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THE MENACE OF PRIVILEGE

AN ESTIMATE OF HENRY GEORGE, JR.'S RECENT BOOK*

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THIS book represents the general view that, in America, monopoly and the money power are making the poor poorer, as well as the rich richer; and that a radical reconstruction of American institutions is necessary, the governmental system of representative democracy and the federal union of States, on the one hand, and the common-law system of free, responsible and enforceable individual contact, on the other hand, having miserably failed.

Like his illustrious father, Mr. George regards the private ownership of land, together with the manner of its taxation, as a primary source of all these alleged evils; but he goes much further, I think, than his father would have gone, in his attack upon the existing social order. The writings of the father, whether his theories were right or wrong, deserved and received respectful attention from political economists; this utterance of the son belongs to a totally different category.

It is a fierce polemic, in the preparation of which the author has apparently taken no pains to verify his assertions of fact. Everything that

came to his hand,—newspaper reports, rumours (contradicted or uncontradicted), inferences, suspicions, gossip and scandal,—he has eagerly employed without question, if only it tended to render odious the persons, enterprises, parties, institutions, laws or opinions against which he is waging war. He is as ready to throw mud as stones. The alleged faults and vices of particular individuals are, for his purpose, as pertinent evidence as the alleged revelations of widespread social conditions; and, in either case, the allegation is quite enough for him as justification for its use, without further inquiry as to its truth. His ethical offence is only aggravated by the scandal-monger's "It is reported," or "I do not accuse or blame the man. I only point him out!"

There is an immense volume of such belligerent literature; and the serious student is greatly embarrassed in dealing with it. For it undoubtedly contains facts, arguments and suggestions not without value; but the labour of sifting it to obtain them is too great to be repaid by the residuum thus extracted. As a specimen of the things which many people believe, and the way in which many people reason, and therefore as indicating a factor of which the student and the statesman must take account, such books are doubtless important. But as contributions to a thorough knowledge of present conditions, or of present evils or perils and their remedies, they have little or no practical value. For life is short and books are many; and ordinary people, seriously inves-

*The Menace of Privilege. A Study of the Dangers to the Republic from the Existence of a Favoured Class. By Henry George, Jr. Published by the Macmillan Co.

tigating a given subject, must needs confine themselves, if possible, to the examination of trustworthy evidence. For such people, the rule is almost imperative, that, when any witness is shown to be, in any particular, not merely careless, but recklessly and deliberately disingenuous, his testimony may be entirely disregarded,—even though sometimes, consciously or unconsciously, he may have told the truth.

Mr. George's book deals with unquestionably important subjects; it is written in excellent English, and it contains many ideas and suggestions worthy of notice. To expose its innumerable misstatements, suppressions and distortions of fact and its errors of reasoning a book of equal size would be required. Such a book would contain the corrections which the author himself should have made before publication. Whether this detailed refutation would be worth while or not, it is manifestly beyond the sphere of a periodical journal. All that I can here do (and I do it, without aspersing the sincerity of Mr. George, for the simple purpose of defining the true character and weight of his work), is to point out some features of this book, from which, I think, its nature and value can be fairly inferred.

The first of these features is the treatment given to labour-unionism, as an element of the problem under consideration. This discussion, while presenting a specious appearance of frankness, ranks the modern labour union as a "resistance to privilege," instead of an audacious assertion of privilege, and practically ignores the fact that the present national federation of labour unions is the most stupendous organized movement against industrial liberty and the rights of citizens ever known in human history; that it maintains at State and Federal capitals a perpetual "lobby" for the intimidation of legislators, in comparison with which the occasional lobbying of capitalists

is insignificant; that it has secured, through this bulldozing agency, the specific exception of labour unions in many statutes, prohibiting other citizens from acts thereby permitted to such unions; that, for the anthracite regions of Pennsylvania, it has thus obtained a law, practically preventing the employment, in whatever emergency, of miners, however skillful, to take the place of its members; that it has achieved a practical monopoly of the importation of skilled labourers from abroad, through the Federal law (administered by labour-unionist commissioners), which forbids the admission into the United States of a man who knows where he can find employment, while it admits the man who does not know, but (if he be a member of a labour union) will find out, within an hour after he has been passed as unobjectionable; that it antagonizes candidates for office, if they do not have the "union label," duly paid for, upon their political circulars; that it justifies and practices, through the "boycott" and the "sympathetic strike," the injury and ruin of employers totally innocent of blame, or even of knowledge, concerning its claims or controversies; that, though comprising, at the maximum of its fluctuating membership, not more than 10 per cent. of the workers in the "organized" trades which it represents, it ostracizes as "scabs," and pursues with unrelenting, vindictive hostility (whenever this course seems politic) the other 90 per cent.; that it limits the employment of apprentices, and discourages the education of skilled workmen in trade-schools; that it does not hesitate to subject the public to inconvenience and distress for its own selfish interest; that it denounces as tyrannical the ordinary, decent enforcement of order by courts, police, militia or regular troops, while its operations are almost invariably attended by disorder and crime, of which it disclaims the responsibility, yet accepts the benefit;

