

WAS GEORGE A RACIST BECAUSE HE SUPPORTED RESTRICTIONS ON IMMIGRATION?

We have heard Henry George was inappropriately condemned as a racist by a Harvard professor at a ceremony commemorating George's death, because he supported limitations on immigration of Chinese coolies. This is very strange. In *Progress and Poverty*, George specifically argued that all races, including the Chinese, were equal. He also, in other writings, opposed the unrestricted importation of illiterate Chinese coolies, brought in originally by the railroad companies and later by the owners of California's huge estates for crop picking. The resulting explosion of complaint by American working men in the 1870's was described in the epic *Great Debates in American History, Vol XI*, edited by Professor Marion Mills. Much of what was then said is now being argued in relation to the immigration of Latin Americans as well as southeast Asians. Mills wrote in explaining the background for the Congressional debates on Chinese exclusion in 1877-79:

"During the decade following the Civil War, great opposition to the further admission of Chinese developed in the Pacific States, whether they had been brought in great numbers under provisions of the Burlingame treaty with China, in order to work upon the railroads, etc. The price of white labor was very high owing to the opportunities afforded American citizens to take up homesteads, mining claims, etc., and so dig out of the land rich wages for themselves as well as be independent of employers. But, when the more productive mining claims and homesteads were taken up, and the amount of these was further limited by Government grants to railroads, the product of land at the margin, which, according to the law of David Ricardo, establishes the rate of wages, decreased more and more, until the hitherto independent American citizen was forced into the labor market. Here he met with the competition of the Chinese coolie, who, with a far lower standard of living, and with virtually the same ability as an unskilled laborer, underbid him as an employee.

"Obviously, though the coolie is the cause of the low wages, I am forced to take or starve, and therefore he began to demand, through his congressman, the exclusion of his competitor from this country. The coolie, having no vote, had few political friends, and these were idealists who lived far to the east, and even there commanded little influence"

The Burlingame treaty of June 18, 1868 stated in part:

"The United States of America and the Emperor of China cordially recognize the inherent and inalienable right of man to change his income and allegiance, and also the mutual advantage of free migration and emigration of their citizens and subjects, respectively, from the one country to the other for the purpose of curiosity, or trade or as permanent residents."

On February 28, 1877, the Report on Chinese Immigration by the Joint Congressional Committee made its report. It noted the rapid development of the Pacific Coast "with the cheap and docile labor of the Chinese, and the opposition to restriction on Chinese immigration by religious teachers, referring to "a duty and opportunity for Christianizing them." The report continued:

"The committee found that laboring men and artisans, perhaps without exception were opposed to the influx of Chinese, on the ground that hard experience had shown that they are thereby thrown out of employment and the means of decent livelihood are more difficult of acquisition. . . . The Chinese have reduced wages to what would be starvation prices for white men and women, and engrossed so much of the labor in the various callings that there is a lack of employment for whites; and young men are growing up in idleness, while young women, willing to work, are compelled to resort to doubtful means of support."

However, the problem in the 19th century was that the imported Chinese were men without education of any kind, who had been practically slaves to the ruling landlords during the rule of the Chinese emperor. The pittances they received for working for the railroads and the big California estates were fortunes compared to what they would

receive back home. And so the strife with American workers was inevitable.

Today, we have a much different situation. The best educated and most prosperous families in China and Taiwan have been sending their children to the U.S. to study. And those students are usually at the top of every class and the recipients of most scholastic honors. We discussed the educational progress in California with Bryan Stevens, formerly president of the California Teachers Association, who spent years teaching social science in San Marino High School. San Marino is a very wealthy community. Asked whether his students were really interested in social science, Stevens said that outside of the Chinese, most of the San Marino students were just interested in booze, drugs, and sex.

The claimed discrepancy between Henry George supporting removal of tariffs on goods, but opposing immigration to the U.S. of the same foreign workers to produce the same goods was explained by Professor Paul Clark of Williams College twelve years ago as follows:

"George argues that it is essential to distinguish goods markets and labor markets. In labor markets, competition among laborers determines basic wages and wage differentials; American wages are comparatively high internationally because America is a country with abundant natural resources. In goods markets, protection restricts availability of goods, raises prices, and reduces real wages of labor. Thus protection in goods markets is actually harmful to American labor. On the other hand, protection in labor markets, such as by restricting immigration, could be beneficial to American labor. Thus, advocates of industrial protection, in George's eyes, not only deceived wage earners about its actual (adverse) effect on real wages, but also typically favored free immigration which further restrained real wages."

Workers always gain and landowners lose from a minimization of workers. This was made obvious in the horrible times of the Great Plague in the middle ages. Wages zoomed, and it was hard to get workers at any price. At the same time, the price of land collapsed. As it was before, so it is today. ●●●●●