

letter from the editor

Yesterday a new book arrived entitled *Generation Rent* by Chloe Timperley. Its subtitle is *Why You Can't Buy a Home or Even Rent a Good One*. It is a substantial gathering of evidence about the modern housing market and how it has ceased to serve its proper function of providing citizens with decent homes. Instead it has become a form of exploitation, where even the ordinary home buyer now sees themselves as 'investing' in a product that will produce a financial return. With the banks entering mortgage provision lending has trebled and consequently house prices have increased. As a result the number of home owners is decreasing each year, while the rental market increases and provides insecure and poor quality homes.

Generation Rent explores all this in detail and brings to light what we, as Georgists, already know: that land speculation lies at the root of the housing problem because land is finite. Buying and selling the same plot of land at a profit is essentially pyramid buying and selling. Because the profit comes from no actual increase in wealth, since the land does not increase, one day the pyramid will topple.

Meanwhile increasing house prices take a larger and larger share of people's incomes. Pay rises simply get absorbed in higher house prices and higher rents. There is no net increase in wealth. And where consumption of new wealth does increase, it is through credit. At the end of the day nobody benefits, apart from the institutions that lend at interest.

It is clear that bad laws allow this situation to develop, along with increased homelessness and the spread of foodbanks. Minor palliative policies are implemented, which at best only slow down the inevitable decline. The situation is defended by slogans about the 'free market' and how the market will 'self-adjust', while the fundamental problem of land tenure is never addressed.

If we read the ancient philosophers and the early Christians we discover they share one simple insight: that 'nature' or the 'land' belongs to nobody and ought to be held in common. Yet throughout history the land has been appropriated by the few who have managed to exploit the many. According to George, that is how civilisations fell, and in Britain we are now doing the same. And yet the obvious insight that nature cannot become private property fails to be grasped. Each home owner and each renter is brought into the vicious cycle unwittingly, contributing to the problem, yet unable to break out of it.

The British pride themselves in their freedom. We are a free democracy. Yet to be a free democracy means taking responsibility for the nation's laws and acquiring a basic understanding of the nature of society. Without these we cannot be said to be free. There is another simple insight shared by the ancient philosophers and early Christians: any law which benefits one party to the disadvantage of another party is a bad law. In fact, according to Gaius in his commentaries on *The Institutes of Civil Law*, it cannot even be called a law. Any law made contrary to nature is no law, no matter how 'legal' it may be.

Right at the root of law-making lies one very simple question: what is in accord with nature? And the first question that follows from that is: what may be private property? Nature provides sufficient for all as a direct gift. So any kind of arrangement of how to share nature must be through common agreement. No one, contrary to Locke, can claim a portion of nature simply through taking it first or applying labour to it. No cunning art or sophistry can turn nature into private property. So the foundational laws of any society must be in agreements of how each citizen has equal access to the gifts of nature. If these agreements are inequitable, then a maldistribution of wealth will inevitably follow, depriving some of the most basic needs, such as decent homes to live in.

It is clear from Henry George that if these basic laws were followed, then our relationship with wealth in general would change. The quest for acquisition of material wealth would cease because its root is the fear of poverty. This in turn would bring an end to the spoliation of nature and the environment. It would enable all to see clearly what was common and what was individual. It would bring an end to the commercialisation of money, labour, and land, and to the unjust laws that make them so.

The beauty of the land tax is that it draws a clear line between what is private and what is common, or between the individual and the community, and between what is commercial and what is not commercial. This in turn shows how government revenues should be applied to the general good, to public benefits which are more adequately administered from a common fund than through individual provision. The present pandemic has demonstrated that public health can be secured only through mutual effort and collective responsibility. 'All for one and one for all' as we read in *The Three Musketeers*. It is also clear that university education should be similarly funded and that its commercialisation is harming the institutions themselves. It is the duty of each generation to provide for the next. Nature shows this clearly throughout the species. The creation of educational debt is a profound abdication of democratic responsibility.

People have recently been angry with historic slavery and slave owners, yet have failed to appreciate that slavery was founded in the misappropriation of land. Without unlawful property in land there can be no slavery. As Henry George observed, land abuse has always been the root cause of economic and social injustice. And so it is now with housing in the UK. It is no use being angry with history when inequity through bad law-making lies evident in our streets. A free democracy has in its hands the power to remedy the ills of its bad laws through making just laws. But this power can only be exercised where it is understood that the pursuit of the common good is the only way to secure genuine individual good. That is the first law of society.



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