

Tolstoy, Proudhon and Henry George

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Most of us are to some degree familiar with the influence Henry George had on the great Russian thinker, Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy's writings began to make reference to George's ideas as early as 1885, and the two of them corresponded on the abolition of private property in land and the single tax. George's untimely death prevented a planned meeting at Tolstoy's home, Yasnaya Polyana. Tolstoy's respect for George is expressed in the oft-quoted "People do not argue with the teaching of George; they simply do not know it. And it is impossible to do otherwise with his teaching, for he who becomes acquainted with it cannot but agree."

As the child is father to the man, Tolstoy (apparently with little disagreement) found in George's words written exposition of ideas and truths he had known all his life. This is related in a letter from Tolstoy to Tatiana, his daughter: "I have long ceased to interest myself - and in fact I never interested myself - in political questions; but the question of the land, that is of land slavery, though it is considered a political question, is...a moral question, a question of the violation of the most elementary demands of morality, and therefore that question not only occupies my mind but torments me."

Tolstoy was earlier also tormented by the repressiveness of the State, which made him a kindred spirit of the celebrated French anarchist, Pierre Joseph Proudhon; and from whom Tolstoy acquired his appreciation of the anarchistic political analysis. From Paris in 1857 he wrote to Botkin: "...for me, political laws are such a horrible lie that I do not see in them anything either better or worse... I will never again look at such a thing and I will never anywhere serve any government."

As did Proudhon, Tolstoy came to view private property as theft, government of man by man as oppression and the union of order and anarchy as the highest form of society. Tolstoy is also known to have read Herbert Spencer (whose positivist philosophy he rejected). If Spencer's original treatment of the land question in Social Statics found its way into Tolstoy's reading, this may have planted a seed later to be watered by George's Progress and Poverty. What is evident is that because of Proudhon and George, Tolstoy came to understand why his earlier philanthropic scheme to distribute his estates among the peasant farmers had failed, and the reasons why governments cannot but eventually become either totalitarian or authoritarian.

Individualism, anarchism, pacifism and Georgism are intricately woven together in Tolstoy's personal philosophy. He may not have been, as one of his critics have taken pains to note, an original thinker; there is no question as to his ability to recognize sound and original thinking in others.

Tolstoy's denial of private property and his anarchistic views on government are to most Georgists and Libertarians philosophically extreme; and, in our interdependent modern world, impractical. His world still provided the opportunities of a vast frontier. Importantly, there is a great deal one can learn about the human condition from Tolstoy's writing. His thinking derives from a long history of intellectual dialogue among conservative counterrevolutionaries in Europe who benefited by the evolution of Jeffersonian democracy.

George's personal attachment to the democratic experience was a distinct advantage as his own political thinking matured; he instinctively tied together as necessary preconditions to democratic society both free access to land and individual freedom. That the English colonies in North America became the breeding ground of democracy was largely fortuitous because it could not have occurred even in England, whose political economy was ripe for class struggle. The colonials were largely

ungovernable without the expenditure of tremendous sums, and so were able to construct a government of very limited powers while taking advantage of the free frontier.

The ideal conditions of free soil and benign government has long since disappeared from civilization; however, in 1776 the tide of despotism was temporarily pushed back. Peter Drucker, in The Future of Industrial Man, without really appreciating the dynamics, accurately presents the impact on world history:

"The American Revolution brought victory and power to a group which in Europe had been almost completely defeated and which was apparently dying out rapidly: the anticentralist, antitotalitarian conservatives with their hostility to absolute and centralized government and their distrust of any ruler claiming perfection. It saved the autonomous common law from submersion under perfect law codes; and it re-established independent law courts. Above all, it reasserted the belief in the imperfection of man as the basis of freedom."

I cannot help but think that we have again reached the point where only a second such revolution can again push back the despots. Since the frontier is gone, that revolution must take place not on the battlefields but in the heart and mind of each individual. As did Tolstoy, I have found no better teacher than Henry George and no better peaceful method than to collect the rental value of land for the common good. In these respects, I stand with Proudhon, with Tolstoy and with George as a fellow conservative counterrevolutionary.