

Economic Determinism—A False Doctrine

By EDWIN S. ROSS

THOSE who have been following current Georgeist thought must have noticed wide divergences in the interpretation of the philosophy of Henry George as applied to the realities of the day. Chief among the bones of contention have been the justification (or lack of it) for American participation in the war, and the value or non-value of politically democratic institutions.

While the controversy has been spirited, to say the least, a critical analysis of the causes of the ideological split is needed. It is in order to promote a more open discussion of the problem that the present article is offered.

I believe the fundamental cause is not far to seek. The basis of the difference is acceptance or non-acceptance of the doctrine of "economic causality." Commonly referred to as "economic determinism," it holds that all of the actions of men arise from the struggle to obtain material things. The version accepted by some Georgeists, taking cognizance of the source of material things, states that, in the last analysis, history is to be viewed as a struggle for land, and that all our institutions—political, social and moral—are ultimately determined by such material considerations.

The Georgeist proponent of economic causality contends that political democracy is worthless while private ownership of land remains. He is contemptuous of the right to vote, to worship freely or enjoy free speech, for to him the economic system is the only reality; all else is but its reflection. He can, with an easy conscience, sit back and "search for causes" while the new barbarians place yokes upon the peoples of the world. "Are they not already yoked?" he asks.

No less an authority than Henry George himself is quoted in support of such a view, most often as follows: "The ownership of land is the great fundamental fact which ultimately determines the intellectual and moral condition of a people." Yet only a little reflection is necessary to see that, in conjunction with the entire Georgeist philosophy, the quoted sentence has not the meaning it appears to have. For if it is true that the ownership of land actually determines finally the course of our history, then there is nothing we can do about it. The seeds were planted long ago, and all else is inevitable.

If the doctrine of economic causality were a true one, then all the agencies and individuals engaged in working to achieve a Georgeist society ought to cease their efforts. They are futile, for the sequence of events has already been determined by our economic system. If a Georgeist society was meant to come, it will come at the appointed time—the time dictated by mechanical economic forces.

If, on the other hand, we can change from private to public ownership of land whenever we so will, then a new factor has entered—our *will*. "Economic causality" must bow to consciously controlled action.

Karl Marx, in propounding his doctrine of economic determinism, understood well the consequences of his theory. He declared that nothing he or anyone else did would hurry or retard the coming of the socialist society by one tick of the clock. The conditions of production would bring it at the moment when the time was ripe. Can anyone really suppose that George was guilty of any such pseudo-scientific nonsense? Over and over again he declared that not the selfish striving for material things, but the love of justice and the love of one's fellows constituted the strongest of motives for human action.

The believer in economic causality, in seeking, for instance, to exonerate the international aggressors of today from responsibility for the world chaos that exists, is very much in the position of a defense attorney in a murder case who might use the following argument: "The defendant, Jones, had nothing to do with this matter. He merely raised a heavy sledge over Brown's head. The force of gravity, as you know, is an inexorable law. The weight dropped with terrific speed, and poor Brown was but the victim of 'physical causality.'" By similar "reasoning" we can excuse every crooked politician, every corrupt administrator of a public institution, and all thieves and criminals. Are they not all equally subject to their economic environment?

This sort of economic determinism is really a form of fatalism. The logical conclusion of it is that the victim of all the wrongs being perpetrated today cannot change anything, and that he should therefore resign himself to his fate, making no effort to defend himself until the Good Society should somehow miraculously appear, full-grown.

It is not argued here that material and economic considerations are not a powerful factor in human action. It is, however, emphatically denied that these constitute the sole motives and causes of men's action. Stronger motives, more closely associated with the conscious will, play their part—religious fervor, love of country, and all the things about which men feel strongly.

Henry George did not resort to the lazy-minded philosophy of "economic causality." In speaking of the Civil War, for instance, he expressed the view (see "A Perplexed Philosopher") that the timidity with which the *moral* question of slavery had been treated so emboldened the slave owners that they "flung the nation into war." Is not the parallel to our contemporary appeasers and aggressors clear?

I say to satisfy their desires.

Basically, the notion that all of man's actions are dictated by material considerations springs from a complete misunderstanding of the nature and limits of economic science. Economics is not the sort of science, like astronomy, that permits of accurate predictions. We can only say that *if* man's actions are so and so, *then* such and such will result. But we cannot predict what his actions will be, because the will of man is involved, and the will is essentially unpredictable.

Lionel Robbins, in "The Nature and Significance of Economic Science," has put the matter aptly by pointing out that the economist can say with scientific precision that the desire for increased tariffs is incompatible with the desire for increased foreign trade, but nothing in his science lets him know when, or to what extent, man's desires in this respect will change.

The proponents of "economic causality" tell us that the present World War is nothing but a struggle for land. As for the brutal terrorization of a large part of the earth's population, that is too bad, but it shouldn't disturb us too deeply, or deter us from dreaming on about the Perfect Society to come thousands of years hence. What's the use of doing anything now? they say. If it wasn't fascism it would be something else.

This school of thought even shies away from the economic explanation (if such they are seeking) that Europe is in distress because the Nazis have been building up a monstrous military machine with a tremendous expenditure of labor and wealth (out of all proportion to the claim of being a "have not" nation) which, had it been otherwise used, must have considerably raised the standard of living. This explanation opens the question of the will and choice of a group of men, and disturbs the perfect doctrine of mechanical economic forces.

Nearly every modern thinker of importance has rejected the doctrine of economic determinism. Let us not fall into the absurdity of embracing it. It is intellectually indefensible; it turns out to be a set of windy generalizations which are punctured with the slightest analysis.

Let us rather admit that the course of history lies in our own hands; that we personally, all of us, are and ought to be responsible for our own acts; that we have a duty to protect and rescue our fellow men from the tyranny which is engulfing the world—even though we still may have the evil of private property in land to combat. We will then be listened to with respect.

But if we claim to espouse a radical reform while at the same time sneering at political democracy and such freedom as we do enjoy, we shall be, very properly, the objects of suspicion, regarded as irresponsible "crackpots" so in love with a doctrine that we have forgotten to love men.

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