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Henry George, Jane Jacobs, and Free Trade

By DAVID BOYLE*

ABSTRACT. Henry George and Jane Jacobs were both journalists and made a contribution to economics based on their commitment to the original version of free trade, as understood by 19th-century liberals, rather than the late 20th-century version. The distinctive concept of free trade, as originally understood, was as an instrument for small-scale producers to break up entrenched monopolies and serve the interests of the ordinary citizen. That was how Cobden used it in the debates over the Corn Laws in the 1840s, and how Ruskin, Gesell, Chesterton, and other critics conceived of economic liberation. In debates over free trade in recent decades, that term has come to mean a defense of power and privilege, the exact opposite of the intent of 19th-century liberals. George and Jacobs sought to restore the original meaning by developing theories of development and distribution that would enable the market system to benefit everyone.

The famous Gold Rush in California in the 1850s was a bitterly disappointing and brutalizing experience for many of those taking part. But for a few, it changed their thinking about the meaning of money and wealth—why some had it and some did not. It also produced a number of cautionary tales. One of the prospectors, carrying his gold home with him on a ship that foundered in the Pacific, became the subject of one of the tales told by the great English critic John Ruskin a few years later.

He described how the passenger, who was carrying 200 pounds of gold with him, was loathe to abandon his hard-won wealth when the ship disappeared beneath the waves. He therefore strapped as much as he could to himself, and jumped over the side. Once in the sea, the gold dragged him down to the bottom.

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"Now, as he was sinking," asked Ruskin rhetorically, "had he the gold, or had the gold him?"

For Ruskin, this was more than a morality tale; it was an economic parable. He put it at the heart of his controversial 1860 essay series on economics in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, commissioned by the editor, novelist William Makepeace Thackeray. In this way, Ruskin launched his influential attack on economists who believed that scarcity was the basic existence of humanity. No, says Ruskin ([1862] 2004: 85) to Malthus and Ricardo:

> The real science of political economy, which has yet to be distinguished from the bastard science, as medicine from witchcraft, and astronomy from astrology is that which teaches nations to desire and labour for the things that lead to life: and which teaches them to scorn and destroy the things that lead to destruction.

One of those who must have known the story, because he headed out west in search of gold himself, was the economic maverick Henry George, author of the biggest selling American book up until that time, *Progress and Poverty* (1879), and the great theorist of land taxation. George was too late to be a Miner Forty-Niner. He was not able to head for California to go gold-prospecting until 1858, at the age of 19. Instead, he went to work for the local newspaper in San Francisco.

Shortly after his marriage there, he nearly went to British Columbia in search of gold, but became instead a printer for the *San Francisco Times*. As a journalist, he was able to travel widely and write editorials, including his pioneering article, "What the Railroads Will Bring Us" (George 1868), which first looked at the crucial question that is at the heart of this essay: How is it that more money, and more investment, can bring poverty in its wake? That was the issue that eventually led to his land tax ideas, just as it was the issue that led Ruskin—also during the 1860s—to write his pioneering book *Unto This Last*, which used and developed the *Pall Mall Gazette* articles.

For Ruskin, it required a new economic language. For poverty and environmental destruction brought by the wrong kind of wealth and investment, he coined the term "illth."

Unto This Last practically destroyed Ruskin's reputation as the art critic of the age. It was one thing to promote "Modern Painters," the title

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of the work that made him famous; it was considered something else entirely to strike at the fundamental economics of the age. And neither then nor now has conventional economics managed to understand there is such a thing as "illth" as well as "wealth."

By 1867, half a world away from Ruskin, in London, Henry George had become editor and was observing the rapidly growing state of California developing around him, and was asking parallel questions. The fact that land became the great issue of the next three decades was partly because of George, and not really to do with Ruskin, but it emerged from a parallel train of thought. George came to believe that land was more fundamental to the economy than either labor or capital, and it was land speculation—the great phenomenon of the United States after the Civil War—that was causing poverty.

