

FIFTY YEARS IN THE GEORGIST MOVEMENT

By ROBERT CLANCY

Fifty years in the Georgist movement is a long time - a half-century! - but there are others who have been in it even longer.

My introduction was in 1932 just as the Henry George School was being started. I had just left high school and was learning about hard times since that was the worst part of the Great Depression. I attended lectures by Oscar Geiger, founder of the School, and was persuaded that the philosophy of Henry George held the answer to our serious economic problems.

Geiger eventually formalized his teaching by initiating courses based on George's Progress and Poverty and other works. He secured a headquarters and conducted the School until June 1934 when he died. The School continued and I continued my association with it, working at various jobs, also teaching and organizing its library. I also worked for the Schalkenbach Foundation and later became associate editor of Land and Freedom, the American counterpart of Land and Liberty.

After serving in the U.S. Army during World War II, I returned and was offered a job at the Henry George School, eventually becoming its Director, developing classes, correspondence courses, extensions, foreign language work, etc. This continued until 1968 when I was placed on a sabbatical leave and was then separated from the School.

Thereafter I and my colleagues started the Henry George Institute, which continues and of which I am President. My association with the International Union led to my editing its Newsletter which has evolved into the Georgist Journal. Since 1949 I have attended all the International Conferences and at present I am its President. Currently there is an effort to link the branches of the American movement together via the Council of Georgist Organizations of which I am Chairman.

So I have had a good deal of contact with the Georgist philosophy and movement. The present and future, however, interest me more than the past. I offer some thoughts based upon my experiences and deductions.

The economic analysis, remedy and philosophy of Henry George hold up very well. The reasoning behind the taxation of land values strikes me as unassailable. By using rent as public revenue and abolishing other taxes, the social fund is returned to society and the right of the individual to the product of his labor is recognized. Natural opportunities are opened up and a basic cause of our economic distress is overcome. A free market and free trade are part of this philosophy of freedom. The motto "Free land, free trade, free men" sums it up.

But I must add that, as beautiful and symmetrical and reasonable as this philosophy is, it is, alas, not self-evident to all. It appealed to me immediately as it has to others. But there are also many others who do not see it no matter how it is explained. Though disappointing, we must realize that this is the case. We may cite the following explanations: Many (possibly most) people are primarily interested in their own well-being and not that of society, and a social philosophy sails over their heads, even when it is shown

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to be in their own interest. Also, people do not always do what is reasonable but persist, by inertia, in their old ways; they also tend to follow their leaders like sheep.

Our adepts have been looking for a long time, and are still looking, for the magic formula, the "open Sesame" that will render our ideas clear and acceptable to all - and we feel somehow that we are at fault for not having found such a formula. A lot of this is "post hoc" reasoning. Since a certain approach or statement didn't do the job, it must have been the wrong formula - so the search goes on for the "mot juste" that will work the miracle.

It may be the wrong search. Better to find those people to whom our philosophy makes sense and are willing to join in an effort to further it. We could certainly use more workers in our cause!

Geiger thought that we should aim at leaders and thinkers and they will influence their followers. This is sound, but the trouble is we don't know who or where are the leaders and thinkers who may turn our way. It is like saying all you have to do is buy stocks when they are low and sell when they are high. So we tend to go after those who are already high up - a famous professor, a leader after he is elected to high office, etc., after their ideas and program have already been formed. Better to get people while they are still searching and struggling, young people aspiring to leadership and still open-minded. Though we can't win them all - "many are called but few chosen" - support often comes from unexpected sources.

I sympathize with the impatience over our slow progress; I have felt it myself. But while we are lamenting this, let's not forget what we do have. Despite our seeming weakness, the fact remains that the Georgist movement has survived after a century. How many movements have lasted that long? And I believe our influence may be more pervasive than we suspect.

We are in a long-range work. It is a revolution in thinking to separate land from labor products, to recognize that the earth is our common heritage and that the producer is entitled to his product. It is basically a great idea that must be put over. And so we must never give up our educational effort no matter what other programs we may devise.

One thing I think we ought to do is study the efforts made in our movement over the years, to see where they have succeeded and where they have failed. We ought to follow the dictum, "Prove all things, hold fast that which is good." I have seen good things let go that were accomplishing results, because they did not seem to be going fast enough. This is usually followed by floundering and haphazard efforts that lead nowhere. In the past century, almost anything you can imagine has been tried in the Georgist movement, and more besides. There is plenty to study in the history of our movement.

