

## THE LAND QUESTION AND COMMUNITY

One of the most harmful effects of the privatisation of land is the erosion of community. The history of land enclosure in England and Scotland shows this to be its primary effect. Communities that were originally more or less self-sufficient were broken up and families were driven from the land to the towns or cities to seek paid labour. In this way the natural relations between people and the land were permanently broken, and gradually the poorest were driven into the city slums that were unfit for human habitation. These slums themselves were a form of land exploitation in England until 1851 when legislation imposed minimal standards on dwellings. We hardly need to repeat this history as it is well known. The village dweller ceased to be his own master, owner of his own capital and the works of his hands and was compelled to become a wage labourer. We have long forgotten that in the high Middle Ages a wage labourer was considered equal to a pauper and in need of charity since he was unable to support himself. Both the Church and the ordinary people would support him and his family. Such community support had more dignity than being a wage labourer. Welfare was a shared responsibility and part of community life. The common good took precedence over individual good.

But perhaps what has not been so well known is the long-term effects of the privatisation of land on human community generally. There is something of a forgotten history here. With the land enclosures and the rise of modern industry, creating the wage labourer, the basic conception of society gradually changed. This became very evident to me in my researches into the background of Henry George's *A perplexed Philosopher* in preparation for Volume VI of the *Annotated Works*. My usual areas of study are classical Greece and the Middle Ages. The conception of society in those times was profoundly different from our modern conception. For example, in the Greek city state, or *polis*, every citizen was understood to be responsible for the good of the whole. It was this responsibility for the well-being of the whole city that defined a person as a citizen and which gave them rights. Or in medieval times a town was likened to a living organism, analogous to the universe itself, with each member enjoying a specific station according to their abilities to contribute to the good of all. The various trades, institutions and customs were all understood as serving the common good. Nobody was excluded, and those unable to support themselves were simply looked after by the whole community. This was not a matter of 'entitlement' but simply of the nature of community.

So it came as a shock to me to read the social theories of the nineteenth century – the theories of Herbert Spencer, Thomas Huxley and Charles Darwin, for example. While these three differed in certain respects about evolutionary theory, they shared two basic beliefs in common: the theory of biological progress and the new radical Individualism. That is to say, they each saw the present rise of industry as an advance on all

previous history, and they each saw the 'individual' as the centre of society, in particular those individuals who commanded the great expansion of industry and of the British Empire. They saw this progress not only as material progress, but also as moral progress. Indeed, for Herbert Spencer in particular, material progress and moral progress were one and the same thing. They were expressions of the synthesis arising from the original factors of matter and motion – his materialist theory of evolution. Matter and motion had culminated in the biological superiority of the English race and the great captains of industry, the envy of the French.

If you read the opponents of Henry George in his own time, their cry is 'liberty' and 'individual freedom'. Their enemy was not merely Henry George and the various socialist reformers, it was 'the state' or government itself. Their conception of individualism was that, as higher individuals evolved, the need for the state would eventually wither away. Government was for an earlier and lower stage of evolution, such as in classical Greece. Likewise, the poor – which is to say the 'morally inferior' – would wither away too if left to their proper evolutionary fate under the law of survival of the fittest. By the way, it was Spencer who coined that phrase 'survival of the fittest', not Darwin, although Darwin happily adopted it. It corresponded with the theory that the great law of nature was competition within and between species, an idea now projected onto society and the market economy.

Now it is not difficult to see how these ideas were amenable to extreme reformers on either side – to the Marxists and to the Libertarians. On the one side, *all* property and all means of production should be owned by the State. On the other side, *all* property and all means of production should be owned by private individuals. Yet both sides had the conception of the state eventually disappearing through evolution. In one the individual would be subsumed into an amorphous community. In the other, solitary evolved individuals would be practically self-sufficient in mastery of the world's resources. On one side the 'proletariat' was supreme. On the other the 'individual industrialist' was supreme. Yet both positions were equally materialist, determinist, and atheist. And both were equally opposed by George. The Individualists and the Marxists both read Herbert Spencer.

