

## RESPONDING TO CONSERVATIVE, LIBERTARIAN, AND PROGRESSIVE IDEOLOGY

As I often say to my students, “history is very messy.” There has always been a strong individualist orientation within the “American” population, the dynamics of which were described by Frederick Jackson Turner looking at the influence of the frontier. We need to remember that “the frontier” during the era of the nation’s founding began not very far beyond farmlands surrounding Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore or Williamsburg.

From the very beginning the debate raged over the extent to which government is necessary to protect life, liberty and property. And, integral to this debate was the debate over the need to distinguish between societal and individual property. Was nature (i.e., land) justly to be owned by individuals; and, if so, did those who held deeds to land owe to the community or society “the rent of land” for the privilege? Thomas Paine (building on arguments by John Locke, Adam Smith and Anne Robert Jacques Turgot) put this argument into practical form in his essay *Agrarian Justice*.

In my own writing I have described Paine as the architect of a very distinct set of principles, cooperative individualism. Paine thought through the problems of governance to advance a structure that would secure and protect individual liberty within a cooperative societal framework. Was he more libertarian, or more progressive? What he opposed was privilege in any form. The kernel of his insights found expression in the early writing (*Social Statics*, 1851) of Herbert Spencer on “the land question.” The Scot, Patrick Edward Dove also contributed to the same line of thinking.

Cooperative individualism found its next, and, arguably most effective champion, late in the 19th century with the emergence of Henry George. George’s first book dealt specifically with the land question. To George’s credit, he was accused by defenders of the status quo of being a socialist and by socialists of being a tool of the capitalists. Among those who came to embrace the

principles embraced by Henry George is a very eclectic list of profound thinkers, reformers, statesmen and civic leaders. The 1909 campaign speeches of Winston Churchill described the monopoly of land as “the mother of all monopolies.” Leo Tolstoy did his best to convince the czar and Russia’s aristocracy that only by adopting Henry George’s policies could revolution be avoided. Sun Yat-Sen took Henry George’s proposals into his campaign to unite the Chinese under a modern form of democratic republic.

In the United States, the Wilson administration included Louis Freeland Post and other devoted supporters of Henry George’s “single tax” program. Frederic Howe, appointed Commissioner of Ellis Island, had worked in the mayoral administration of Cleveland’s “Georgist” mayor Tom L. Johnson. In the 1920s Francis Neilson founded *The Freeman* and brought Albert Jay Nock on as editor. Both were strongly influenced by George and Paine. A later version of *The Freeman* was published as the organ of the Henry George School of Social Science and edited by Frank Chodorov, a family friend of the senior William F. Buckley. Because of this family friendship, William F. Buckley Jr. came to see the wisdom offered in Henry George’s writings but, as he offered during one interview, his conservative friends did not want to entertain such a radical departure from the American System. Milton Friedman told a stunned audience that the best source of public revenue was the rent of land, as proposed by Henry George.

If history is messy, ideology is conflicted. Those on the Right want to preserve privileges they argue are rights. Those on the Left want to preserve privileges they argue are necessary to mitigate the more deeply-entrenched privileges guarded by the Right. Libertarians claim to be opposed to coercion of any sort. Yet, they ignore the fact that the private appropriation of the rents yielded by the control over nature effectively results in the redistribution of property from its producers to a privileged “rentier” segment of society. Inevitably *Cooperative Individualism* is the true “third way”. ■