# Henry George, Emma Lazarus, and the Concept of Liberty: Comparison and Contrast

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To compare and contrast the major writings of the famed economist, Henry George (1839-1897), and the noted poet, Emma Lazarus (1849-1887), it is necessary to touch upon three themes that are common to their work: 1) the theme of Progress and Poverty; 2) the theme of sectarianism versus the universal; and 3) the theme of Liberty, which brought fame to both American authors.

## 1) The Theme of Progress and Poverty

No book of economics has ever received the acclaim that Henry George's Progress and Poverty (1879) did. He set upon himself the task of finding out (and solving, to his satisfaction) the problem of the constant and concurrent "association of poverty and progress...the great enigma of our times." "It is," he declared, "the central fact from which spring industrial, social and political difficulties that perplex the world."[1] He continued:

> It is the riddle which the Sphinx of Fate puts to our civilization, and which not to answer is to be destroyed. So long as all the increased wealth which modern progress brings goes but to build up great fortunes, to increase luxury and make sharper the contrast between the House of Have and the House of Want, progress is not real and cannot be permanent. The reaction must come.[2]

George proposed, therefore, "to seek the law which associates poverty with progress, and increased want with advancing wealth."[3] How atrange it was, he pondered, that in a century that witnessed great scientific inventions and improvements, all designed to "lighten the toil and improve the condition of the laborer,"[4] the contrary took place, for "upon streets lighted with gas and patrolled by uniformed policemen, beggars wait for the passer-by, and in the shadow of college, and library, and museum, are gathering the more hideous Huns and fiercer Vandals of whom Macaulay prophesied."[5]

Using an apt metaphor, he compared the earth to a ship:

> It is a well provisioned ship, this on which we sail through space. If the bread and beef above decks seem to grow scarce we but open a hatch and there is a new supply, of which before we never dreamed. And very great command over the services of others comes to those who as the hatches are opened are permitted to say, "This is mine!"[6]

And so, George proposed his celebrated "Remedy," by means of which those who monopolize the resources of nature would be compelled to relinquish their vast and immoral holdings, and permit access(to all people) to such resources of the earth.

Two years after the publication of Progress and Poverty (1881), Henry George was living in New York City; and so was the budding poetess, Emma Lazarus, a young lady of wealth, who considered herself to be a protege of Ralph Waldo Emerson. (Later on, she changed her mind about Emerson, regarding Thoreau to be a much greater philosopher than Emerson.)[7]

Emma Lazarus read Progress and Poverty and was very much impressed with it. Evidently under the spell of the "ship" metaphor (as well as George's powerful introduction to the problem), she wrote the following sonnet and sent it to the New York Times:

PROGRESS AND POVERTY

Oh splendid age when Science lights her lamp
At the frief lightning's momentary flame,
Fixing it steadfast as a star, man's name
Upon the very brow of heaven to stamp!
Launched on a ship whose iron-cuirassed sides
Mock storm and wave. Humanity sails free,
Gayly upon a vast, untrodden sea,
O'er pathless wastes, to ports undreamed she rides,
Richer than Cleopatra's barge of gold.
This vessel, manned by demi-gods, with freight
Of priceless marvels. But where yawns the hold
In that deep, reeking hell, what slaves be they,
Who feed the ravenous monster, pant and sweat,
Nor know if overhead reign night or day?[8]

A biographer of Emma Lazarus, Eve Merriam, told the story of the writing of the poem: "George's book, Progress and Poverty, had made a deep impression on her...Emma wrote a poem about his ideas, in which she pictured Progress as a ship of state sailing across the sea. The ship contained riches, and the people above deck were free and happy. Yet the power for the ship came from those who labored below, in the dark, damp hold, sweating as slaves. After the New York Times printed her poem, she sent George a copy."[9]

Henry George, according to Lazarus' biographer, was "very moved" by the poem, and thus a correspondence about social problems began between Emma Lazarus and Henry George.

(George, interestingly enough, was born ten years before Lazarus, and died ten years after she did.) George "urged Emma to write more about topics of the day. A person with her gifts was needed to express the longings and the aspirations of the great masses of working people all over the world."[10]

Emma Lazarus was mainly a poet; Henry George was mostly an economist. Yet the two of them found mutual topics of interest, and both of them were fervent evangelists. They were both purpose-driven idealists; they were both shocked by the existence of misery and poverty in the world; they were both dedicated to justice, freedom,and progress for all people. Their correspondence was friendly and warm.

* * *

2) The Theme of Sectarianism Versus the Universal

A certain jarring incident (to Henry George) put an end to the peaceful association between the poet and the economist. To explain, it is necessary to go back a few months.

In the same year (1881) that Emma wrote her poem, "Progress and Poverty," the Czar of Russia, Alexander II, was assassinated by the Nihilists. The Jews were blamed for the murder, and then the pogroms started. Hundreds of thousands of Russian Jews began to flee to other countries, especially to America.

