

## THE BIRTH AND LIFE OF THE SINGLE TAX

Based on a talk by ROBERT CLANCY at the 1987 ISTA Conference

The Single Tax as it has come to us from Henry George is a proposal "to abolish all taxation save that upon land values." Sounds simple but it has many ramifications. George does not mention it until page 406 of Progress and Poverty. There is a long and intricate analysis before it is reached. When it is presented out of hand, there is a tendency to react to it: "It's not fair to single out land values... It wouldn't be enough for public revenue... It's simplistic... etc." But the analysis must be considered: it is the result of a search for the basic causes of our economic problems.

Problems of taxation and land tenure have been central problems throughout history and they have troubled all civilizations. Some of them handled these successfully, at least for a time - most did not and went astray. It is a long, intricate and very interesting history and should be researched and developed.

There were some early anticipations of the Single Tax, but as a specific economic idea with continuity, the impôt unique began with the French Physiocrats of the 18th century. François Quesnay, the founder, was a physician to Louis XV. He was also a brilliant thinker concerned with the economy, and he wrote the Tableau Economique. He gathered together a group of intellectuals who called themselves Physiocrats, derived from the Greek, meaning rule of nature. They developed the idea of an economy that could operate freely with a minimum of regulations and interference from government, and included free international trade in their program. And they developed the impôt unique - a single tax on land rent (the produit net) with the abolition of taxes on the production and exchange of wealth. There were certain limitations: they thought of agriculture as the only true production, and of manufacturing and commerce as sterile - and their tax would be levied on agricultural land only.

Nevertheless, the Physiocrats opened grand vistas and had a great influence. One of Quesnay's most brilliant disciples was Anne Robert Jacques Turgot, who became



Louis XVI's finance minister. But the nobles opposed his ideas and he was dismissed. "Enlightened despots" in other countries were interested in Physiocratic ideas, but they were likewise discouraged by their landowning nobles.

Physiocracy influenced one of the greatest thinkers of all time, Adam Smith, who is known as the Father of Political Economy. Other classical economists also saw the special nature of land and its rent, notably David Ricardo and John Stuart Mill. There was also an influence in America. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were familiar with Physiocratic ideas. Thomas Paine wrote a pamphlet on "Agrarian Justice" advocating the Single Tax. Pierre Samuel du Pont, a Physiocrat, settled in America.

Lesser known thinkers also promoted the idea. In Britain these included William Ogilvie who in 1782 wrote an essay proposing the Single Tax; also Thomas Spence who had a large following in his time. Later, in 1850, Patrick Edward Dove wrote The Theory of Human Progression advocating the idea. In the same year Herbert Spencer also promoted the idea in Social Statics, although he later recanted.

Then, in America, came Henry George, who knew little of these developments, but came to the Single Tax out of his own quest for a solution to economic problems. He launched a movement that continues to this day; we think of this movement as starting with George, although he had eminent predecessors. George himself did not name his proposal the "Single Tax" in Progress and Poverty. That was done by a New York lawyer, Thomas G. Shearman, who presented the name in his book Natural Taxation. (And of course it harks back to the impôt unique.) George accepted the title and called it such in his later speeches and writings.

George himself and his followers launched efforts, both political and educational, promoting the Single Tax. Many heroic campaigns were undertaken - George's two campaigns for Mayor of New York, Tom L. Johnson's efforts as Mayor of Cleveland, Joseph Fels' state by state campaigns. Largely as a result of George's influence, there was a nation-wide effort to scientifically assess land; the Pittsburgh plan came into being; and land value taxation was adopted in different parts of the world. There was a vigorous campaign in Britain to assess land for taxation, which was defeated by the House of Lords.

World War I was a serious interruption of these efforts. However, although there were fewer comparable efforts after the war, the idea and the movement continued in the 1920's and 1930's. It moved more into the field of education with the formation of the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation and the Henry George School. Classes were held and literature was distributed. Advocates tended to call themselves Georgists more than Single Taxers, recognizing that there were economic ramifications and philosophic considerations and that it was not merely a fiscal reform.

But political activity was by no means discontinued. The Henry George Foundation of America, the International Union for Land Value Taxation and Free Trade and the Danish Justice Party were founded in this period, with sights on political action. Several individuals achieved public office as mayors, state legislators, U.S. Congressmen, and progress has been made in converting municipalities to land value taxation. World War II did not interrupt the movement as much as World War I. did. Diverse and multiple organizations and efforts continue to this day, and a feeling of progress, however slow, is sensed. Various names and titles are used for these activities, including the "Single Tax."

The idea of "birth and life" brings up the thought of "death." While social historians have been wrong about it - the death of the Single Tax has been greatly exaggerated - what about the implication? My own thought is that the "death" of the Single Tax movement as a special and separate movement need not be lamented if the ideas become an integral part of society not needing a "movement" to promote it.