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My Discovery of Henry George - in the UK

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Last year, on what I thought would be an innocent two week jaunt in and around London in springtime, doing research at the British Film Institute, I unexpectedly discovered one of history's best kept secrets. This discovery turned a supposedly innocuous trip into something of a mission.

I was sitting in Regent's Park, two days after arriving in London, reading the entertainment and events listings of a weekly magazine when a notice under the heading "Political Activities" caught my attention. It read "The Green Economics Society of the LSE (London School of Economics and Political Science) meets Mondays at 6:30 pm. Room E-108."

The reason this caught my attention is that for years I have had an interest in ecological economics but realized I lacked comprehensive information of how the economic machine really worked. Since I lacked this knowledge, I was also unaware of any viable alternatives to the present system. As a consequence, I had pretty well given up my quest to understand "the dismal science." I had made countless attempts on my own to reach such an understanding, but inevitably wound up frustrated.

So sitting in a London Park and coming upon this simple notice, I figured I had nothing to lose and might actually learn something — perhaps they knew something on this side of the Atlantic that was unknown or unacknowledged at home. Perhaps it was the fact that this group at the London School called itself a "society" that impressed me. I figured if they were calling themselves a society, well, they just might know their stuff. At the time I didn't realize that almost every group in Britain calls itself a "Royal" this or that or a "Society" of such-and-such. It must be part of their whole pomp and circumstance thing. Anyway, I felt at least a semblance of enthusiasm — despite having more or less resigned from my personal pursuit of economics. I really didn't know what to expect, except perhaps some interesting discussion.

After arriving at LSE and sitting in room E-108 for some time, into the meeting walked an elderly gentleman who looked like everyone's stock image of an economics-wizard. He had frazzled white hair and wore a frumpy blazer; he carried the requisite manila folders under one arm and surveyed the room looking somewhat askance. This was the man of the hour and, I would later learn, the leader of a one man crusade to keep alive the dream of Sidney and Beatrice Webb. *Who?*

Well, Sidney and Beatrice Webb were asso-



Sidney and Beatrice Webb

ciates of Henry George and were significantly influenced by George's economic thought. They were also the founders of the London School of Economics. Though they were Fabian Socialists, they credited Henry George with, in their words, "arousing the British social and political conscience as no one else in this period" (the latter part of the 19th century).

Their original aim for the School was "to contribute to the improvement of society by promoting the impartial study of its problems and the training of those who would translate [economic] policy into action. Today the School stands as one of the most prestigious of graduate schools, recognized as the Harvard of the UK in business and finance circles. It has, however, strayed quite far from the Webb's original intentions for it.

After the meeting in room E-108, I asked a recent graduate of the School whether the history of the School itself ever came up in all the

classes he had taken and whether in the course of his studies the students had ever considered analyzing social problems from a "progressive" point of view. "No," was his answer.

After learning the history of the LSE, I was in equal measure inspired and disturbed. Inspired because I thought I had found what I had been searching for — a school that had, at least at one time, a comprehensive approach to the study of social problems from an economic point of view. Disturbed because I had learned how far the School had strayed from its original mission. Nevertheless, I decided to become involved in the activist wing of the student body and the Green Economics Society.

Some weeks later the coordinator of the Green Economics Society, Janos, announced that the Society had a few hundred pounds left in its budget for the year. It was decided to spend this money wisely by organizing a forum/reception with the aim of publicizing the work of the Society, as a way of reaching out to the rest of the student body and the public at large. We also got two well-known Georgist/green economists, James Robertson and Helena Norberg-Hodge, to speak.

The result was a success. We increased the number of regular members of the Society, from fewer than five to forty-two. For me personally it was a success — I had found a comprehensive approach to economics and social problems. And I was learning more about Henry George and the Georgist approach to those problems. I had discovered answers to my seemingly unanswerable questions about the nature of poverty. And I acquired a sense of hope that there is much that can be done about it.

On returning to the U.S., I enrolled at the Henry George School of Social Science, where I plan to continue my studies — which began with a chance glance at an announcement in a listings magazine in a London park. Sometimes you have to go far afield to find something that's been in your own backyard all along.