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How I Came to Embrace the Principles Embraced by Henry George

By Jill Quirk

Jill Quirk continues our series of personal journeys relating the different paths by which we arrive at Geoism. To “see the cat” is to experience a sort of revelation, in the manner of when a kid sees the hidden cat in those activity book drawings of a tree or bush. After you see the cat, the Geoist paradigm just seems so obvious.

I’m not sure that I’ve actually seen a cat but here’s my story.

My paternal grandfather died when I was 6, so I have scant memory of him. I am told that he used to talk about the philosophy of Henry George with his friends for hours on end. His daughter, my aunt used to listen to their conversations, completely fascinated, as a child. Over more recent years in discussions with her about subjects which concern me such as environment, human overpopulation, land prices, international trade and tariffs, transport and travel it seemed to bring to light things that her father had said during those early Henry George discussions. She would quote fragments from them such as

- “There is enough in the world for everyone, but there is unequal distribution.”
- “The land, the sea and the air were put here for everyone, but you only occupy the land, you cannot really own it.”
- “There is one perfect tax system, a tax on land.”
- “Labour should not be taxed.”

She remembered the following argument:

“If you were in a train carriage you only occupy one seat so why should you be able to hold more land than you can use and prevent someone else from using it?”

She tells me “It was as clear to my him as daylight is to you and me that if Henry George’s philosophy were put into place in our tax system, we would have equality or at least equal opportunity. It would be a perfect state. People told him it sounded like communism, but he said that it was the opposite! He said we are born capitalists and should have equal opportunity.

She tells me there was an active Henry George group in Albury N.S.W. in the late nineteenth century, but it was defunct by the 1920s when she would have been listening to her father and his cronies.

I was slightly interested in these quotes from the distant past but couldn’t work out the essence of

Henry George's ideas from what she said, as there was never any real thread to it.

My father would also have heard these conversations but I can't recall him talking to me about Henry George. He certainly talked politics of a kind, however and it was dominated by a deep concern for the environment and man's impact on it. This led him to realize that it was increasing human population, which meant that the effect of man's activities on the environment was unlikely to diminish and things were not going to improve as long as the population kept increasing. He read books like "The population bomb" by Dr. Paul Ehrlich and I did too. I took on his concerns. When I was in my late teens, however, and near voting age (which was then 21), there was no political party which represented my views. A lot of my friends were leaning towards the A.L.P especially given Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War and seemed to think this party held the answer. I had no such feelings. To me the parties did not seem contrasted enough and neither party had a concern for the environment.

At 23, I touched down in India en route to Europe and noticed that for a really overpopulated country, thipopulated country, things did not lonogks as bad as I expected. I guess that's when I realized that different peoples had different impacts on their environment according to the level of technology and standard of living. The higher the standard of living the worse it was for the environment! This seems really obvious now but that was the first time I had ever been in a third world country. After this I lived in Europe for a couple of years and did not pay much attention to politics in Australia. The books I read around this time were Albert Camus- "The Outsider" and Jean Paul Sartre's trilogy "Roads to Freedom", and "Nausea." I liked this moody French introspection and the grappling with ethical questions in a world envisaged with neither God nor purpose. I also read Germane Greer's "The Female Eunuch." which was a great introduction to the world of feminism. This was the early 70s and the western world was in a state of social revolution. It was the time of the "hippie" and those people in San Francisco with flowers in their hair. It was so different from my parents' world and the world in which I had grown up.

I started my B.A. at the University of Melbourne at the age of 25 after returning from Europe. (Before leaving for Europe I had qualified as a reluctant librarian and also dropped out of an art teaching course) At Melbourne I studied philosophy and French as well as politics and psychology. I read Plato's "Meno" in philosophy, which is a dialogue arguing as to what are the qualities of the "perfect" or the "good" man. Jean Paul Sartre popped up again in both philosophy and French. I also remember reading Berkley's dialogue about how we know the world through our senses, how unreliable they are and the conclusion that our perceptions must be placed in out minds by God.

During my university course I enjoyed debate on philosophical matters but never felt as fascinated by politics even though I studied it for one year. My concern was the environment and for the major political parties this was a side issue.

Over the next decades, the Australian environment continued to deteriorate, as did that of the

globe as a whole. Lake Pedder in Tasmania was flooded and ruined forever to provide hydro electricity to a continually growing Australian population, more and more land was covered in houses to accommodate more and more people. Species were lost at the rate of knots. More and more cars on the roads meant more and more animal deaths and the efforts of conservation groups like the Australian Conservation Foundation seemed fruitless in the face of this.

Most people I spoke to could not see this connection between increasing human numbers and a deteriorating environment. I usually got the feeling that making this connection was not approved of and was “anti-people.” Discussing this question left me feeling perplexed and on dangerous ground.

