



A rudderless philosophy in the name of Henry George

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THE FORGOTTEN LEGACY OF HENRY GEORGE

Essays by Kenneth C. Wenzer and Thomas R. West

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PERHAPS the most interesting of the nine essays in this book is Ken Wenzer's chapter on "The Degeneration of the Georgist Movement". It would have been both more interesting and more relevant if the author had taken us into the 21st century. Instead it is historical and does not go much beyond the 1930s.

Henry George himself looked at the British feudal system as a prototype of his own utopian vision, with the service and obedience of the peasant towards a lord in return for the protection and the organised structure offered by the lord. It recognised land as a common possession, and sustained a society with an ethos of mutual assistance.

The feudal system degenerated over the years as, according to Ken Wenzer, George's own ideas and proposals have degenerated. George wished to remove from taxation all wealth save that derived from land. The compromise solution which developed and is indeed fashionable today is the two-rate system, which proposes a minor shift in percentage of tax from improvements to land. This, says Ken Wenzer, fails because

Nothing in the two-rate plan addresses the twin evils of land monopoly and land speculation, nor does it confiscate privilege through the appropriation of land values, nor does it even approximate the lifting of the burden off of production, distribution and consumption. Instead, in its reduction of fundamental reform to fiscal readjustment, it would perpetuate and reinforce private property in land and privilege. It neglects to speak even to such minimal issues as the need to graduate tax burdens according to differing classes of land. The two-rate shift, put forth by conventional reformers who rejected the single-tax philosophy, was a by-product of a growing public social consciousness in general. It is a minor supplement to many other taxes and merely shifts money from one pocket of the same landowner and homeowner to another. The two-rate tax, even in the surface improvements it engenders raises the value of land. It therefore actually fosters speculation and monopolization, making housing less accessible to the labourer and the poor. So there cannot be any confusion between what it stands for and the purpose of the single-tax movement, which was to strengthen the cord between virtue and

property and to sustain George's powerful vision of a perfected society.

The author looks at the efforts of Tolstoy and Kropotkin. He goes back beyond the French Revolution to the Sun King, Louis XIV, and examines the corrupt tax régime that set the precondition for insurrectionary chaos. He avows that a primary agent of social strife has been the land, but that utopian visions can produce Bolshevik nightmares.

There have been many visionaries other than George who proposed utopia: Thomas More, Francis Bacon, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Claude Henri de Rouvroy Comte de Saint-Simon, Robert Owen and H.G. Wells. Although none of these utopias has ever been realised they have, says Ken Wenzer, "liberated the human race from some of the weight of the past". That may be so, but the earliest settlers in America carried the baggage of private property with them from the old world. Millions of acres were given away to the railway companies and the settlers themselves

bought land under the Homestead Act. The native Indians were driven out with scant regard to their rights.

Henry George's reforms were straightforward and simple, but he was unable to put them into practice. As Ken Wenzer says:

In politics George was a chronic failure. Losses during the 1870s in California, in the 1886 mayoral campaign in New York City, and in New York State a year later made his ideas seem as dismal as his fate. His support of mainline politicians and party planks, such as Cleveland, for the reduction of tariff (on George's part a tactic to awaken social consciousness) also created dissension in the single-tax ranks and invited the fragmentation of his movement in the next decade ... Making his situation worse is that George unilaterally donned the mantle of global prophet, so sure of his way between "the plutocracy on one side and the mindless masses on the other" that he became increasingly intransigent and close-minded. Failing health in the last decade of his life prior to 1897 added seclusion. Even before George's death all this combined to threaten the sinking of the single-tax movement and all his remakings of the world.

After George's death a variety of watered-down proposals and compromise solutions took the place of the single tax. They failed to make much impact and mostly faded from the scene. Ken Wenzer points out the folly of these fiscal reforms bereft of any connection with the utopian tradition of justice and the historical image of a balanced society. "Its partisans", says Ken Wenzer, "jettisoned whatever they thought to be excess freight, and what they threw overboard was the rudder itself."