

# James Otis Sargent Huntington

1854-1935, Founder, [Episcopal] Order of the Holy Cross

James Huntington was born in Boston in 1854, studied at Harvard and at St. Andrew's Divinity School in Syracuse, was ordained to the priesthood around 1880, and served a working-class congregation. After a few years, he felt called to found a monastic order for priests of the Episcopal Church, and with two companions he began working among poor immigrants on New York's Lower East Side. After a slow start, he with others became the Order of the Holy Cross, which now has a monastery in West Park, New York, and priests involved in parish work and social work scattered elsewhere. Huntington was Superior of the order for several non-consecutive terms, but devoted himself chiefly to preaching, teaching, and counseling until his death on 28 June 1935. Since this is the feast of Irenaeus of Lyons, he is commemorated on the anniversary of the receiving of his monastic vows by the Bishop of New York on 25 November 1884.

In the course of his work, he became involved in the labor-union movement and the land-tax movement. The latter of these may require some explanation.

Henry George, author of *Progress and Poverty*, argued that, while some forms of wealth are produced by human activity, and are rightly the property of the producers (or those who have obtained them from the previous owners by voluntary gift or exchange), land and natural resources are bestowed by God on the human race, and that every one of the  $N$  inhabitants of the earth has a claim to  $1/N$ th of the coal beds,  $1/N$ th of the oil wells,  $1/N$ th of the mines, and  $1/N$ th of the fertile soil. God wills a society where everyone may sit in peace under his own vine and his own fig tree.

The Law of Moses undertook to implement this by making the ownership of land hereditary, with a man's land divided among his sons (or, in the absence of sons, his daughters), and prohibiting the permanent sale of land. (See Leviticus 25:13-17, 23.) The most a man might do with his land is sell the use of it until the next Jubilee year, an amnesty declared once every fifty years, when all debts were cancelled and all land returned to its hereditary owner.

Henry George's proposed implementation is to tax all land at about 99.99% of its rental value, leaving the owner of record enough to cover his bookkeeping expenses. The resulting revenues would be divided equally among the natural owners of the land, *viz.* the people of the country, with everyone receiving a dividend check regularly for the use of his share of the earth (here I am anticipating what I think George would have suggested if he had written in the 1990's rather than the 1870's).

This procedure would have the effect of making the sale price of a piece of land, not including the price of buildings and other improvements on it, practically zero. The cost of being a landholder would be, not the original sale price, but the tax, equivalent to rent. A man who chose to hold his "fair share," or  $1/N$ th of all the land, would pay a land tax about equal to his dividend check, and so would break even. By  $1/N$ th of the land is meant land with a value equal to  $1/N$ th of the value of all the land in the country.

Naturally, an acre in the business district of a great city would be worth as much as many square

miles in the open country. Some would prefer to hold more than one  $N^{\text{th}}$  of the land and pay for the privilege. Some would prefer to hold less land, or no land at all, and get a small annual check representing the dividend on their inheritance from their father Adam.

Note that, at least for the able-bodied, this solves the problem of poverty at a stroke. If the total land and total labor of the world are enough to feed and clothe the existing population, then  $1/N^{\text{th}}$  of the land and  $1/N^{\text{th}}$  of the labor are enough to feed and clothe  $1/N^{\text{th}}$  of the population. A family of 4 occupying  $4/N^{\text{ths}}$  of the land (which is what their dividend checks will enable them to pay the tax on) will find that their labor applied to that land is enough to enable them to feed and clothe themselves. Of course, they may prefer to apply their labor elsewhere more profitably, but the situation from which we start is one in which everyone has his own plot of ground from which to wrest a living by the strength of his own back, and any deviation from this is the result of voluntary exchanges agreed to by the parties directly involved, who judge themselves to be better off as the result of the exchanges.

Some readers may think this a very radical proposal. In fact, it is extremely conservative, in the sense of being in agreement with historic ideas about land ownership as opposed to ownership of, say, tools or vehicles or gold or domestic animals or other movables. The laws of English-speaking countries uniformly distinguish between real property (land) and personal property (everything else). In this context, “real” is not the opposite of “imaginary.” It is a form of the word “royal,” and means that the ultimate owner of the land is the king, as symbol of the people. Note that English-derived law does not recognize “landowners.” The term is “landholders.” The concept of eminent domain is that the landholder may be forced to surrender his landholdings to the government for a public purpose. Historically, eminent domain does not apply to property other than land, although complications arise when there are buildings on the land that is being seized.

