

# His own worst enemy

Under the heading "Our own worst enemy", Geoffrey Lee (*L&L* autumn 2008) reviews a long article by Professor Michael Hudson called 'Henry George's Political Critics' in *AJES* January 2008.

The title in effect summarises the view given by Prof. Hudson that Henry George, both in the tactics he employed and in the legacy he left to later followers, was "Our own worst enemy". George, politically, was a liability to his own movement! It is a pity that nothing Geoffrey Lee writes dispels this insulting and patronising insinuation. In fact, barring one small difference, what Geoffrey Lee does is simply to agree with Prof. Hudson.

Let us take just three of the criticisms: *George's Support of Capital Against Labour*, *George's Ricardian Emphasis on Rural Land*, and *George's Rejection of an Academic Platform to Elaborate Rent Theory and Taxation*. These headings must strike anyone familiar with George's life and teaching as quite bizarre. More bizarrely, Prof. Hudson quite evidently supports these criticisms. They are his criticisms.

He accuses George at Berkeley in 1877, for example, of displaying a "belligerent attitude"; he writes that he "indulged in a tirade against economists" and that he claimed that economists had made no 'substantial improvements' since Ricardo. Anyone interested in what actually happened may read George's address and anyone interested in expert commentary on this whole incident may check Prof. Hudson's assessment against that of George's biographer Charles Albro Barker.

Geoffrey Lee, reflecting Prof. Hudson, says that "George was not given to cooperating with others". What is the evidence? It is that he did not join other participants in a Land Reform Conference in Paris in 1889. Again, anyone interested in what happened may read Henry George Jnr. I have found no reference in Barker. Certainly the evidence is rather sparse for such a sweeping generalisation.

But the review by no means exhausts Prof. Hudson's criticisms. In fact, for the most part the review appears to go no further than the first nine pages—the article is forty pages. It misses the main criticism from Hudson's point of view. This is that George wrongly refused to ally himself with the socialists and the labour movement, and that Georgists have inherited this unfortunate legacy.

So trenchantly does he make this criticism that we find George accused of "his alliance with capital" and of "his support of capital even when it became monopolistic, extortionate or abusive of workplace conditions".

Yet again, anyone interested to see how true this comment is can retrace George's relations with the socialists, especially in 1886. To do so, I believe, is to see that this criticism misrepresents what is really a complex set of events.

The later shift of the georgist movement to the right, to an almost solely fiscal basis (the 'single tax') was not the work of George at all but of Thomas Shearman and those who followed him in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet that point is not made by Prof. Hudson.

George said at the end of *Our Land and Land Policy* that the land question deserved all the attention we could give it and that, the more it was looked at, the broader and deeper this question became. There lies the justification of George's supposed "singular" and "narrow" focus. Here "singular" is far from "narrow".

It is possible to argue that his failure to get support amounted less to his supposed inability to get on with others, his "aloof behaviour" or "self-centred personality" than to society's preference for that interventionism known in America as Progressivism.

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*The phrase "we're our own worst enemy" is used to mean a person's own failings often pose their greatest hurdles in life. Perhaps George was his own worst enemy, as the review and its subject conclude, or maybe not. But, for clarification, the review does not claim or imply that George was our—ie. the reform movement's—worst enemy. What do readers think? Dr Hudson points out that the quotations cited from his article are "in fact taken by me directly from the Barker biography of George, and are referenced". Ed.*

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