

Mason Gaffney, October 18, 1923-July 16, 2020

BY POLLY CLEVELAND, ON JULY 28TH, 2020

My old friend and mentor, Mason Gaffney, died last week at his home in Redlands, California. I thank David Cay Johnston for a [warm and insightful obituary](#) in the *New York Times*. I also thank Wyn Achenbaum and Nic Tideman and the Schalkenbach Foundation for an [extraordinary tribute](#) with excerpts from his writing. Especially check out Mason's timely article, [The Red and the Blue](#), on why high median income cities like New York and San Francisco vote blue, while low income regions vote red: Land values are disproportionately high in prosperous big cities, making homeownership "unaffordable" for middle class residents. So they rent—and vote blue. Suburban and small-town homeowners vote red.

I first met Mase in 1970. My husband and I were working on Ralph Nader's "Power and Land in California" project. In researching that boondoggle visible from the moon, the California State Water Project, I had encountered a scholarly article on irrigation canals, canals that crisscrossed each other delivering water to those who least needed it while bypassing those who needed it most. The article was not only devastating, but funny, so funny I laughed out loud. I had to meet the author!

Come Christmas, we looked up Mase in Washington DC, where he was a scholar at Resources for the Future. He invited us to dinner at his apartment. After frying us up us hamburgers with soy sauce, he whipped out his guitar and sang a few numbers from Tom Lehrer—I remember one about "sliding down the razor blade of life." And Gilbert and Sullivan songs, to his own words. We talked late. I don't remember about what, but I was enthralled. He sent us off with a packet of reprints and an enjoinder I didn't then get: "Tax capital and you drive it away; tax land and you drive it into use."

Soon enough, I dropped out of grad school in ancient Near Eastern languages and followed his trail to the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at Berkeley. Here, with the help of the massive reading lists he sent me, I eventually learned to apply real economics to big questions, starting with what keeps societies unequal and wages low.

Mase loved a good party. Once, we gave a party for him at our apartment on Telegraph Hill in San Francisco. He and wife Tish and baby Laura were traveling from British Columbia to UC Riverside. A bagpiper appeared on the street outside. Really

loud. Tish worried he'd wake the baby. But Mase invited the man in and sang numbers with him while the guests clapped and cheered.

Mase and I stayed in touch by letters and email over the years. I wish so much I had managed a last visit before Covid struck. I'll always miss him. And I'll always be grateful for everything he taught me, for his courage and honesty in confronting bastardized economics and history, and for his generosity, clarity and humor in this benighted world.