

Two Major Influences

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In a lifetime few people have the opportunity or receptiveness to become aware of concepts that are able to transform their thinking along new and logical lines. My days have been favoured by an encounter when I was a military instructor at the British Military College of Science. There I became one of a series of selected "targets" of a civilian instructor, Harry Knowles. In his gentle persuasive manner he soon had me committed to a study of Progress and Poverty, but he pointed out that in this work, George did not claim to have expressed the ultimate in social truth.

The second person to influence my thinking was Loring D. Beckwith of Stockton, California who edited The Forum and with whom I corresponded. Just as Henry George refined the definition of the term "wealth" as used in economics, so Beckwith applied a similar process to other terminology in common use with Georgists and others. The implications are far-reaching.

If we free the term "moral" from its discordant outgrowths and make it apply to individual relationships only, a whole new vista opens up. The Georgist understands wages to be an individual product, and rent a social product. Similarly, Beckwith realised that morality concerns individuals only - what people do and think and feel. Society, not being able to do, to think and feel is not governed by morality. Society is influenced by natural law as are the tides, the seasons, the circulation of the blood, the digestion of our food. To have good social conditions we do not need to call upon morality to make every one virtuous. We can have good social conditions with men lacking in the higher moral qualities, just as we can have safe aircraft made by men as imperfect as they are. All that we need to do to improve social conditions is to spread an understanding of the natural laws of the distribution of wealth which together make up a science as exact as the science of chemistry or physics. Any one who can apply the principles of good business management will be able to apply the social science to see how we may have peace, prosperity and social harmony. We trust Nature, said Beckwith, to circulate our blood, to digest our food. We must equally accept Nature's ability, unaided by man's interference, to bring about social justice.

Beckwith set me to thinking about land titles. We don't sell land, he said, we merely sell title to land. We can't tax land, but we can put a tax on land titles. Relating this idea to the question of rent: rent can originate only with the granting of land titles either by fiat law or by common consent. It follows that rent is communally produced. When people say that rent is caused by differences in fertility, by possession of a view, access to seashore or a lake, etc., they ignore this fact. In such cases rent is merely enhanced by community pressure, just as it is enhanced by the activity of the community around about - good neighbours, and both publicly and privately financed benefits available at a site.

Beckwith agreed with Henry George that the distribution of wealth is dual, not tripartite. People as individuals work to receive wages. People as a community work to receive rent. The idea of interest being a channel of the distribution of wealth is illogical.

Beckwith insisted again and again that land is not property; that people must have equal freedom. These two pivotal statements are the quintessence of the Georgist philosophy. Land is not private property; land is not government property; land is, as it ever was, the property of the Maker. Man holds it in usufruct, and if he cares at all for his posterity, he is obligated to be a good steward.

TAX REFORM AUSTRALIA is the new name of the Henry George League of Victoria. Address is the same: 31 Hardware St., Melbourne 3000, Vic., Australia. This group was host to a Conference, January 24-25 on "Incentive Tax Reform - the Way to Prosperity." It was held at the University of Melbourne.