

# letter from the editor

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It is the beginning of a new decade and this invites us to review the history and prospects of George's influence on society. From George's time and in the first half of the twentieth century Progress and Poverty is widely known and many leading politicians in the UK worked to introduce the land tax. There was also a large literature on George and several widely circulated magazines, such as our own Land&Liberty.

In recent decades this activity has waned and the various Georgist organisations around the world are not attracting so much interest and the numbers are falling. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that the generation that grew up under the social struggles of the early twentieth century, and had links back to Henry George, has been superseded by a new generation. Perhaps also the period of growing prosperity in the 50s and 60s gave the illusion that the economic problems of the past had been remedied.

That illusion is now being dispelled as we see the ever-widening gulf between the rich and the poor, and how the real standard of living has not risen for decades despite the constant increase in production. What is happening is a continuous rise in the cost of housing as a proportion of income, while the increased production is being supported by credit. People are living beyond their means, while the banks and various money lenders are flourishing on the interest on credit.

It is increasingly clear that this situation cannot continue, and that had a land tax been implemented in the 50s or 60s this crisis would not exist. Neither would the enormous gap between rich and poor. There is a growing literature showing how land monopoly is the fundamental factor determining this situation. Also, there are economists who see the merits of a land tax.

Nevertheless, there is little sign of real change. The economic facts are before us, and with the dissemination of modern media, available to everyone as never before. Yet there seems to be a perverse blindness to economic laws. Why should this be so? The recent general election in the UK perhaps gives us an indication. Over-shadowed by Brexit, it was an election bereft of any social or community values. It seems to me that this general lack of community values is the reason the laws of economics cannot be confronted. Rather as with the nineteenth century individualism, each may live in the hope they can work their way into the life of rich few. The over-emphasis in education on the acquisition of skills for the market place sustains this dream.

So the question arises: is the aspiration for material wealth enough in itself to bring about change? Is the campaign for the implementation of a land tax simply as a fiscal reform enough to bring about change?

Perhaps it is the values that inspired *Progress and Poverty* which are now being neglected or have been forgotten.

I was reading *In Quest of Justice* by the Georgist Francis Neilson, MP for Hyde constituency from 1910 to 1916, the other day. He points out the dangers of over-emphasising the material aspect of George's argument for the land tax in *Progress and Poverty*:

*And here let me say a word about the danger of over-emphasizing the material gain to be achieved by untaxing wealth and taking the rent for the use of the community. This is what I call the machinery of the reform, and I can very well imagine that, if it were accomplished, men might soon forget what was done and relapse once more and become again helots of the State. Something is required before and during the period of applying the remedy to give men a firmer grasp of the essentials of this great matter. If I might say so, we must not forget the spirit of man when we appeal to his stomach. It is all very well for us to say that our purpose is to give men the opportunity to produce their food, fuel, clothing and shelter without hindrance; but if we take a glance at what is happening and has happened all through the ages, we shall see that some of the greatest rogues on earth have had far more necessities than they could ever use. Necessaries in themselves have never yet nourished the spirit of man. Indeed, all the records point to this extraordinary fact — that the greatest spirits in all lands have been those who required the least means of subsistence. This in no way precludes the desire to abolish poverty, and I agree that poverty in the millions works sad havoc with the spirit, that it is undoubtedly responsible for the ignorance and waywardness that hold us all in this slough of despair. Do not forget that all through the work George emphasizes the necessity of desiring through his reform to reach a higher plane of culture and refinement. This in the past has been somewhat slighted, and too much has been made of the material change to be hoped for under a system of untaxed wealth.*

Neilson's *In Quest of Justice* was published in 1944 and is perhaps more than ever worth reading. It is a fine examination of the meaning of justice in the ancient philosophers, far wiser than our modern conceptions. And his words 'Do not forget that all through the work George emphasizes the necessity of desiring through his reform to reach a higher plane of culture and refinement' are perhaps more salutary now than when he wrote them in the 1940s. The pursuit of economic justice is not an end in itself, but for the sake of 'a higher plane' in which culture flourishes. It is only through culture that we become a society as distinct from an economy. To quote Neilson again, 'If I might say so, we must not forget the spirit of man when we appeal to his stomach'. There is perhaps an ancient law hinted at here: that unless we aspire to a higher good, we will not even attain a lesser good.



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