

Response from Thomas R. West

Robert Andelson's address delivered at last summer's land-value taxation conference at Edinburgh is a courteous and intellectually provocative response to the essays that Kenneth Wenzer and I put together commenting on Henry George. I can recommend Mr. Andelson's talk as a subtle presentation of the case for the single-tax ethos as George articulated it. I must defer to Dr. Andelson for any detailed commentary on George. And since Dr. Wenzer possesses a greater familiarity with the land-value tradition than I, I'll limit myself here to discussing the comments on my essays and not tread on his territory. I want instead to speak to the narrower question that prompted my essays in the volume: George's positing — mistaken, I believe — of an inviolable right to property.

George argued, of course, for taxation of the whole value of land as determined by natural richness or by location near a center of industry or population, and for leaving free of all taxes whatever derives from labor or investment. That is his core program; his complications of it are not at issue here. My understanding of George has been that the single tax intends to bring to economics not only efficiency but justice. It appropriates for the community the whole of the wealth of land, which was designated for humankind in common. And it assigns to the worker or the capitalist the whole of the market earnings from the improvements that labor brings to the land as well as the forms that work impresses on words, images, or other materials apart from land.

The idea of the social appropriation of all land value suggests to me the belief that an exact monetary figure can be put on land and justly shared out to the whole community, for which land was divinely provided. My assumption has been that if George could believe in so close an assignment of value in the case of land, he was making a parallel assumption about wage or other income: that the market can give it a value that will closely represent the degree or danger or intensity of the effort. This second notion, Dr. Andelson explains, George did not hold. Leaving income untaxed was not for the sake of allowing the market to discover the wage that is precisely correspondent to labor. It was for the sake of freedom.

I must allow Dr. Andelson that point, insofar as it applies to George himself. When I read a social critic as sophisticated as George or hear a politician on the right, from whom sophistication is not to be expected, what I pick up is something on the order of "Why are you taxing away my hard-earned money?" That rhetorical question makes sense only if you assume that thus-and-such a tax represents the theft of such-and-thus an amount of effort translated into the portion of income being taxed. I'm prepared to believe that George was not so foolish. What I want, at any rate,

is to point to the implicit suggestion, in many complaints against taxation of income, that the correlation exists. And isolating work from the insult to its moral, ascetic, and aesthetic character that is involved in assigning it a money value should make it more possible to decide just what kinds of taxes are most useful to the economy.

But what I want to consider now is Dr. Andelson's interesting point that leaving income untaxed — leaving the individual to seek work and income on an open market uninvaded by the IRS — is in George's scheme designed to extend the realm of freedom.

Whatever George's intentions, I must disagree with the claim that the market's assignment of property and wages contributes to the enlargement of freedom. The freedom of the worker, if jobs and the education to prepare for them are available, lies in choosing the work and choosing how carelessly or painstakingly to do it. The wage or salary is established by economic forces beyond the worker's control, or by economic forces qualified by taxation. In privileged kinds of employment, to be sure, the applicant may negotiate the salary. But the boundaries of the negotiation are fixed by the market, whether or not taxation also enters into the final sum. A believer in the capitalist market may hold that the collectivity of workers, by their choices, sets the wages and salaries; a believer in democratic government will insist that their vote for legislators determines both the salaries and the taxation. But thinking of this sort, which Dr. Andelson has not subscribed to anyway, looks to an abstract kind of freedom that depends on reifying the Workers or the Voters, assumed to have a collective will, and has nothing to do with the range of choices within which actual individual breathing and thinking workers and voters must live their days. So I would say of the idea that a wage is freely won what I would say of the idea of a wage justly won: the concept endows work with a power that it does not have.

Still, George was certainly a proponent of freedom. His greatest contribution to the idea of freedom, though, lies not in his withdrawal of government from regulation, but quite to the contrary in the energetic use he would make of government in prying land away from private monopoly. Insuring the widest availability of natural resources to whoever wants to make use of them looks to the largest kind of freedom: the liberty to bring all that is in you of strength, imagination, and self-discipline to making some kind of impress on the world around you. It is notable that George, though himself a printer craftsman, did not succumb to the romantic nostalgia for some earlier age of craft that so tempted other social commentators of his time. He embraced the austere technical and scientific project of the nineteenth century. What he wanted of freedom goes very well with the dream of socialism, apart from the halfway socialism of state planners, or the doctrine-choked socialism of the Marxists, or the antisocialism of the Soviet Union. It is the freedom to give play to the creative and cooperative faculties. (J)