

A Plea For A Revitalized Georgeist Movement In America

By PHILIP RUBIN

IN Australia and New Zealand, a municipal single tax exists in many cities; Denmark imposes a national tax on land values; in Great Britain there is a parliamentary land-value taxation bloc of fifty members, influential and powerful enough to pass a national land-value taxation bill the moment a Labor government comes into being when this war is over.

But what progress has been made in the United States of America, birth-place and home of Henry George? Only the irrigation districts of central California and a handful of tiny "single-tax" colonies. There is not a single city here—not even a small city—which exempts improvements entirely from taxation. Georgeists have no considerable strength in a single state legislature, no influence upon Congress or the national administration. This, after more than half a century of earnest, devoted, self-sacrificing agitation.

What is to blame? What is the trouble? After nearly a decade of study of the Georgeist movement in this country, I have come to the conclusion that the blame lies partly with American Georgeists themselves. In order not to be misunderstood, let me emphasize the word "partly". It is true that to a large extent the lack of progress of American Georgeism in practical politics and practical accomplishment is due to objective conditions in America which Georgeists alone can hardly change—a materialistic and "ruggedly-individualistic" psychology which has not been interested in a social order based on justice, but only in satisfying its own immediate selfish needs; a speculator and gambler psychology which has given rise to the most corrupt political life of any country in the world.

The fault of American Georgeists is that, in revolting against the corrupt American political life of the half-century and more before 1933, they have allowed themselves to swing to the other extreme—that of idealism, which, lacking contact with ordinary, every-day human problems and human beings, tends to become fanatical dogma, the cult of a priestly elite, educated to mouth certain phrases without being expected to attempt to put these ideas into practice. Thus, what was once a vigorous reform movement, becomes the property of intellectual snobs who look down with contempt upon stupid hoi-polloi. American Georgeism today is too respectful of the aristocratic individualism expressed by such as Mr. Albert Jay Nock, among whose disciples, unfortunately, is to be found Mr. Frank Chodorov, Director of the Henry George School of Social Science.

Because American Georgeists have allowed themselves to be pushed out of American practical politics—a thing they should not have allowed to happen—it is possible for us to be told (as Mr. Chodorov did tell us in the last issue of LAND AND FREEDOM) that politics and organization are not for such angelic beings as Georgeists, that education alone—education of more Olympians who will be willing to sit with us on our lofty mountains and help us while our time away in vain quibblings over obscure doctrinal points—is all that is necessary. One may laugh at this point of view if one doesn't take the Georgeist movement too seriously, if one hasn't made it a part of his or her life. But Henry George at least, who died while in the midst of a campaign for the mayoralty of New York, who knew and felt that political action and education could only be separated from each other at grave peril to the movement, wouldn't have laughed, for he would have realized its serious implications for the further progress of the fight to return the soil to the people.

So today, nearly eight years after the advent of New Deal Liberalism, which might have given us the chance for many practical accomplishments in the field of land value taxation in this country had we gone about it in the right way, we still remain immaculate idealists and dogmatists, untouched and unharmed by worldly politicians, proud—oh, how proud!—of our virginity. How long will this spinster attitude of American Georgeism prevail? I have no way of telling. But I do know it's about time to shake off our apathy. There is too much work to be done in these United States for us to sit idly by, prating about education versus organization. People are eager to hear our message, *providing* we will relate it to their daily needs—*providing* we will display more humanity towards the remote ideal of the confiscation of land rent and the abolition of all taxes. For example, there is an immediate need to exempt buildings (I don't like the word "improvements" — it's too technical and the man in the street doesn't "get" it), and put a much higher tax on vacant and semi-vacant lots than is now the case in our cities, so that cheap, but decent, homes may be erected for millions of American slum dwellers.

The Federal government, now embarked on its huge defense program, is worried about finding proper housing in the future for millions of workers. Can't we Georgeists show the Federal, as well as local, governments that our way—a high tax on vacant lots and concurrent exemption of buildings—is the only way to prevent land owners from

holding up large-scale housing for defense workers, that such a method of taxation is therefore the patriotic method? Are we willing to do this, or would we prefer to continue our unconstructive attacks upon the Administration for its failure to become one hundred per cent Georgeist?

