
Geoists in History:

George Bernard Shaw (1856 - 1950)

“To understand the matter we must begin by grasping the fact that land is neither unlimited in quantity nor equally valuable everywhere”



When it comes to summarizing Shaw we have to invent a whole new classification. For starters, he is the only person to have been awarded both a Nobel Prize in Literature (1925) and an Oscar (1938). And it was Shaw who started that whole tradition of refusing awards, but did eventually accept the Nobel only at his wife's behest because she considered it a tribute to Ireland. He did knock back the money, though. His Oscar was for his work on the film based on his own play, *Pygmalion*.

G. Bernard Shaw (he hated the "George" and never used it) was born in 1856 in Dublin, in a lower-middle class family of Scottish-Protestant ancestry. His father was firstly a low-ranking civil servant and later a failed corn-merchant, and his mother was a professional singer. His father's alcoholism caused Shaw to become a lifelong abstainer (what happened to the cycle of abuse?) and his mother to run off with her singing instructor.

Shaw, only 16 when his mother cleared off, remained in Dublin with his father and continued attending a series of better, private schools but hated them all passionately, famously declaring "The only time my education was interrupted was when I was in school." When he shortly afterwards worked as a clerk for an estate office, he found that almost as boring. In 1876, Shaw joined his mother's London household with his two older sisters. Here's when he got his big break in the form of a whole pound sterling a week which gave him some freedom to find his calling.

Perhaps inspired by the artistic leanings of his mother's household (his sisters were also engaged in the arts), he put his allowance to full use. Shaw began to frequent public libraries and the British Museum reading room where he studied earnestly and began writing novels. He earned his allowance by ghostwriting his mother's music column, but it became some time before he became self-supporting.

With an ever-curious mind, he soon became involved in progressive politics. Standing on soapboxes, at Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park and at socialist rallies, he learned to overcome his stage fright and his stammer. And, to hold the attention of the crowd, he developed an energetic and aggressive speaking style that is evident in all of his writing.

His life seemed to be unconventional in every way. In the course of his political activities he met Charlotte Payne-Townshend, an Irish heiress and fellow Fabian whom he married in 1898. The marriage was never consummated, at Charlotte's insistence, though he had had a number of affairs with married women. Shaw was a lifelong outspoken supporter of women's rights.

Although his first profitable writing was music and literary criticism, in which capacity he wrote many highly articulate pieces of journalism, his main talent was for drama. Nearly all his writings addressed prevailing social problems but have a vein of incisive humour which makes their stark themes more palatable.



Shaw's wittiness should not obscure his important role in revolutionizing British drama. In the Victorian Era, the London stage had been regarded as a place for light entertainment. But Shaw was the Midnight Oil of his day – no frothy romances, light comedies or costume dramas from him. Rather, Shaw made his works a forum for considering moral, political and economic issues, possibly his most lasting and important contribution to dramatic art. There was no end to Shaw's probing questions; he examined education, marriage, religion, government, health care, and class privilege. In this, he considered himself indebted to Henrik Ibsen, who pioneered modern realistic drama, meaning drama designed to heighten awareness of some important social issue. Everything to which Shaw turned his hand seemed to be laced with radical rationalism, an utter disregard of conventions, a keen dialectic interest but all made much easier to digest by his verbal wit.

Shaw's plays weren't performed until the 1890s but by the end of that decade he was already an established playwright. He wrote 63 plays and his output as novelist, critic, pamphleteer, essayist and private correspondent was prodigious. He is known to have written more than 250,000 letters.

Rather than massage his public image to heighten his popularity, Shaw's bohemian ways seem to know no bounds. For instance, he joined in the public opposition to vaccination against smallpox, calling it "a particularly filthy piece of witchcraft", despite having nearly died from the disease when he contracted it in 1881. In the preface to *Doctor's Dilemma* he made it plain he regarded traditional medical treatment as dangerous quackery that should be replaced with sound public sanitation, good personal hygiene and diets devoid of meat. Shaw had become a vegetarian while he was twenty-five and a firm anti-vivisectionist and antagonistic to cruel sports. His position, succinctly stated, was "A man of my spiritual intensity does not eat corpses."