He reached this conclusion during a ride he took over San Francisco Bay in 1871. This is how he described it:

> I asked a passing teamster, for want of something better to say, what land was worth there. He pointed to some cows grazing so far off that they looked like mice, and said, "I don't know exactly, but there is a man over there who will sell some land for a thousand dollars an acre." Like a flash it came over me that there was the reason of advancing poverty with advancing wealth. With the growth of population, land grows in value, and the men who work it must pay more for the privilege. (Nock 1933)

Here was the same paradox that Ruskin had articulated, and the same paradox also that had killed the sinking prospector with the gold. The more valuable the land, the more poverty there seemed to be. This was illth at work. The answer, he believed, was to prevent land speculation so that the money was used more effectively, and to do so with a tax on the unimproved value of the land itself.

Thanks to *Progress and Poverty*, land became the great radical issue of the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. It became the core issue of radical Liberalism on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United Kingdom, the ruling Liberal Party launched a land campaign that was cut short by World War I. It produced a series of offshoots like the Distributists, again on both sides of the Atlantic, and the advocates of "allotments" in the United Kingdom, which could provide basic access to land.

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But the fundamental issue of too much money being used in the wrong way has been the source of some of the most creative of the economic mavericks—I use the term in its most positive sense—of the early 20th century, from Silvio Gesell (the inventor of negative interest currencies) to G. K. Chesterton (the Distributist pioneer) (Chesterton 1926).

Both are of interest now also because of their demand for an economics of diversity, the argument that conventional economics leads without intervention to monopoly and uniformity and an unbalanced economy that benefits the wealthy, and, according to the Distributists, to tyranny. George, Gesell, and Chesterton all distinguished between wealth that emerged from restricting access to natural resources, or from the manipulation of money, and wealth that emerged from productive endeavor. The former tended to squeeze investment out of the latter.

These are arguments that are being articulated again as the early 21st-century economy looks increasingly like that late 19th-century one. In recent years, these might have been arguments for restricting the free movement of trade, but George—and the others too—saw it differently. Henry George was a fervent free trader.

He was a vigorous opponent of tariffs, which divided him from other parts of the labor movement in the 1880s. This particular argument was one of the main reasons that his United Labour Coalition unraveled and prevented him from being elected when he stood for election at the time.

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But there are also parallels with the other figure who is the subject of this article. Jane Jacobs was also an economic pioneer who began as a journalist, in Jacobs's case an architectural journalist who began writing about urban planning for the magazine *Architectural Forum* in the 1950s. Her revelation was covering the redevelopment of Philadelphia by Edmund Bacon, and finding that African Americans were not being treated with care—nor were other poor people who were affected—and that community life was effectively ended.

Her book, the parallel to *Progress and Poverty*, was *The Death and Life of the Great American Cities*, a devastating critique of conventional

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urban redevelopment (Jacobs 1961). The case for a small-scale, human style of redevelopment, going with the grain of urban history and the way people actually live, led to her playing a leading role in campaigns by a group of New York women in Greenwich Village against the inner urban motorway plans of Robert Moses.

It also led to the adoption of her ideas by supporters of the Austrian School of free market economics, and of her more ambitious works on the history of cities (Jacobs 1985). She argued that cities have always developed economically, not by specializing, but precisely the reverse—by replacing imports with homegrown versions. Work on regional specialization in the U.S.A. also suggests that it has been in decline since the end of World War II (Kim 1998; Krugman 2011). If Jacobs was right, then that must have implications for our understanding of regeneration now. It suggests that what holds cities back is not so much marketing skills; it is technical ones. What gets in the way is not so much the failure to attract outside investment, it is the failure to use what skills they already possess. What gets in the way is not lack of external investment, it is lack of internal investment—and the monopoly power that prevents it.

There are many differences between George and Jacobs, but there are some similarities too. They were both journalists who learned their craft and ideas by articulating peculiarities in the current theories they saw around them. Both led protests by radicals and were hailed by the liberal left (though not always the socialist left). Both were also hailed more recently by the free market right. Jane Jacobs has been hailed by the advocates of the Austrian School of economics for her "innate grasp of the power of voluntary exchange and spontaneous order" (Callahan and Ikeda 2003). Supporters from the right argue that, as such, heavy-handed central planning fails to take account of the subtleties of the knowledge possessed only by the individuals on the scene (for which she coined the term "locality knowledge"). Jacobs (1969: 161) also implies the critical importance of places being self-aware, and the need for feedback loops—which is why she argues that currencies naturally suit city regions rather than nations.

