



## POVERTY IS NOT NATURAL

by GEORGE CURTIS

Reviewed by Kai Dattani

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This country is crying out for a new narrative on its deepening poverty crisis. The last few months have done little to help. Consideration of the severe economic impacts of a hefty national lockdown has only just begun. Manchester United strikers are taking the place of politicians in holding the government's feet to the fire. In the aftermath of its crippling 2019 election defeat, the Labour Party are yet to carve out a new identity and philosophy. It certainly feels as if there is a gulf of ideas about the causes, impacts and solutions to poverty.

However, is that so?

In *Poverty is not Natural*, George Curtis traces a clear cause behind poverty throughout history. For Curtis poverty exists as a structural fault in the system, a reversible injustice in the same light as slavery or apartheid, or put simply; a choice. Behind this 'fault' exists the recurring and currently unsolved injustice of private property in land, as laid bare in Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*.

However, it would be a mistake to assume that *Poverty is not Natural* is simply a rehashing of Henry George's work. In a thorough interrogation of private land ownership throughout history, Curtis goes far and into depth, preventing the book from existing in any sort of Georgist bubble.

In its first part, the book is remarkably comprehensive in its exploration of private land ownership as a cause of poverty. Curtis explores works written by Winston Churchill, Leo Tolstoy and Keir Hardie. Beyond these famous voices, Curtis delves into lesser-known historical figures who have argued along the same lines as Henry George. These include Bishop Thomas Nulty, who fiercely defended the rights of Irish tenant farmers being forced off their land during the Great Famine, and Andrew MacLaren, a Member of Parliament within Clement Attlee's Labour government who argued for a land value tax in the aftermath of the Second World War.

For a long-serving trade unionist and Labour Party councillor, Curtis's book is remarkably politically diverse. He calls out the austerity of the right, whilst also sharply challenging the gradual shift towards government welfare and socialism of his own party on the left. This diversity of ideas is directly a result of Curtis's unique personal background and political journey.

Lincolnshire born and bred, Curtis grew up around the farms of his agricultural county, quickly joining the National Union of Agricultural Workers in 1942. He rose to become the District Organiser of his area and went on to serve in this role for over thirty years. His special interest and expertise in the plight of rural communities and regional inequality are clear within the text. He explores the damaging role of private land ownership from an agricultural point of view, notably in his chapter covering the Great Famine in Ireland, whilst also looking forward towards solutions to solve the United Kingdom's current crisis of regional inequality and rural poverty.

It becomes clear very quickly that George Curtis's politics in the book are deeply personal and cannot be separated from his own life experiences. As someone who had the pleasure of corresponding through letters with George Curtis since 2018, in the editing process of the book, hearing about his experiences that directly shape the chapters was fascinating.

A particularly memorable account that I got to speak with him about was his visit to East Germany in the late fifties. After visiting the Leipzig Fair, a state farm and the Buchenwald concentration camp with its prisons and gas chambers, he realised that there must be a 'third solution', aside from free-market capitalism or authoritarian Marxism to cure poverty. It was these encounters that led him towards Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*, published in the year 1879.

Despite the book's bold historical interests in the history of poverty and support for a land-value tax, it by no means lives in the past. After establishing the forgotten narrative regarding private land ownership throughout history, Curtis moves forward with powerful momentum into the present day. First of all, Curtis dissects the role of charity within today's society, proving how it can only mitigate the effects of poverty as opposed to addressing the cause.

Most interestingly, Curtis delves in detail into the issues within the Labour Party in its response to poverty. Heavily inspired by his own experiences as a councillor in the Labour Party, Curtis explores how Henry George's ideas regarding poverty have in fact been written out of the party's philosophy. His knowledge of the history of the Labour Party, right from its birth with Keir Hardie to the exclusion of Georgist ideas within the Attlee government

is thorough, informed and particularly relevant today, as Labour goes through its own ideological makeover under new political leadership.

When discussing *Poverty is not Natural* with George Curtis, as I had the privilege to do so as the book's editor, his vision and political ideas for today's society and economy were savvy and well-articulated, all whilst being based upon clear, uncomplicated moral truths. Personally, I am glad that these parts made it into the book.

In the book's latter chapters, Curtis proposes replacing a complicated, convoluted and unequal tax system with a single tax on land value. Curtis's solutions seeks to balance economic efficiency with a higher moral justice; showing how both can exist as two sides of the same coin. The articulation of his ideas is comprehensive, considering the positive impacts on people of all ages and backgrounds, as well as businesses, the government and even homeowners.

Whilst going into complex economic ideas, Curtis never let's go of the Christian Methodist philosophy that runs behind the book as its spine. He proves how simple politics and economics can be, when one considers that what is just is usually also economically profitable.

As a qualified Methodist preacher since 1949, Curtis's references to Biblical works as a moral compass are frequent, however, the book is far from overly religious. Instead Curtis deliberately broadens out into non-denominational, wider ideas of natural law to prove just how 'unnatural' poverty is and how realigning our modern-day policies and laws with natural law can cure such a social evil.

*Poverty is not Natural* is simultaneously a whistle-stop tour through Christian, political and social history, a modern 'Condition of England' novel and a radical policy proposal that an economist would marvel at.

Conclusively, in this very recent book from publisher Shephard-Walwyn George Curtis manages to convincingly mesh together his own life experiences, historical interests, Christian faith and acute analysis of the economy into a streamlined and easy-to-access argument for social justice. 🇬🇧

## HGF BRIEFING NOTES

### FRIDAY MEETINGS ON ZOOM

The principles of Henry George will not cease to be taught even in times of global pandemics and general turmoil. As was the case with this year's successful Open Day Event the HGF's regular Friday meetings have now been organized on the online platform Zoom until further notice.

This reorganizing relates to both the afternoon and the evening sessions. All times remain the same. The timeslots being 2:30pm to 4:00pm and 7:15pm to 8:45pm, respectively.

Before meetings can again take place in a regular social format at Mandeville Place all relevant Zoom links can be found at the HGF website. Please notice both the relevant Meeting ID as well as the correlated password/passcode.

Go to:

[www.henrygeorgefoundation.org/events/friday-events](http://www.henrygeorgefoundation.org/events/friday-events)

### NEW LAND&LIBERTY FEATURES

In this autumn issue we introduce a new Land&Liberty feature under the title *From Our Archives*. As many regular Land&Liberty readers will know our heritage stretches back to 1894 beginning with the name *The Single Tax* and later, in 1902, under the name *Land Values*.

As editors we appreciate and cherish our magazine's history and consider it a true privilege to continue forward on this path. But as we move forward we sometimes come across little interesting pieces from our magazine's fascinating past. Pieces, which feel equally relevant today as in the time they were written. We have decided to give those pieces new life. Not in every issue; but when we come across something that reflects a social issue in our own time. We hope you will enjoy reading *From Our Archives*.

Starting with our upcoming winter issue in January/February '21 you will also find a longer and more detailed passage from Henry George's writings. In much the same way as explained above we will aim for this passage to reflect a contemporary social issue. 🇬🇧