"Economic rent, arising as it does from variation of fertility or advantages of situation, must always be held as common or social wealth, and used, as the revenues raised by taxation are now used, for public purposes."

A great man often seems to produce a second surge in creative output once his fame confers the company of other notable figures. In Shaw's case, he became friends with prominent men such as H.G. Wells, IRA leader Michael Collins, G. K. Chesterton, T.E. Lawrence ("of Arabia") and the composer Edward Elgar.

But sometimes a monumental turning point happens out of the blue – let's allow Shaw to describe his in his own words: "I went one night quite casually into a hall in London, and I heard a man deliver a speech which changed the whole current of my life. That man was an American – Henry George... Well, Henry George put me on to the economic tack, and the tack of political science."

This crossroad occurred to Shaw in 1882 when George was touring Great Britain. Shaw had already been reading works of the geoists John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer as well as August Comte and Charles Darwin, but after sitting spellbound under the eloquent oratory of George, Shaw read his magnum opus, *Progress and Poverty* and was never the same man. Shaw, in a letter to George's daughter Anna, put it this way "Your father found me a literary dilettante and militant rationalist in religion, and a barren rascal at that. By turning my mind to economics he made a man of me...."

Another point in common was that George and Shaw both took on the power of the established churches and were much angered by the general public's complacent acceptance of poverty as the will of God, each of them calling such attribution "blasphemy."

Humanity is, it seems, a mass of contradictions ... some may put it more strongly and call us all the walking wounded. Great men like Shaw seem to stumble and fall, too, and in an intellectual sense Shaw certainly did so. The causes of this are too tangled for this humble writer to unpick. Be that as it may, we can still follow some clear threads in the later half of Shaw's long life.

"It is so opposed to moral commonsense and so complicated mathematically, that I could find fifty experts in the tensor calculus more easily than five statesmen who think of the land question habitually in the terms of the law of rent ... Our politicians cannot draw their conclusions from it ... they simply do not know of its existence."



Shaw also strove for social justice, but later looked to socialism to achieve it, somehow forgetting how the Law of Rent will never confer justice unless we first deal with the land question. But Marx and socialism was all the rage in London, and Shaw began preaching socialism with the utmost zeal and enthusiasm at socialist rallies. A little later Shaw denounced the forcible reforms of Marxism and termed himself a Fabian Socialist. The Fabians believed that reform should be gradual and induced by peaceful means rather than by outright revolution. Fabians were named after the Roman General, Quintus Fabius Maximus, who advocated weakening the opposition by harassing operations rather than becoming involved in pitched battles.

It's interesting to see how Shaw disagreed with Marx on the means of changing society and the powers who control it. While Shaw did agree with many of Marx's theories, he was aware that Marx would have little impact on the working class. He wrote that although *Das Kapital* had been written for the working man, "Marx never got hold of [the working man] for a moment. It was the revolting sons of the bourgeoisie itself - Lassalle, Marx, Liebknecht, Morris, Hyndman, Bax, all like myself, crossed with squirearchy - that painted the flag red. The middle and upper classes are the revolutionary element in society; the proletariat is the conservative element."

As well as being a prodigious literary powerhouse, Shaw participated in the formation of the Labour Party. Along with three other Fabian Society members, Shaw founded the London School of Economics and Political Science in 1895 with funding provided by private philanthropy. Shaw also helped to found the left-wing magazine *New Statesman* in 1913. For a short time he was active in local politics, serving on the London County Council

Another turning point in Shaw's (indeed, in every European's) life was the First World War. For him, the war represented the bankruptcy of the capitalist system, the last desperate gasps of the nineteenth-century empires, and a tragic waste of young lives, all under the guise of patriotism. He expressed his opinions in a series of newspaper articles under the title *Common Sense About the War*. His uncompromising opposition at a time of mindless nationalism proved to be a disaster for Shaw's public stature: he was treated as an outcast in his adopted country, and there was even talk of his being tried for treason. His dramatic output ground to a halt, and he succeeded in writing only one major play during the war years, *Heartbreak House*, into which he projected his bitterness and despair about British politics and society.