On the face of it, neither George nor Jacobs was arguing for controlled or planned economies. In fact, planning was something of an anathema to Jacobs. But they were looking afresh at how normal

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market economics might work in a more humane way—Henry George by looking at how a land tax would divert investment back where it belongs, in the productive economy; Jane Jacobs by looking at the way that currencies linked to the economies of cities could provide a self-regulating mechanism that kept their economies in balance with each other. Both were interested in solving some of the problems of monopoly or uniformity.

Both, in short, were concerned not with replacing free market economics, but with organizing the basic operating system of economics so that it worked more effectively.

Because of this, both have something particular they can offer the debate at the beginning of the 21st century, by helping us re-cast free market economics as a way of looking afresh at it. Although *laissez faire* has been conventionally understood as a license to ride roughshod over the poorest, that need not be the case. The free market used to be understood as the antidote to slavery. To find the source of that idea, we need to go back in time to the 1860s, when slavery was disappearing, East and West.

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It is one of the great ironies of history that, East and West, the liberation of the agricultural slaves and serfs—the people who carried out most of the work in the fields in Russia, eastern Europe, and the southern United States—happened almost simultaneously.

The slaves were freed by the Emancipation Declaration of Abraham Lincoln in 1863, though it required another two years to win the Civil War, amend the U.S. constitution and finish the job. But the Russian serfs were freed from bondage to the land at almost the very same time. This declaration was in March 1861, to cheers outside the royal palace in St. Petersburg, but it also was going to take two years. It finally came to fruition on February 19, 1863, just five weeks after Lincoln's declaration.

Both liberations were great victories for the forces of liberalism, but also great disappointments for agrarian radicals, because in both cases the slaves and the serfs were catapulted from bondage into poverty.

In the U.S.A., slavery was replaced by debt bondage. In Russia and eastern Europe, the land that had been tilled by the serfs, and to which they had been added as human assets, was valued at one-third more

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than market value, and this the serfs had to pay their former owners over a period of 49 years (History of Russia 2011). It provided them with a fat pension, and, for many serfs, even the details of the terms were not agreed for decades. Just as the former slaves found in the U.S.A., many of the serfs were thrown on the mercies of the money lenders. In both countries there was a huge shift from the land to the industrial cities.

One of those who watched, first horrified, and then enraged, at the treatment of the serfs, was a Russian aristocrat called Prince Peter Kropotkin. He was to play a major role in the development of the ideas of agrarian radicalism in other countries. Kropotkin influenced his great contemporary, Mohandas Gandhi, who took similar ideas across India (though Gandhi also got it from Ruskin's *Unto This Last*). In the Russian Revolution and the struggle for Indian independence, Kropotkin and Gandhi both found themselves nation-builders.

Although Kropotkin has gone down in history as a socialist, a rival of Karl Marx, he was also an advocate of small-scale mutual enterprises, as set out in his classic *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (Kropotkin 1904).

The basic problem with the market, as it stood, was articulated by those anti-slavery campaigners who predicted the downside of liberation, and who watched it unravel with horror. They realized that simple liberation was not enough, and that the free market, if it was organized badly, could entrench slavery, and not just for the slaves. The word "slavery" was used by Henry George in particular to describe the monopolistic ownership of the land (George [1879] 1979: 352).

This also explains a little why George became an ardent free trader. In the 19th century, free trade still carried its old anti-slavery message. For liberals committed to free trade on both sides of the Atlantic, the element of freedom in it was always about shifting intractable power relationships. It was originally about the small taking on the big, and, most of all, it has always been about the lower levels having the freedom to challenge from below. That was how the philosopher of the Austrian School saw it; Karl Popper said that only an "open society," that allowed this kind of challenge could "set free the critical powers of man" (Popper 1984: Vol. 1: 1). Conventional wisdom has to be challengeable, by ideas or entrepreneurs, which is why open societies tend to be more adaptable than closed ones.