Suddenly, Emma Lazarus, conscious of her Jewish heritage, became a fanatic partisan. All her time was now devoted to Jewish themes and Jewish causes. A fiery book of her poems appeared, called Songs of a Semite. One of the poems in the

book, titled "The Banner of the Jew," is representative of the entire collection. Three stanzas of the poem appear below:

> Wake, Israel, Wake! Recall today
> The glorious Maccabean rage,
> The sire heroic, hoary-gray,
> His five-fold lion-lineage:
> The Wise, the Elect, the Help-of-God
> The Burst of Spring, the Avenging Rod.
>
> . . . . .
>
> Oh deem not dead that martial fire,
> Say not the mystic flame is spent!
> With Moses' law and David's lyre,
> Your ancient strength remains unbent.
> Let but an Ezra rise anew,
> To lift the Banner of the Jew!
> A rag, a mock at first--erelong,
> When men have bled and women wept,
> To guard its precious folds from wrong,
> Even they who shrank, even they who slept,
> Shall leap to bless it, and to save.
> Strike! for the brave revere the brave![11]

Henry George read Emma Lazarus' Songs of a Semite. Not that he did not agree with her indignation about the injustice to the Jews. H.G., too, agonized about the persecuted--all of them, all over the world. But he felt that Emma was "turning her talents in the wrong direction." He reminded Emma of their earlier correspondence, and concluded: "I did not propose to you to write songs for your people, but for the people."[12]

George had always believed that "localizing" the issues was being sectarian and narrow. He wrote for all people; for the universal, not the particular. "The differences between the people of communities, in different places and at different times," he wrote, "which we call differences of civilization, are not differences which inhere in the individuals, but differences which inhere in the society."[13] All people are

the same, George stated; to write constantly about one segment of the total population was to "diffuse" the attack on injustice generally.

As for the Jews, even in Progress and Poverty he wrote that they were no different from all the other people in the world. "The Jews," George declared, "have maintained the purity of their blood more scrupulously and for a far longer time than any of the European races, yet I am inclined to think that the only characteristic that can be attributed to this is that of physiognomy, and this is in realtiy far less marked than is conveniently supposed, as any one who will take the trouble may see on observation."[14]

He concluded with the comment that persecution of the Jews will vanish in time, as is visible in the United States, where, because of "the lessening intensity of religious belief,... the distinction between Jew and Gentile is fast disappearing."[15]

George's remarks disturbed Emma Lazarus greatly. She could not accept the judgement that she was sectarian. The ideals of the Jewish people, she felt, as set forth in the Code of Moses, were very close to what George himself believed in. Did he not write a magnificent essay on Moses? And did he not say, "The free spirit of the Mosaic law took their thinkers up to heights where they beheld the unity of God, and inspired their poets with strains that yet phrase the highest exaltation of thought"?[16]

(Of course, when George wrote the above-quoted passage, he used the Mosaic example as one of many, since he also

referred to Greece, Rome, England, and other nations of the past and present.)

Emma Lazarus could not accept the Henry George criticism. Did not the laws of Moses "assert that the corners of the field and the gleanings of the harvest belong in justice, not in charity, to the poor and the stranger?"[17]

No, she thought to herself, even when someone as great as George objected to her new "narrowness," she would not abandon her Jewish quest. "On the contrary--she would deepen that interest--and broaden it to reach others."[18] Her preoccupation with the Jewish question would really be the universal question, since Jewish philosophy dealt with the same problems that George raised.

So began Emma's probing new work, "Epistle to the Hebrews," published serially in The American Hebrew. She wrote this new essay to express her pride in Judaism, and to give her Jewish readers "pride, conviction."[19]

In fact, when she met young William P. Barnes (while visiting England in 1885), she discovered him to be a follower of Henry George, and he was aware of her poem, "Progress and Poverty." He expressed amazement at her knowledge of so many details of the land question. Instead of giving credit to George for her excellent awareness of things economic, she stressed her fervent Jewish partisanship. "After reading carefully the land laws of the Old Testament," she remarked, "everybody should know what the American agrarian reformers think and why they think it."[20]

The correspondence with Henry George came to an end.

