

Seeing Which Cat?

Presidential Address by Dr. Robert V. Andelson at the 23rd International Conference of the International Union for Land-Value Taxation and Free Trade, University of Edinburgh, Scotland, July 11, 2001

An anonymous article in the February, 1998, issue of *The Economist* described Henry George as “probably the only tax theorist in history whose beliefs have become an object of cult devotion.” To characterize George simply as “a tax theorist” is something like characterizing Chopin as “a piano player.” But I’ll let that pass. The disposition to regard our movement as a cult is nothing new, nor is it surprising. After all, we have our Sainted Founder, and we have our Sacred Book. Like the Bible, there is even a concordance to it (which I’ve found quite helpful over the years).¹ As is the case with cults, we have a special, esoteric language, known only to initiates. I refer, not only to economic definitions, but also to certain phrases that serve almost as passwords among Georgists. Of these, undoubtedly the prime example is “Seeing the Cat.”

Before I discuss this phrase, I want to say that at the end of my remarks I intend to demonstrate that, despite these superficial similarities, Georgism is not actually a cult. That is not the main object of this discourse; you may take it, rather, as a sort of bonus.

“Seeing the Cat”! As most of you are probably aware, the expression refers to that moment of illumination when one suddenly grasps the truth of what we have come to call “the Georgist paradigm.”

Louis F. Post, in *The Prophet of San Francisco*, attributes its origin to a speech in the late 1880s by Judge James G. Maguire in support of land-value taxation. Here is what Judge Maguire said:

I was one day walking along Kearny Street in San Francisco when I noticed a crowd in front of the show window of a store. They were looking at something inside. I took a glance myself, but saw only a poor picture of an uninteresting landscape. As I was turning away, my eye caught these words underneath the picture: “Do you see the cat?”

I looked again more closely, but I saw no cat. Then I spoke to the crowd.

“Gentlemen,” I said, “I do not see a cat in the picture. Is there a cat there?” Someone in the crowd replied: “Naw, there ain’t no cat there. Here’s a crank who says he sees a cat in it, but none of the rest of us can.” Then the crank spoke up. “I tell you,” he said, “there is a cat there. The picture is all cat. What you fellows take for a landscape is nothing more than the cat’s outlines. And you needn’t call a man a crank, either, because he can see more with his eyes than you can with yours.”

Well, I looked again very closely at the picture, and then I said to the man they were calling a crank, “Really, sir, I cannot make out a cat in that picture. I can see nothing but a poor drawing of a commonplace landscape.” “Why,

Judge," the crank exclaimed, "just you look at that bird in the air. That's the cat's ear." I looked but was obliged to say, "I am sorry to be so stupid but I really cannot make a cat's ear out of that bird. It's a poor bird, but not a cat's ear." "Well, then," the crank persisted, "look at that twig twirled around in a circle; that's the cat's eye." But I couldn't make out an eye.

"Oh, well," returned the crank a bit impatiently, "look at those sprouts at the foot of the tree, and the grass; they make the cat's claws." After a rather deliberate examination, I reported that they did look a little like claws, but I couldn't connect them with a cat.

Once more the crank came back at me as cranks will. "Don't you see that limb off there? and that other limb just under it? and all that white space between?" he asked. "Well, that white space is the cat's tail." I looked again and was just on the point of replying that there was no cat's tail there that I could see, when suddenly the whole cat stood out before me.

There it was, sure enough, just as the crank had said, and the only reason the rest of us couldn't see it was that we hadn't got the right angle of view, but now that I saw the cat, I could see nothing else in the picture. The poor landscape had disappeared, and a fine looking cat had taken its place. And do you know, I was never afterwards able, upon looking at that picture, to see anything in it but the cat.²

I have read this long passage because it contains a point that I want to impress upon you, and ask you to bear in mind: The cat has a tail! The significance of this will become apparent later.