A new Shaw had emerged—the wit remained, but his faith in humanity had dwindled. In the preface to *Heartbreak House* he said: "It is said that every people has the Government it deserves. It is more to the point that every Government has the electorate it deserves; for the orators of the front bench can edify or debauch an ignorant electorate at will. Thus our democracy moves in a vicious circle of reciprocal worthiness and unworthiness."

Soon after the war, Shaw found his dramatic voice again and rebuilt his reputation, first with a series of five plays about "creative evolution". His 1925 Nobel Prize for Literature led to the strong revival of his plays in London. Several theatre companies in the United States began producing his plays, old and new, on a regular basis.

Intellectually, Shaw's tide turned again. Shaw was not necessarily better informed about actual conditions in other countries than other people were at the time, and tended to believe the best of people who professed similar principles to those he held himself. This led to him taking some positions that now seem grotesque.

After visiting the USSR in 1931, when he met Stalin, Shaw became a supporter of the Stalinist USSR. Later that year he broadcast a lecture on American national radio telling his audience that any 'skilled workman...of suitable age and good character' would be welcomed and given work in the Soviet Union.

It gets worse. In an open letter to the Manchester Guardian in 1933, he dismissed stories—which were later determined to be largely substantiated — of a Soviet famine and Stalin's mass murders as slanderous, and contrast them with the hardships then current in the West during the Great Depression.

It's no simple task, but it's worth a shot – let's examine Shaw's increasingly wayward economic views and identify where he goes astray. Concerning the cause of poverty, Henry George found it in the denial of access to valuable land. His remedy was designed to free monopolized land for production; and the abolition of all other taxes was to be another spur to economic growth. Capital, being a factor of production, would not be taxed. Disputing George's proposal, Shaw declared that poverty is caused by the joint monopoly of land and capital. For his solution, therefore, he urged the collection, not only of rent, but of the return to capital (interest) as well. All income had to be confiscated by the State, and redistributed "according to need."

Shaw didn't see that equality of opportunity would essentially give rise to social and economic justice where a good measure of equality of income would exist.

A further argument involved Ricardo's Law of Rent. At the time both Georgists and socialists claimed descent from the same source, Ricardo's theory, which demonstrated that rent increases at the expense of both capital and labor. George found in Ricardo's law a ready-made formula and justification for his own remedy. All that was needed, he stated, was merely to funnel rent from private appropriation into a communal fund. No other levy was necessary or desired.

Shaw disagreed. To him, the collection of rent (even though it was "the economic keystone of socialism") was only the first step toward total appropriation by the state. The main object of socialism, he stressed, was the collection of all revenues and the imposition of an all-powerful socialist state in stark contrast to George's championing of liberty, individual worth, untrammelled production and limited government.

Another characterization is that George believed that the private appropriation of land and natural resources was theft, whereas Shaw believed that all property (i.e. land and capital) was theft. Shaw indiscriminately condemned capitalism for being deeply flawed and was unlikely to last – he should have specified land monopoly capitalism. Yet, as you can see in this article, selective quotes from Shaw indicate that he had seen the geist cat. Indeed, late in life there were indications that he revisited and reaccepted his earlier insights – he wrote to one American that "My ambition is to repay my debt to Henry George by coming over some day and trying to do for your young men what Henry George did for me." Go figure.

Shaw lived the rest of his life as an international celebrity, travelling the world, continually involved in local and international politics. Perhaps it was the fire in his Irish belly that kept him going so strongly for so long – at the age of 94, it took a fall from a tree he was pruning to knock him off.

Next issue: the first president of the American Federation of Labor, Samuel Gompers

