

## Georgists Turn Out at Eastern Economic Association Conference

*by Wyn Achenbaum*

The Eastern Economic Association held its annual conference in Philadelphia in February. The USBIG (US Basic Income Group) held its own sessions under the EEA umbrella, sponsoring a single track of presentations, mostly held in the same room. (Two years ago, there were two USBIG tracks.) Drawn by a number of familiar names, including most notably, the keynote speaker for USBIG, Nic Tideman, I chose to attend. The USBIG schedule had many interesting sessions, but a number of familiar names popped up elsewhere on the large EEA program, and there were various eye-catching session titles and individual papers.

*From the USBIG Keynote Address by Prof. Nic Tideman*

Suppose that a group of people propose to organize a political movement that would levy a tax on incomes from wages and savings, to finance a greater basic income grant. They argue: “We believe that in a good society, people take care of their fellow citizens. We want to live in a society in which anyone with an income is required to pay a portion of that income into a fund that provides bigger basic income grants. Why shouldn’t we be able to create such a society?”

The answer is that they should be able to create such a society for themselves, but they do not have a respectable claim to imposing such a society on people who do not want it. Thus it is important to have a process by which people with preferences that differ from those of the majority are able to separate themselves from the rules that the majority wishes to impose. This is necessary both to give the majority the opportunity to have the society they want for themselves without being constrained by the objections of the minority and to give the minority the opportunity to be free from a tyranny of the majority. The processes by which the minority remove themselves from the rules of the majority are migration and secession. Because both of these processes are costly, it is important for the majority to be sensitive to the possibility that they are imposing unwarranted burdens on the minority.

The ethical problem of the majority in the world we live in is yet more complicated. The rights of all persons to equal shares of the value of exclusive access to nature are not recognized. And the rights of unhappy minorities to secede are not recognized either. Thus a majority with the power to impose its preference on the minority must choose between denying themselves the opportunity to have the form of society they wish for themselves, and imposing on the minority costs that they

should not have to bear. Starting basic income grants with revenue provided by payments for exclusive access to Nature will ease this dilemma, but a significant part of it will remain until global rights of equal shares of the value of exclusive access to nature, and rights of secession, are recognized.

For those who have never attended one of these, a few words are in order. At any one time, there might be a dozen sessions going on. Some might draw as many as a few dozen people. Others will have half a dozen. Some rooms will only have the moderator, the speakers and the discussants. People wander in and out of sessions quite freely. Many of the presenters are young economics faculty, and in a few sessions, graduate students or undergrads. Presentations are made using overhead slides; many presenters bring copies of their paper to hand out. Discussants often present with slides as well. The discussion was often along the lines of how a paper might be improved before being submitted for publication.

There is an exhibit hall, populated mostly by publishers. The Schalkenbach Foundation had a table there, next to USBIG's, and Blackwell, which publishes *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, also had a table.

Friday morning, Dan Sullivan and Harold Kyriazi were set for a session on "Saving Communities". Unfortunately, the assigned room was on the 33rd floor of the hotel, rather than on the 2nd, 3rd and 4th floors where the bulk of the activity was going on. After 15 or 20 minutes, when no one else had arrived, we went downstairs and sat in on another session. I later talked to someone who had arrived later and wondered where the session was. The session we joined was part of the USBIG track, and the Q&A turned out to be quite interesting. There were just enough Georgists in the room, and the questioning was lively, including an impassioned and well-reasoned response by Laura-Lee Smith to a somewhat ugly statement from an audience member.

Steve Zarlenga challenged the monetary theories of both Adam Smith and Carl Menger, while Cay Hehner explained how the only points of agreement between Adam Smith and Karl Marx are their points of error. Polly Cleveland spoke on "Cooperation, Competition and Rent: A Natural History Perspective". Richard Biddle and Dan Sullivan did a session on the *Landlord Game* story behind the game of *Monopoly*. Prof. Jerome Heavey reported on the effect of Federal tax policy on state tax policy choices. Alanna Hartzok compared and contrasted the disposition of oil royalties in Alaska, Norway and Nigeria.

I wandered into a session on teaching economics, wondering whether that was a good use of my time, and found myself sitting next to Mike Curtis, and the next to arrive was Steve Zarlenga; the total audience might have been 10. In another session, also

devoted to teaching economics, I was one of perhaps 6 in the audience. In yet another, on poverty, I was one of five. This one included a presentation from a Census Bureau researcher on people going in and out of poverty, and another from a Bangladeshi-born instructor who was teaching a survey course on poverty and Katrina. In yet another, a young professor from Marist spoke on land and ownership. The Q&A sessions were generally lively and interesting.

I had just completed posting Harry Gunnison Brown's *Significant Paragraphs from Progress and Poverty* on [my website](#), and had printed out a dozen copies of the PDF file version to hand out. I found what seemed to be good homes for each. I also handed out yellow "bookmark this page" bookmarks for the website, sometimes with suggestions of specific pages that might be of interest to the person based on their paper or a question they had asked.

Saturday evening, Nic Tideman gave the keynote speech for the USBIG series, and they clearly heard him. After dinner, there was a reception at the Henry George School, attended by about 25 people.