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This explains why the political force behind "free trade" was originally liberalism. That makes sense because free trade, as it was originally understood, was the right of the weak to challenge the strong.

"I see in the Free-Trade principle that which shall act on the moral world as the principle of gravitation in the universe—drawing men together, thrusting aside the antagonism of race, and creed, and language, and uniting us in the bonds of eternal peace," said the English free trade pioneer Richard Cobden ([1870] 1908: 184), explaining the original doctrine of free trade in Manchester, as part of his campaign against the Corn Laws:

> I believe that the effect will be to change the face of the world, so as to introduce a system of government entirely distinct from that which now prevails. I believe that the desire and the motive for large and mighty empires; for gigantic armies and great navies ... will die away; I believe that such things will cease to be necessary, or to be used when man becomes one family, and freely exchanges the fruits of his labour with his brother man. I believe that ... the speculative philosopher of a thousand years hence will date the greatest revolution that ever happened in the world's history from the triumph of the principle which we have met here to advocate.

As in the U.S.A., the origins of free trade campaign in the United Kingdom lay in the successful anti-slavery movement. Having abolished slavery in the British Empire, people like Harriet Martineau, John Bright, and Richard Cobden went on to think about the way that economics can also enslave. Bright and Cobden did as much as anyone else to gather the forces of free trade into one party—the Liberal Party—dedicated to reform. Free trade was not just the antidote to slavery, they said, it was also the antidote to war.

The right of free people to trade equally with each other was also the antidote to monopoly, which was the way that the wealthy kept people poor—and monopoly, as Cobden said, "is slavery in another form" (Cobden [1870] 1908: 89).

Cobden died in 1865, so he hardly lived to see emancipation in action. But he believed there were such things as economic manacles. If you just set slaves free, you could bind them just as firmly by forcing them into debt and controlling where they could buy what they

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needed—just as the Corn Laws forced the English poor to buy bread at inflated prices.

So the original approach to free trade is not simple license to do whatever you want if you are rich and powerful enough. The original rationale was thoroughly cognizant of Adam Smith's original warning that collusion between entrenched businesses can end in "a conspiracy against the public." This is the same ambiguity about business that we saw earlier. On the one hand, the entrenched provider is capable of locking people into their business by market power. On the other hand, if free trade is understood as it should be, a business can be the means of liberation—if it represents the new approach, the alternative provider, or the imaginative, liberating shift.

The history of the idea of free trade is not well understood. The shift in the way that the Chicago School understood it in the 1930s, from the liberal Henry Simons to his arch-conservative protégé Milton Friedman, meant that the whole idea of "free trade" as a liberating force became blurred. That confusion lies behind the muddle that politicians find in dealing with business, partly hoping to borrow some of their sheer ability to make things happen, partly inveigling them into an alien agenda of processes and impossible objectives, partly praising, partly controlling. It is hard to navigate. It is impossible sometimes to see clearly.

One of the side effects of the confusion about free trade is that, all too often, the best efforts of governments around the world have simply compounded the basic problem that Cobden and Bright identified and called "monopoly." It is the entrenched power, not so much of the market leaders, but of old ideas and old ways of doing things. Specifically, it is the way that the structures that are supposed to open up markets to challengers and entrepreneurs so often keep them shut in practice.

The whole edifice of preferred suppliers—at local government level, or in relation to European procurement rules at the international level—is too often used to frustrate new entrants and challenging new ideas. It is as if Cobden and Bright's great free trade campaign—which led to the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 in the United Kingdom—has been subtly reinterpreted in such a way that they insulate the companies that are the least flexible and most in need of change.

The result is that the global economy has become infected by monopoly. The top 30 food retailing corporations account for one-third

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of global grocery sales in the world. One transnational corporation controls 80 percent of Peru's milk production. Five companies control 90 percent of the world grain trade. Six control three-quarters of the global pesticides market. The result is higher costs, poorer service, and a creeping slavery that gives us no choice where we shop. What was once a critique of monopoly—free market economics—has become a justification for it.

