

# letter from the editor

Georgists interested in ecology and the environment will be acutely aware of how the economic realm is never included in the ecosystem. Often it is portrayed as an unwelcome intrusion into nature. This is hardly surprising since economists generally regard 'nature' merely as a source of materials for production. Land is now lumped in with capital and thus removed even further from 'nature' than in George's time. Yet the urgent task of responding to climate change demonstrates that our economy is not outside nature at all.

Nevertheless, environments also tend to regard our human economy as outside nature, as an interfering foreign element. Seen in this divided way campaigners demand reforms in production that cease harming the environment. In itself, that is a reasonable demand. But it does not address the economy itself as part of nature, as much a part of the ecosystem as the oceans, the mountains or the forests. Viewed as part of the ecosystem it begins to become clear that it is the injustices *within* our human economy that cause the harm inflicted on the environment. The poverty, inequalities, exploitations, injustices within the economy are the inward cause of destruction of the environment. Since the human economy is out of harmony with itself it is out of harmony with nature at large. Unlike in ancient societies, we do not regard the human economy as a living organism. We conceive it abstractly, as financialised, represented on computer scenarios, ever seeking efficiencies, and thus dissociating it from the living systems of nature. Human beings themselves might as well be robots since they are also 'economically abstracted' into quantitative units of labour and consumption.

This dissociation of the human economy from nature has been with us for three hundred years, or since the idea arose that human society was an artificial construct, and therefore outside nature. In ancient times human society was always regarded as part of the great, ever renewing cosmic order. The seasons of nature were the seasons of society. In medieval times human society was seen by analogy with various living organisms. The economic activity was not separated from the activity of society as a whole. Work was seen as a contribution to the well-being of all, giving each person a station of dignity within the whole. All served all. And because the economy was seen as meeting the natural needs without excess, rest from work was valued more than the endless pursuit of wealth. Henry George remarks that the average family living off the land could manage perfectly well working only three days a week.

All this changed when property in land was turned from a 'legal' entitlement to a 'natural' entitlement. According to ancient natural law all land is common property, and any modification of this was a matter of 'positive' law only, and positive law in property can be suspended when necessity arises and law reverts to the natural law. Thus property was a pragmatic arrangement for convenience. But all this changed when the claim on property, specifically on land, became regarded as part of natural law, when the human person was defined as a property owning being. This new idea not only changes the entire economy, it changes the whole relationship of the human species with nature. And nature itself ceases to be 'nature' and becomes property. Indeed, the human person takes ownership of himself as though he were his own slave master, and puts himself on the market as labour.

So the break with natural law through proprietorial rights in land came with proprietorial rights in persons. Both become legal entities subject to positive law. So there is a direct correspondence between the internal relations of human economy and the external relation with nature at large. And in both realms exploitation in entirely new forms becomes possible. The environmental harm which inevitably follows corresponds with the social harm within society itself. They are inextricably bound together.

Unfortunately few Georgists yet see this connection between economic injustice and environmental abuse. Although it is argued that the land is a commons, it is generally taken to be a 'location' and a 'resource' for production, with little thought given to it as our habitat along with all other species. Yet the economic and social injustices that arise through land monopoly, where the land and the community are both exploited, also accounts for the excessive extraction, bad farming methods, deforestation and pollution which the environmentalists observe. Our modern industrial society lives in a false relationship with the land, and the consequences of that effect the land itself, not only society.

However, since environmentalists themselves do not generally understand that land and other monopolies lie at the root of this false relationship, they can only propose measures that restrain the effects of the abuse of land, such as tax incentives. Georgists make similar proposals, seeking to solve the environmental crisis through fiscal measures. But fiscal measures of various kinds have been in operation for decades already and the large monopolies simply build them into their cost structures and so pass them on to their customers, usually falling heaviest on the poor.

If our economy were brought into harmony with nature, then human production would enhance nature rather than deplete it. That is how nature herself works. Plant the seed and it multiplies. The same law is present in the division of labour. Effort produces a surplus. When wealth is lawfully exchanged it is mutually beneficial. But this natural law of nature is interrupted by land monopoly where nature is put to inappropriate, inefficient and unjust use, and where any natural surplus is misappropriated. It is a vicious circle that ends up depleting nature rather than enhancing it. It obscures the natural duties of caring for the land and for future life on earth. It is a great tragedy that the common cause of poverty, of pandemics and global warming is simply through ignoring the laws of nature. A just economy and a natural economy are one and the same thing. There is an opportunity here for Georgists to connect the laws of economics with the modern discoveries of ecology. As Joseph Stiglitz says, 'we as citizens have the right to make sure that that money serves a dual purpose – not only the purpose of bringing the economy back, [but] back in a way that is more consistent with the vision that we want of the post-pandemic economy and society. And that means a more equal society, and a much greener economy.'



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