In surveying some of these efforts, I have noticed that it doesn't work very well to lunge at too much with all our force. Better to build up some influence and try to enlarge it. It may be disappointing not to get everything, tempting us to give up. But that's life - and we'll get further working with the way life is than against it.

We often disagree with one another, and I think we'd better find some way of getting reconciled to that. We may have the idea that we've developed an approach that would make great headway if only our recalcitrant colleagues would see the light. But let's keep in mind that if we win over great numbers of people, they too will be a diverse lot with many different opinions - surely

more varied than now. So we might as well learn how to work together before expanding, finding our common denominator despite disagreements.

I think our movement will also have to learn the art of management. For instance, since its early days, whenever there have been large funds, they have been managed haphazardly and arbitrarily (to say nothing of selfish motives). A more rational and democratic approach ought to be worked out. And as against the "miracle" type of thinking, I think we need to realize that no matter how noble may be our aims, we are subject to the ways of the world and cannot be exempt from the rules of the game, from the principles of good business.

The Georgist philosophy covers a great deal. When the Great Depression struck, the Georgist movement was unprepared to call attention to the Georgist explanation of depressions, because virtually all efforts were keyed to municipal tax reform. Well and good, but larger questions should not be neglected. In our concept of "land", natural resources are included and we need to be ready when such things as the oil crisis occur. We deal with the ocean, too, with public lands, with air waves and outer space - all of which are increasing in importance. We deal with free world trade, too. While we are justified in working for municipal tax reform, let us not forget that these big questions relate to our philosophy. When they arise, some communication to the world is in order.

It's also well to bear in mind that we don't have all the answers. Many matters bear on the George philosophy and we should speak of them. But we haven't got all the details worked out. Some years ago I worked on a manual on "The Application of Land Value Taxation," and we worked out answers to a number of questions. But we can't solve everything a priori. We'll have to learn as we go along; we do not know in advance every hitch that may develop. This is especially true as we get close to the serious consideration of land value taxation.

I have been involved mostly in the educational aspect of the movement's work. But I respect the efforts to get land value taxation adopted and am impressed with the work going forward on this front.

Let's not forget that in addition to widespread ignorance, we have enemies. Let us be aware that the beneficiaries of privilege do not take inroads on their privilege lying down. The chances are that we will not see the enemy, he will work behind the scenes pulling strings.

And let's not forget that we do have a philosophy. It is worth exploring the intellectual, philosophical and cultural aspects of the George philosophy. Certainly Marxism has a pervasive influence, not only in the political world but also in the intellectual world. Marxism is a fallacious philosophy, yet many intellectuals are intrigued by it, they have many-sided discussions about it and there are numerous journals in this field. Why intellectuals seem more attracted to Marxism than to Georgism is an interesting question. Georgism is a sounder philosophy, yet much of it lies unexplored. The Marxists have ransacked history with their interpretations, and there should be a history of the world written with a Georgist analysis, making use of the land question and the law of human progress. We are not playing hookey when we delve into these matters.

A number of Georgists have also developed a sort of guilt complex about our gatherings, such as this Conference. "All we do is talk to ourselves," is the complaint. Well, if that's all we did, I'd agree we should feel guilty. But surely we should be doing something between conferences and then we are perfectly justified in getting together, reporting what we have done, listening to others, exchanging views, meeting one another and "recharging our batteries"

for the period ahead. That's enough; we need not hanker for every Conference to be a miracle that will make us surge to tremendous breakthroughs. After all, virtually all other groups get together - economists, politicians, followers of various schools of thought, etc.

It is possible to be idealistic and realistic at the same time. We can cherish and work toward our long-range goal and still accept the world as it is and work for short-range goals. Often unexpected opportunities present themselves. We may frequently fail, but that should not be the end of everything. By understanding we have a long-range goal, we can pick ourselves up and carry on.

We have a great resource at our command that we should hold onto - and that is Henry George. Though some think we should let go of this identification, I think that would be a mistake. We may be sensitive about being considered fanatics or cranks or obsolete - but most of this springs from ignorance. A reasonable explanation to persons interested enough to listen sets this straight. George's works contain an amazing amount of stuff. Go back to re-reading some of it to see what I mean. Also, George is widely known and is accounted one of the world's great thinkers. We should keep developing modern interpretations of the ideas and their application to current conditions, but we should never let go of the original works; they are still our best resource.

A lot of what I say calls for more adepts than we have now. That is where I came in, so to speak. I come back to urging a continuing educational work to the end that more workers in our cause will be developed.

In spite of everything, I am not discouraged. I think the Georgist philosophy and movement have a great future.