These are the kind ideas that were at war with each other in George's time, and which he was in part dealing with in his critique of the social theory of Spencer in his *A Perplexed Philosopher*. My point, however, is that these ideas, at both extremes, were consequent upon the privatisation of the land. The conception of human community had been radically changed, or rather, radically distorted and deformed.



Given that only a few individuals have possession of the land, and that they determine its uses and who shall prosper, whatever may be 'natural' in the human community is necessarily distorted. Traditions and customs, institutions, functions and specific talents and abilities, which arise only through continuous integration of community, are all gradually lost or degraded. Society loses any distinct form and the people no longer experience themselves as members of specific communities or as fellow dwellers on Mother Earth. The sense of belonging to a particular place gradually disappears.

There is a law of consequences at work here. If the natural relation of the community with the land is broken, then natural human relations are broken or lost. As Tolstoy put it in his book on art: 'If farming is wrong, then everything is wrong'. With the privatisation of land economics becomes founded in a theory of scarcity of resources, which in turn gives birth to the theory of market competition. The natural distribution that arose through community is now replaced by need.

These ideas of the nineteenth century remain powerful influences in our own time, even though Herbert Spencer is all but forgotten. Yet he remains, along with Auguste Comte, a founder of the new science of sociology. His influence extends to Karl Marx and Max Weber. Marx saw Spencer's theory of 'survival of the fittest' as confirming his theory of 'class struggle'. And I think it is true to say that our understanding of society has been in continual crisis since that time. In particular, the civil realm has been in conflict with the economic realm. For while civil rights have grown, economic rights have diminished, while the causes of this diminishment have become almost invisible in modern economic theory. And this disconnection between the civil and the economic realms has itself contributed to a profound distortion in the very idea of 'natural rights'. For example, the freedoms that properly belong to the economic realm are now sought in the civil realm – such as the minimum wage. And in the civil realm itself, the quest for *equality* has turned into demands for recognition of *difference* in so-called 'identity politics'.

Paradoxically, the rise of modern individualism, and the quest for equal rights, has turned into a loss of a sense of personal identity, especially in younger people. There is no longer any sense of belonging in community where rights may be exercised. Identity politics is at root an expression of communal alienation and cultural displacement.

All these distortions lie at the door of the general failure to understand that the land cannot be withdrawn from nature into private property. They are all consequent upon the misappropriation of the land. George himself listed a host of social ills that arise through this failure of understanding, for example, criminality and alcoholism. I think we can now count

drug addiction as a necessary consequence too. We can also count the erosion of the family and responsible parenthood as a consequence. Natural social relations are destroyed through the wrong relation with the land. These in turn place huge costs upon the welfare state, which itself is a necessary and inevitable consequence of the misappropriation of land.

And here is where one of the most outrageous ideas of Herbert Spencer is still at work. We condemn the criminal, the broken family and the drug addict in the same way that Spencer condemned the Victorian slums. It was from this condemnation of the poor, regarded as responsible for their own fate, that eugenics became widely discussed in England and other parts of Europe. The disintegration of the family, criminality, and drug addiction are all 'unnatural' social phenomena. But they are not due to the 'degeneracy' of the individuals, and therefore to be remedied by any form of eugenics or 'social cleansing' through natural selection. Such solutions were seriously proposed in the nineteenth century, even in the British Parliament. Such ideas have the devastating effect of concealing the real causes of deprivation, the breaking of the natural connection of society with the land.

As a young man Herbert Spencer had seen the injustices that arose through the privatisation of the land. As I am sure you know, Spencer wrote a magnificent chapter arguing that land cannot be private property in his first book, *Social Statics*, published in 1850. George had made Spencer well known through quoting from that chapter in *Progress and Poverty*. Until then *Social Statics* had remained relatively unknown. But George quoting it extensively put Spencer in an awkward position in relation to the ruling class in England – the landed class. Anxious to protect his name and to remain in the right circles, he needed to extricate himself from what he once knew to be true and just. In modern terms, his opposition to private property in land had become for him 'politically incorrect' and would lead to social exclusion.

