



philosophy

RULING IDEAS

Over the last three years we have been meeting on Friday evenings to explore the writings of Henry George and the *Laws* of Plato. We have now embarked on a study of Aristotle's *Politics*. Some have asked, why should the HGF be looking at Plato and Aristotle? Surely the works of Henry George are enough. There are several answers to this question. The main reason, however, has been to try to understand why the implementation of George's policies face such enormous obstacles. It is not simply a matter of the land question being difficult to grasp, although it has all too often been reduced to arguing for a fiscal change. Even where it is understood, resistance is mounted on various fronts. The implementation of a land tax is at once efficient, just, encouraging to free trade and virtually impossible to evade. So the question becomes: Why the stubborn resistance?

Of all the arguments against the implementation of a land tax, leaving aside those that fail to properly understand it, the most interesting is the claim that it is too idealistic. George is seen as a utopian dreamer ignorant of the harsh realities of the world and the true powers that drive the modern economy. This utopian argument has more force than any of the arguments against the practical implementation of a land tax, all of which can be rationally answered. The utopian argument is on another level to either the fiscal or the practicable. It is rooted in a host of notions about the nature of society, human nature, and justice. These notions are never directly articulated, but are rooted in a belief that a truly just society is unattainable, either because all political systems are inherently corrupt or unstable, or because human beings are essentially selfish and do not really desire justice, or even that justice itself is only a relative concept with no universal meaning. These kinds of suppositions have become generally acceptable, as is evident in most media and advertising, where the public are invariably addressed as selfish individuals no matter what their politics. Indeed, it is commonly assumed that the best we can hope for is protection by government from the selfishness or exploitation of others like ourselves. Seen in this way, all politics and all trade become nothing else than negotiated self-interest. Most ordinary people, although they intuit this is wrong, are resigned to it and doubt if it can ever change.

These ideas that shape the general attitude of the modern West, and which make progress towards economic and social justice such a struggle, have roots of which few are conscious. These roots are not obscure. They are present at the birth of economics as a science. We find them formulated in the works of Hobbes, Locke, Adam Smith, Mill, to name the most obvious and most influential. In a sense Francis Bacon is father to them all, as it was Bacon who envisaged our relation to the world as purely instrumental and that nature should be conquered and exploited for the exclusive benefit of a materialist society, as argued in *The New Atlantis*. Hobbes, an associate of Bacon and for a time his secretary, took Bacon's empiricist principles and applied them to the study of human society. Thus, from the beginning, economics is a mechanistic science. For Hobbes, every individual is driven by the desire to rule over all men and to possess all wealth. There is no natural social inclination in human nature. On the contrary, everyone is instinctively solitary and sees all others as a threat to their life and possessions. According to Hobbes, the most basic human passion is the fear of death, and so the primary concern of politics must be to protect the individual from all other individuals. This fear of death is the origin of human rights, the first right being the right to self-defence, originally formulated by Hobbes as the right to kill. We see this in full force today in the American right to bear arms.

The basic ideas of Hobbes, expressed in his *Leviathan*, although they met with strong criticism in his time for their harshness, are adopted in modified and gentler form by Locke and Adam Smith. Human relationships are tamed by contract, and even membership of society itself is conceived as contractual. What formerly had been social relationships, including commerce, now became legal relationships. What formerly had been the sense of the common good, now became each individual's claim upon the state. The human person, as Simone Weil observed, was reduced to a legal entity.

These ideas, which still rule modern democracy, did not spring out of thin air. They are rooted in a deliberate rejection of the traditional understanding of society and of human nature. In particular they aimed to overthrow the tradition of Natural Law stemming from classical Greece and Rome, and the Christian understanding of human nature made in the image of God. Natural Law understood the whole of nature as harmonious and ordered toward universal good. Human or written law was understood to be derived from this. The 'golden rule' of Christianity – to do unto others as you would have them do unto you – and the Great Commandment – to love God and one's neighbour as oneself – are attacked as either absurdly utopian and unrealistic, or else as devices of religious oppression. In *The New Atlantis* Bacon reverses the golden rule to 'do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you'.

