

Behind the veil

If the capitalist paradigm is obsolete, society faces two choices. One is for a helter-skelter rush into any change, for the sake of change; which implies a philosophical vacuum within which there is an absence of agreement as to the direction for the constructive renewal of society. Or: the demand will emerge for controlled change in the direction of a more fulfilling system.

The demise of the Weimar republic and the rise of Hitler during the 1930s was one example of the former process. The serious prospect of a return to this option surfaced during elections in 1993 in both Russia and Italy, in which fascists captured the allegiance of a significant proportion of populations that were sceptical about the viability of the existing social philosophy.

Constructive reforms cannot occur without solid consensus support for a new paradigm; and new visions cannot flower in the public consciousness until obsolete perceptions are consigned to history. We can hint at the obstacles to the cultural evolution of society by reviewing some contemporary problems where the demand for change is being forcefully advocated, but in which the "solutions" appear to be unsatisfactory. We bear in mind that the primary need is the reintegration of society into a wholesome system based on cooperative association and virtuous personal behaviour.

Devolution of Political Power

One of the major geopolitical exercises of the 20th century was the attempt to aggregate power into super-states. Despite some startling successes, this appears to have failed. The most notable example was the USSR. The failure of the more recent attempt by Europe to create a superstate through

the Maastricht agreement is an example of democratic politics inhibiting the aspirations of politicians who are not in touch with ordinary folk. Replacing the notion of the super-state is the concept of "subsidiarity", which expresses no more than the need to devolve powers back to the old nation-state. This return to square one, however, whether through the Balkan solution or peaceful agreement, will not satisfy the imperatives of the 21st century.

The world needs a new political matrix based on horizontal cooperation and vertical differentiation based on the devolution of political power and cultural diversity. We are one world; a global economy, facing common problems on a worldwide scale. But in addition, there is an equally urgent need to provide the flexibility that is necessary for the revival of locally-based ethnic identities built on respect for diversity.

Culture is inextricably fused with territory. There can be no renewal of cultural identity without a corresponding recognition of the need to define a new set of rights. In fact, the quest for land is the single most important issue at the peace conferences in all the trouble spots of the world. Yet the bargaining over new social and political structures proceeds outside the framework of a land ethic that is validated by anthropology and morality. Deals are struck on the basis of exhaustion from wars of attrition, and the agreements are all executed in terms of property rights that were the original cause of the conflicts.

The Georgist paradigm does not prescribe the precise nature of new social and political linkages. In fact, there can be no one solution; cultural diversity dictates the need for a variety of approaches that are capable of coexisting. The Georgist paradigm, however, facilitates their emergence through the stress on the primacy of individual liberty and communal integrity through a rational system of public finance.⁵⁴

The Rights of Women

The debate about personal freedom is currently most sharply focused on the demands for the empowerment of women. There is an increasingly confident assertion, forcefully expressed by Rosalind Miles, that their case for power comparable to that of men is unanswerable:

For patriarchy has run its course, and now not only fails to serve the real needs of men and women, but with its inalienable racism, militarism,

hierarchical structures and rage to dominate and destroy, it threatens the very existence of life on earth.⁵⁵

The debate is a clouded one, stemming in part from the bias against patriarchy in an influential study by Frederick Engels. Because of his ideological preconceptions, Engels sought to link the loss of women's ancient rights to the emergence of privately-owned capital. Yet he was frank enough to admit: "As to how and when this revolution took place among civilized peoples, we have no knowledge".⁵⁶

Feminists are now using psychoanalysis as a tool for exploring the origins of their condition. These begin with parenting which, of course, directs the initial focus onto women as mothers. The maternal role is being explained in terms of an analysis of "capitalism" - that is, that set of values assigned by Marx and Engels to that concept. Intuitively, approaching the problem from the Georgist perspective, one wonders whether "delineating the forms of psychological damage characteristic of contemporary capitalism"⁵⁷ is the appropriate starting point for an analysis of gender conflict.

An issue that warrants exploration is the value-system embedded in matriarchal society. Feminists display an ambivalent attitude towards the concept of matriarchy. Some of them argue that matriarchal society/power, as a system which pre-existed patriarchal power/society, is a-historical, a myth which they regard as part of a plot by the apologists of patriarchalism; while at the same time being attracted to the myth as supporting their onslaught on the family as the oppressive institution that must somehow be abolished.

Unfortunately, this confusion leads to an underestimation of the anthropological realities that underpin the role of women in pre-historical societies. There is adequate evidence to show that, in the earliest societies, women were at the heart of a clearly-defined set of rights to land, the purpose of which was the advancement of both the biological unit and the community. Those rights established a relationship between the sexes based on reciprocity, co-operation and respect. This is a vision that contradicts Simone de Beauvoir's conclusion that "in truth that Golden Age of Woman is only a myth... Society has always been male; political power has always been in the hands of men".⁵⁸

One suspects that feminists would do more to advance the cause of their

gender if they abandoned the language of socialism (with, for example, the socialist's focus on "commodities") in favour of Georgism (and a consideration of the role of land rights in society). Might a redefinition of personal rights recast society in terms of equality and justice for all, irrespective of gender?

Threat to the Biosphere

Concerns such as those to which we allude above, however, will count for little unless mankind develops a new ethic for his habitat. A seemingly voracious appetite and the values and institutions which are not calibrated with the welfare of the biosphere, are now generally recognised as unsustainable. Something needs to be done, but the debate is stumbling at the first fence over two basic issues.

George Bush's intervention in the proceedings of the Earth Summit in Brazil in June 1992 usefully highlighted the poverty of philosophy and of politics. He declined to sign life-conserving protocols because (he claimed) he was concerned for the jobs of US citizens. Yet, even as the president spoke, his statisticians in Washington, DC, were preparing to announce that the system which he was championing had cast 10m people out of the jobs market, an achievement accomplished without the assistance of measures to defend Mother Earth. And then there was the problem of money. Why should the rich industrial nations pay a disproportionate amount towards the cost of changes that would help to heal the wounds of nature?

According to the Georgist paradigm, there is no problem. People do not need the president's paternal concern for their jobs. Change the system of public finance, and people will get on with the task of earning their daily bread. Within that framework - surely the rental income of land is the appropriate source from which to draw the funds to heal nature? Surely it would not take too great a leap of the imagination to see that a global development fund financed out of rent would be both equitable and efficient? Furthermore, such a strategy would be self-financing. Enhance the quality of the environment, and people will be willing to pay higher rents for the benefits of access to the improvements! In other words, the revenue base expands to meet the global clean-up challenge which will face mankind in the 21st century!⁵⁹

Issues such as these require extensive discussion, if we are to take action of the kind that can ensure that life in the 21st century is not to be punctuated by wars which, shrouded as they usually are with talk of religion, ethnicity or whatever, are, at their heart, about access to land.