

letter from the editor

Why is it that the proposals of Henry George have not been universally adopted? Is it because the fundamentals of economics are inherently hard to understand? In the article on the Physiocrats in this issue we see the struggles of the early economists in grasping the law of rent. It is very curious that, in the age in which reason was held in the highest esteem, and when scientific and technological advances were being made, that it soon lost its way with the study of economics, despite the promising beginnings with the Physiocrats. It is often overlooked that the Romantic movement challenged the claims of the scientific rationalism that swept through civilisation at that time. Long before George was born the poets, such as Coleridge and Blake, protested against the brutalisation of nature carried out in the name of reason, and at the reduction of human nature to a mere 'thing' or machine, and the turning of the world into an inert 'resource' to be plundered at will.

What happened at that time was that 'reason' became associated with nature conceived as a great machine, as we see with Newton, Bacon and Hobbes. The economists and social reformers attempted to understand society in the same mechanistic way, and so a divorce occurred between 'reason' and 'ethics', and this divorce is still with us today. What they now called 'natural law' was not the law of nature as traditionally understood, as the intelligent ordering of nature towards harmony and flourishing, but rather a reduction of law to blind forces, devoid of intelligence or purpose. Even divine providence was now conceived in this mechanistic way. Romanticism arose in opposition to this mechanical view of nature, and aspired to social reform on the basis of the goodness and dignity of human nature, directly opposing the conception of man as driven by fear and greed.

This divorce between reason and ethics is precisely what Henry George could see and which he sought to remedy. In the Conclusion of *Social Problems* he writes:

"Here, it seems to me, is the gist and meaning of the great social problems of our time: More is given to us than to any people at any time before; and, *therefore*, more is required of us. We have made, and still are making, enormous advances on material lines. It is necessary that we commensurately advance on moral lines. Civilization, as it progresses, *requires* a higher conscience, a keener sense of justice, a warmer brotherhood, a wider, loftier, truer public spirit. Failing these, civilization must pass into destruction. It cannot be maintained on the ethics of savagery. For civilization knits men more and more closely together, and constantly tends to subordinate the individual to the whole, and to make more and more important social conditions".

According to George, material advance demands a corresponding ethical advance at the same time, a greater sense of responsibility towards nature and society. This ethical advance is the natural response to the abundance of nature. George calls it 'a higher conscience', which raises the human relationship with nature to a higher level, while this in turn raises society itself to a new level – to a primary concern for justice and a new spirit of social unity in common service. The truly 'socialised' individual has the moral capacity to act for the sake of the whole of society. The 'ethics of savagery', of 'every man for himself', is really a product of a degenerate or failing society.

There comes a point where the innate laws of socialisation are invisible without looking towards the common good, and where seeing the common good opens up a deeper understanding of society and its potential. But the common good can be seen only through the sense of justice. The laws of inert matter cannot be applied to the social sphere. The social sphere comes into being and develops through thought and reflection, manifest in a 'higher conscience'. And so George writes:

"Social reform is not to be secured by noise and shouting; by complaints and denunciation; by the formation of parties, or the making of revolutions; but by the awakening of thought and the progress of ideas. Until there be correct thought, there cannot be right action; and when there is correct thought, right action will follow".

Reason and justice must inform one another. What is clearer now than it was in George's times, is that there is a direct correlation between the ills and injustices of society and the unlawful or abusive use of the earth. The exploitation of humanity and of the environment have a common root. These ills and abuses show a failure of intelligence as well as a moral failure. "What oppresses the masses is their own ignorance, their short-sighted selfishness", says George, refusing to lay the blame on government or industrialists. This 'short-sighted selfishness', which sadly seems to guide many voters, brings about an intellectual blindness. A society without insight into justice will necessarily be a crippled and limited society, open to exploitation and encouraging criminality. A few may gain enormous material riches, but in a general moral and intellectual poverty.

Poverty and environmental destruction are two sides of one thing: the effect of the divorce of reason and ethics. As George often observes, poverty is always explained away through bad reasoning. We are only now beginning to see how the abuse of reason and disregard of justice have inevitable social and environmental consequences. The laws of nature operate negatively for a society that cannot see that the creation of wealth must serve the common good, rather than private gain, and be in harmony with the biology of the earth. Modern ecology has shown us that nothing in nature exists in isolation or just for itself, and that the ethic of 'enlightened self-interest' is a wholly false ethic, harmful to society.

This is why the proposals of George should be presented as at once rational and just. If reduced to mere fiscal proposals, they fail to persuade. And if reduced to a moral crusade, they are dismissed as utopian. It is only through seeing they are at once rational and just that their full social and economic implications may be grasped. George implores us to understand that economic and social justice are the natural condition of society:

"There are deep wrongs in the present constitution of society, but they are not wrongs inherent in the constitution of man nor in those social laws which are as truly the laws of the Creator as are the laws of the physical universe. They are wrongs resulting from bad adjustments which it is within our power to amend".



Joseph Milne
editor@landandliberty.net