The consequence of these ideas is the separation of humanity from nature and of commerce from civil life. And from these come the ruthless exploitation of the earth and ecological destruction, and the reduction of the majority of citizens to labour at exploitative wages. The aim of society becomes the acquisition of luxury, as formulated by Adam Smith, and the means is continuous competition of all against all.

This is the world that Henry George is confronted with, which to him manifested as the consequence of an injustice in our relation to the earth, the private appropriation of rent, the natural revenue of government. George could still appeal, however, to the sense of justice of the ordinary citizen, and to the Christian idea of the neighbour, because these ancient values still lived in the hearts of most citizens, while the 'intellectuals' were sold to the mechanistic world of Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke. If the ordinary citizens of George's times had read Cicero or Aquinas they would have seen their sense of natural justice reflected there. But with few exceptions the 'educated' dismissed Cicero and Aquinas, and along with them Plato and Aristotle. For the educated it was the unrealistic belief in universal justice and the harmonious order of nature that prevented social progress, which must come from the resolute application of science and technology and mastery of the forces of nature. This doctrine was promulgated by Herbert Spencer whom George directly challenged in his *A Perplexed Philosopher*.

George did not return to Cicero, Aquinas, Plato or Aristotle. Instead he grappled with what he saw to be the misunderstandings of the classical economists, attempting to retrieve from them what was demonstrably true and expose what was obviously false. In addressing the ordinary citizen he could do this convincingly, calling upon the innate sense of justice and the Christian understanding of the neighbour and the common good. This is clear in all his writings and speeches. But his academic opponents were armed with sophisticated arguments that turned economics into an abstract science, and this suited the vested interests of

monopolies and those who lived off the labour of others. Thus economics, and the study of society generally, were abstracted from their roots in human community and the tradition of ethics and morality.

George, one feels, could not have turned to Cicero or Plato or Aristotle. But he was not that kind of thinker, even though he makes occasional references to Marcus Aurelius and Aquinas. But he could still call upon the traces left by them in the common wisdom of the ordinary citizen, and of course the teachings of the Gospels. This is no longer the case. The modern realm of economic thinking is bounded by the rootless abstractions and an amoral analysis of human exchange. It is a closed world of thought, and even where attempts are made to break out of conventional economics at the universities nothing really new arises. Even the most radical thinking is still rooted in Hobbes and Locke and no real connection can be made between economics and universal justice. It remains an assumption that economics and ethics are naturally at variance with one another. In George's time the Church also, still grounded in a medieval conception of community and the common good, had no resources with which to meet the rise of secular individualism and the growth of the industrial society. Besides, the new economics and the contractual conception of society demanded separation of the Church and State.

Nothing can change so long as these ideas of the seventeenth and eighteenth century are not challenged. But so long as they remain invisible yet shape all our presuppositions about economics and the nature of society, they cannot be challenged. The private appropriation of the value created by the community is integral to the basic assumptions of the modern world view. Likewise, all ideas of redistribution of wealth or land are rooted in the same world view, because such policies are merely mitigations of a fundamental injustice that remains unseen and unaddressed.

It was with the aim of bringing to light what is invisible in modern economics that we embarked on the exploration of Plato's *Laws* on Friday evenings at Mandeville Place. We decided on the *Laws* for two reasons: first because it is Plato's *practical* exploration of the founding of a just society, his Republic being a purely philosophical exploration; second because the birth of modern economic theory begins with the outright rejection of Plato and Aristotle and their influence through the Middle Ages, as may be seen repeatedly in *Leviathan*. Bacon likewise dismisses ancient philosophy in his *Novum Organum* with the words:

We have as yet no natural philosophy that is pure; all is tainted and corrupted: in Aristotle's school by logic; in Plato's by natural theology; in the second school of Platonists, such as Proclus and others, by mathematics, which ought only to give definiteness to natural philosophy, not to generate or give it birth. From a natural philosophy pure and unmixed, better things are to be expected. (Novum Organum, XCVI)

The new 'natural philosophy' here proposed by Bacon is mechanical deduction, which will discount 'Aristotle's Logic', 'Plato's natural theology', and the 'Platonists mathematics'. That is to say, all *philosophical reflection* not based on mechanical measurement. Hobbes adopts this method in *Leviathan*.

