

HENRY GEORGE AND THE HENRY GEORGE SCHOOL

by Paul Nix

The ultimate objective of the Henry George School's efforts should be the same as the objective of Henry George himself: namely, to eliminate poverty by establishing a just society. George identified the cause of poverty, defined the remedy, and demonstrated that his remedy is not only compatible with men's basic concepts of justice and freedom, but also essential to the realization of those concepts.

But that, for George, was just clearing ground. He wanted to eliminate poverty, not just talk about it. He studied alternative means to implement his remedy, found one that seemed effective, practical, and not very disruptive, and spent much of the rest of his life urging its adoption.

Despite George's own dedication to getting his ideas put into action, some Georgists argue that this aspect of George's teaching is not the proper concern of the Henry George School. One Georgist, for example, has argued that the policy of the Henry George School should be based not on Henry George's objective, but rather on Oscar Geiger's objective, which, according to that writer, was to teach George's philosophy and nothing else. I think this view does injustice to Geiger. I have read that he was active, successively, in the Single Tax Party, the Commonwealth Land Party, and the New York State Single Tax League, prior to establishing the School in 1932. The School's initial format was a series of evening forums, which Geiger apparently deemed unsatisfactory. He developed the more systematic ten-lesson courses in 1933. He died in 1934.

In perspective, it seems to me that Geiger was constantly experimenting with new approaches, that he was prepared to abandon any approach that did not succeed, and that the ten-lesson courses just happened to be the experiment he was currently working on when he died. It is inconceivable to me that such a dynamic and imaginative person would, had he lived, have insisted that the last approach he experimented with be rigidly maintained forever as the only activity of the Henry George School.

The same Georgist went on to say that: "Our policy should be to teach the philosophy to anyone so that he can enjoy its implications today and so it will enrich his life now...(so that he can) view the world with more equanimity and a better appreciation of the fallacies as well as the wisdom of actions taken by people today."

I have tried to visualize how Henry George might have reacted if, after one of his lectures, a listener had come up to him and said: "Mr. George, you have enriched my life; I can now view the world with equanimity."

When George saw the bull who had wound his rope about the stake, he was not content to enjoy the implications of his knowledge that the bull would be better off if he had the full range of his rope. Nor did he invite his friends in to share this knowledge with him, so that they, too, could view the bull's plight with equanimity and with a better appreciation of the fallacy of the bull's actions. Instead, George went out and

drove the bull in the way that would untwist his rope. Only then did he get the satisfaction of accomplishment. And only then was he of any use to the bull.

What accomplishment is there, for us or for our students, in simply having read and understood what George wrote? He laid it all out for us. As someone once told Oscar Geiger, anyone who can think consecutively can understand the message of Progress and Poverty. Our challenge is to find some way to put it into practice. If we really believe that society would be better off under conditions of freedom and justice, then surely we have an obligation to society to help them to find a practical way to create those conditions.

If we accept that obligation, the next question is: How do we start? George didn't tell us what actually happened when he went out to help the bull. I'm sure he did not start off by lecturing the bull on the advantage of freedom, or on the stupidity of twisting his rope. And even if I can imagine him having done that, I cannot imagine him then walking away, saying, "I've told you all you need to know; if you don't solve your problem now, it's not my fault."

Many Georgists approach the public with this take-it-or-leave-it attitude. When most of the public chooses to "leave it", the Georgist is unperturbed: "If they don't agree with me, they aren't worth bothering with." But who, then, are to be the beneficiaries of George's noble dream?

When George went out to help the bull, he had to deal with the bull on terms the bull was prepared to understand; if we really want to be of some use to society, we must deal with people on their terms, not ours. Just like George's bull, the majority of our citizens are confused, frustrated, angry, suspicious. We must approach them cautiously and with respect. There is no point in telling them things that they are not prepared to listen to; you cannot sell cuff links to a man who has no shirt. If, however, we can show them something that is clearly to their advantage, perhaps we can entice them to move in a way that will ultimately untwist their rope.

How do we get people's attention and get them moving in the right direction? There must be many ways, and, no doubt, different techniques will appeal to different groups. We should not reject any idea that seems promising until we have tried it. Even when an idea has failed, if we think we know why it failed we should correct the defect and try again.

I continue to stand firm in my insistence that courses in the writings of Henry George must be the center of our activity. It is from these courses that our future leaders will come, and it is essential that those leaders have a full understanding and appreciation of the kind of society that George envisioned. But, unless we do much more than that, we will not have done justice to Henry George, and we will have failed our obligation to society.

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