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Comment

THE FULL GEORGIST PHILOSOPHY

In a book on various political ideas which I came across recently, there was a friendly explanation of Henry George's ideas. However, the following was stated: "No systematic political philosophy or program was contained in the theory of George," adding that entire reliance was placed upon the Single Tax.

The Single Tax has mustered much enthusiasm, devotion and effort, and one wonders whether this would occur just with a theory of taxation. We often speak of the "Georgist philosophy." What are we talking about?

It is true that George set about single-mindedly to try to solve the paradox of "progress and poverty", and he came up with a powerful answer leading to the Single Tax - enough to explain the enthusiasm. But in his inquiry, George delved deeply and widely into economic, social and political thought. And bear in mind that he wrote several books after Progress and Poverty.

It is also true that George consistently emphasized his proposed remedy - and that he is most associated with it. But we find scattered through his writings not only a political philosophy but a philosophy in general. This is more implicit than explicit, but the threads could be drawn together to weave the central philosophical outlook he drew upon in discussing his main theme as well as other themes.

In a reconstruction of "Georgist philosophy," we might begin, as philosophers often do, with methodology. Chapter III of Protection or Free Trade, "Of Method," would serve as a start. The nature of the universe would be a good follow-up, and we find this in The Science of Political Economy; also in A Perplexed Philosopher, in the course of countering Herbert Spencer's materialist philosophy. The nature of man as a social being, as the unsatisfied animal with spiritual yearnings, fulfilling the law of least exertion, runs throughout his writings, as do ethical principles, notably in The Condition of Labor, George's open letter to Pope Leo XIII.

A political philosophy and program can be drawn from Social Problems, in which George shows statements from the French Declaration of Rights and the American Declaration of Independence to be the cornerstones of his politics; he also expounds on the functions of government, asserts the need for more direct contact between government and the people, and avers (along with Jefferson) that an educated citizenry is a requirement of democracy.

With respect to a complete outline of political and economic reform, the absence of such is actually a part of George's philosophy. What he did not propose is as important as what he did propose. George believed in natural growth. Detailed positions on everything would be an encumbrance. The adaptability of Georgist philosophy to the world's diverse cultures is one of its strengths.

- R.C.