If Georgeism in the United States is to begin to show practical achievements in the direction of the ideal of justice and freedom as Henry George formulated it, I am convinced Georgeists will have to reconstruct their views on human nature, human aspirations and the possibilities for persuading people by utilizing the faculties that lie within the human make-up. They will have to learn to maintain a balance between idealism and life's realities: they will have to learn to become politicians, if not in the derogatory American, then in the more complimentary British sense. If Georgeists fail to impress themselves upon the psychology of average Americans, believing with the Marxians that only economic interests dictate people's thinking, they will remain just where they are today.

Certain steps which American Georgeism ought to take immediately, to get back into the main stream of American daily life, here suggest themselves. Some of them have already been mentioned by Mr. Mortimer A. Leister in the last issue of *LAND AND FREEDOM*. I shall try to give a bare summary of them in what follows:

1. *Organization.* An American Association for Land Value Taxation, similar in aim and scope to the British association, should be formed, and divided into state associations. These groups should never forget that while land value taxation and the pure Georgeist ideal are related to each other as an immediate means is related to a remoter end, they are not identical, and that though a great number of people will go along with us part of the way, only a few will be willing to follow us all the way. All, therefore, that it can and should advocate is *greater* land value taxation concurrently with the exemption from taxation of certain things, such as buildings, necessary consumers' articles, etc.

The headquarters of the national organization should be either in Washington, Pittsburgh or Chicago, *not* in New York City, whose life and mode of thinking is not characteristic of that of the rest of the country, and which is too much the paradise of esoteric quibblers. Either of the three cities I have mentioned has its advantages as national headquarters—Washington, because it is the seat of government; Pittsburgh, because we have accomplished a little and have an opportunity to still further demonstrate, practically, our principles in that city; Chicago, because of its central location. Which of these three is best suited as a national headquarters, would accomplish most for Georgeism if an American Association for Land Value Taxation were located there I am not quite certain, though I would perhaps vote for Washington. But I am convinced that New York is unsuited for this purpose.

2. *Our relation to Socialism.* Georgeism has, with justice I think, been called moderate socialism, practical socialism, sane socialism. We *do* advocate the socialization of rent and of necessary monopolies, and some are also in favor of the socialization of finance and credit. True, our theoretical differences with the Marxian Socialists and Communists are wide and profound, opposing as we do the socialization of productive capital and the destruction by the State of competitive, private-profit industry. But today the more moderate Socialists, or Social-Democrats, realizing what the destruction of competitive, private-profit industry has done to Russia, are inclined to be less enthusiastic about this phase of their program and to put more emphasis on the idea of socializing monopolies—that is, non-competitive industry—which Georgeists also advocate. Why shouldn't Georgeists enter the moderately-socialistic Labor Party of New York and similar parties in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Washington State, etc., there to advocate their views and through these parties advance their cause practically, as has been done in Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain? Either we should do this or be prepared to form a political party of our own, as our Danish friends have done, a thing I personally would not advocate for this country.

I presume that individual Georgeists who work in certain trades are as active trade unionists as are workers of other convictions. But it would, I believe, help the Georgeist cause in this country if Georgeists as a group kept up an active interest in American labor unions and their problems, particularly the problem of keeping them free from corrupt leaders.

I know several active Georgeists who also take an active interest in the consumer cooperative movement and are even among the leaders. Here Georgeist groups might participate more directly than in labor unions, might become influential and serve the cause by more group participation in the movement for cooperative stores, still a young and growing movement in this country. In their necessity to combine idealism with a realistic view of things, the cooperative and Georgeist movements have much in common.

In the smaller cities and towns of this country, I find that the more liberal churches are among the best groups in which Georgeists might work. In my own town—a small New England city of some 30,000 people—I find the Social Justice League of the Unitarian Church the most receptive group in the community. Other Georgeists in small cities of similar size have probably found a similar situation.

In states like my own, where the Democratic party represents progressivism and readiness to listen to new ideas we can and should work with and through that party. In such cases—but in such only—it might be good policy on our part to emphasize our differences with the Socialists rather than our similarities.