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I am arguing here that both Henry George and Jane Jacobs and their campaigns were rooted in the original understanding of free trade, determined to root out their rather different interpretations of uniformity, understanding that monopoly is the enemy of diversity.

Jane Jacobs's work on the development of cities towards diversity, rather than, as conventional economics specified, away from it, has been confirmed most recently by the New Economic Geography of Paul Krugman (2011). The underlying problem is that the free market requires re-framing to prevent the production of a *rentier* class. That is what Jacobs and George set out to accomplish. That goal has motivated economic geographers, micro-economists, and development economists, but may not have yet filtered through to mainstream economic policy on either side of the Atlantic.

What makes these issues directly relevant to today is that John Maynard Keynes ([1936] 1964: Ch. 24) predicted the "euthanasia of the rentier" two generations ago. But the advent of what Citibank called "plutonomy" has brought the whole phenomenon back in a seriously worrying way, as the work of Thomas Piketty and others has shown (Boyle 2014: 25).

Part of the problem that both George and Jacobs tried to address is that, in conventional economic regeneration, the poorer places are deemed to have no assets of their own. Their savings are taken by national institutions and invested elsewhere. The money flowing through their local economy leaks out to external businesses, which have a monopolistic stranglehold over the area. When their public authorities contract outside businesses, they often bring in their own workforce. The land is owned externally and the rents are paid externally. The result is a kind of vicious circle.

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Henry George's solution was to tax the land values, providing every area with some local assets. Jane Jacobs's solution was to replace the imports using local production, and this has a peculiar effect on mainstream economists. Who could deal with every village making their own smartphones, after all? The point is whether, to mop up spare capacity in some places, there may be scope for *more* local production, especially as fuel prices look set to raise the cost of transportation. If that can be done without putting up trade barriers, without raising costs or undermining quality—so that local producers can compete on more equal terms—then that fulfills Jane Jacobs's vision: diversity and choice.

The underlying logic is that even impoverished cities have hidden, wasted resources that can only be accessed locally.

The most powerful elements of these arguments draw from free market ideas, but with one difference. It is increasingly clear that there is a problem with the way mainstream economic development supports new businesses, even successful ones, if they are smaller. National banking infrastructure finds this demonstrably difficult, especially in the United Kingdom, where outstanding credit to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) has only just begun to recover since the disasters of 2008.

The precise data in the United Kingdom about the contribution made by smaller businesses is not as well researched as it is in the U.S.A., but we have to assume there are parallels. Glaeser and Kerr (2010), writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, showed in a graph that small firms are the source of employment growth:

> Our research shows that regional economic growth is highly correlated with the presence of many small, entrepreneurial employers—not a few big ones.

The authors argued that the arrival of a big company in a local or regional economy might have little comparative effect on employment, "even when they are doing well." Fleming and Goetz (2011), writing in *Economic Development Quarterly*, came to the same conclusion:

> Economic growth models that control for other relevant factors reveal a positive relationship between density of locally owned firms and per capita income growth, but only for small (10–99 employees) firms,

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whereas the density of large (more than 500 workers) firms not owned locally has a negative effect.

The implication is not just that SMEs are vital for local economies, especially when they are owned and managed nearby, but also that they contribute disproportionately to the national economy. This is not the simplistic version of free market economics that suggests that, if there is an investment opportunity, someone will always make the requisite investment.

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To take this argument too far would be to stray into new territory. This article was designed simply to look at two pioneers, both of whom were rooted in the need for economic diversity and for whom it was important that the resources of the economy should be allocated, as far as possible, in ways that can create human diversity.

Both Henry George and Jane Jacobs wrestled with these issues, and did so from the point of view of journalists who understood an earlier version of free market economics than the current one, which has become an apologia for monopoly rather than what it was originally intended to be—a critique of it.

What both try to achieve is not to end the basic freedom to do business, but to change the operating system of the free market—the underlying rules—so that it works more effectively.

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