

The Spirit of Henry George

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Theory and practice are often referred to as if they were necessarily polar opposites. It is true that some Georgists are theorists only, and are offended when their ideas are not received with enthusiasm. Henry George had the theory, but with a difference. He recognized the practical considerations and took the opposition, not as an affront, but as a thought to which he could appeal.

Theory is like the plan for a house that is designed with the occupants in mind. The plan is a necessary part of the building, but as construction proceeds there will be unexpected obstacles. To insist that every detail of the plan be executed precisely as drawn, when perhaps certain specified materials cannot be supplied, is to render it ineffective. Changes and compromises simply must be accepted.

Theories Must Be Viable

Similarly, the most important theories will be little more than subjects for discussion in controversy, unless the participants are kept in mind. Those who sponsor philosophies of action, but who do not allow for the limitations of human creatures, carry emotional burdens with which we are all familiar.

That certainly does not outlaw discussion or the exchange of ideas. Anyone may, academically speaking, hold a comprehensive and "perfect" picture for the world. This may equip him with a useful and dynamic purpose. But to take a philosophy, even the Georgist philosophy, as an accepted fact rather than a suggested plan for the good of all, is to encumber it rather than aid it.

Human life and the ways of the world are complex and often unpredictable. Theory or philosophy will emerge from the circumscribed field of ideas only when the practical requirements are recognized.

Theory is proved as it walks the earth. Only that which proves itself in the affairs of men has cultural relevance. Unused ideas remain in the nursery of hope. But it is comforting to note that as theory is used, even to a small degree, the way becomes open for all to put it increasingly into practice.

Henry George understood that the most important factor in his philosophy was a working acceptance by his fellow men. He was not merely advocating a reform. He was calling on his contemporaries to consider his proposal or to suggest other ways to improve social conditions.