

Heilbroner: "Henry George—Anathema of the Respectable"

by Dr. Heather Remoff

American economist Henry George wrote passionately about the impact of systems of land tenure on economic and social equations. Critics of Henry George include Robert Heilbroner who in his summary of the ideas of great economic thinkers dismisses the work of Henry George as "anathema to the world of respectable opinion". George's central thesis is of the absolutely crucial role monopoly in land plays in the peaks and depressions of the business cycle. Heilbroner declares that, "to put the blame for industrial depressions on land speculation is to blow one small aspect of an expanding econ-

omy quite out of proportion to reality." However, it is interesting to note how Heilbroner describes the social disruption that resulted from the kinds of monopoly in land made possible by the British Enclosure Acts.

"It is almost impossible to imagine the scope and impact of the process of enclosure. As early as the middle of the sixteenth century riots had broken out against it; in one such uprising, 3,500 people were killed. In the mid-eighteenth century, the process was still in full swing; not until the mid-nineteenth century would it have run its terrible historic course. Thus, in 1820, nearly fifty years after the American Revolution, the Duchess of Sutherland dispos-

essed 15,000 tenants from 794,000 acres of land, replaced them with 131,000 sheep, and by way of compensation rented her evicted families an average of two acres of submarginal land each."

"But it was not merely the wholesale land-grabbing that warrants attention. The tragedy is what happened to the peasant. Deprived of the right to use common land, he could no longer maintain himself as a 'farmer'. Since no factories were available, he could not - even if he wanted to - metamorphose into a factory worker. Instead, he became that most miserable of all social classes, an agricultural proletariat, and where agricultural work was

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lacking, a beggar, sometimes a robber, usually a pauper."

In these paragraphs, Heilbroner is not describing Ireland, he is describing England. However, it was these same Enclosure Acts that set in motion the Irish tragedy, for they legalized the private ownership of land. The Irish "problem" was caused, not by breeding excess, but by absentee landlords. The Irish were a people almost totally disenfranchised from their land. English landlords were the barrier that distorted land's power as a regulating factor. Land monopoly is not one small aspect of an economy that has been blown out of proportion to reality, and Heilbroner seems to be aware of this, at least when dealing with specific situations.

Land, broadly taken to mean all naturally occurring resources, is at

the heart of the economic function. That this is less obvious in 2005 than it was in 1820 is because we have inserted an industrialized layer between ourselves and the land. Most of us no longer live "close to the ground". However, we are still animal in nature. Our economic systems are more elaborate than those of other species, but at the heart of our very survival is the ability to draw energy, from the naturally occurring world. Heilbroner's example from post-enclosure England makes only too plain how monopoly in land disrupts the distributive function of a healthy economy, with dire impact upon our demographics, ecology, and, ultimately, our biology.

There are those who argue that nineteenth century economic and social dislocations were a necessary prerequisite to the flowering of the industrial revolution. After all, the Enclosure Acts made it possible for the land-owning classes to amass the

capital necessary for the investment in factories that would eventually provide displaced workers with jobs. This is not a view I share, and I hope my arguments will expose the fallacy in the notion.

There is no living creature that can be denied reliable access to naturally occurring resources and survive. Humans are no exception. In the future I will elucidate the relationships between economic strength, reproductive restraint, and the productively efficient use of natural resources. At the moment we humans are a species out of ecological control. A first step in restoring the balance is to understand the innate nature of our adaptive responses to social and material constraints.

Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1979 Centenary Edition).

Robert L. Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 4th Edition, 1972).