

# Geoist in History

## Franz Oppenheimer (1864 - 1943) by Karl Williams

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Franz Oppenheimer was a pioneering sociologist and political economist whose name is synonymous with the belief that liberty is the ultimate virtue and its corollary that the power of the state is invariably oppressive. As a German-born Jew, he lived to see the very worst of his dire warnings come to pass.

He was born in a suburb of Berlin, the son of a rabbi. The time, the place, and the family surroundings in which he spent his childhood and adolescence left indelible traces in the intellectual and emotional posture of the mature man.

By talent as well as by interest he was marked out for the study of history and the humanities, fields which then included what we call today the social sciences. But coming from a family of modest means he had to prepare for a more secure living. He thus chose the study of medicine, by no means with enthusiasm. He pursued the study of medicine at the universities of Freiburg and

Berlin, where his academic talents enabled him to graduate in 1885 at the age of 21.

It may appear to casual observers a pity Oppenheimer's arrival into the fields of history, sociology and economics was delayed by the ten years of his adult life spent in the preparation for, and the building up of, a medical practice. But all mighty intellects need grist for the mill and in retrospect he himself felt that his training in the natural sciences, especially in biology, played a significant part in shaping his outlook as a social researcher. So did his daily encounter with disease and general misery in one of the poorer districts of Berlin. Perhaps even more important was the insight that only by struggling with concrete experience could a scientist come to grips with the real forces operating in his field.

After he had practiced medicine for a decade, his interests changed dramatically. In 1896, at the age of 32, the time had arrived for a radical break with his professional past. And so Oppenheimer liquidated his medical practice and devoted himself from that point exclusively to social theory and experiment. He became a student of political and economic affairs and earned his PH.D. at the University of Kiel in 1908. In 1909 he became a lecturer at the University of Berlin, and after the Great War he moved as full professor of economics and sociology to the University of Frankfurt in 1919 where he worked for ten years.

Until the halls of a university were fully opened to him in 1919, he had also enjoyed a very successful journalistic career which offered him the material basis for scientific freelancing. Some of his most original works date from that period: his first demonstration in *Grossgrundeigentum und Soziale Frage* (*Property and Social Issues*) of the disastrous role which large landed property has played in social history, his critique of Malthus and Marx, and that little masterpiece of socio-political analysis: *Der Staat* (*The State*), of all

his writings the best known in Anglo-American scholarly circles.

Classical economics (where land is rightly central) was widely accepted in Oppenheimer's day, especially due to the influence of Henry George. The other stimulus to Oppenheimer the economist was the great geoist David Ricardo, about whom Oppenheimer wrote his doctoral thesis.

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*"The State essentially and almost completely during the first stages of its existence, is a social institution, forced by a victorious group of men on a defeated group, with the sole purpose of regulating the dominion of the victorious group over the vanquished, and securing itself against revolt from within and attacks from abroad. Teleologically, this dominion had no other purpose than the economic exploitation of the vanquished by the victors. No primitive state known to history originated in any other manner."*

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Although not a practising Jew, Oppenheimer worked in various capacities for the betterment of his folk, particularly in support of Jewish communal settlements in Palestine. He was also one of the co-founders of the German Committee for Freeing of Russian Jews.

Oppenheimer grew up during a relatively brief period in German history when the large majority of Jews were not conscious of any real or potential conflict between their Jewish and their German loyalties. How far the emphasis was on the latter can be judged by his father's dictum - the earliest which Oppenheimer could remember: "I am a German, and as such I am loyal, sincere and without falsehood." No less revealing is a little poem which the son composed at the age of fifteen, before the first rumblings of political antisemitism sounded. In the poem he rejoiced in the thought that more than ten generations of his ancestors had lived along the Rhine, that an uncle had died fighting against the Danes and a cousin had fallen in the Franco-Prussian war, both of them battling for Germany's honour. Who then, he concluded, would dare to deny him the status of a true, a native German? The most inhuman of surprises lay in wait for him, as we

know from German history.