So he joined the Radical Individualism of his time and opposed any kind of amelioration of poverty, whether from charity or from Gladstone's reforms. His idea of justice was now 'each gets the consequences of their own actions'. The rich entrepreneur *deserves* his wealth, the poor chimney sweep *deserves* his poverty. The destitute *deserve* their destitution. The fact that the labour of the poor made the rich wealthy was quietly overlooked. According to evolutionary theory, the strong survive and the weak are eliminated. That is the new justice. It is 'social progress', another distorting idea of the nineteenth century. And one can see its roots going back to Thomas Hobbes' notion of the state of nature as 'war of all against all'. While for Hobbes it was a static condition of things, for Spencer and his wide following it had become an evolutionary principle, and therefore equated with the fiction of social progress. In fairness to Hobbes, he saw government as necessary to curb what he conceived to be the natural brutality of individuals.

It may not be very comfortable to admit it, but these ideas are still at play in our own time. But for us they have become normalised. For example, business is regarded as necessarily driven by competition for the highest profit. Wholly indifferent

and mechanical 'market forces' determine who thrives and who is eliminated. And under the notion of 'freedom of the individual', and a host of arbitrary claims that spring from it, the underlying economic injustices remain invisible, or are taken to be inevitable. Yet they corrode the life and culture of community.

Perhaps the tragedy in all this is that it was foreseeable. Not only had George pointed to the dire consequences of privatisation of land, but many others in his time and slightly earlier had also pointed it out. For example Robert Owen, who founded the cooperative movement in 1826, along with several communities and schools for children, here in the UK and the USA, with decent housing and fair wages. Also Patrick Dove, who George praises in *The Science of Political Economy*, had proposed a land tax in 1851 as the way to justice in a truly Christian society.

But even acquaintances of Darwin, Huxley and Spencer proposed the introduction of a land tax. The most important of these was the evolutionist Alfred Russel Wallace, who had first formulated the theory of natural selection, usually attributed to Darwin. He was first president of the Land Nationalisation Society formed in 1881, where he arranged for Henry George to speak when in England. In 1882 Wallace published a remarkable book entitled *Land Nationalisation: Its Necessity and its Aims* in which he notes that he had come across *Progress and Poverty* when he had almost finished his book. He fully endorses George's analysis of the land question.

As a widely travelled naturalist, Wallace had seen how well so-called 'primitive' societies live, remarking that they had far higher moral standards than Victorian England that tolerated poverty and inequality. This observation was contrary to the claims of Spencer, who describes primitive societies as cannibals. But one observation of Wallace that I find especially striking is that our large cities are unnatural. He observes that this is indicated in the necessity of sewer systems. Where people live without privatisation of land, they are naturally dispersed into small communities, and in these communities all wastage is returned to cultivate the land. There is no wastage, no need for refuse collection. Wallace's observations of evolution are now gaining recognition among scientists, and he is regarded as the earliest environmentalist. He saw the obvious link between the privatisation of the land and the destruction of the environment, including the ailments and diseases that come with large cities.

Thus Wallace observed a link between the natural social proportion of communities, morality, environment, and the land question. The privatisation of land creates a rift between the civic and economic realms as an inevitable consequence of a wrong relation with the earth. And to some extent modern Georgists inadvertently contribute to this wrong relation, if I might say so, by abstracting land into 'location'. Location and locomotion are the words Herbert Spencer used in his abdication from his earlier philosophy. He speaks a great deal of nonsense about our rights to 'natural media', such as air, water and light, and where 'land' now becomes just another 'natural media' where we have 'locomotion'. In neoclassical economics 'land' has been abstracted out of existence, or conflated into either capital or location. This follows from Herbert Spencer and is contrary

to Henry George. Consider what happens if we turn the primary elements of production – land, labour and capital – into location, energy and assets. Economics is then no longer part of nature or society. It is no longer human. George Orwell observed that, if you wish to deceive and confuse the public, use Latin abstracts and avoid concrete Anglo-Saxon words. As an example he gave ‘extending borders’ as a substitute for ‘war’. This tendency to abstraction now deceives and confuses modern students of economics, removing it from ethics and an activity of community. There is a belief that if you translate concrete observed reality into abstract formulas you get nearer to the truth of things and make them ‘rational’ and ‘scientific’. We have inherited this tendency from the nineteenth century but forgotten its rhetorical and ideological origins.

