

# The Definition of Land

KENNETH JUPP

In *The Science of Political Economy* Henry George refers to three possible definitions of Land:-

The original and *ordinary meaning* of the word 'land' is that of dry superficies of the earth as distinguished from water or air... As a *law term*, land means not merely the dry superficies of the earth, but all that is above and all that may be below, from zenith to nadir...as a *term of political economy* [land] comprises all having material form that man has received or can receive from nature, that is to say, from God." (Bk.III Chap.XV; first two paragraphs).

It is becoming more and more apparent that Henry George's choice of the *economic* definition of 'Land' in preference to the *legal* or the *ordinary* definition was most unfortunate. It has given rise to a great deal of confusion among Georgists and, naturally enough, among those to whom they have unsuccessfully tried to explain Henry George's philosophy. He could have chosen any of the three senses: ordinary, legal, or economic. In choosing the economic definition he was probably influenced by the legal definition - all that is above and all that may be below the surface; but so much of what in his day was included in the legal definition has since been taken away from the landholder's control. Coal and other minerals have been nationalised, and the air has been internationalised. This is no longer a reason for adopting the economic meaning in explaining Henry George's

philosophy. The ordinary meaning would have been best, because it could not have been misrepresented, as has the 'economic' definition he chose.

First of all, the modern economists do not always use, and in any case do not stick to the economic definition, and even if they did, they would see no particular importance in it.

Secondly, the concept involved in the 'economic' definition is extremely difficult for ordinary people to grasp. Most people associate 'land' with rural acres, and forget the land that has disappeared under buildings. If they can be brought to realise the importance of the latter because of its greater value, they still cannot see how the value of land in the City of London is 'received from nature, that is to say from God'. This, it is suggested, puts a barrier in the way of people to-day, when religion is not much in vogue, trying to understand the true depth of Henry George's philosophy.

Thirdly, Georgists themselves do not stick faithfully to the 'economic' definition, especially when they are considering the enormous value attaching to city-centre land. This value is, of course, due almost entirely to *location* - ie. proximity to all that the human race past and present has done, is doing, or is expected to do, which enures to the benefit of the fortunate holder of land in that particular spot, unless he is compelled to pay it to a landlord as rent. Although it is true that the

efforts of the whole human race, and their outcome in roads, railways, tunnels, bridges, airports etc. do derive from 'nature, that is to say from God', this is not obvious except to people of acute religious sensitivity. The majority of people regard any artificial structure on earth as created by Man.

Henry George's vision goes much further and deeper. He looks to the First Cause of all things. His 'economic' definition quoted above made it quite clear that the power which creates wealth of whatever kind is the creative power of God. When economists, and indeed most people, use his definition they often overlook his reference to the Deity, and omit it from their explanations. Many Georgists, for example, would say the early primary factors in a food-gathering economy are Man and Land, or Labour and Land. However, that is dualistic thinking. Nothing comes out of two forces. Science says any force produces an equal and opposite reaction. A third force is necessary. Hence the Christian doctrine of Trinity, or the Indian Non-dualism ('A-dwa-ita') which also deals only in trinity deriving from the Absolute One. To the religious when they come to think of it, the overall force which works through Man and through Land (in the Georgist sense including all of Nature except Man) to produce wealth, must be the Creator. Dualistic thinking is divisive and wreaks havoc in our time: Black and White; East and West; Labour and Capital, etc.

and of course the current rumpus about Gender. It helped to destroy Marxism in spite of Marx having adopted Hegel's 'thesis, antithesis, and synthesis'. Henry George avoids this error when he speaks of all the material things having form that man receives "from nature, that is to say, from God".

We may reasonably take 'God' or 'Nature' as a name for the primal energy which enlivens and works through everything in the universe, including Man. In theological terms this is indeed the doctrine of the Immanence of God, which Christians are bound to hold in parallel with the doctrine of the Transcendence of God (Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church sub verb. 'Immanence'). Indeed the Physiocrats of the 18th century whom Henry George admired used the word Nature to signify God - *Laissez faire la Nature*.

