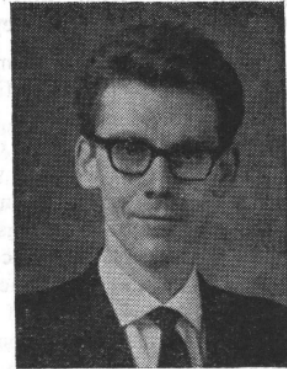


The Evolution of Georgeist Ideas

BY P. R. HUDSON

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IT HAS BEEN SAID that if a young man has not been attracted to socialism by the age of twenty-one he lacks a sense of social justice. It has also been said that if he has not become a conservative by the age of thirty he is oblivious to the social pressures around him and remains a frustrated idealist. To a certain extent I have confirmed these generalisations by my personal experience and attitudes.

I first became interested in politics when studying history at school. At the age of sixteen, having followed the historical battle of the working classes from 1760 through the period of the Industrial Revolution to the rise of the trades unions and the Labour Party, I was firmly convinced that socialism held the key to the problem of the unequal distribution of wealth. Within seven years, after experience in the catering industry and in the army, I was convinced that Conservative policies had considerable advantages over those of their natural opponents.

This change in attitude was brought about through observation. Business life had convinced me of the desirability of competition. I had come to realise that absolute equality was not only impossible but positively undesirable. Individuality and independence became important to me. Disillusionment with the emerging Welfare State, combined with amazement at the petty restrictive practices resorted to by employees in industry, made socialism less attractive. Notwithstanding my change of political coat, however, I retained within me a basic conviction that my philosophy lacked something. All around me I witnessed the signs of poverty amid affluence and I probed my mind for the cause of the unequal distribution of wealth. The answer eluded me.

I had noticed that this problem of wealth distribution varied in scale from country to country and appeared to persist in all political systems. Living in Spain for a year had shown me the more obnoxious sides of paternalistic dictatorship, religious intolerance, and a censored press.

Working experience in Italy had brought home to me the evils of intense "regionalism." Extremes of wealth were matched with egoistic indulgence. Poverty accom-

panied ignorance and superstition. Political instability went hand in hand with corrupt administration and nepotism. All these things puzzled me. My own life was reasonably successful, yet to a certain extent I was troubled by thoughts of the less fortunate.

During my military service I had the opportunity of examining the "German Economic Miracle" at first hand and was duly impressed. In Germany I saw competition at work, efficient administration and a relatively high standard of living being enjoyed by a large percentage of a sophisticated and educated society. At this juncture I began to think a little more about the path along which my own career as a trainee hotel manager was taking me. I was influenced considerably by the views of three graduates with whom I worked in the Intelligence Corps. These friends, who had enjoyed the advantages of higher education which I had shunned in favour of financial reward, were all determined to find work which would be "morally satisfying" after the questionable usefulness of military service. I too began to think on these lines.

After "demob" and another couple of years of satisfying the gastronomic desires of a fortunate minority who could afford first-class hotels and restaurants, I was attracted to new work in local government. I soon found myself absorbed in the whole range of social services, and fascinated by the historical development both of these services and of local democratic government. My studies opened up a new vista of life and brought further enjoyment to work which presented me with a challenge and enough spare time to pursue those things which I had long wanted to do. For some years I had been an avid reader of the serious weeklies and the economic columns of the Sunday Press. While I had no formal academic background in economic theory I tried hard to follow the trends of government policy and the views of the more popular pundits. I realised, however, that I could never get to grips with the subject, and I was consequently attracted by an advertisement to the Henry George School.

My first impression of 177 Vauxhall Bridge Road was somewhat mixed. I was intrigued by an atmosphere of amateurism, a contrast of conflicting decor and of what

appeared to be elusive reticence. Who was Henry George? What sort of organisation was I becoming involved in? What were its motives and intentions? Where did it get its money?