I will mention in passing that the proposals of Henry George have attracted support from persons as diverse as Felix Morley, Aldous Huxley, Woodrow Wilson, Helen Keller, Winston Churchill, Leo Tolstoy, William F Buckley Jr, and Sun Yat-Sen. To the Five Nobel Prizes authorized by Alfred Nobel himself there has been added a sixth, in Economics, and the Henry George Foundation claims eight of the Economics Laureates as supporters, in whole or in part, of the proposals of Henry George (Paul Samuelson, 1970; Milton Friedman, 1976; Herbert A. Simon, 1978; James Tobin, 1981; Franco Modigliani, 1985; James M. Buchanan, 1986; Robert M. Solow, 1987; William S. Vickrey, 1996).

The immediate concrete proposal favored by most Georgists today is that cities shall tax land within their boundaries at a higher rate than they tax buildings and other improvements on the land. (In case anyone is about to ask, “How can we possibly distinguish between the value of the land and the value of the buildings on it?” let me assure you that real estate assessors do it all the time. It is standard practice to make the two assessments separately, and a parcel of land in the business district of a large city very often has a different owner from the building on it.) Many cities have moved to a system of taxing land more heavily than improvements, and most have been pleased with the results, finding that landholders are more likely to use their land productively – to their own benefit and that of the public – if their taxes do not automatically go up when they improve their land by constructing or maintaining buildings on it.

An advantage of this proposal in the eyes of many is that it is a Fabian proposal, “evolution, not revolution,” that it is incremental and reversible. If a city or other jurisdiction does not like the results of a two-level tax system, it can repeal the arrangement or reduce the difference in levels with no great upheaval. It is not like some other proposals of the form, “Distribute all wealth justly, and make me absolute dictator of the world so that I can supervise the distribution, and if it doesn’t work, I promise to resign.” The problem is that absolute dictators seldom resign.

For those who wish to inquire further, I recommend reading the book *Progress and Poverty*, by Henry George. It is available from the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation or from your local bookstore or library. It should be on every list of Great Books of the Western World, or of books that every educated person is assumed to have read. Ask for their catalog, and make a similar request of the Henry George Foundation of America.

I repeat, this is not an argument for a political or economic proposal, but simply background material on the founder of a religious order. You did not expect me to tell you that James Huntington was a disciple of Henry George and leave you wondering who Henry George was, did you?

by James Kiefer

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Fr. Huntington wrote an important article entitled “Tenement House Morality,” published in *The Forum* (July, 1887) and in Henry George’s weekly newspaper, *The Standard*, on June 26, 1887. Both are available online.

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*The New York Times* of July 18, 1887 carried an article entitled “Playing Second Fiddle: Henry George is Again in the Background: Father Huntington Awakes All the Enthusiasm at Last Night’s Anti-Poverty Meeting.” Here is an excerpt:

“... Father Huntington waited calmly until the stamping and cheering of these enthusiastic anti-poverty people had ceased. The working classes reminded him of the slave who had bought his liberty three times and had again been made a slave.” The workingman had bought his liberty thrice, yes, thirty times, yet he was still in industrial slavery. If men were made free and the land were made free, then the people would get what God intended for them.”

“... If at times Father Huntington talked over the heads of his auditors, that fact did not interfere with the warmth of the applause showered upon him. After he sat down he was compelled to rise a couple of times to acknowledge the cheers of the 1,500 or more people who gladly did him honor. He created a hearty laugh later in the evening, when one of the audience, in relating a personal experience, said he had asked an Episcopal clergyman to talk on labor matters once, and the clergyman had said he must first secure the consent of his Bishop. Would not Father Huntington be cast out of the church for his advocacy of the new doctrine?

“Stepping to the footlights Father Huntington said: “My Bishop is not that kind of a Bishop and I’m not that kind of a priest.”

This was at a weekly meeting of the Anti-Poverty Society, on Sunday nights in New York City. See <http://henrygeorgethestandard.org/>. (Fr. Huntington's reference was to the Roman Catholic archbishop Michael Corrigan, who had excommunicated Dr. Edward McGlynn, the much-loved pastor of the largest Roman Catholic Parish in America, St. Stephen's, for his commitment to Henry George's ideas.) Dr. McGlynn and Henry George were followed in newspapers all over the country.

See also: [Henry George's address to the 1884 General Convention at Detroit](#), entitled "Is Our Civilization Just to Working Men?"