

Utopia and the Georgist philosophy

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MOST PEOPLE are content to live in circumstances that remain for the most part unaltered. Any change in an accepted social pattern may cause psychological disruption. A natural disaster, or a major political shift – as in a revolution – has great potential to foster rapid social fluctuations, alter the collective life of a nation, and engender fear. It is in such periods that prophets, visionaries or lunatics are most likely to propose a perfected world.

The primary agent of social problems has been the land. The soil is the source of all sustenance and riches. Who controlled access to food and wealth could dictate the political and economic structure of a nation, and that in turn would decide the nature of social relations, customs, and traditions¹. Since land and its resources were owned by a select minority, the poorer members of society would have to rent the land or hire themselves out as field labourers. More often than not poverty would stalk the countryside and the cities, swelled by peasants who could still not find work.

When the oppressive conditions reached the breaking point or a new arrangement, such as the transfer of payment in kind to money during the Middle Ages, and age-old customs and traditions could no longer fulfill their functions of giving meaning to life, a psychology of fear and shock would follow. Masses of people would be given over to fantasies encompassing apocalyptic or messianic visions of the destruction of the tyranny of the rich landowner and the privatisation of land.

The more educated could idealise these half-articulated notions as utopia. For more than 2,500 years men disenchanted with endless strife and injustice were sometimes encouraged to dream of a utopian world order of complete social harmony. These aspirations first became apparent in the Hebrew Scriptures. For a prototype the prophets looked to an earlier Adamite Eden or pre-Noachian paradise. Their purpose was to console and fortify people's courage to survive the vicissitudes of oppressive times. It was crushing circumstances that kindled utopian visions of an ultimate triumph, spiritual and physical

prosperity, and the mission of a chosen people, at times led by a messiah. Hopes such as these were to be taken up time and again by Judaic, Christian, Islamic, and secular visionaries.

This persistent tradition has become an important part of the group consciousness of diverse peoples. Sometimes utopian desires have served as dry kindling for a desperation that came of suffering, poverty, and repression resulting in riots, insurrections and revolutions. And then when misery does not disappear with the overthrow of old institutions, anger turns to cynicism or to a search for a utopia that had been betrayed. So the means that justify the ends, a concept that became fashionable during the Bolshevik nightmare, brings a nightmare pursuing a utopia.

At other times, the concept of utopia has served as a muse for reflective minds. Thomas More, Francis Bacon, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Claude Henri de Rouvroy, le comte de Saint-Simon, Robert Owen and H.G. Wells contributed to a literature of utopia. Henry George was tempted by this tradition. Eighteen years before he wrote *Progress and Poverty* in 1879, George wrote in a letter to his sister during the Civil War:

How I long for the Golden Age – for the promises of the Millennium, when each one will be free to follow his best and noblest impulses, unfettered by the restrictions and necessities which our present state of society imposes upon him when the poorest and

the meanest will have a chance to use all his God-given faculties, and not be forced to drudge away the best part of his time in order to supply wants but little above those of the animal...

Sometimes I feel sick of the fierce struggle of our highly civilized life, and think I would like to get away from cities and businesses, with their jostlings and strainings and cares, altogether, and find some place on one of the hillsides, which look so dim and blue in the distance, where I could gather those I love, and live content with what Nature and our own resources would furnish; but, also, money, money, is wanted even for that. It is our fate – we must struggle, and so here's for the strife!

What a glorious thought it is, that at last all will be over – all trial, all care, all suffering forever finished; all desire filled, all longing satisfied – what now is but hope become reality – perfect love swallowing up all in one boundless sea of bliss. How the old hymn that we used to sing in the Sunday School swells and peals through the mind, when one realises its meaning as a living truth, like a glorious burst of the heavenly music, telling of the joys of the redeemed and freed.

“Oh, that will be Joyful
Joyful, Joyful, Joyful
Oh, that will be Joyful!
To meet, to part no more!
To meet, to part no more,
On Caanan's happy shore,
To sing the everlasting song
with those who've gone before.”

What a thought, what a picture! With all we love or have loved here “to meet, to part no more – one unbroken family around His Throne!” Can we be unhappy long, if we believe this?¹

SOURCES

- 1 Letter, Henry George to Jane George, Sept. 15, 1861; reel#1, Henry George Papers, New York Public Library.
- 2 Henry George, *Progress and Poverty*, 25th Anniversary ed., 1879; New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1960, p.330.
- 3 Henry George, *Social Problems* (1883; New York: Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, 1992), p.208.

- 4 *Ibid.*, 241.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 242-243.

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TWO TYPES of utopias, one religious and one secular, have been the dreams of prophets and philosophers. Spiritual visionaries, giving up on the lot of mankind, sought utopia in the afterlife. Total despair and resignation seems to be the driving force of this variety. Secular utopians concern themselves with the ultimate perfection of mankind in this world. Sometimes both impulses have combined to form a unique amalgam; a reorganisation of society that is to be governed by religious precepts. But whatever may be the particular persuasion or specific end, all utopian thinkers share psychological, social and economic motives: to escape the imperfection and suffering looms large, to achieve a perfect society in which the individual and the community can realise their greatest potential.

In a utopia a perfected individual is to live in a society freed of injustice and want. It is to be a total reordering of existing patterns on a foundation of right conduct and individual responsibility or, in some renderings, a godly life.

Although utopian in inspiration Henry George's political economy was to be a practical means of achieving an egalitarian arrangement in which people would live and labour in harmony without trampling upon the equal rights of others. People's potential was to be maximised for the good of the community without the atomisation of individuality. There were to be no national boundary lines and governments were to be shorn of all military and policing powers. *Progress and Poverty* reasserts the age-old truth of the Stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius that "We are made for co-operation – like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of the upper and lower teeth."²

FOCUSING all taxation on the value of land – an entire ground rent with no taxation on labour or improvements, which was to be collected for community functions, with any excess redistributed to the people – is known as the single tax, the opening wedge for this idyllic vision.

"Practically, then, the greatest, the most fundamental of all reforms," George wrote in *Social Problems*, "the reform which will make all other reforms easier, and without which no other reform will avail..."³ The single tax was the mechanical *modus operandi*; indispensable, but not George's ultimate objective.

It would lay a firm foundation for political and

social justice. But George was not so naive as to believe that this pure land-value taxation scheme would of itself do such important yeoman work alone. No, he would insist, for a mere economic instrument would approximate the cold mechanistic forces of a dialectic shorn of human love and dignity. Necessary not only as a precondition for the adoption of the single tax but as the means to make it effective once in place was enlightenment.

"Civilization, as it progresses," George declares, "requires a higher conscience, a keener sense of justice, a warmer brotherhood, a wider, loftier, truer public spirit. Failing these civilisation must pass into destruction. It cannot be maintained on the ethics of savagery."⁴

The great evolutionary change that George envisioned:

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. Power is always in the hands of the masses of men. What

oppresses the masses is their own ignorance, their own short-sighted selfishness.⁵

George would walk away from meaningless economic measures that would ensure mere pocket savings so that an owner could spruce up his house with a coat of paint and instil and perpetuate notions of private property in land. And he would also castigate anyone who arrogates his name against his wishes, and more so those who distort his grander vision of social justice by claiming their philosophy to be his and who fossilise themselves into a self-perpetuating obscurantist parochialism. But he

would most assuredly applaud men and women who quietly illuminate new modes of thinking and a greater awareness of the environment – those who allow for academic freedom and a broadening of horizons. L&L