* * *

### 3) The Theme of Liberty

Not only was Henry George's Progress and Poverty the "best-seller" among economic texts, but that portion of it known as the "Ode to Liberty" (a prose poem of much distinction) brought George international recognition. A portion of this famed classic appears below:

> We honor Liberty in name and form. We set up her statues and sound her praises. But we have not fully trusted her. And with our growth so grow her demands. She will have no half service!
>
> Liberty! it is a word to conjure with, not to vex the ear in empty boastings. For Liberty means Justice, and Justice is the natural law--the law of health and symmetry and strength, of fraternity and co-operation.
>
> They who look upon Liberty as having accomplished her mission when she has abolished hereditary privileges and given men the ballot, who think of her as having no further relations to the everyday affairs of life, have not seen her real grandeur--to them the poets who have sung of her must seem rhapsodists, and her martyrs fools! As the sun is the lord of life, as well as of light; as his beams not merely pierce the clouds, but support all growth, supply all motion, and call forth from what would otherwise be a cold and inert mass all the infinite diversities of being and beauty, so is liberty to mankind. It is not for an abstraction that men have toiled and died; that in every age the witnesses of Liberty have stood forth, and the martyrs of Liberty have suffered.
>
> We speak of Liberty as one thing, and of virtue, wealth, knowledge, invention, national strength and national independence as other things. But, of all these, Liberty is the source, the mother, the necessary condition. She is to virtue what light is to color; to wealth what sunshine is to grain; to knowledge what eyes are to sight. She is the genius of invention, the brawn of national strength, the spirit of national independence. Where Liberty rises, there virtue grows, wealth increases, knowledge expands,

> invention multiplies human powers, and in strength and spirit the freer nation rises among her neighbors as Saul amid his brethren--taller and fairer. Where Liberty sinks, there virtue fades, wealth diminishes, knowledge is forgotten, invention ceases, and empires once mighty in arms and arts become a helpless prey to freer barbarians!
>
> . . . . .
>
> In our time, as in times before, creep on the insiduous forces that, producing inequality, destroy Liberty. On the horizon the clouds begin to lower. Liberty calls to us again. We must follow her further; we must trust her fully. Either we must wholly accept her or she will not stay. It is not enough that men should vote; it is not enough that they should be theortically equal before the law. They must have liberty to avail themselves of the opportunities and means of life; they must stand on equal terms with reference to the bounty of nature. Either this, or Liberty withdraws her light! Either this, or darkness comes on, and the very forces that progress has evolved turn to powers that work destruction. This is the universal law. This is the lesson of the centuries. Unless its foundations be laid in justice the social structure cannot stand.[21]

"We honor Liberty in name and form. We set up her statues..." Thus Henry George began his Ode. And it is in connection with the setting up of one such statue that we turn to Emma Lazarus.

In 1883, an appeal came to Emma from a committee that was planning to set up, on Bedloe Island in New York harbor, a colossal statue, called "Liberty Enlightening the World." The sculptor was to be Auguste Bartholdi of Paris, and the statue was to be a gift from France to the United States.

The appeal to Emma was to write a poem that would appear on the pedestal of the statue. Hesitating for a while, "she sat down, and in the last week of November, 1883, wrote fourteen ·s that have become immortal"[22] "One of the most remarkable pects of the poem," wrote a biographer, "was that Emma had

never seen the burning torch of liberty shedding its light through the salty air of New York harbor upon the 'huddled masses' of immigrants."[23]

"Emma completed her sonnet within a few swift hours," recorded another writer. "The lines were to endure forever after as the Voice of Liberty itself."[24]

This was Emma Lazarus' world-famous sonnet:

THE NEW COLOSSUS

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"[25]

Commenting on Emma's poem, James Russell Lowell, famed author and American Ambassador, wrote to her: "I liked your sonnet about the Statue much better than I like the Statue itself. But your sonnet gives its subject a raison d'être which it wanted before quite as much as it wanted a pedestal. You have set it on a noble one, saying admirably just the right word to be said, and achievement more arduous than that of the sculptor."[26]

Writing about Emma Lazarus' poem, one observer wrote: "It is a hymn of hope, of love. The winds blow over the harbor;

waves rush in, pull back. The words shine bright; the Voice of Liberty sings clear."[27]

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Henry George and Emma Lazarus: voices of Liberty, symbols of eternal hope.

## Notes

1. Henry George, Progress and Poverty (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1979), p. 10.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 12.

4. Ibid., p. 3.

5. Ibid., p. 7.

6. Ibid., p. 243.

7. H.E.Jacob, The World of Emma Lazarus (New York:Schocken Books, 1949), p. 62.

8. New York Times (1881).

9. Eve Merriam, The Voice of Liberty: The Story of Emma Lazarus (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959), pp. 126-127.

10. Ibid., p. 127.

11. Jacob, pp. 92-93.

12. Merriam, p. 127; Jacob, p. 161.

13. George, p. 504.

14. Ibid., p. 497.

15. Ibid., p. 498.

16. Ibid., p. 547.

17. Merriam, p. 127.

18. Ibid., p. 128.

19. Ibid., p. 130.

20. Jacob, p. 188.

21. George, pp. 546-548.

22. Jacob, p. 178.

23. Ibid., p. 179.

24. Merriam, p. 157.

25. "The New Colossus," by Emma Lazarus (on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty).

26. Jacob, pp. 179-180.

27. Merriam, p. 179.

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