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# Let them Come – Henry George on the Global Migration Crisis

by Dr Franklin Obeng Odoom

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United Nations figures suggest the number of migrants now looking for a place to lay their heads and obtain some food to keep body and soul together is in the millions. So dire is this 'migration crisis' that it drew extensive commentary in the latest papal exhortation to the world – *Amoris Lætitia* – in which the problem is described as 'dramatic' and 'devastating' to all, destroying both families who migrate and those who stay behind. There is no shortage of analysis of why there is a migrant crisis and how it might be addressed, but a Georgist perspective is lacking.

Yet, in 1883, Henry George offered insights not only on 'How to manage the migrant crisis and keep Europe from tearing itself apart' (*The Economist*, 2016, vol. 418, no. 8975), but also on how to destroy

the roots of the problem his stimulating book, in *Social Problems* (Chapter IX of the 1966 version). At the time, large numbers of Irish migrants were arriving on the shores of the United States as poverty and inequality increased in Ireland and between Ireland and the rest of the world. Most commentators were against Irish emigrants into the United States – echoing a Malthusian population theory of more people equals more poverty, while sympathisers made the case for the acceptance of migrants on grounds of compassion alone, without taking into account the political economy of migration.

## 1. George on the causes and Solutions to Forced Migration of the Irish



Henry George was meticulous and thorough in developing his stance on the Irish migration. He first looked at the structural reasons for the forced migration of Irish; next he examined the conditions in the host country – the USA, and then offered his major recommendation: let them come, but abolish private property in land both in the origin and destination of migrants.

George had written extensively on the Irish land question, and there was no better person to understand the social conditions in Ireland. He showed that the monopolisation of land in Ireland was at the root of the Irish problem. A few people had captured land, were extracting rent from tenants, and were hoarding so land had become extremely expensive. Rent was swallowing incomes from work and with little left to eat after paying rent, workers were left frustrated. The reward for work – wages – itself was the target of so much taxation that, coupled with the growing rent, the conditions of workers were dire. Most of the workers could only take on debts but even then they could only afford to live on precarious lands. Areas with better land were occupied by the landlords' animals because such land use was more profitable. The conditions for major insurrection were rife.

The response of the Irish authorities was two-fold. The first was to invest in the army to hold down protest. And, second, to give 'aid' to the struggling by offering them some pocket money and some assistance to migrate to America where, in George's words, they were being dumped like garbage. The prospect of 'greener pastures' in America looked good for both the migrants and the authorities. Yet, the social dynamics that gave rise to the Irish problems plagued the USA too.

George saw how the Irish 'human garbage' would worsen the problems in the United States in two ways. First, population increase from migration would force rent up, but that is not to say migration worsens rent. Rather, private property in land creates the condition for rising rents. Second, the Irish problem would enable some Irish landlords to benefit twice: keep the landlordism in Ireland and add landlordism in the

United States. Without doing anything about the land dynamics in place, they would exact rent there as they were doing in Ireland. The tenants were worse off either way.

George's preferred solution, nevertheless, was: 'let them come'. However, he pointed out the land system was in need of fundamental changes. Migrants, like the rest of the US population, needed to work the land rather than become absentee landowners living off the rents exacted from those tilling the land. As America had large areas of vacant land, the migrants could till the land and be enabled to do so with some income and guidance to start off. Their labour need not be taxed. Those who had the privilege of private property in land, however, needed to be taxed heavily on 'their' rent in order to return the social windfall back to society. Applying this set of remedies would weaken the forces of dispersion and enable the distribution of concentrated wealth in the United States.

## 2. Contemporary Migration Crisis , the Ghost of Thomas Malthus and the Resurrection of Henry George

Analysis of contemporary migration is heavily influenced by the ghost of Thomas Malthus. From this perspective, society is worse off, the more population grows. Both wages and rents rise or fall based on the size of population. Like Malthus, much of the analysis of migration overlooks the question of land and private property in land along with its role as the motor for hunger, disease, and war are yet to be carefully analysed. Indeed, land is absent from analysis of the structural push factors while land is also totally missing from whether migrants ought consider what the exaction of rent is doing to the majority of people in the host countries and cities. The host countries may have some policies to paper over the cracks in their own system and mask the poverty and social unrest, but the good conditions in the host countries are mostly enjoyed by a minority, notably landlords whose privileges can increase with migration, especially if the migrants will be subjected to the workings of the market mechanism in land. In addition, new landlords might compound the problem.

It is striking that the migration crisis comes at the heels of land grabbing on a global scale. There is already research compiled in Fred Pearce's 2012 book: *The Land Grabbers: The New Fight Over Who Owns the Earth* showing land grabbing has triggered internal migration crisis as people whose land has been taken away from them seek new life and livelihoods without roots in the soil as waged labourer. The link between property rights and the migration crisis on the global scale is yet to be made. The reason, as Daniel Bromley, editor of *Land Economics*, mentions in his *Veblen-*

Commons Lecture given at the Allied Social Sciences Association meeting on January 3, 2016 in San Francisco, is that mainstream economics struggles to understand institutions such as land. More empirical research is needed to ascertain precisely the landed roots of the migration crisis, of course, but Henry George's historical study suggests the Georgist line of thinking is a useful framework.

