
An
Appreciation
of
Henry George

by
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*America's Foremost Philosopher
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AN APPRECIATION OF HENRY GEORGE

THE fact that Henry George has an ardent group of disciples who have a practical program for reform of taxation has tended to obscure from the recognition of students of social theory that his is one of the great names among the world's social philosophers.

It would require less than the fingers of the two hands to enumerate those who from Plato down rank with him.

Were he a native of some European country, it is safe to assert that Henry George would long ago have taken the place upon the roll of the world's thinkers which belongs to him, irrespective, moreover, of adherence to his practical plan. But for some reason we Americans are slow to perceive and celebrate intellectual claims in comparison with the merits of inventors, political leaders and great industrialists.

In the case of the author of "*Progress and Poverty*" the failure has doubtless been accentuated in academic circles by the fact that Henry George thought, wrote, and worked outside of them. And in the world at large, in spite of the fact that no works on political economy have had the circulation and reading obtained by his writings, discussion of the practical merits of his plan of reform of taxation has actually tended to blur his outstanding position as a thinker. This has been the case because the enormous inertia of social habit and the force of tremendous vested interests have depreciated his intellectual claims in order to strengthen opposition to his practical measures.

I do not say these things in order to vaunt Henry George's place as a thinker in contrast with the merits of his proposals for a change in methods of distributing the burdens of taxation. To my mind the two things go together. His clear intellectual insight into social conditions, his passionate feeling for the remediable ills from which humanity suffers,

find their logical conclusion in his plan for liberating labor and capital from the shackles which now bind them. But I am especially concerned to point out the claims which his social theory has upon the attention of students.

No man, no graduate of a higher educational institution, has a right to regard himself as an educated man in social thought unless he has some first-hand acquaintance with the theoretical contribution of this great American thinker.

This is not the time and place, nor is there need, to dwell upon the nature of this contribution. Henry George is as clear as he is eloquent. But I cannot refrain from pointing out one feature of his thought which is too often ignored:—his emphasis upon ideal factors of life, upon what are sometimes called the imponderables. It is a poor version of his ideas which insists only upon the material effect of increase of population in producing the material or monetary increment in the value of land.

One has only to read the fourth section of "*Progress and Poverty*" to note that Henry George puts even greater stress upon the fact that community life increases land value because it opens "a wider, fuller, and more varied life," so that the desire to share in the higher values which the community brings with it is a decisive factor in raising the rental value of land. And it is because the present system not only depresses the material status of the mass of the population, but especially because it renders one-sided and inequitable the people's share in these higher values that we find in "*Progress and Poverty*" the analysis of the scientist combined with the sympathies and aspirations of a great lover of mankind.

There have been economists of great repute who in their pretension to be scientific have ignored the most significant elements in human nature. There have been others who were emotionally stirred by social ills and who

proposed glowing schemes of betterment, but who passed lightly over facts. It is the thorough fusion of insight into actual facts and forces, with recognition of their bearing upon what makes human life worth living, that constitutes Henry George one of the world's great social philosophers.

JOHN DEWEY

WHAT OTHERS HAVE SAID

To very few of the children of men is it given to act the part of a great teacher who makes an outstanding contribution toward revealing the basic principles to which human society must adhere if it is to walk in the way which leads to freedom. This Henry George did, and in so doing he expressed himself with a clarity of thought and diction which has rarely been surpassed.

JUDGE SAMUEL SEABURY

It is a full half-century since no inconsiderable part of the world was plunged into vigorous and often excited controversy over the thesis and arguments of a book by Henry George. He called it *Progress and Poverty*. The very title was abundant in challenge, and the argument of the book was more challenging still. . . . The years that have passed have set his economic analysis and economic teaching in due perspective, and enable us now to consider them with a just sense of their permanent importance and with regard to the soundness of their underlying principles. It may be said at once that so far as Henry George pointed to privilege as an unbecoming, unfair, and indeed disastrous accompaniment of progress, his teaching has passed into economic theory everywhere. Sound economists in every land accept and support economic opportunity as fundamental.

NICHOLAS MURRAY BUTLER
*President of Columbia University
and Nobel Peace Prizewinner*

Henry George was a master of English; one of the greatest that ever used a pen. . . . He was one of the real prophets of the world; one of the seers of the world. . . . His was a wonderful mind; he saw a question from every side; his philosophy appealed to every school. . . . Henry George wrote a profound book, the first book on political economy that people may read; the first and perhaps the last that was readable to plain ordinary men.

CLARENCE DARROW

People do not argue with the teaching of George; they simply do not know it. And it is impossible to do otherwise with his teaching, for he who becomes acquainted with it cannot but agree.

LEO TOLSTOY