

Henry George's Vision

1989 is the 150th Anniversary (the Sesquicentennial) of Henry George's birth. He died in 1897, and 92 years later he is remembered and honored.

What is it that makes George so revered by relatively few people and so unknown by the vast majority? He gave a remedy for economic ills after a careful analysis. Most of those who study it are converted. But to others - who do not study it, or do not follow its reasoning, or have an agenda that prevents them from acknowledging it - its significance is lost.

An important factor is the perspective that needs to be taken. George leads the inquiry from one level to another until the prospect opens expansively and one is able to see the whole of economic society. Every part relates coherently to every other part. It is a difficult vision to attain and maintain, but it is absolutely necessary.

One important point made by George is that progress as it is leaves out a significant number of people who endure poverty, and to him this was unacceptable. And he set about looking for a solution that would take in everybody rather than pit class against class, group against group.

Other responses to this situation have been woefully inadequate. One has been to admire the progress and ignore the poverty and the problems. Another has been to blame poverty on the poor people. Another, more humane, has been to alleviate poverty with a redistribution of wealth through taxes, charity and welfare measure - producing, however, a tangle of complications and difficulties. Another is to point to some sections of society as being treated unfairly, for instance minorities. Ameliorative measures in this area, though well intentioned, create new problems without solving the basic one. A recent example is the bad and exploitive treatment of immigrants, especially illegals. But in California in George's day almost everybody was an immigrant (there was not much worry about illegals) and still most of them managed to make out. When George came to New York from California, no doubt the poverty he observed was suffered mostly by recent immigrants. But it was intolerable to him that anybody should be left out.

When Henry George was on the scene, lecturing, writing, campaigning, there were many who admired him who did not completely grasp what he was talking about. But he imparted a strong sense that what he was driving at was for the benefit of all mankind. Economists before and since George have had great influence. Adam Smith is revered as the Father of Political Economy. Karl Marx was the founder of international communism. John Maynard Keynes influenced the fiscal policies of most of the world. But George was the only economist who ever became a popular hero!

"The tumult and the shouting" have died. What remains is a truth that holds up despite all the opposing, ignoring, refuting. Man is totally dependent on the land - a truism that is often forgotten. Oscar Geiger used to say that the fish in the ocean see everything about them except the ocean itself. So it is with man and the land. The problem is to work out a method whereby the equal rights of all to natural opportunities are secured. This was George's contribution.

Those of us who assent to the Georgist philosophy are justified in carrying on despite the seemingly insurmountable odds. For sooner or later, the world has to rediscover Henry George's vision - a humane, holistic and rational answer.

