. George's calculation is a piece of sheer economic *naiveté*; and a very little study of the situation would have shown him that we are too far gone in democracy to make it possible to extend taxation without a corresponding extension of State organization of labour.

But since Mr. Hyndman, implacably jealous for his faith, brought off a debate, it is a pity that the side of Social Democracy was not upheld by a Fabian (and here again you must allow for my partiality as a Fabian). The sport of hoisting the bourgeois economist with his own petard, and braining him with his own text-book, is a Fabian speciality. Mr. Hyndman only knows one style of wrestling in economics – the Marx style: he denies and rejects all other styles. With the Fabian it is catch as catch can, Ricardo, Jevons, or Mill. Sidney Webb would have tied the law of rent round Mr. George's neck, and hung him up on the very highest peg of Social Democracy. Hubert Bland, with his unfailing debating instinct and his exasperating single eyeglass, would have made short and sanguinary work of the logomachies about competition and monopoly. Within the ranks of the Federation itself there was Mrs. Besant, who would probably have converted the Georgites. All these tried debaters can handle Social Democracy better than any other subject; whereas Mr. Hyndman, whose attachment to it is in the nature of a passion, cannot debate on it at all, though he can handle indifferent subjects with abundant smartness and clearness. If Mr. George had refused to accept the issue as between Land Nationalization and Social Democracy, and had forborne his ill-considered hymning to competition and individualism, the debate would probably have rather improved his position than otherwise. As it is, he came off – or from my partial point of view seemed to come off – with nothing but damage, mostly self-inflicted. Mr. Hyndman remains where he was before;

and the occasion was one of those on which the man who does not lose ground gains some.

G. BERNARD SHAW.

P.S. – As a Fabian, I take the opportunity to put in a complaint of the brief reference made in the course of the debate to statistics. After our drudging and grubbing and dust eating, and checking and counter-checking, in order to place the balance sheet of rent, interest, profits and wages (not to mention a mass of other figures, and a special statistical tract on this very question of capital and land) in the hands of every Social Democrat who values the information at a penny, it was hard to have the audience left to believe that Social Democracy depends for its figures upon Arnold Toynbee's criticism of "Progress and Poverty" published six years ago. The ingratitude of the Social Democratic Federation to the Fabian Society – but no matter

---

1. This article is printed precisely as it was written. Those who are inclined to take Mr. Bernard Shaw's amusing criticisms too seriously are recommended to buy and read the verbatim report of the debate itself, published by the Justice Printery, 337, Strand. W.C., and on sale there, at Reeves, 185, Fleet Street, and to be had of all booksellers, price 4d. It should also be borne in mind that Mr. Henry George always and everywhere expressly excludes from rent the return due to capital and labour invested in improving the soil or in constructing houses, streets, drains, &c. The "economic" rent of Great Britain on this basis most certainly does not exceed £60,000,000 a year in town and country together. – ED.  
INTERNATIONAL REVIEW.