

SEPTEMBER 6, 1952

Henry George, Anti-Socialist

Those many citizens who are concerned over the modern drift toward socialism, why have they given so little attention to Henry George, America's outstanding, irreconcilable enemy of socialism?

There are still followers of Henry George. These are putting on special celebrations this month of the author, 80 years ago, of *Progress and Poverty*. Their voice is but a sparrow's whisper, so small it has become. Why are the dreaders of socialism so neglectful of Henry George?

"Progress and Poverty" presented an idea which, up to 40 or 50 years ago, had an important following. Cleveland's Tom Johnson, mayor and congressman, was a powerful follower, 40 years ago, of the Henry George philosophy. The "single tax" idea was making headway. Now it has largely dropped from sight, and just when the "socialism" which it opposed is more an issue than before.

The value of land, Henry George taught, is produced, not by the labor of any man, but by the labor of everyone. The high cost of the corner lot in the city is the product of the labor and enterprise of the whole city. The value of the lot, the land, is the measure of the value of the society surrounding it. Take that value for public use, and the public will only be getting back what it gave.

Getting back what thus it gave, the community will have all the money it needs to serve its interests. There would need be no other tax. Houses, factories, incomes would not need be taxed, but only the land beneath and behind them. Once the land, including the city lots and mines, was taxed by the community to get back the value the community gave it, there could be no monopoly, but only free enterprise. Socialism could no more thrive and survive under those conditions than a snowball under a July sun.

So goes the argument.

The name of Henry George, who died more than 50 years ago, is still remembered and by some revered. The prescription which he wrote, his guarantee against the collectivism which most of us abhor, lies mostly forgotten, all unfilled. Are we as dead set against socialism as we think we are? Why, then, the averted eyes, the blank, unknowing look, at mention of Henry George the anti-socialist?

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50 East 69th Street
New York 21, N.Y.

Henry George vs. Socialism and Communism

THE SOCIALISTS, as I understand them, and as the term has come to apply to anything like a definite theory, and not to be vaguely and improperly used to include all who desire social improvement, do not as you imply, seek the abolition of all private property. Those who do this are properly called Communists. What the Socialists seek is the assumption by the State of capital (in which they vaguely and erroneously include land), or, more properly speaking, of large capitals, and State management and direction of at least the larger operations of industry. In this way they hope to abolish interest, which they regard as a wrong and an evil; to do away with the gains of exchangers, speculators, contractors, and middlemen, which they regard as waste; to do away with the wage system and secure general coöperation; and to prevent competition, which they deem the fundamental cause of the impoverishment of labor.

The more moderate of them, without going so far, go in the same direction, and seek some remedy or palliation of the worst forms of poverty by Government regulation. The essential character of Socialism is that it looks to the extension of the functions of the State for the remedy of social evils; that it would substitute regulation and direction for competition, and intelligent control by organized society for the free play of individual desire and effort.

But it seems to us the vice of Socialism in all its degrees is its want of radicalism, of going to the root. It takes its theories from those who have sought to justify the impoverishment of the masses, and its advocates generally teach the preposterous and degrading doctrine that slavery was the first condition of labor. It assumes that the tendency of wages to a minimum is the natural law, and seeks to abolish wages; it assumes that the natural result of competition is to grind down workers, and seeks to abolish competition by restrictions, prohibitions, and extensions of governing power. Thus mistaking effects for causes, and childishly blaming the stone for hitting it, it wastes strength in striving for remedies that when not worse are futile.

As for thorough-going Socialism, which is the more to be honored as having the courage of its convictions, it would carry these vices to full expression. Jumping to conclusions without effort to discover causes, it fails to see that oppression does not come from the nature of capital, but from the wrong that robs labor of capital by divorcing it from land, and that creates a fictitious capital that is really capitalized monopoly. It fails to see that it would be impossible for capital to oppress labor were labor free to the natural materials of production; that the wage system in itself springs from mutual convenience, being a form of coöperation in which one of the parties prefers a certain to a contingent result; and that what it calls the "iron law of wages," is not the natural law of wages, but only the law of wages in that unnatural condition in which men are made helpless by being deprived of the materials for life and work. It fails to see that what it mistakes for the evils of competition are really the evils of restricted competition—are due to a one-sided competition to which men are forced when deprived of land. While its methods, the organization of men into industrial armies, the direction and control of all production and exchange by governmental or semi-governmental bureaus, would, if carried to full expression mean Egyptian despotism.

We differ from the Socialists in our diagnosis of the evil, and we differ from them as to remedies. We have no fear of capital, regarding it as the natural handmaiden of labor; we look on interest in itself as natural and just; we would set no limit to accumulation, nor impose on the rich any burden that is not equally placed on the poor; we see no evil in competition, but deem unrestricted competition to be as necessary to the health of the industrial and social organism as the free circulation of the blood is to the health of the bodily organism—to be the agency whereby the fullest coöperation is to be secured. We would simply take for the community what belongs to the community, the value that attaches to land by the growth of the community; leave sacredly to the individual all that belongs to the individual; and, treating necessary monopolies as functions of the State, abolish all restrictions and prohibitions save those required for public health, safety, morals, and convenience.

—"Condition of Labor," §III.

By HENRY GEORGE