3. *Working on local government.* Getting people to sign petitions to city councils for building exemption would, I believe, be an excellent way of educating masses of people who never heard of Henry George to the importance of land value taxation for their own immediate welfare. Such petitions would compel newspapers to give us a good deal more publicity than they ordinarily would, besides bringing the question vividly home to large numbers of peoples and causing a healthy discussion. However, I would advocate this procedure only for smaller cities and towns, not for places of more than 100,000 population.

4. *Correct philosophy of life.* Henry George wanted society to be based on both justice and freedom, but of the two he realized that justice was the more important, because more fundamental. We deprive a criminal of his freedom, because we believe it just that society should do so, because one man's freedom may endanger the freedom of thousands. We believe then that freedom *in society* is conditioned by the principle of social equity, is dependent on justice, and not vice versa, and that when justice prevails freedom will automatically follow, but that when freedom is granted the individual, justice among men does not automatically result. We believe in social justice *and* in the individual freedom which it alone can establish and guarantee.

But many American Georgeists talk today as if individual liberty, not social justice, were fundamental. And so, average Americans, listening to us, ask, "What is the difference between your beliefs and Mr. Hoover's rugged individualism?" Of course there is a vast difference, but by emphasizing individualism at the expense of Collectivism or Socialism (a point I thought Henry George made clear when he showed the necessity of each *in its proper place*), we invite misunderstanding of our position by otherwise progressive-minded people, a misunderstanding for which only we ourselves are to blame.

5. *More warmth of friendship among American Georgeists.* This is a delicate subject, which at first glance might not seem so important for the practical progress of the movement in America, but if we are to accomplish anything here, we must be united by deeper and warmer bonds of friendship than we have hitherto shown toward one another. Socialists and Communists address their fellow workers as "Comrade," and what is even more significant, I believe, is the fact that when Socialists or Communists meet, their conversation shows that the range of interests which they have in common is far wider than the interests shared by Georgeists.

American Georgeists, unlike British Georgeists I met in London, are too apt to regard one another only as economic thinking machines, sharing no other common interests, such as sports, sex, art, music or literature. In our conversations we give each other the impression of monomaniacs, which

we really are not. We are, at bottom, as warmly human, as alive and as imaginative—perhaps even more so—as people of other radical beliefs. Let us then relate our philosophy to the richness and fullness of human life, instead of narrowing our common interest to a condemnation of the present economic system.

To return to the point where I started in this article, I would say that our excessive idealism has led to both fanatical zeal and dogmatic coldbloodedness. America today is undergoing a psychologic change from its excessive materialism and rugged individualism. Because of this change American Georgicism must change its attitude. At long last, we have an opportunity to meet and mingle with the American mind and heart. But we must be willing not only to teach, but to be taught as well, if we are to accomplish anything worthwhile in this country in the direction of Henry George's ideal of social justice.

Let us stop talking nonsense about developing an intellectual elite. Let us forsake our ivory towers and relate our ideal to the throbbing life that surrounds us. Let us learn that only friendships and brotherhood among human beings can usher in an era of social justice and individual freedom. When we have done that, the satisfaction and joy of accomplishment, of achievement, will be ours.

ONE in a series of documentary short films released by M.G.M., known as "The Passing Parade," deals with a very interesting account of the fight against the disease pellagra. This film, entitled "A Way In The Wilderness," is the story of the discoveries of Dr. Joseph Goldberger in his investigations of the disease. Contrary to general belief, Dr. Goldberger proved that pellagra is not caused by a germ, but is the result of malnutrition. When his theories were substantiated, the Government proceeded to send the proper food supplies to the stricken areas. But then came the depression—general low wages—the migrant workers, the Okies . . . and more pellagra. It became evident that the root of the disease is now beyond medical science. The cause is poverty. Science, says the commentator in this film, has done all it can—it has contributed its share. The rest—the solution to the problem of poverty—is in the hands of 130 million citizens.

A SAD commentary on the effects of our city civilization upon the health of the citizens is the fact that over 20% of the men called in the first New York City draft failed to pass the Army medical examination. Raised in an artificial and repressive environment, and divorced from healthy contact with the good earth, this is not too surprising. The officials who are now worrying over the high percentage of unfit men would do well to ponder the inequitable holding of the land they are preparing to defend.