

A HOPEFUL MESSAGE

Followers of Henry George like to deplore the scant attention paid to him and his ideas in a world today so desperately in need of them. While there is no sudden rebirth of the worldwide acclaim that greeted the author of "Progress and Poverty," some of his basic concepts are gaining recognition in a number of arenas.

From the Falkland Islands to the Sinai desert and other lands in varying stages of contention, there is a growing awareness of the distinction between sovereignty and access. Nations that presume to govern an area may, for all their swagger, be less relevant to the future of those lands than the people who have an investment in using them to build, to grow, or even to camp out. Of course, when governments deny or restrict access to the land, they are behaving like any monopoly owner, with much the same negative consequences for labor and enterprise alike. Even a change of government without freeing of the land for broader access will not provide genuine freedom, as the newest post-colonial nations of Africa and Asia are learning to their regret.

At a less lofty level, the most popular application of Georgist philosophy in the form of land value taxation is now being considered seriously at the state and local levels in those strongholds of American democracy, Boston and Philadelphia. Areas in which taxation is already a considerable state and local burden may not prove to be an ideal testing ground for the purest application of Georgist theory. The high local taxes in Philadelphia and the combined state and local burdens in Massachusetts would not disappear with the imposition of higher taxes on land values. Yet, there is a growing understanding of the salutary effect both on economic development and the revenue base of a higher tax on land than on buildings. The common sense of the measure may help win it new adherents. Its adoption and use in highly visible communities can only broaden acceptance.

There is still a long road between a better property tax and the ethical basis of political economy. There will always be some unwilling to make that leap from the practical to the ideal, or the reverse. Our job at the Henry George School is to help those who are seeking the broader concept or the specific application understand the relation between the two. Instruction in ideas and working towards their implementation can be mutually supportive rather than exclusive activities. It is the best way to move forward on all fronts.

Philip Finkelstein