Georgist world of Huxley

By Fred Harrison

TWENTIETH century writers who have sought to predict the future have generally been pessimistic. As social critics, they believed we were destined for a dehumanised existence.

Some of them suggested we were collectively heading for the funny farm: George Orwell exploited this notion in a masterly way in *Animal Farm*, his savage satire of the dictatorial aspects of Soviet socialism.

But in alerting us to the dangers of regimentation, the subordination of individual freedom to the orderly process of central planning, and the amoral efficiency of scientific solutions, they made the fatal mistake of narrowing their readers' visions of what was possible.

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* is a classic example. Fortunately, the author was big enough to recant and tell another tale.

HUXLEY (1894-1956), after taking a first in English at Oxford, earned a living by writing verse. He was living in France when he wrote *Brave New World* in the early 1930s, before settling in California in 1937.

Brave New World offered readers the vision of two models. One was of a primitive existence on a reservation in New Mexico; here, the "savages" would be free to live their lives based on the nuclear family system, free to drown their pain and sorrows with alcohol.

In the other society, humans were bred in test tubes. They lived trouble-free lives of controlled bliss and sexual promiscuity. The price they paid: the abolition of all sense of individuality.

Scary, yes, but real? In the foreword to the 1946 edition, Huxley pinpointed the central flaw in this work.[1] He acknowledged that he was wrong to offer "only two alternatives, an insane life in Utopia, or the life of a primitive in an Indian village, a life more human in some respects, but in others hardly less queer and abnormal. At the time the book was written this idea, that human beings are given free will in order to choose between insanity on the one hand and lunacy on the other, was one that I found amusing and regarded as quite possibly true."

Generations of students of literature and political philosophy have pored over Brave New World, the better to understand the future. And they came away blinkered!

Huxley redeems himself when he concedes that, if he were to rewrite the book, he would offer a third option, one which he characterised as "the possibility of sanity." In a few bold strokes he outlines the elements of this model:

"In this community economics would be decentralist and Henry Georgian, politics Kropotkinesque and co-operative. Science and technology would be used as though, like the Sabbath, they had been made for man, not (as at present and still more so in the Brave New World) as though man were to be adapted and enslaved to them."

Huxley, now, did not want to transport the Savage of the Indian tribe to Utopia "until he had had an opportunity of learning something at first hand about the nature of a society composed of freely co-operating individuals devoted to the pursuit of sanity. Thus altered, *Brave New World* would possess an artistic and...a philosophical completeness, which in its present form it evidently lacks."

THE tendency towards statism was one of Huxley's fears. This, he argued, was the result of rapid technological change, the adoption of mass production techniques, and the fact that the population was largely propertyless. This combination produced "economic and social confusion," the solution to which was centralised governmental control of a totalitarian kind.

"Only a large-scale popular movement towards decentralization and self-help can arrest the present tendency towards statism," he warned. "At present there is no sign that such a movement will take place."

On the latter point, Huxley has been proved to be wrong. There is now a growing demand for the decentralisation of power, both in economics and politics.

That demand is not, as yet, coherently articulated by either the libertarians or the "greens", the most vociferous opponents of statism.[2] In the main these two

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REFERENCES

1 The first edition was published in London by Chatto & Windus in 1932. The 1946 foreword appears in the 1977 Granada paperback edition.

2 A start has been made. See Paul Ekins, Editor, *The Living Economy*, London: RKP, 1986.

Call that stirred the world

HENRY GEORGE emerged on the American scene with the publication of his first book, *Progress & Poverty* in 1879. His stirring call for liberty through economic equity quickly captured worldwide attention and placed him among the front rank of economic and social philosophers.

His central idea was that poverty grew with advancing wealth because land monopoly and speculation absorbed all the increase brought on by progress. The thesis first appeared in a series of editorials, then as a pamphlet, in 1871. George had been a journalist. Still in his teens and trained as a printer, he had left his native Philadelphia in the 1850s for San Francisco. There, after failed adventures in search of gold, he practised his trade, working for several newspapers, rising from printer to reporter to editor. He became publisher of his own newspaper and a leading citizen of San Francisco by the time *Progress & Poverty* was published.

In his youth, he was exposed to the anti-slavery sentiment alive at home in abolitionist Philadelphia. During periods of hard times and depressions in California, he personally suffered the pang of hunger, unemployment and uncertainty. This background helped to make him an ardent student of the science, which in his estimation, should explain the cause and supply the cure for the problem of the persistence of poverty with the increase of wealth.

Reading the economic writers of his time – Prof Henry Carey, Henry Fawcett, James Rogers, etc. – he found a jumble of confusion and contradiction in their definitions, analyses and conclusions. Even masters of classical economics such as John Stuart Mill and David Ricardo, who, like himself, took their lead from the great Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations*, fell into errors of thought that to George's mind befogged the subject.

Progress & Poverty was not an attempt to redesign

GRANDFATHER CONNECTIONS

• Aldous Huxley was the grandson of Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-95), the British biologist who is generally agreed to have been one of the 19th century's top scientists.

One encyclopaedia describes him thus: "His remarkable powers of research, his clear exposition of scientific facts, and his accuracy of deduction have rarely been equalled."

It was probably through his grandfather that Aldous Huxley became familiar with the works of George. According to Agnes de Mille, Henry George's granddaughter: "Thomas Huxley had been historically the first of what Mother always referred to as 'disciples'" *(Speak To Me, Dance With Me,* Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1973, p.71).

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schools of thought fail to integrate the economics of Henry George into their political philosophies. If they were to do so, they would realise that the concentration of corporate and political power that stems from the monopoly control over natural resources would automatically dissolve.

This is what Huxley came to appreciate. He saw that the socialisation of the rental value of land (using the tax system and the marketplace) would liberate people, shifting the balance of power in favour of the individual. People would acquire the freedom to choose whether to work for themselves or others; be free to agree on the terms of employment without resort to the countervailing power of trades unions; and enjoy decent living standards based on the retention of the full value of the product which they produced by their labour.

In sharing the value of the resources of nature among all members of a community, by using the money to fund socially-necessary projects, a new social spirit would emerge based on generosity and co-operation, rather than selfishness and conflict. This is evidently what Huxley had in mind when he incorporated the name of Kropotkin, the Russian anarchist, into his model of an alternative society. Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) developed a theory of mutual aid in which social stability and individual welfare were promoted by the communal side of life.

The Georgist model is now receiving increasing attention (though not always with due acknowledgement to Henry George himself). It synthesises the best of the two major streams of thought of the past 100 years; the freedom of the individual associated with the rights and obligations which stem from the social and spiritual side of life.