Oppenheimer's fierce intellect led him to fill all his spare time with economic and historical studies, and he was perfectly located in Berlin to engage in rich intellectual meetings. He found, in the "Ethical Club" and in some of the Berlin salons (then seething with intellectual excitement) an audience for his gradually forming ideas. There he met Gustav Landauer, Wilhelm Boelsche and, above all, Theodor Hertzka (author of *Freiland - outdoors*, and another disciple of Henry George). Under the latter's influence, but already showing independent reasoning, he published his first pamphlet *Freiland in Deutschland*, which contains the core of his later doctrine: to conquer capitalist exploitation and instability through cooperative land settlement. Oppenheimer also acknowledged his intellectual indebtedness to another mighty geoist, Gerrard Winstanley.

Many of Oppenheimer's works were translated and transmitted to libertarian thinkers throughout the world. The geoist Albert J. Nock embraced much of Oppenheimer's interpretation of politics in his own work and regarded him as one of the "Galileos" who deprived the state of all moral prestige. Moreover, because Nock largely agreed with the views of Henry George in regard to land - namely, that the only legitimate tax was on the natural (unimproved) value of land - he was attracted to Oppenheimer's contention that land rent originated in unjust expropriation by the original exploiter. It should be said, however, that Oppenheimer did not fully grasp the nature of economic rent and so certain aspects of his writings are somewhat self-contradictory.

It's not easy to condense Oppenheimer's dismantling of the notion that the State has some kind of noble mission, but here goes. The State, Oppenheimer persuasively argues, is always born in the conquest of one group by another. The conquerors then set themselves up as the government and extract tribute in the form of taxes from the conquered. Furthermore, the State can have originated in no other way than through conquest and subjugation, and to advance his argument he drew on vast historical research with dramatic examples of the beginnings of the State from prehistoric to primitive, from huntsmen to herders, and from the Vikings to modern day. The State, Oppenheimer observed, affects the most





mundane as well as the most important aspects of our lives. As a powerful, sprawling institution, it shapes the other major institutions of society and reaches into our most personal everyday affairs.

*"The class state can arise only where all fertile acreage has been occupied completely."*

In a largely agrarian age, Oppenheimer still knew that everyone is affected by equal access to land and natural resources, and he argued that, so long as the industrial worker has the alternative choice of settling on the land, his wage cannot fall below the income of an independent farmer. Oppenheimer focused his attack on the "land monopoly" (Bodensperre) which blocks access to free land as workable property. The abolition of the land monopoly seemed to him indispensable for a just society.

Oppenheimer's historical analysis saw prehistoric tribal conditions as a rather serene, if not idyllic, phase of human existence. The great divide between tribal and civilized society occurred when nomadic tribes of camel and horse herdsmen and Nordic maritime nomads (such as the Vikings) set on their course of

conquest, subjugating sedentary populations to the east and west. Their conquests led to the land monopoly, tribute payment, and exploitation. All sorts of other monopolies emerged after the land monopoly.

Oppenheimer considered that nonexploitative economic arrangements would work best in a collectivist environment. His ideal was a state without class or class interests in which the bureaucracy would become the impartial guardian of the common interests. He and Henry George both regarded the state as a longtime protector of privilege, and also believed that the state was radically transformed by democracy.

Oppenheimer's strong attacks on the state and the system of taxation and outright land ownership which it protected inevitably made him the enemy of powerful interests. In 1929, at the age of 65, he retired from academia for reasons of health and moved to a rural settlement near Berlin that he had helped to establish before World War I. At this point the Nazis began their ascendancy and, to someone like Oppenheimer who was acutely aware of how the power of the state can be perverted, he prepared to get out while the getting was good. When Hitler became chancellor in 1933, Oppenheimer left Germany and resumed his teaching career in France and Palestine before immigrating to Los Angeles in 1936.

He continued to write and in 1941 was a founding editor of the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, a journal which followed the ideas of Henry George. His legacy extends beyond the libertarian world, with his son being an Israel Prize recipient and one of his pupils, Ludwig Erhard, becoming German chancellor in the 1960s and who attributed to his professor his own vision of a European society of free and equal men. When Oppenheimer died in Los Angeles in 1943 the world was only just beginning to glimpse the fate of those whom Nazi Germany deemed unfit to live. Indeed, Franz Oppenheimer was presented with a confirmation of the warnings he had been making for most of his life in the form of the most horrific example of the inbuilt temptation of the state to overreach its rightful limits.

Next issue: Number 71 - Ebenezer Howard, the founder of the garden city movement in which people live harmoniously together with nature.