The arrogant certainty of these founding fathers of empiricism is now in question, and modern philosophy no longer accepts that there is a single mode of knowledge or 'methodology' that

discloses the truth of things – what Bacon calls ‘natural philosophy’. ‘Postmodernism’, for all its flaws, has thrown in doubt much of the thought of the last four hundred years, though largely in the name of historical relativism which comes with its own problems. Nevertheless, this new situation of uncertainty has opened up ancient thought to fresh exploration and understanding, as it is no longer seen through the eyes of rational materialism. There is a growing reappraisal of ancient philosophy, accompanied by fresh translations that avoid the tendency to use terminologies belonging to later periods.

Given this new situation we can now see how Bacon and Hobbes and their followers completely misconceived the ancient thought which they so fiercely attacked. The new materialist outlook of the age made Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics such as Cicero or Marcus Aurelius, and the Schoolmen such as Aquinas, incomprehensible to them. They misconstrued the very words they read because they conceived human nature and causality differently. For the ancients the question ‘What is the good life?’ was not about the competitive acquisition of wealth or ‘conquering nature’. It was concerned with how to live in justice and in harmony with nature.

Indeed, the word ‘justice’ is one of the words that became incomprehensible in the new ‘natural philosophy’. For Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics and the schoolmen justice was a universal that applied in all times and in all places. It belonged to the very order of the cosmos itself as the opposite of chaos. It was to be discerned by reason in the nature of things. This ancient conception of justice, which lies at the core of Plato’s enquiries into society and politics, was discounted at a stroke by Hobbes. For him nature is not an order or harmony of all things, but rather a state of war of all against all:

To this war of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice. Force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues. Justice and injustice are none of the faculties neither of the body nor mind. If they were, they might be in a man that were alone in the world, as well as his senses and passions. (Leviathan XIII)

Hobbes is perfectly aware he is here contradicting Aristotle, who says:

We may begin by observing that they have been defined relatively to two kinds of law, and also relatively to two classes of persons. By the two kinds of law I mean particular law and universal law. Particular law is that which each community lays down and applies to its own members: this is partly written and partly unwritten. Universal law is the law of Nature. For there really is, as everyone to some extent divines, a natural justice and injustice that is binding on all men, even on those who have no association or covenant with each other. (Aristotle, Rhetoric, 13)

These words accord with eighteenth century jurist and politician William Blackstone:

This law of nature, being coeval with mankind and dictated by God himself, is of course superior in obligation to any other. It is binding over all the globe in all countries, and at all times; no human laws are of any validity, if contrary to this: and such of them as are valid derive all their force, and all their authority, mediately or immediately, from this original. (Blackstone, Commentaries on the Laws of England, Introduction)

Hobbes rejects any such universal law. He presupposes that society comes into being through the gathering of solitary individuals, and that all laws are either written or imposed by force. This theoretical assumption, unsupported by any evidence, is adopted in subsequent economic theory. The notion of the lawless solitary individual can be traced back to *nominalism* which holds that

there are no universals, and *atomism* which holds that the parts create the whole. This means that ‘society’ is an artificial construct made up of autonomous individuals all naturally opposed to one another since each wants all property and all power – the ‘artificial Leviathan’ of Hobbes. In this situation of mutual war ‘justice’ can only be by contract or power of the ruler. There is no universal justice, as Plato and Aristotle claim, to which a society may look in order to devise its laws. All justice is contingent and arbitrary, and this is the basis of the theory of moral relativism that permeates the modern social sciences.

