

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

Libertarians

To the Editor:

Your April 30th editorial "The trouble with libertarians," has been in my "things to do" folder awaiting the proper moment for a response. Today seemed like the appropriate time.

You were criticized by a number of supposed libertarians for advocating broad-based tax support for mass transit. You responded that while "a voluntary society... is a worthy goal," we must "evolve in that direction without impairing our day-to-day survival."

On the issue of mass transit, those who have a vested interest in Philadelphia's economy might consider a plan that charges user fees (say, three times what is currently charged) only to those who are leaving the city. This plan might become a deciding factor for those trying to decide whether to work in Philadelphia but live in suburban communities.

As for the raising of revenues from taxation, the availability of such public services plays a significant role in pushing up land values; therefore, that increase is an appropriate source for the needed revenue.

A question you raised asked why it is that all societies in history have passed through feudalism. Feudalism is part of the "natural scheme" of things where the hunter-protector class manages to also appropriate the lands of an agrarian society.

Of all the societies in history, Murray Rothbard was able to find only one—the Celtic Irish—who managed to thwart the rise of a monopolistic/oppressive state. This lasted only as long as

these people remained isolated from mainstream Eurasian culture. The English then brought feudalism and its elitist structure to libertarian Ireland.

Statism is, unfortunately, the direction in which the elitists have taken us.

Mainstream conservatives want the liberty of being able to establish monopolistic capitalism without restriction while dictating controls over individual actions in the realm of morality.

Mainstream liberals call for freedom of choice but are unable to accept a competitive economic model where there is failure.

Both groups operate under assumptions of group hierarchy—of leaders making the decisions and followers doing what they are told to do.

The libertarian sees these philosophical conflicts and prefers the dangers of private monopoly to state monopoly; the libertarian extols the virtues of private schools, hospitals, roadways, police protection and courts—a society built on private contracts.

What you have pointed out is that libertarian philosophy does not provide the framework for an incremental, evolutionary dismantling of the existing structure that will also provide each citizen the birthright of equality of opportunity.

Those who seriously want to achieve the goal of a society based on voluntary contracts should look to what the Georgists have been saying for the last century. The problem with the world economy and the primary justification for heavy-handed government/intervention in our daily lives has ostensibly been to soften the effects

of tax and property laws that have historically protected the wealth and power of the few.

We need tax and property laws that will stimulate a universal rise in the consumption power of citizens everywhere throughout the world. We need equality of opportunity and an erosion of monopolistic protectionism.

The Georgist proposal is to gradually reduce and then eliminate all taxation imposed on the production of physical wealth (i.e., end wage taxes, sales taxes, personal property taxes, inheritance taxes and that portion of the real estate tax falling on improvements). At the same time, make up the lost revenue by applying a higher rate of taxation to the assessed value of land and natural resources.

I will anticipate your question by answering what this would accomplish:

Land and natural resources have a "zero production cost." Except for the fact that the state has permitted private control over land and natural resources, each of us could access them equally. Our government gave away large portions of this country to the railroads and to speculators. What little land homesteaders obtained eventually found its way into the hands of the powerful, whose influence in the state and federal governments ended forever Jefferson's vision of a nation of yeoman farmers.

Today, the source of this nation's material wealth is controlled by a very small number of people; over 90% of all the privately-held land in the United States is controlled by less than 5% of

our population. This and worse concentrations of landownership exist throughout the entire world.

As a result, we live under a very unstable global economy, a fact those in power use to entrench and expand their controls over economic (and political) activity. Whether we talk about the state-socialism of the Soviet Union, or state-capitalism as exists in much of Latin America, or simply the heavy state-intervention of the United States and Western Europe, the long run outcome is the destruction of what individual liberties we have left.

At least we Georgists have identified a way out from under the grip of statism. While I have little hope that those who have fooled themselves into thinking socialism is anything but a road to slavery, I am puzzled by the narrow-mindedness of many libertarians, who ought to pull their heads out of the sand and get in there with us Georgists in our fight for meaningful change.

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Editor's comment: In my view, your generally lucid discussion degenerates into rhetoric precisely when you reach your central point. Who are "the powerful" of whom you speak, and precisely how did all that land "find its way into their hands"? You assume that land ownership is all blessings and no hassles, but a landlord in North Philadelphia might tell you otherwise. Ditto for the owner of a farm on the Israeli-Syrian border. And if 90% of the land is controlled by less than 5% of the people, so what? Many people have no desire to own land, including many rich and powerful people—Wall Street investment bankers, for example.