

THE ELEMENTARY COURSE IN HENRY GEORGE'S PHILOSOPHY

by JOHN S. CODMAN

Revised November 1, 1946

There appears to be a general consensus among those who have taught the elementary classes using "Progress and Poverty" as the text book that the reading assignments are too long and that this fact is to a great extent the cause of the failure of so many of the enrolled students to complete the course. As to the remedy for this situation there are three conspicuous proposals which are as follows:

1. To increase the number of lessons from the usual ten to whatever number will enable the whole book to be read, but will substantially reduce the reading assignment for each lesson.
2. To retain the number of lessons at 10, and to reduce the reading assignment for each lesson by actually leaving out portions of the book as required reading.
3. To discard "Progress and Poverty" as the text book and to substitute for it some other book which would be shorter and more easily understood.

I believe that No. 1 is not a solution of the problem, because it is not altogether the length of the assignment per lesson which causes loss of students, but its character as well. By this I mean that there are parts of the book which are too difficult for the ordinary reader and can be simplified, that there are other parts which are not necessary to an understanding of George's proposal, and finally that there are still other parts which are distinctly not helpful to such understanding.

I do not conclude from the above that the solution of the problem is to substitute some other book for "Progress and Poverty" as the text book of the course. I have examined a number of books which have been suggested for that purpose, including several abbreviations of "Progress and Poverty", but I still feel that as a class leader I would prefer to have my students own a book which is a classic, will be an addition to their library, and a reference book for all time. I would, however, like to see a reduced reading assignment for the elementary course.

I do not think that we should expect the student to read every part of the book when he first goes through it. Instead he should be guided to the essential portions of the book, so that he can readily grasp the extreme simplicity of George's proposal. Obstacles to his understanding of this, such as unnecessarily difficult and confusing passages in the book, should be removed so that his interest may be sustained to the end of the course and may broaden into a desire to continue the study of George's proposal.

I do not think we can afford the time to make economic experts out of those enrolled in our elementary course. It should be our purpose to guide them to certain fundamental ideas in the simplest and most direct way, and we are, I think, putting obstacles in our path when we insist on the complete reading of such a book as "Progress and Poverty" by individuals who are in the main unused to economic reasoning.

Coming now to more detailed suggestions, I believe that the difficulties of the reading assignments lie wholly in Books I to VI inclusive. I believe that Books VII to IX inclusive should be read by every student if he has the aptitude and time to digest them, but that parts even of these Books should not be required reading in the elementary course. Required reading, however, should be definitely required, that is it should be insisted upon by the class leader who should warn

the students that failure to read the assignments, as a minimum of reading, will mean for them a complete loss of the advantages of discussion offered by the course.

Before being more specific in regard to assigned reading, it is first necessary to determine just what it is that we believe the student ought to understand on graduating, in order that we may emphasize the important portions of the book and may impress upon the student the exact nature of the evil in our social order to which George pointed and the exact nature of the remedy he suggested. Both can be simply stated, but my experience with our graduates in advanced classes teaches me that very many of them have failed previously to grasp either the nature of the evil or the nature of the remedy.

According to my understanding the evil to which George points is the private appropriation of rent and his remedy for the evil is the collection of rent for the benefit of the community. If this is so, then it is the plain duty of the Henry George School to so arrange and interpret the required reading that the nature and origin of rent shall be indelibly impressed upon the student's mind. He should become "rent conscious". He should clearly understand that rent is a product socially created and that its collection for public purposes is in no sense a tax or burden on industry, but involves simply the right of the producer (the public) to his product. This right, if violated through private appropriation of rent, entails the violation, through the arbitrary method of taxation, of the equal right to his product of the individual producer. It is also extremely important that every student graduating should clearly understand that rent is the true measure of land value, and that land price (often called "Land Value") is nothing more than the price of the privilege of appropriating a part of the rent for private purposes.

I cannot here undertake to say in detail just how I believe the assigned reading should be divided among the ten lessons, nor shall I speak here of how classes in my opinion should be conducted, except to say that an experienced teacher should be able to avoid the dullness of the reading and answering of the questions on the assignment sheets. Instead he should show the class the value of these sheets as a means of self examination.

With the above introduction my suggestions for assigned reading are as follows:

The introduction to "Progress and Poverty" entitled "The Problem", very considerably condensed, should be read to the class on the opening night, and the class should be encouraged to read the whole of it before the second lesson. A condensation can readily be made which will read as smoothly as the original and will cover the vital points.

