

Henry George

1839-1897

Economist & Philosopher

On September 2nd, 1839, Henry George, the great American economist and social philosopher, was born in a three-storied row house at 413 South 10th Street in Philadelphia. His brief formal schooling was obtained at Episcopal Academy and Central High School. As a boy he traveled around the world as a seaman, then joined the California gold rush. There he became a printer, a journalist, an editor, and finally a world-famous writer and lecturer. He died in New York in 1897.

George's best-known work, *Progress and Poverty*, was written as an outcome of his witnessing the contrast between wealth and poverty in New York. It was completed in San Francisco in 1879. His later books included *Social Problems*, *Protection or Free Trade*, *A Perplexed Philosopher*, *The Condition of Labor*, and *The Science of Political Economy*.

George lectured on his ideas throughout the United States and Canada. He also lectured in England, Ireland, Europe and Australia. He was a candidate for Mayor of New York. In 1886 he came close to winning (many say, he was counted out), and in 1897, when it was felt certain he would win, he died a few days before the election.



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George's major work, ***Progress and Poverty***, is subtitled "*An inquiry into the cause of industrial depressions and of the increase of want with the increase of wealth — the remedy,*" It is dedicated "*To those who, seeing the vice and misery that spring from unequal distribution of wealth and privilege feel the possibility of a higher social state and would strive for its attainment*".

In this book George examined and dismissed various theories about poverty and found the answer to be in the laws of distribution, which give, as material progress goes on, a rising share to rent (the payment for land). This is aggravated by land monopoly and land speculation. He proposed to solve the problem by taking the rent of land as a "single tax" and abolishing all other taxes.

Influence

Progress and Poverty became the most widely read book on economics. It went into several editions and was translated into many languages. The book spurred an active movement for the propagation and application of its ideas. In England, George's ideas were in almost daily discussion in Parliament. The influence extended to other countries such as Denmark, Australia and New Zealand where land value taxation had been partially adopted. In the USA, the influence was felt in property assessment, special taxes on land values, some single tax enclaves, and public land policy. Prominent leaders were influenced by George, such as Woodrow Wilson, Winston Churchill, Leo Tolstoy and Sun-Yat-Sen.

The Georgist movement continues today, although most of its efforts are to shift real estate taxes from land and buildings to land alone. Pennsylvania has had the most success with reforming the real estate tax. About 20 of its municipalities now tax land values more than those of buildings, in varying degrees.

Comparisons

Henry George's chief nineteenth century rival in the field of economics was Karl Marx, whose socialist ideas and denunciation of capitalism contrasted with the espousal of a free-market-economy with equal opportunities for all. George's chief twentieth century rival has been John M., Keynes, whose ideas were widely applied. Keynes ideas were, however, increasingly challenged by the end of the 20th century. George's ideas, (though not tried on a large scale) have worked to the extent that they have been tried --- increasing housing, jobs and economic activity.

Appreciations

Mortimer J. Adler: The reading of *Progress and Poverty* is an unforgettable experience.... It is an incomparable statement of the democratic credo.

Louis D. Brandeis: I find it very difficult to disagree with the principles of Henry George.

John Dewey: It would require less than the fingers of two hands to enumerate those who, from Plato down, rank with Henry George "among the world's social philosophers.

Albert Einstein: Men like Henry George are rare, unfortunately. One cannot imagine a more beautiful combination of intellectual keenness, artistic form, and fervent love of justice,

Aldous Huxley: (Forward to *Brave New World*): *If I were now to rewrite the book, I would offer a third alternative ... the possibility of sanity ... Economics would be decentralist and Henry Georgian.*

Helen Keller: Who reads shall find in Henry George's philosophy a rare beauty and power of inspiration, and a splendid faith in the essential nobility of human nature.

Franklin D. Roosevelt: Henry George was one of the truly great thinkers produced by our country.... I wish his writings Were better known and 'more clearly understood.

Dwight D. Eisenhower voted for Henry George for the Hall of Fame.

The White House Library includes *Progress and Poverty* in its collection of outstanding American books.