Using 'Land' in the strict economic sense adopted by Henry George as comprising *all having material form that man has or can receive from nature, that is to say, from God*, then we have a trinity of God, Man, and 'Land'; three factors which adequately describe the 'Adam-and-Eve' economy, in which Man is simply a food-gatherer consuming the natural fruits of the earth - part of 'land'. In this triad, God is the primal force or energy which breathes through and activates both Man and Land.

In truth Henry George could just as well have used 'Nature' instead of 'Land' in this case. Strictly, it is the 'rest of Nature', because Man is part of Nature, and we have separated 'Man' from 'Nature' in constructing the triad. To isolate Man in this way is perfectly right; for God gave Man dominion over the rest of Nature (Gen. 1.28). God, Man, and 'land' (the rest of Nature as Henry George defined it) are the primal trinity whence wealth proceeds.

These three factors suit the Adam-and-Eve economy of food-gatherers. The same is true of the Nimrod economy, when Man is the Mighty Hunter, so long as he makes his own weapons, nets, traps etc. Similarly when Abel was a keeper of sheep - in the pastoral economy; and when primitive Man began to till the ground - the agricultural economy of Cain. If he made his own tools, the three primary factors are unchanged. It is still God working through Man and 'Land' - i.e. the rest of Nature. Tools are a secondary factor. So is the seed corn he saves and puts in store. These are 'capital', but their use and manufacture are confined within the word 'Man' in the triad, because he alone both produces and uses them.

Specialisation and exchange (trading of products) change all this. Man the producer now buys his tools etc. from another producer who specialises in making such goods. At first this is merely, in Henry George's terms, 'directed' co-operation between the two. But increasing specialisation soon fragments production. Numerous subsidiary producers make minutely detailed parts of a total product so that the producer of the whole depends more and more on what Henry George calls 'spontaneous or indirect' co-operation from others doing apparently unrelated productive work at a distance in both time and space from the primary producer. Hence a new feature: the necessity to be in a position to take advantage of the work of others who indirectly and unconsciously co-operate with the producer's work in what is now an intricate market economy. Man producing wealth needs to be in close touch with other human beings and the market. Location is all important to him.

Robinson Crusoe was fortunate that his island was adjacent to the wreck from which he was able to

salvage considerable tools, equipment, and stores provided 'unconsciously' by collaborators in a distant land. The first settler going West into 'the unbounded savannah' had with him in his covered waggon tools and stores of seed etc. brought from the populated East.

Specialisation and exchange thus splits 'Man' into isolated units of individuals or groups who do not, any of them, make the whole product unaided. Each unit of production (an individual or company) needs not only nature but also the assistance of some of the rest of mankind; and the three meet at the location on land where they carry on their production.

The advantage of location is readily understood by estate agents and others - not least those who profit by the buying and selling of land. Location becomes increasingly important as industrial society develops, with ever-increasing specialisation and ever-expanding markets. Henry George describes this diversification of production in its 19th century culmination in Book III, Chap. X (*ubi sup.*). His superb description of a ship at sea under full sail demonstrates two types of co-operation. Both 'directed or conscious' and 'spontaneous or unconscious' co-operation contribute to the spectacle. A hundred years of advance in science and technology since that time would illustrate the distinction even more forcibly in, for example, the launching of a satellite to travel in space, or the construction and firing of a nuclear weapon.

At some point in this widening and diversifying of the market the 'economic' definition of 'land' has become an embarrassment. Clearly it is 'land' in the original or popular sense - 'the dry surface of the earth' - which has become so very valuable. Those who do not realise this - there are a remarkably large number of such! - could surely be taught it. They

could also more easily grasp the importance of 'land' or 'ground', which tends to lie unobserved or forgotten underneath buildings. Ground rents still exist in England; but it is only in the case of rural or agricultural land that they can comfortably be considered as payment for what a man receives 'from nature, that is to say from God'.