Wallace, speaking as a natural scientist, gave a warning against this tendency, noting that the economists William Jevons and Alfred Marshall were turning economics into an abstract mathematical science and breaking the link between the natural activities of labour on land as understood by Adam Smith, Robert Owen and Henry George. This move has, so to speak, ‘privatised’ the academic study of economics. Marshall’s famous attack on George when he had given a lecture at Oxford was to accuse him of having no academic expertise and therefore no knowledge of economics or right to speak on the subject. The move to appropriate economics for academic experts alone was one of the tactics used to undermine George and to protect the landed classes. My point is that abstract words such as ‘location’ instead of ‘land’ tend to *dislocate* the study of economics from the natural world as experienced in actual life. We must be careful not to speak the language of pseudo-science. As Edmund Burke pointed out to Thomas Paine, the knowledge of society is not derived from abstract metaphysics, but from the study of history and taking prudent action according to the possibilities for improvement in given circumstances.

Just as we have become accustomed to the privatisation of land, so likewise we have become accustomed to the privatisation of the individual. It is no accident that George’s opponents hit upon the ‘individual liberty’ as a defence of private property in land. Surely every individual should be free to make up his own mind on the question of property!

This argument conceals the obvious truth that *all* people have an equal right to dwell upon the land – to a ‘location’ if you insist! It is a self-evident truth utterly obvious to the Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert, the North American Indians, and the Australian Aborigines. They do not speak of ‘location’, but rather they acknowledge the land as the sacred Mother of all living beings, shared in common with all species. It is obvious that nature intends her gifts to be shared by all creatures, and she grants no contracts, deeds, titles or charters of private possession to any being. Sharing is the natural and equitable relation to the land. This ‘sharing’, which is still practiced in some parts of the world, even in modern Europe, is the natural basis of society and community. It is at once economic and civic. Everyone is a *participant* rather than a private autonomous individual. All *genuine* human rights spring from sharing the land and participating in communal life together. They are simply given

in the natural order of things and do not require proclamations or bills to exist. To turn natural rights into legal claims, although necessary in the present state of things, actually turns the human person into a private commodity, or into a ‘legal entity’ as Simone Veil argued. This is what the Radical Individualism and Libertarianism of the nineteenth century has given us under the invisible hand of Herbert Spencer’s social evolution.

I am not attacking our modern civil liberties. These are a great achievement of judicial development in the face of great odds. Community strives to continue to exist even when uprooted from the land. I only wish to bring attention to the fact that these civil liberties are in large part delusory if not founded in economic justice. The acceptance of privatisation of land has accustomed us to a perpetual conflict between civic and economic justice. And the more we attempt to resolve this conflict through civil freedoms alone, the more deeply we become enmeshed in economic injustices, not only of land speculation but also of the vast commercial monopolies and destructive banking practices which now prevail. By an extraordinary turning of things backwards, land speculation, vast commercial monopolies and modern banking are defended under the rubric of *civil liberties*.

One final thought. I have argued that we need to see the *social and civic consequences* of the privatisation of the land and the artificial economy of land speculation. It is not enough to study this issue within the economic sphere alone, since the historical separation of the economic and civic spheres are a direct consequence of private land ownership. In George’s time this connection was still obvious and could be seen by all. Social reformers, such as Robert Owen and the Quakers, were *economic reformers* at the same time as *social reformers*. It is the modern *disconnection* of the two spheres that leads some reformers to seek means of taking from the rich to give to the poor. But no amount of economic redistribution remedies the social consequences of land speculation. Likewise with those who demand changing the ‘system’. These kinds of mechanical changes really change nothing. They are ideologies rather than practical policies.

What is really needed is an understanding among a sufficient majority of the population of the real causes of poverty, crime, broken families and drug addiction – not to mention climate change and destructive modern farming methods. And in this regard, it is of little use merely campaigning for the implementation of a land tax.

The Georgist movement needs to widen its range and study the nature of society and its institutions. That wider approach was present to some degree in the early movement but has now faded away. To a very large extent, the materialist, individualist, atheist, and deterministic social theories of the nineteenth century are still with us and continue to influence our thought. They have created a cloud obscuring perception of the natural relations between the land and citizenship. 📌

*Editor’s note:*

*Talk given at the Henry George Foundation Open Day 2021*