Last year, a slim volume of seven essays was published under the title, *The Forgotten Legacy of Henry George*.³ Five of them are by Dr. Kenneth C. Wenzer, known to many of us as editor of *The Henry George Centennial Trilogy*, as well as of other useful books. The other four are by Dr. Thomas R. West, a history professor at the Catholic University of America. Although a couple of the essays are of only minor relevance, on balance I commend this little book as being thoughtful, stimulating, and provocative, as well as, for the most part, elegantly written. The authors are not content to regurgitate familiar Georgist mantras, but bring to bear upon the Georgist paradigm some reading and thinking of their own, reflecting the input of social critics rarely encountered in our circles, such as G. K. Chesterton and Eric Gill. Superficially, the most controversial essay is the one by Wenzer entitled, "The Degeneration of the Georgist Movement: From a Philosophy of Freedom to a Nickle and Dime Scramble," a scathing denunciation of two-rate property taxation as being not merely a trivialization of Henry George's vision but an actual road-block to its realization. Although I am not without sympathy for the sentiments that led to this conclusion, there is a strong practical argument that leads me to reject the conclusion itself.

I will instead focus on a less obviously controversial, but, to my mind, more profoundly disturbing theme that runs throughout the major essays

in the book. It has to do with labor and its earnings. (When I speak of labor, I subsume capital, properly so-called; I am not sure that Wenzer and West do.)

To them, work, correctly understood, is not just a means to material benefit. It is a religious vocation, both an end in itself and a source of personal fulfillment and inner freedom. To glorify God through creative effort is what makes human life meaningful. To pursue excellence in one's daily tasks lifts them to a sacramental level. This was, of course, Luther's doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, and the original thrust behind the so-called "Protestant work ethic." But it also characterizes, in a more restricted sense, certain aspects of Roman Catholic life found in various monastic orders and in lay societies such as *Opus Dei*. Insofar as one's labor produces material gain, the primary object of that gain is to benefit society, not to heap up riches for oneself. As a Christian, I can only say "Amen" to this.

Wenzer and West attribute to Henry George an emphasis upon excellence in work as a calling basic to the properly-oriented human life, that, I confess, has never impressed me as being all that prominent in his teaching. Yet it is in no sense inconsistent with it, and is something that I not

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only find personally congenial but believe deserves to be explored and integrated more fully into the thinking of our movement. The point of contact is already present. For if the distribution of wealth were to be reformed along Georgist lines, ordinary people could afford to reject shoddy, mass-produced commodities in favor of quality and craftsmanship.

Aesthetic taste might show only marginal improvement, if any, but there would be much greater proportionate demand for wholesomeness in food, and for durability and dependability in other goods. Thus, the tendency would be toward small-scale agriculture and organic farming, and toward less rapid depletion of the earth's resources. These are things we need to stress as we build bridges to our potential allies among the Greens. So, far from denigrating this theme in Wenzer and West, I celebrate it. What I find disturbing is the way they fit it into their analysis.

Wenzer claims that "the purpose of the single-tax movement . . . was to strengthen the cord between virtue and property."⁴ He and West insist that the virtue or objective value of work cannot be correlated with its return in the marketplace, and on this point, again, I take no issue with them. The market does not necessarily reward merit. Confucius is reputed to have said: "The superior man knows what is right. The inferior man knows what will sell." And H. L. Mencken is reputed to have remarked

that “nobody ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public.”

But this is all beside the point. The function of the Georgist system, as I understand it, is not to reward merit but to effectuate and to maintain freedom. And that includes the freedom to indulge poor taste, so long as doing so does not involve coercing others.

When someone objected to Henry George that the single-tax is not a panacea, he replied that he was well aware of that, “but freedom is; and the single-tax is the way to freedom.”⁵ “Freedom,” however, is a word with many meanings. The two meanings most relevant to our discussion were elaborated by Sir Isaiah Berlin in his classic inaugural lecture upon assuming the Chichele Chair of Social and Political Theory at Oxford in 1958.⁶ At the risk of oversimplifying, we may say that by “negative freedom” he meant freedom from external coercion by human beings. The regulating principle of reciprocity prevents it from degenerating into mere license. “Positive freedom,” on the other hand, is the inner freedom associated with mastery of self. This is personal fulfillment, and, although Berlin does not say so, mental and moral theorists have long recognized that it never comes when sought directly, but only through devotion to something higher than the self.

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Needless to remark, such devotion cannot be imposed, for imposed devotion is a counterfeit. Government, by definition, is a monopoly of physical force. This is why its object can never be directly to provide for positive freedom. For if it assumes that role, the end to which the individual is compelled to give himself invariably turns out to be – guess what? The government!

Negative freedom is essential to the realization of positive freedom. But insofar as government arrogates to itself the function of directly implementing positive freedom, it inevitably violates negative freedom, and thus becomes a barrier instead of an avenue to positive freedom.

