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What's this?

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Dear Ron:

The Wareing study seems to me to provide background of value to anyone interested in PROGRESS AND POVERTY. One gains insight into what must have been in Henry George's thinking and feeling about the issues of his time. I am no expert on the intellectual history covered but have some impressions. They support Mr. Wareing's. My observations follow in somewhat random order.

1. Something of a surprise! The author points out (p. 36) that George had elements of "end-state" thinking, i.e. that perhaps a Golden Age can be envisioned. The end of progress? Perhaps a hint? But not, one should say, conclusive. The dominant spirit of HG's work, I believe, is that mankind can make a better world. Certainly there will be unending change. HG did not, we must conclude, intend to leave us a confining prescription except as to one basic structural feature of a broadest nature that would work profound changes in human affairs.

2. Wareing does not make explicit a point of great significance today: Neither George nor his predecessors or contemporaries had access to much quantitative data. Vast amounts of non-quantitative institutional material not available a century (or a decade) ago bear upon the subjects of PP. One may feel that too much emphasis today goes into measurement and too little into the kind of thinking embodied in PP. In any case, however, LILP would not be responsible if it restricted its work to the type (and with the content) HG did when one has so much more evidence and the ability to use it in meaningful ways.

3. One biography of HG reports that near the end of his life he was presented with some of the then new economic theory (Austrian??) but in a rather fatigued way decided to ignore it. I do not trust my memory, but I submit that admirers of PP and other writings should recognize that we can base our thinking and the policies that emerge upon more complete economic theory than that of PP.

4. How can one use the Wareing research? It describes a world--rather, several sets of ideas and feelings--of human beings, who were concerned about matters of profound importance. Each strain of thought seems to me

to have merit and limitations. To varying extent they reveal inadequacies of the others. How they meld, however, into HG's writings would be of some interest. More to the point for us is the indication that any person's philosophy can (doubtless will) result from many human sources. (I explicitly exclude Divine Revelation as a foundation for specific, detailed conclusions on social policy.) HG's era was not "the end of history". It was not finality as regards knowledge about how people can conduct their group lives, i.e., community, collective, national, etc., activity.

Men (not many women except as wives may have exerted influence behind the scenes) knowing what went before and with some sense of results proceeded to dream and to propose. I would draw from Wareing the sense that what enabled HG to accomplish greatly were several threads of thought that by no means included all of which human beings would be capable. Wareing does not, I believe, attempt to identify any explicit influence of "Social Darwinism" on PP. But he makes clear HG's belief that institutions, including government, do "make a difference".

5. Perhaps another way of expressing impressions from reading Wareing: Should we not conclude that PP presents matters of great value, not the least of which is the

recognition of a process of learning? (I think that it is in PP that HG says that his goal is to make us think.) The figure of speech of seeing farther than our fathers because we can stand on their shoulders has merit--our children and theirs will be able to see farther by rising higher on the basis of accumulations of knowledge. But we, and then they, must make the effort to climb. Mere existence does not enable us to see farther than Aristotle or HG; there must be effort to learn.

6. Mankind today can profit immensely from PP. And we can hope to do better by drawing upon the accumulation of knowledge in the century since HG's death. Our opportunity--and responsibility--must be more than taking the fullest advantage possible of HG's writings. We should draw upon and add to the best of what can be learned up to now.

Do I preach? Perhaps. My object is to state why one could support PP earnestly while endorsing something more. And that something might conflict with part of PP. (The "singleness" of HG's tax proposal, for example, would seem to me quite unrealistic. I do not know how narrowly a court

might interpret the provisions of a will. Support for governmental policy today should not rest upon the authority of a text--PP--but the insights of such a text can be of value, immense value in the case of PP (in my view).

7. Jeffersonians, Jacksonians, utopians, social Darwinists, populists and followers of HG said things of value for us today; but the fact that there are elements of current value does not mean that an entire world view deserves endorsement. The need to reject some elements does not mean that all should be cast aside. (Trite--but true!.) Wareing does not attempt to distinguish elements of PP that are outdated from those of merit for us. Perhaps there is more to be done now along such lines if conformity to the directions of a will is questioned.

An aside: Most of my friends have heard me say, perhaps more than once, that any missionary will oversell his or her brand of salvation. But there may be merit along with nonsense and error. I have a feeling that real merit in Georgist doctrine has been rejected too often along with the unacceptable. A health program may have value even if it will not work the miracles implied in advertising.

8. PP does not lay out plans for getting HG's ideas implemented. HG might well have thought that the power of his persuasion would move the public to the action he advocated. In what was a simpler world the details, the specific elements, of his program might have seemed obvious. Today, in contrast, situations are diverse and complex. How would budgets fare? What would be the differences from one community to another? Are the numbers of, say a two-tier property tax, large enough to exert a significant influence on decisions about investment, e.g., encouraging the modernization and expansion of plant and equipment and housing? To what extent has construction in effect resulted from tax concessions that embody some of the elements of a Georgist policy. Would open space be reduced? Urban compactness be encouraged? And so on.

The LILP programs, whether deliberately designed for answering such questions, would contribute to answers. Perhaps more explicit concern connecting them would be in order.

9. Wareing's discussion of reforms, etc., does not get far in "nuts and bolts". Neither does PP. But

assessment is critical in property taxation. LILP efforts for many years have sought to assist the improvement of assessment. Such direction of attention has, in itself, substantial value. And it would contribute to the achievements HG seeks. Perry Prentice was correct, I believe, in asserting that the improvement of assessment would do something, perhaps a good deal in some localities, to shift tax burdens off man-made capital on to land values.

Those in favor shifting some or much of property tax from man-made capital to land recognize that the quality of assessment deserves emphasis. If burdens on land values increase, inaccuracies and inequalities in assessments will have adverse results. The work of LILP in raising the quality of assessing contributes to the ends HG sought in PP.

10. Reading the Wareing essay and thinking about PP, one will sense the need for dreams (generalities) about potentials for progress and also the vital significance of details, of specifics. And "land" is indeed very "specific". Much of LILP effort goes into the understanding of details of one or another aspect of "land" and human relations to it.

11. I do not recall a PP discussion of who is to lead reform. Wareing's observation (p. 31 and note 118) about leadership raises the subject. Someone must act and induce others to act. In the foreseeable future mankind cannot, I fear, expect from an elite "enough" leadership of the right kind for constructive reform (including, I submit, shifting of some tax from man-made capital to land). But one can expect that better education of elected officials and the judiciary, and an increasingly professional civil service will exert influence of a type scarcely known in HG's day, LILP works toward this end.

12. Plus ca change etc. A century and a fifth after HG and some of his contemporaries pressed for action against poverty, it remains as an unsolved problem. Concern for justice and less inequality finds expression today. By looking at the goals of reformers (p. 33 ff) one sees that life today has been freed from burdens now (almost) forgotten.

The last few pages remind us that PP and George's other writings were directed toward reform. He believed that government could be a useful instrument in a world in which individual effort should be crucial.

I refrain from further preaching.