that it condemns as treason the attempt of any workman to obtain recognition or promotion by superior skill or loyalty; that its members are, certainly in many cases and probably in all cases, bound by oath to an allegiance and obedience superseding all other obligations;—in short, that it aspires to become, and has to no small degree become, an "imperium in imperio," superior to all other authority whatever.

If there exist among us to-day any really dangerous "privileged classes," fortified in their arrogance by statutes, and supported by time-serving politicians, as well as sentimental philanthropists, the present labour union class should head the list. Yet Mr. George puts it in the opposite list, and falsifies history by describing it as a defensive movement, whereas, as an element in the present situation, it is everywhere and always aggressive, and has encountered only within two or three years past the opposition of anything like a commensurate organization of employers..

This omission to give to the national organization of modern labour unions its proper place among the dangerous "privileged classes" may be charitably considered as an honest error of opinion, to be amicably controverted. But Mr. George's book furnishes abundant proof of his willingness to support his opinions by a reckless manipulation of evidence. Whoever would apply this test with swift and certain result may turn to his account of the Cœur d' Alene "labour troubles" of 1899,—an almost wicked distortion of the facts, ignoring the anarchy and crime which imperatively called for Federal intervention and martial law, and tacitly endorsing the methods and proceedings of the worst gang of organized robbers, ruffians, and assassins that ever terrorized a community.

Since Mr. George gives a professed summary of the results of an investigation by the Committee of Mili-

tary Affairs of the United States House of Representatives, he must be supposed to know the facts which he does not state, as well as those which he selects and emphasizes. He must know that the investigation, instigated by a sympathizer with his party, made by a committee including other sympathizers, and expected to furnish ammunition for an attack upon the Federal administration, ended in a complete collapse of that purpose, and an approval by the committee of the action of the government.

He must know that the politicians who originated the promising raid abandoned it in disgust. He must know that this outcome was mainly due to the frank and manly evidence of the "Populist" governor of Idaho, elected as an opponent of corporations and "privileged" classes, yet regarding himself as bound by his oath of office to maintain public order and protect life and property in his State. He knows now, at all events, that Governor Steunenberg has paid the penalty of his fearless discharge of duty, having been brutally assassinated, in accordance with repeated threats from the organization which he defied and defeated.*

Concerning this brave man, the central figure of the whole proceeding, and of the Congressional inquiry from which Mr. George quotes so freely what happens to suit his purpose, he has nothing to say, not even so much as a mention of the Governor's name; and he quotes nothing from the Governor's dramatically and overwhelmingly conclusive testimony. Concerning the outrages of 1899, or the previous reign of terror of which they were a revival, he has only to say that "at a place called Wardner, there was some kind of a demonstration on

*Since this article was written, the arrest and confession of the murderer, and much additional evidence going to prove the complicity of labour union leaders in this crime, as well as others of the same nature, together with the indictment of several of these leaders, have emphasized the statements here made.

the part of the miners, and the concentrator mill of the Bunker Hill mine was blown up with powder by, it is supposed and charged, some one on the workmen's side, although no proof of this seems ever to have been found!"

An author capable of offering such a summary of the Cœur d' Alene case is not fit to be trusted as a witness; and even an advocate capable of imagining he could strengthen, by adducing that case, his condemnation of the use of the army of the United States, in the last resort, to sustain the authorities and protect the citizens of a State, is not entitled to a respectful hearing.

I call attention to this instance* as apparently involving a deliberate and conscious suppression of facts, in the spirit of a partisan orator, whose business it is to present his own side only. If he thereby misleads his readers, "caveat lector!" There are those who can present the other side, if they choose: let them attend to that duty. Every page of Mr. George's book shows that this is his habit of thought in small matters, as well as great.