By direct contrast with this view, for the ancients ‘society’ is the natural state of humanity. The human being is naturally social and political. The theoretical solitary individual is an economic fiction that distorts the communal nature and origins of the human species. Society does not arise out of the association of solitary individuals, but rather individuals arise out of society. To be a ‘person’ is first to be a ‘citizen’. The ‘state of nature’ is the reverse of Hobbes’ theory, and justice is a universal that determines all subsequent relations. Richard Hooker, in his *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* immediately prior to Hobbes, seeking to recover the Natural Law tradition in the Protestant Church, reasserted the ancient understanding of society:

Civil society doth more content the nature of man than any private kind of solitary living, because in society this good of mutual participation is so much larger than otherwise. Herewith notwithstanding we are not satisfied, but we covet (if it might be) to have a kind of society and fellowship even with all mankind. Which thing Socrates intending to signify professed himself a citizen, not of this or that commonwealth, but of the world. (The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, Book 1, Chapter X)

To be ‘a citizen of the world’ was the Stoic ideal, for whom the cosmos itself was conceived as the ‘city of man’, from which comes the word ‘cosmopolitan’. For the philosophers of the seventeenth century onwards this classical understanding of society and justice is rejected on the grounds that it aims too high. It is the utopian dream of ‘idle philosophers’. In order to be practical our sights must be lowered and a more realistic account be given of human nature. This new account discards the traditional view of human nature as rational and replaces it with the rule of the passions, the driving passion being the fear of death. In traditional terms this is to reverse the natural order in which reason rules over the will, and to replace the love of the good with the fear of evil. This theory of the primacy of the passions later becomes the utilitarian ‘will of the people’.

Given that the first passion is fear of death, protection therefore becomes the basis for devising the laws of society, and the revised conception of ‘justice’ becomes the basis of human rights. This brings to an end the tradition of Natural Law. Justice becomes what the individual can claim for himself from society, rather than what serves the welfare of all.

How does this affect the conception of property, and especially land? It is here that the classical economists get into difficulty, since on this basis any claim upon land can be maintained only on the basis of who first claimed it, without contract or consent, or who subsequently paid for it. But the original claim itself cannot be defended, nor, according to Locke, can it be remedied. The notion that labour applied to land creates ownership of the land (as distinct from its produce), by extending self-ownership, can have no natural, contractual or social basis. The Natural Law tradition, on the contrary, understands that *all things*, including land, are by nature common property. Nor is there such a thing as ‘self-ownership’. The ‘proprietary self’ is a new conception rooted in the primacy of the solitary individual that theoretically precedes society.

This is why the Guardians in Plato’s *Republic* are allocated no property. Common ownership is the ideal, but it is interestingly

modified in Plato's *Laws*. There each household, which amounts to an extended family, is allocated two plots of land which provide for self-sufficiency. These plots cannot be bought or sold but remain the property of the original household in perpetuity. And since all citizens contribute to the governance of the city, the land question is solved at a stroke and 'rent' takes the form of communal service. Yet Plato maintains that this is a compromise of the ideal, which precludes all land ownership, but this is possible only for the most virtuous people or for the gods. Thus the property laws of Plato's Magnesia are a compromise to the unsteadiness of human character, measured against perfect justice.

In his questions on theft in the *Summa Theologica* Aquinas asks: what should a destitute person do who has no food. He replies that such a person may take what he needs from one who has enough, and this is not theft because all rights to private property are suspended for the destitute and *the law reverts to the natural condition in which all property is shared in common*. He acknowledges that private property is a compromise for 'fallen man' who would neglect property if it was held in common. It is only in the monastic life, he suggests, that property may be held in common. Thus 'perfect justice' is the ideal that society may be measured by, but which may be adapted to suit the moral condition of any particular community. It is the adaptation of the Natural Law that serves as the basis for customary law for Aquinas. The Christian model of common property remains, however, the ideal.

The purely contractual justice of Hobbes, even where it adapts to meet new circumstances in a democracy, is likely to be influenced more by minority or factional claims than by a concern for the common good. The modern drift towards the litigious society is a consequence of this contractual conception of society, while community itself becomes more and more fragmented into opposing interests and claims to special rights.

The effect of this philosophy of mutual fear is to foster a society of mutual exploitation. Yet since such a societal life is against nature in the traditional sense, most ordinary people are split by a double ethic, one that intuitively recognises goodness and justice, and one adapted to the so-called 'real world' and all its moral compromises. The moral and the legal realms are consequently dissociated from one another - precisely the dissociation that the Natural Law tradition resolves, and which government is meant to resolve.