The proper function of government is, rather, to maintain negative freedom – including equal freedom of access to the storehouse of natural opportunity. Obviously, this is the kind of freedom that George had in mind when he said that the single-tax is the way to freedom. And in terms of this kind of freedom, I repeat, the legitimate function of government is not directly to effectuate the fulfillment of human personality, but simply to provide a framework within which individuals, reciprocally, may freely pursue their separate ends. Because the proper object of government is thus limited, it has no business telling people what values they should pursue; its sole rightful concern is that the rule of reciprocal freedom be

observed. That is a tall enough order in itself to keep it fully occupied.

Yet the fact that ultimate values cannot licitly be dictated by political authority, and must, to be psychologically authentic, be chosen by each person for himself, does not mean that they are necessarily subjective. Neither does the fact that they cannot be proven. For they do not rest upon mere liking, mere subjective preference. Because they are ultimate, there is no way to demonstrate logically or empirically who is right or who is wrong about them, and the mutual freedom of individuals to rank them hierarchically for themselves must be respected. But none of this indicates that at least some of them might not be objectively authoritative, or that some value hierarchies might not be objectively superior to others. Such considerations, however, belong to the realm of theology, not politics, and this is the fundamental argument for the separation (at least effectively although perhaps not formally) of church and state.

Now let's return to our friends, Wenzer and West, and take a closer look at how their ideas jibe with George's idea of freedom:

George, while fully honoring the dignity of honest work, would leave it up to the individual to decide whether to perform that work primarily as a means of creative self-expression, of service to society, or of accumulating personal wealth. Wenzer and West would have the government ensure that people have the means to work independently, rather than guaranteeing them the freedom to exchange their work or its product for whatever it will bring, and to keep what they receive as a result. Like Gill and the distributists (that is to say, Chesterton and his friend, Hilaire Belloc), they would "[remove] property from its place at the termination of an act of work, and [put] it at the beginning, in the laborer's materials and tools...."⁷ "As a hammer, a carpenter shop, a home computer, as an object owned at the start of a project, property can grant a measure of independence that makes the effort fully expressive of the producer.... The social fund that George would collect from his single tax could have no application more fitting to his sensibility to the meaning of work."⁸

Well, if this application is restricted to the social fund, I find nothing objectionable in the idea – provided, of course, that the fund could accommodate it after paying for necessary protective functions. One argument for public education is that it is supposed to prepare people for a self-sufficient start in life. Perhaps giving everyone a hammer or a computer might have better results; I'm inclined to suspect that almost anything would!

But Wenzer and West are all too ready to short-circuit negative freedom, and make positive freedom the direct responsibility of government. The problem lies, not in providing property at the beginning but in removing it from the termination of an act of work. I'm not suggesting that they advocate doing away with private property in labor products, or

abolishing the market system. But they view these things as mere conveniences, privileges granted by the community because it finds them, within limits, socially useful, and, hence, subject to being withdrawn or curtailed when deemed otherwise.⁹

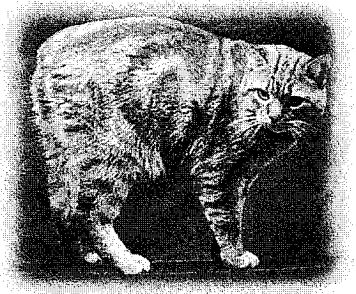
George, on the other hand, regarded them as natural rights, essential aspects of a just social order. When he spoke of labor and capital receiving their due return in the process of distribution, he wasn't talking about social expediency any more than he was talking about rewarding objective merit. He was talking about an inseparable and vital mode of negative freedom – freedom to own and to exchange produced wealth.

Wenzer and West do not fail to recognize that Nature should be treated as a source of equal opportunity for all, and that socially-produced values should be socially appropriated – far from it! In that respect, they accept George's "sovereign remedy" in full. They are contemptuous in their denunciation of two-rate property taxes, of the "single-tax limited," indeed, of all reforms that stop short of appropriating something close to the full economic rent for public use.