His practice, however, is modified by incidental disclaimers of responsibility, which belong rather to the retailer of gossip and scandal than to the apostle of truth. For instance, in one place, after asking the question,—"What causes the unequal distribution of wealth by which one class is made superabundantly rich, while another, vastly greater, has a hard struggle to get a living?" he proceeds as follows:—

"The will of Heaven, some say. President George F. Baer, of the Anthracite Coal Trust, was credited by the newspapers of the country, in the summer of 1902, during the second great hard-coal strike in Pennsylvania, with writing to a correspondent:—

"The rights and interests of the

*Mr. George's reference to the Homestead, Pullman, Cripple Creek and other strikes and outrages, are similarly "unfair," in the old sense of that term, and not its modern labour-union sense.

labouring man will be protected by the Christian men to whom God, in His infinite wisdom, has given the property interests of the country.'

"Whether or not Mr. Baer said this [the italics are mine], it represents the thought, or at least the utterance, of a certain class of privileged people."

The letter of Mr. Baer thus garbled was published in full by "the newspapers of the country"; so that even Mr. George, who habitually adopts this authority as sufficient, has no excuse for his malicious misrepresentation, guarded with a cowardly "whether or not." The further intimation that what Mr. Baer may or may not have said "represents the thought, or at least the utterance" of a certain class, carries the art of insinuation one step beyond sublimity. Nobody could require Mr. George to quote the thoughts of the wicked verbatim. But if he proposes to represent their utterances, why not take an utterance that he can guarantee as authentic? Or are we to believe that all such utterances are representative, "whether or not" they were ever uttered?

The book exhibits also a pretence of literary honesty in quotations and references which will, at first glance, doubtless produce upon many readers the impression of careful research and fair citation. Some of these repeat an old trick. Mr. — writes a book, based upon "sworn testimony," under which he adduces stories told in court by witnesses for one side, omitting to mention how they were shattered by cross-examination, contradicted by other testimony, or rejected by judge or jury. Miss — quotes Mr. —; Mr. George quotes Miss —; and thus an original slander is elevated by repetition into an "authority," to be accepted by clergymen, philanthropists, reformers, doctrinaires, and demagogues. The way in which such superficial, smart essayists make "authorities" of one another would be

comical if it were not, in its popular effect, so demoralizing.

Mr. George's book is to be chiefly condemned, not because it is essentially an aggregation of all sorts of material, largely gathered from newspapers and magazines, but because this miscellaneous stuff has been arrayed and employed, with no little rhetorical skill and dexterity, to simulate an honest investigation and a comprehensive discussion of the great questions with which the author professes to deal. Already his work has been characterized, by writers who ought to know better, as "a book of first-rate interest and importance," and "a remarkable piece of description and analysis" of "present-day conditions."

What is the thesis which this book professes to maintain? After much rummaging of its inwardly confused and inconsistent (though outwardly, with much pretentious division and subdivision, logically arranged) contents, I can reach no other conclusion than this,—that Mr. George, starting with the private ownership of land as the root of all evil, manages, before he gets through, to come very near adopting the principle of Proudhon, that all "property is robbery."

His father was anxious not to be reckoned a communist or thorough-going socialist; and it is likely enough that he would likewise protest against such a classification for himself. In such a protest, he might very well be sincere. In religion, politics and science alike, no distinctions are so passionately insisted upon as the minute ones which the average observer overlooks. But, however Mr. George may object, the effect of his indiscriminate attack upon "Privilege" is an attack upon property.

How he has reconciled his implied condemnation of all legally conferred

monopolies (of which class patents and copyrights are the chief representatives under American law) with his own course in copyrighting his book, for the benefit of his privileged publisher, so that no one else can reprint it for twenty-eight years to come, even upon payment to Mr. George for compiling it, must be left to his conscience. We might imagine a time when the (not impossible) immense sale of this work, protected by the odious copyright monopoly, shall have enriched both compiler and publisher, entitling some later member of Mr. George's school to denounce both of them as the bloated beneficiaries of "privilege."

Or, on the other hand, we might imagine a time when, the said sale not having been so large as the work deserved, and the original purchasers having, through an erroneous estimate of its value, sent their copies to the junk-man for ultimate transformation into useful wrapping-paper, the book will have become a rare and costly curiosity, so that the lucky possessor who had omitted to throw it away will be able to obtain for it, from the rich connoisseurs whom it denounces, a price representing not only its intrinsic value, but an "unearned increment," due to an artificial scarcity, resulting in an odious monopoly!

I do not seriously anticipate, however, from Mr. George's monopolistic copyright, acquired as a legal "privilege" for the benefit of his publisher and himself, either of these unhappy effects. On the contrary, I deem it likely that his book will be forgotten, in spite of its earnestness, eloquence and literary skill, because it deals with profound questions in the spirit of partisan prejudice and passion. It is essentially not judicial, but oratorical; and hence it will be ephemeral.