I made the resolution at my first class to see the whole course through, half-expecting to be confronted sooner or later with an inducement to join some semi-clandestine organisation. Gradually, of course, the curtains of mystery were lifted and I was pleasantly surprised. A whole series of things seemed to happen in succession as missing pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that I had long pondered over slid into place, exploding in their wake a host of theories and misconceptions which I had held for many years. By the end of the Basic Course my former superficial studies of economic and social conditions in other countries were thrown up in a new light of understanding. I was sure I had been shown the key to what had eluded me — the key to the association of progress with poverty.

Progress and Poverty itself had provided me with an opportunity to observe and think anew. The book had stimulated my imagination, and I was impressed with George's logic and sincerity if somewhat put off by his rhetoric and style, which I felt had a faintly Dickensian, if not Gladstonian, ring. Needless to say, however, I was sold completely on land reform by way of the collection of economic rent. I then followed through with the other three Courses.

By this time I was mentally applying the Georgeist theories to my own work which was, and still is, mainly connected with town planning and urban development. For many years I had been interested in architecture and cities. To me the city, with all its faults, congestion and charm, represents the sum total of man's progress. Cities are like people. They are living entities with personalities and highly individual characteristics. It is in cities that we find the accumulative results of men seeking to satisfy their desires, both economic and aesthetic. Cities are treasure houses of humanity and the most complex of markets. They are the research laboratories of progress and poverty. Nowhere else can be found such heights of co-operative achievement. Nowhere else are there such contrasts of wealth and misery.

A study of the history of any city quickly shows how local geography and the pattern of land ownership are the two most important factors that influence the form and direction of urban development. The squalor of many of our industrial towns is as much an example of these influences as is the grid-iron framework of the Manhattan street pattern. There is no doubt in my mind that under a reformed system of land tenure the whole urban pattern of this country would tend to change for the better.

The land use problems of a highly sophisticated, technical and mobile society are not the same as those of a mainly static and rural society. It appears to me that whatever reforms are made in the system of land

ownership, some decisions concerning land use, building control, preservation, and the provision of basic services will have to be taken for the community through its democratic machinery. I do not consider that this would be incompatible with Georgeist principles provided that such controls were kept to a practical minimum.

With this in mind, my own efforts made towards influencing others of the advantages of Georgeist reforms are directed to one end: to secure a legislative foothold for L.V.T.

This question of the approach to the uninitiated presents, in my opinion, the greatest challenge to the whole Georgeist movement, and it is one with which I am deeply concerned. Having had the good fortune to attend the 1964 International Conference in New York, I am more than ever convinced of the importance of this vital topic. To me, this conference held many bright rays of hope in an otherwise dismal international economic scene. Two things impressed me greatly: first, the tremendous revival of interest in Georgeist reforms in academic and professional circles around the world, and secondly the energy, skill, diversity and growing professionalism of the Georgeist advocates. More and more examples are to be found of detailed study and painstaking research being undertaken at the instigation of Georgeist sympathisers. This work is often academic, professionally presented and is completely objective in its analysis. Free from both prejudice and emotion such work is of immeasurable value. In today's world of the computer, the technician, the statistician and the highly trained scientific expert, logical argument alone is not enough to impress those who help to form public opinion and lead in the active fields of politics and administration. This may be regrettable but it is a fact.

Georgeists have always held that their basic economic theories can stand any test. If this is true then such tests and studies are to be welcomed. If the language of logic has changed to the language of sophisticated statistical analysis, then we must learn to speak that language.

The Georgeist movement to me is an evolutionary one which is changing both in its approach and its membership. As in any movement, such change is slow but necessary. This does not mean that I advocate a renunciation of principles. It simply means that I feel that the tide is turning from an emotional approach to a more sober one. There are increasing signs that the pressures which the whole of humanity is now facing are leading to a more thorough study of cause and effect than ever before.

It is up to each of us to make the most of the opportunities now appearing. In my own field I am attempting this as I think best. I am comforted by the knowledge that there are many others working on similar lines.

I cannot express in a few words what the Georgeist theories have meant for me. I can only say I am so very glad that I stumbled across them while still young enough to devote some energy to promulgating them further.