### 3. How Henry George's Analysis Differs from Mainstream Economists and why Henry George offers superior insights

George's approach is radically different from seeking to 'turn back the boats', merely share migrants across countries, send the army to force out elected leaders in countries of origin, or try to bring peace and an end to war without a land reform programme that returns land to the commons and rewards work – rather than tax it, and let wither the landlord class that pockets all the socially created privileges of society. It is also different from solutions that emphasise border protection using the army and iron laws about granting visas, leaving or remaining in economic unions, sermonising to people about compassion, preaching human rights and obligations of the West to help the rest, and such Messianic strategies for redemption. The Economist magazine captures the spirit of the mainstream economics view: the migrant crisis arose from the rational decision of people from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan – and all places of economic and political difficulties to relocate to Europe to enjoy the fruits of freedom, peace, and prosperity. In its own words: 'Europe is peaceful, rich and accessible. Most people would rather not abandon their homes and start again among strangers. But when the alternative is the threat of death from barrel-bombs and sabre-wielding fanatics, they make the only rational choice' (The Economist, 2016, vol. 418, number 8975, p. 6).

In this view, conditions in the sending countries push individuals out, while conditions in Europe pull individuals to prosperity. The 'biggest push fact... Russia's military intervention in Syria.' In contrast, the biggest pull factor is prosperity in Europe laced with willkommenskultur, the intrinsic welcoming culture of the Europeans, especially Germans, so 'wave after wave' the 'migrants will keep coming' (La Guardia, 2016, The Economist, 2016, p. 67). Such analyses are based on rational individual decision making and superficial drivers, without looking at structural causes. Even if the mainstream analysis is admitted as based on 'bounded rationality' of migrants psychosocial and behavioural choices rather than mere rationality, the unit of analysis remains the autonomous individual and the presumption, that such individuals are driven by utility-maximisation; not social relations. The preferred solution offered by the mainstream is to manage the problem.

Consequently, there are three top solutions all geared towards stopping the push factors, first 'by beefing up aid to refugees', 'review asylum claims while refugees are still in centres in the Middle East or in the ..Greece and Italy, where they go when they first arrive in the EU', and third 'to insist that asylum-seekers stay put until their applications are processed, rather than jumping on a train to Germany' (The Economist, 2016, , vol. 418, no. 8975, p. 9). These solutions confuse outcomes for causes.

George's analysis was much deeper and his solution thoroughgoing. His argument was not simply that migrants should be let in because they bring in brains as the less brainy would not be welcome. True, in George's analysis population is part of the force that drives urban economic change, but it is all population not just the brainy ones or what Richard Florida, the mainstream urbanist, calls 'the creative class'. For George, 'it is its people that make a country great and strong, produce its wealth, and give it rank among other countries' (Social Problems, 1966, p. 104).

He addressed the issue of morality, fit, attitudes and so on, concluding that migrants are generally 'industrious', 'moral', 'peaceable' and where they lacked these qualities demanded by their new neighbours, that lack is not in their nature but it is the product of the poverty and degraded lives that they have suffered (Social Problems, 1966, p. 106). He drew an important distinction between voluntary emigration and crisis-induced emigration. George insisted that the crisis of migration itself had its roots in class conflict and uneven distribution of wealth. Having described in graphic terms the deplorable social conditions under which many migrants lived; he turned to the conditions of landlords:

But the landlords – ah! The landlords! – They live differently. Every now and again in traveling through this country you come across some landlord's palatial home mansion, its magnificent grounds inclosed with high walls. Pass inside these walls and it is almost like entering another world – wide stretches of rich velvety lawn, beds of bright flowers, noble avenues of arching trees, and a spacious mansion rich with every appoint of luxury, with its great stables, kennels, and appurtenances of every kind (p. 110)

### 5. Sharing the Earth So All May Prosper

What, then, is the true solution? For George, that solution is also the most simple: 'share the earth so that all may prosper'. That is to let migrants come but to abolish the one structural motor that is at the heart of the worsening conditions in the migrant countries and is likely to squeeze the migrants in the host countries in which they find themselves: the private property in land. Only two solutions are appropriate

here. Give the migrants land to work as part of the commons while removing taxes from the wages they will earn. And, place tax on the rent exacted from land so the revenue is put to social uses.

Doing so will tame the structural drivers of forced emigration (other forms of emigration are part of social change), and remove the uneven access to and control of economic resources in the host countries which condemn the majority of both migrants and hosts to poverty. So, let them come but be reminded that merely 'Dumping Garbage' – uprooting migrants from one area where there is land monopoly and placing them in another with the same land monopoly problems – is not a panacea. The only true economic freedom comes from making the land commons

through tax, communing, or both. The earth belongs to all and its value has been created socially both in history and at present, so 'let them come'.

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