The difficulty is that they don't want to stop with rent. They would appropriate whatever they deem necessary to meet human needs. And by "human needs" they don't just mean the general need for a structure to secure negative freedom – that is something that many of us would be willing to have partially supported by general levies if the rent fund were to prove inadequate. They mean (and West, especially, is quite explicit about this), taxation of legitimately gained wealth for distribution to the poor.¹⁰

Public poor relief in England began in Elizabethan times as an outgrowth of the Enclosure Movement. It was a kind of partial recompense to the dispossessed peasantry for the hereditary feudal rights of which they had been deprived, and was funded out of rent. But since it was administered by officials who were, in effect, agents of the dispossessors, its original intent was ignored and soon forgotten. It came to be viewed as charity, and charity, however grudging, as a function of government. And in time, its funding came to be regarded as a responsibility of taxpayers in general.

Now, insofar as poverty stems from systemic inequity, that inequity should be corrected, and redress provided to the extent possible without creating further inequity. But sometimes poverty stems from sloth, or vice, or bad judgment on the individual's part. Sometimes it stems simply from chance. Every misfortune is not an injustice. If Jack happens to be stupid, we do not assume that it is because someone stole his share of brains. If Jill happens to be feeble, we do not assume that it is because someone stole her share of health. There may be instances where one might reasonably argue that something of the sort occurs, but they are not the norm. Bad luck may appropriately excite sympathy and a desire to help. It establishes



no justly enforceable claim.

In an hour of terrible need, Henry George stopped a stranger on the street, and asked him for five dollars. Years later, he recalled that if the man had not given him the money, he might have been desperate enough to have killed him for it.¹¹ But he never advocated murder and robbery as a policy, even under extreme conditions.

Needs, as such, do not create rights. We may sympathize with people who are driven to violent acts by extreme need. We may consider this a mitigating factor in imposing penalty. We may work for a just social system in the hope that it will make such need so rare that voluntary giving will suffice to handle it. But to build relief into a system backed by force is to pervert the system, undermining its logical coherence, and rendering it unjust.

George understood this. That is why he asserted unequivocally: "I have opposed every proposition to help the poor at the expense of the rich. I have always insisted that no man should be taxed because of his wealth, and that no matter how many millions a man might rightfully get, society should leave to him every penny of them."¹²

Please note the language. Wenzler correctly remarks that George's philosophy "invites diverse interpretation,"¹³ but there is no hint of ambiguity here. Moreover, although the passage I have quoted was written toward the end of George's life, its thrust does not reflect the conservatism associated with old age or reduced vitality. "I have always insisted. . . ." (my italics), he declared, and it would not be difficult to back this statement up with citations from his earlier works. He sought to extirpate the social arrangements that cause widespread involuntary poverty, but a "preferential option for the poor" had no place in his political program.

Wenzler and West would doubtless say that this is expressive of a narrow, selfish individualism, unworthy of George's larger vision – a vision of community and social solidarity.¹⁴ It is not. It is, instead, a recognition that government is a crude and unreliable instrument of community, and a dangerous engine of social solidarity. Genuine community and solidarity can be forged only in liberty; otherwise, they turn out to be monstrous caricatures.

Well, at last we're ready to return to the picture of the cat. The Georgist cat does invite, as Wenzler puts it, "diverse interpretation." Whether it is Persian or Siamese, Abyssinian or Burmese, Calico or Tabby, we have no way of knowing. However, of this we can be sure: It has a tail; therefore, it cannot be a Manx.

What is that tail? It is the freedom to own and to exchange legiti-

mately produced wealth – not as a limited concession granted on grounds of expedience by society, and hence susceptible of withdrawal on like grounds, but as an inviolable right, ordained by an order of law that is transcendent and immutable.

Wenzer and West have seen an animal that resembles the Georgist cat in many ways. But it is a different breed of cat. It is a Manx.

Now, if Georgism were indeed a cult, it would have no place for heresy or dissent. As president of the International Union (its Supreme Pontiff, so to speak), it would be my solemn duty to purge, dis-fellowship, and excommunicate the authors of this little book. But, superficial resemblances to the contrary notwithstanding, Georgism is not a cult. Even if I had the inclination to order such a purge, I don't have the authority. No one does.

I trust that I have shown wherein their social prescription contradicts that of Henry George. But my object in so doing was not polemical. Rather than denouncing them, I seek to open up a dialogue – a dialogue that will deepen and enrich our insights, and expand understanding on both sides. Such a dialogue can only invigorate the movement. For, after all, what is of supreme importance is not so much what George really said, or what position is closest to his theory, but what is true. And how better can we be faithful to the spirit of the one who introduced his masterwork with the declaration, "I propose to beg no question, to shrink from no conclusion, but to follow truth wherever it may lead."¹⁵ ?

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