

A SURVEY OF THE GEORGIST MOVEMENT

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This is little more than a glance at the Georgist movement, past and present, mostly in the USA. It deserves to be studied as a movement; however, the last serious study of it was "The Single Tax Movement in the United States" by Professor Arthur Nichols Young in 1916 (Princeton University Press).

Appropriately, we may consider the Georgist movement to have started with Henry George, particularly with the appearance of his "Progress and Poverty" in 1879. George promulgated his ideas via lectures, writings and political activity, and at some points there were almost amalgamations with other movements - which, however, did not take place. There were close connections with land movements in England and Ireland, but their aims and methods eventually proved to be too different for collaboration. There was a strong link with the rising labor movement in the mayoralty election in New York, 1886, resulting in the United Labor Party, which backed George as their candidate. But afterwards, this fell apart due to disagreements with socialists in the ranks.

By 1889 the Single Tax movement had emerged and went its own way. Organizations, periodicals and campaigns were undertaken on that theme. George's last campaign for mayor in 1897 was still based on acclaim for him as an individual; but by that time the Single Tax movement was being carried forward by many others in the USA and many countries, and after George's death this work continued.

It may be questioned whether there ever was a Georgist or Single Tax "movement". Basically, it was a great idea to which various remarkable individuals were attracted, each with his own idea as to how to promote it. George himself followed his own inclinations and did not believe in a permanent organization but rather in temporary organizations for a specific purpose or campaign, to be disbanded afterwards. Disagreements and splits arose in George's own lifetime; one was between Father McGlynn, another strong individual, and George himself. And George's 'followers' felt no compulsion to pursue George's advice, guidance or example. Having been converted to the idea, they too had their own inclinations as to what to do about it.

Leaders like Tom L. Johnson entered politics - he became a member of Congress and Mayor of Cleveland. Joseph Fels, the millionaire soap manufacturer, started campaigns to get the Single Tax adopted in one state after another. Louis F. Post became Assistant Secretary of Labor under President Wilson. In this generation following George there were also advances in land value taxation - indeed most of the advances that exist today were started in this period, in Denmark, Australia, western Canada and other countries. In the USA, the single tax enclaves were started, the Pittsburgh plan initiated, improvements in land assessment undertaken and property taxation strengthened. This period also saw the high tide of Georgist influence in Britain where the Liberal Party introduced the 1909-10 budget which called for an assessment of all land in Britain. Such famous men as Leo Tolstoy and Sun Yat-Sen advocated George's ideas.

But then came World War I - in 1914 for Europe, in 1917 for the USA - and it seemed to have a devastating effect on the Single Tax movement. After the war little remained. Professor Young's book came at a time when an era came to a close.

Yet something continued. Although the period after World War I, during the Roaring Twenties, was low ebb for the movement, interestingly enough, organizations were started that still exist today - the Henry George Foundation of America, the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation; also the International Union for Land Value Taxation and Free Trade, the Justice Party of Denmark, the Henry George Foundation of Australia and other organizations.

Then came the Great Depression. And in 1932 Oscar H. Geiger founded the Henry George School of Social Science. True to Georgist tradition, Geiger did this almost single-handedly, with the rest of the movement going their own way. Yet it ushered in a new period for the movement. Geiger saw that there were not enough Georgists to influence public opinion in this critical period and that the most urgent need was for more converts. He also felt that a more thorough grounding in the ideas was needed than "a few words about the Single Tax." Thus the educational method was launched. The School continued and grew after Geiger's death in 1934. More and more Georgists were attracted to it. The School was probably instrumental in saving the movement from extinction, which was close to happening. For more than 30 years the School was the focus of most Georgist effort. And the School - due to its emphasis on "fundamental economics" - was also responsible for a shift in emphasis from the "Single Tax movement" to the "Georgist movement".

In recent years a new diversity has re-emerged. And there has been a resurgence of interest and effort in the fiscal side - but as a Land Value Tax (or Site Value Tax) rather than the Single Tax. Much - perhaps most - of this is coming from former Henry George School students. And this points up the utmost importance of the educational work to sustain the movement; otherwise, we could experience again the decline after the first wave of converts disappeared after George's lifetime. Although we are heartened by the new interest being shown - some of it by prominent people - we ought not forget that most people have never heard of Henry George or Single Tax or even Land Value Taxation.

Does a "Georgist movement" exist today? Or should it exist? Georgists would do well to take stock and see what direction might be taken from here on.