I should omit altogether, as required reading, the two opening chapters of the book, namely Chapter 1, "The current doctrine of wages" and Chapter 2, "The meaning of the terms". By this I do not mean to say that the meaning of the terms to be used is unimportant. Quite the contrary, I consider it most important, but in order to find the definitions the student should not be obliged to wade through Chapter 2. It should be the duty of the class leader to present the definitions and to show exactly by page number where each one can be found in Chapter 2. The reading of Chapter 2 by the student should then be wholly voluntary. I believe the terms, Land, Labor, Wealth and Capital should be introduced at the first lesson after the questionnaire and that in the second lesson they should be thoroughly discussed. Incidentally I would suggest here the very great importance of making clear to the students at the start that there are actually only two factors in production. The class leader should not allow to pass without criticism the statement by Henry George that "land, labor and capital are the three factors of production".

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 dealing with the functions of capital should, I think, be required reading, and after the discussion of them, a word might be said about the "Wages Fund Theory" and those interested could be referred to Chapter 1.

I do not think that any of Book II on "Population and Subsistence" should be required reading. The class leader should briefly explain the Malthusian doctrine and should recommend the reading of Book II whenever the student can find the time either during the course or after its end.

In Book III, The Laws of Distribution, we come to what is the most important part of the book since it introduces the concept of "rent", the understanding of which is vital to an understanding of Henry George's proposal. The average man or woman knows nothing about rent. He reads and hears constantly about capital and labor, interest and wages, but about land and rent he is pretty nearly wholly uninformed. Of especial importance, therefore, is all that George has to say about rent, but I would go further and would urge every class leader to have in his mind and available for use the modern ideas as to rent to be found in the writings of such men as L. D. Beckwith, W. R. B. Willcox and R. J. Otto.

As required reading in Book III, I would suggest Chapters 1, 2, 6, 7 and 8 and would omit, as required reading, Chapters 3, 4 and 5 dealing rather unsatisfactorily with the subject of interest. I would avoid over-emphasizing the agricultural approach to rent. A simple approach, it seems to me, to both rent and interest is that they are merely payments for certain advantages, rent for the use of superior locations on the land and interest for the use of wealth already created, that is for the use of capital.

The terms "margin of cultivation" and "margin of production" do not seem to me to be very necessary for the ordinary student. George uses them as synonymous terms, but the latter is the broader and therefore the better. That land speculation tends to drive down the margin of production is an idea which can be more simply, that is less technically, expressed by saying that it forces users of land to accept locations inferior for their purposes.

Book IV "Effect of Material Progress" and Book V "The Problem Solved" should be required reading in full, but with special emphasis by the class leader on the story of the savannah, page 235, which states so clearly the nature and origin of rent, and on the last three chapters dealing with the effect of land speculation. Experience tells me, however, that great care should be taken that the statements by George indicating that a constantly increasing proportion of the product goes to rent should not be taken to mean that such an effect is necessarily detrimental to the wage earner. It is detrimental only if the socially created product, which is rent, does not return to the wage earner through its collection for the benefit of all, but is appropriated by private parties.

Coming now to Book VI, I think that the first chapter on the insufficiency of current remedies should be passed over as required reading, although to the really interested and intelligent student it should be very much worth while to read it later at his leisure. This brings us to Chapter 2, "The Remedy" and considerable care should be exercised in introducing it, because of the fact that quite a wrong impression is likely to be made on the student by the statement: "We must make land common property". Therefore, I advocate that this chapter should not be required reading in advance of the class at which it is to be discussed. The required reading for that class should end with the ending of Book V; and after the discussion of the required reading the class leader should introduce the remedy and should explain at once by turning to page 405 in "Progress and Poverty" the method proposed by George for making land common property through the collection of rent for the benefit of the public.

I have already suggested that the student with aptitude and time should read the whole of Books VII to IX inclusive, but that some portions nevertheless should not be required reading. Still it is to be hoped that if the student has carefully studied all of the required part of the book and has not been worn down and discouraged by unnecessary reading, he will at the end of the course be keen to make a further study of these Books which, with Book X, are the really great portions of George's work.

The portions of Books VII and VIII which I would recommend should not be required reading are as follows: Chapters 4 and 5 of Book VII, which are purely historical, and possibly Chapters 3 and 4 of Book VIII. Book IX should I think be required in full.

Book X and the "Conclusion" might very well be left to be read by those who have completed the course and have the desire to go further, which desire should of course be encouraged.

If the suggestions above for required reading are followed, the number of pages thus removed from a first reading of the book will amount to over 300, which is more than half the length of the book. Such a reduction would certainly be a drastic move. I believe, however, that as a result we shall have a larger number of graduates of our elementary course who will be interested to continue their study and will already have a better understanding of George's proposal than most of such graduates have at present.

Let us continue to use "Progress and Poverty" as our preliminary text book, but let us not feel obliged to insist that every word be read by our raw recruits. Let us first get them interested.