Although George seeks to illustrate the laws of economics and society from the classical economists, his heart does not lie with their conception of society but with the Natural Law tradition, which recognizes the primacy of community and universal justice. In *Progress and Poverty* he writes:

The laws of the universe are harmonious. If the remedy to which we have been led is the true one, it must be consistent with justice; it must be practical in application; it must accord with the tendencies of social development; and it must harmonize with other reforms. (Progress and Poverty, Chapter 25)

This in no way accords with Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Smith or Mill. On the contrary, it accords with the Stoic understanding of Natural Law, as George immediately shows:

Economic law will prove the perceptions of Marcus Aurelius: "We are made for cooperation - like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of the upper and lower teeth."

Is George aware that he is contradicting the classical economists who explicitly refute the Stoics, and who deny that the 'laws of the universe are harmonious'? The new 'natural philosophy' proclaimed by Bacon and Hobbes refutes this ancient view directly as we have seen. For them the 'laws of nature' are purely mechanical laws, devoid of any moral dimension or teleology. There is no 'harmonious universe' with which human justice can conform, nor are we naturally social beings 'made for cooperation'.

George is appealing to the discarded Natural Law tradition which still resonates in the minds of the ordinary citizens of his time for whom 'natural justice' remained a self-evident truth.

It is worth comparing some of the main differences between the Natural Law tradition and the Natural Rights tradition which arose with the Enlightenment. (In the following summary NL stands for Natural Law, and NR for Natural Rights.)

NL: Known by intuition, NR: known through legal codes and charters. NL: based upon universal justice, NR: devised by human reason. NL: man-made law should conform to universal principles, NR: should conform to the will of the people. NL: aim, the common good, NR: aim, individual freedom. NL: liberty based on responsibility, NR: liberty based on personal values.

The most obvious difference between these two conceptions of law is that one is founded upon the general good of the community, the other on the autonomy of the individual, one on a conception of natural justice, the other on human preference. There is no constant ground upon which Natural Rights are founded apart from their assertion. It is therefore impossible to demonstrate any moral foundation for the laws of economics based on Natural Rights theory. This is why most modern economic theory is morally neutral. It is also why land, labour, and money are regarded as saleable commodities. In Natural Rights theory neither the human person nor the land can be distinguished from any other economic resource, save by contractual agreement. George, on the contrary and in accord with the Natural Law tradition, finds that everyone has an innate sense of justice, as he states directly in *Progress and Poverty*:

Justice is fundamental to the human mind, though often warped by superstition, habit, and selfishness. When I propose to abolish private property in land, the first question to be asked is that of justice. Only what is just can be wise; only what is right will endure. I bow to this demand and accept this test. If private property in land is just, then what I propose is false. If private property in land is unjust, then my remedy is true. (Progress and Poverty, Chapter 26)

George could never have asserted this on the basis of Natural Rights theory. His appeal to justice is to a universal principle true at all times and in all places. It equally follows that if private property in land is unjust, then all its consequences will be unjust too, as George demonstrates in detail. The whole economic argument of George is based on justice as a principle discernible in the order of nature. To appeal to justice in this way shows that in his heart of hearts George belongs to the Natural Law tradition, and that the words of seventeenth century barrister Sir Edward Coke would have resonated with him:

The Law of Nature is that which God at the time of creation of the nature of man infused into his heart, for his preservation and direction; and this is lex aeterna, the Moral Law, called also the Law of Nature. (Sir Edward Coke, Selected Writings of Sir Edward Coke, Volume 1).

Georgists may be encouraged by the current revival of interest in Natural Law and virtue ethics, and also by the renewal of the social and environmental teaching of the Church. Economics and ethics belong together in a true understanding of the nature of society where the common good has precedence over private interest. By studying Plato and Aristotle we may take advantage of this new opportunity. But I give the final word to George:

The natural laws which permit of social advance, require that advance to be intellectual and moral as well as material. The natural laws which give us the steamship, the locomotive, the telegraph, the printing-press, and all the thousand inventions by which our mastery over matter and material conditions is increased, require greater social intelligence and a higher standard of social morals. (Social Problems, Chapter 17). ■