At the end of my B.A. in which I majored in French and Psychology, I studied audiology, which is the science of hearing. This was a whole new discipline to me as it was very factual and hard science, which I found quite refreshing. The only political remark I heard during this one year postgraduate course was when a hapless New Zealander fellow student got the red and blue headphones mixed up and told the supervisor that he always associated red with the left side of politics, yet the red headphone belonged on the right ear! I loved his association but the supervisor was not amused at all.

Through the 80s I concentrated on my new career but somewhere in there joined a book group via one of my colleagues. I loved this group and the discussions that came out of our monthly books. One of my absolute favourites was “Woman on the edge of time” by Marge Piercy which was set in the year 2137 via the “disturbed” brain of a woman suffering in a mental hospital but able to see into the future. It was a sort of Utopia where there were no more cars and everyone travelled together on fabulously efficient, fast and comfortable public transport, life was communal and non-sexist and magic was possible. Another interesting look into the future was Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale.” which I read in these years. This novel pictures a dystopia where fertile women are only allowed to breed in a world where human population has been destroyed presumably through atomic radiation and the protagonist looks back nostalgically at her former life when she had a lover and women were allowed to have jobs, money and independence.

This has nothing to do with Prosper or Henry George but I’m getting there! The environment was still my main political concern and I was a member of the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Wilderness Society. They did not seem to get anywhere in saving our animals and our forests and when the ACF decided to ignore population as a conservation issue. I really felt “what’s the use?”

In the 1990s I discovered a group called “Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population”, now known as “Sustainable Population Australia.” It is an environmental organisation, which from my point of view, acknowledged the key issue in preserving our environment. *We need to stabilise our human population!!*

At last I was talking to people who saw the situation as I did. It was through "S.P.A." that I met Sheila Newman who at that time was writing a thesis on land use planning and its relationship to speculation in land and population growth. It gradually dawned on me that there was a connection between the housing industry and population growth. I saw that by having most of our housing provision in private hands that there was a huge incentive for those who had the means to buy large tracts of land, wait for the population to increase and then to sell the land as building blocks at much higher prices. Money for jam!! . Poor people do not have any such opportunity to make money without doing any work. If there is a rising population then the price of land will go up because (as Mark Twain is credited with saying) "They're just not making it any more." I could see that these speculators would not be content to be patient and wait but that they would lobby government to speed up this process by increasing the rate of immigration. Bingo!!

Back to my aunt.....in the last year or so we were having one of our usual discussions about everything including land speculation and the name of Henry George resurfaced. I still only had fragments to go on so she kindly gave me her father's copy of "Progress and Poverty."

That same evening when I returned home from Wodonga where she lives, I took a look at my email and found people I knew writing about Henry George!! This was an amazing coincidence!

My bedtime reading that night was "Progress and Poverty", which I found fascinating and meticulously argued. I started reading the detailed arguments against defining any part of labour as capital and against taxing people for their work. I must admit that I have not finished this book because I am continually distracted by other books but I will get back to it!

It seems to me that if people were obliged to pay rent on the land they hold in accordance with its value then there would not be this opportunity to make a capital gain. There would therefore be no incentive to hold excessive land in the first place. There would then be no incentive for speculators to pressure government to increase population through immigration in order to sell the land to them or get them to pay rent. We could have modest immigration perhaps at a rate, which replaces those who have left the country, and for more humanitarian reasons, and at least for other reasons than to fill land and houses to make a few people rich.

Population growth would then slow down to about half our present rate and in future decades level off. It is a shame that the Australian population will continue to grow for quite a few years yet just through natural increase but it would eventually stabilise and we might be able to cope with that level of population and our limited water resources etc. at perhaps a lower standard of living than we have now but maybe one that would be tolerable. Our local environment may stand a chance for a while.

From the global perspective, human numbers continue to increase and with this the incidence of poverty and hunger in the world. In the last year or so I read a fascinating book on this topic by

Reg. Morrison called “The Spirit in the gene”, which has had quite a profound effect on my attitude towards this problem. I see the human species as any other species in the sense that it can outgrow its territory and all that sustains it. The human species is part of nature despite the enormous changes it has wrought on its environment. It seems from my reading, inevitable that it will be brought into line and cannot continue to grow forever.

We have no control over this global inevitability, but we can have influence over what happens within our country. If we saw land as a precious resource not to be monopolised by those with the means, we could calm down greed and speculation. If we could stop worshipping “growth” and instead look forward to a smaller population (and economy) we would also be looking towards an improvement in quality of life in terms of air quality, green spaces and cost of housing.

I understand that Henry George and all related ideas are ignored in university economics in Australia and in other countries. My impression is that economics is taught with an underlying assumption that the finiteness of resources is not a problem that man will need to face and is therefore irrelevant in an economic environment of infinite growth. With no pun intended I think that Henry George from his grave could bring them down to earth. I hope that the scholarship that is being offered by Prosper to university students will help to bring his ideas into the student population via the back door even if they are banned from the official curriculum.