'Land' in its ordinary meaning would equally suit the Adam-and-Eve economy, where Land gives access to the fruits of the earth, or the advanced agricultural economy, which still depends to a large extent upon the resources of Nature such as water, sunshine, trees, and the fertility of the soil etc. but in increasing measure nevertheless upon location - nearness to markets, roads, rail, centres of population etc. It suits the extraction of minerals in the same way; a place on the surface of the earth is needed from which to quarry or mine.

It also suits the most advanced economy of to-day, where, in the centre of a big city, Nature's effect on the value of land is comparatively small; while that of location is paramount - because it can give access to the 'spontaneous or unconscious' co-operation of the whole of the national and international community. The benefit to the landholder is reflected in its rental value - its ground-rent.

In the most primitive economies, sparsely scattered nomadic tribes move wherever the whim takes them, without encountering rivalry or opposition in their wandering. In these circumstances Land, in the ordinary sense of that word, is of little or no importance. Nevertheless the ordinary meaning could be used for this and other primitive economies. It is when Cain, the tiller of the soil, in order to reap what he sows and to enjoy the full fruits of his labour, has to enclose the land he has cultivated, and call it 'his', that trouble begins.

He slays his brother, the keeper of sheep - they would spoil his crop! - and the mark of Cain (fighting over 'land') has lain upon Man ever since. In modern history the Australian settlers and the Aborigines, the New Zealanders and the Maoris, the Americans and the Red Indians, serve to illustrate this.

From this point onwards, 'land' in its ordinary sense becomes an essential factor in the economy, growing in importance with developing science and technology. To produce wealth Man must have Land, ie. a patch of the earth's surface; and, if he is to reap the reward of his endeavours (metaphorically, what he has sown) he must enclose it. Moreover the individual or company of individuals who engage in any productive enterprise must have particular land suitably placed to afford them the natural resources and the co-operation of the local, or as the case may be, the national or inter-national community which their type of work requires.

By distinguishing between Natural Resources and Co-operation we have in fact brought about a change of scale. We began with God, who distinguished *Man* from the rest of *Nature*. We have now had to divide Man into wealth-producing individuals or companies; and divide the rest of Nature into other people, and what remains of it - now better called 'Natural Resources'.

Each and every man and woman has to have Land, by which we mean a piece of the earth's surface reserved to us: the ground on which we lie to sleep, until we are able to build on it some form of dwelling - be it a tent, a cabin, a bungalow, a house, a block of flats; the ground we must have to work on, even if to enable us merely to collect the fruits of the earth, drink from the streams, hunt in the woods and so on; or the ground we need, in a more advanced economy, to

cultivate, or to build a shed on, or a workshop, a factory, or a block of offices. We now have particular individuals or groups, on particular land, taking advantage of Nature and of the work of others to the extent afforded by that land.

The Godhead is of course still there! but is more remote. Its creative force remains the source of all life and energy, and works through particular individuals, through Nature which surrounds them, and through other individuals or groups whose co-operation they enjoy from the platform they have acquired on the surface of the earth where these forces meet.

Man was cast out of paradise long ago, and from the immediate presence of God. The ground was cursed for his sake, and he was condemned to earn his bread by the sweat of his face. Not unnaturally, if he is conscious now of the existence of God he is quite likely to feel it, not as a presence, but as something rather remote.

Henry George's definition of 'land' clearly suits the early types of economy. It suits the more advanced, and the most advanced up-to-date economies as well; but only so long as the words '*from Nature, that is to say from God*' are never omitted. Henry George was right in insisting that the co-operation which went to making and sailing the "square-rigged ship" of his illustration is miraculous; to the savage "a higher expression of the same power which he himself exercises in his own rude constructions". This religious basis of Henry George's definition of 'land', is to-day, when religion is in decline, a barrier in the way of most people trying to understand the true depth of Henry George's remarkable philosophy. Yet to abandon his basis while retaining his definition does nothing but confuse. Would it not be better to adopt the ordinary meaning of the word 'land'?