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Author(s): Christopher K. Ryan and Helen B. Ryan

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REMEMBRANCE AND APPRECIATION

George Raymond Geiger (1903–1998):

A Rich Life

By CHRISTOPHER K. RYAN *and* HELEN B. RYAN*

ABSTRACT. George R. Geiger, professor of Philosophy at Antioch College for fifty years, died March 19, 1998. He was a founding member of the editorial council of the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* (1941–1998) and of the *Antioch Review* (1941–1998). He was also an advisor to and consulting editor of the *Humanist* (1955–59). He was the son of the founder of the Henry George School of Social Science of New York City and John Dewey's last doctoral student at Columbia University. Early on in his career he took up his father's cause, that of land value taxation; later he took up a defense of the contributions of his mentor, Dewey, and became in his own words a "journalist of philosophy."

I

Oscar Geiger

DR. GEIGER WAS BORN MAY 8, 1903, to Oscar H. and Nina C. Daly Geiger. He was their only child. Oscar's father, a Viennese tailor, was related to Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), an outstanding scholar of Judaism and the leading proponent of Reform Judaism in Germany. Oscar was an unconventional person. He was a voracious reader who studied for the rabbinate and was ordained at age nineteen. Robert Clancy has preserved his history in *A Seed Was Sown: The Life, Philosophy and Writings of Oscar Geiger* (1952). The elder Geiger held the position of principal of a Jewish orphanage but abandoned it after a year, apparently at the request of his parents, in order to aid them financially. He abandoned his faith as well, although he sustained a

* Christopher K. Ryan, PhD, and Helen B. Ryan, MLS, 401 Garden Street, Iowa City, IA 52245 [Ryanchri@Avalon.net] are grateful to the friends, students, and colleagues of Professor Geiger for their assistance, and especially to Joan L. King.

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belief in the importance of religious studies. He married a Roman Catholic, but George was raised with no church or synagogue affiliation.

Clancy relates Oscar Geiger's conversion to Georgism. In 1895, a friend of the family had recommended that Oscar read *Progress and Poverty*. He did so in one night and woke the friend early the next morning with the query, "What are we going to do about it?" Geiger came to know George for a year or so until George's death in 1897. He became a single-tax activist and remained so for the rest of his life. One activity in which he excelled was street-corner crusading. He was joined in this soapbox oration and debate by a young Harry Golden (Goldhurst). Geiger came to meet Golden through his profession as a furrier, at which he was a success. Geiger invited him to join the "Round Table Literary Club," a study group started by George Geiger and his childhood friends and overseen by his father. All ten in the group were to become prominent citizens. They studied a wide range of subjects. For example, the complete works of Shakespeare, the Bible, and Henry George's writings were assigned and examinations had to be passed. All of the group have expressed appreciation for Oscar Geiger and his contribution to their education.

By 1932, Oscar decided to use his limited savings to establish what he believed to be a stable and productive manner of propagating the message of Henry George—a school dedicated to teaching George's writings. With very little additional financial support he organized, taught, and ran the Henry George School of Social Science.

II

George Geiger: Columbia to Antioch

HARRY GOLDEN COMMENTED ON HIS LIFELONG FRIEND'S proficiency in winning school medals. George Geiger won scholarly competitions to finance his education at Columbia, where he earned four degrees in journalism and philosophy. His father had encouraged him to study journalism with the hope that he would become an editor of a newspaper or a magazine; however, George found he had little taste for journalism: one summer he found himself working for the *New York Times* with two fledgling reporters, A. J. Liebling and Ted Bernstein. Geiger compared his efforts with those of these to-be-legendary journalists and went back to complete his doctorate in philosophy. At Columbia he had faced another competitive challenge

which he could not win; although he was a notable athlete, his position in baseball—that of first base—was the property of his classmate, Lou Gehrig. Several years later, Gehrig invited him to a game in St. Louis, where Geiger was privileged to eat breakfast with the team and Babe Ruth dubbed him “the professor.”

As Geiger commenced work on his dissertation under the supervision of John Dewey. Sidney Hook informed him that as a new student, his responsibility would be to sit close to Dewey during his seminars in order to prevent the chain-smoking Dewey from burning his bushy mustache. Incredulous at first, Geiger found that it was, indeed, a necessary task. Oscar Geiger wished that his son would write his dissertation on the philosophy of Henry George (for whom he was named—his mother balked at Oscar’s desire to name him Henry George Geiger). George was skeptical about this possibility, as a typical dissertation of the day involved translations of medieval texts. As Clancy relates, Dewey agreed not only to support the thesis, but also to provide a preface should the thesis be published. (Biographers of Dewey generally neglect his connections to Georgists and his general acceptance of the single-tax idea, as well as his high estimation of George’s status as a social philosopher.) For three years Geiger labored on his topic only to find that the sole copy of his work of some 350 pages had been lost by his eminent professor! Geiger eventually found his thesis wedged behind a desk in Dewey’s home. Dewey’s chagrin, Geiger has speculated, may have helped him in his long search for permanent employment during the difficult years of the Great Depression. He taught philosophy and a number of other subjects at Bradley Polytechnic Institute and the Universities of North Dakota, Illinois, and Missouri before arriving at Antioch College in 1937, again at the instigation of Dewey. Geiger found the atmosphere at Antioch informal and congenial; moreover, as his colleagues have indicated, he found intellectual stimulation and discourse there as well.

III

A Georgist Advocacy

IN RESPONSE TO FACULTY QUESTIONNAIRES in the 1950s and 60s, Geiger indicated that his fields of interest were value theory, American philosophy (especially John Dewey), twentieth-century philosophy (especially Eng-

lish), history and ethics, history of political theory, philosophical history, and the theory of liberalism. One is struck not only by the breadth of his interests but by a glaring omission, that of Henry George, his philosophy and his "remedy." Geiger's first two books, his published dissertation *The Philosophy of Henry George* (1933) and *The Theory of The Land Question* (1936), as well as several of his early articles, reflected his father's chosen cause. Moreover he was a founding member of the editorial council of the *Freeman* in 1937 and of the *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* in 1941. Will Lissner, who with the aid of Vi Peterson founded the latter journal, indicated that naming Geiger to the council was primarily to win it legitimacy among academics. Although there was no expectation of participation by him, he contributed an article to the first volume and to subsequent volumes. At some point Geiger is reported to have lost interest in Henry George; his only comment was, "That's another long story."

Despite this, George Geiger's contributions to the cause of land-value taxation were and are of great significance. *The Philosophy of Henry George* represented a sizable scholarly advance in the study of George. It followed the biography by Henry George, Jr. (1900) and preceded that of Charles Albro Barker (1955), which Geiger described in a review as the definitive study. Geiger faced the dilemma of explaining George's ethical basis in "natural rights." That he did so to Dewey's satisfaction is implied in Dewey's foreword, as was noted in a review by Harry Gunnison Brown. Dewey stated: "The importance of a knowledge of this underlying philosophy is urged in spite of the fact that the present writer does not believe in the conceptions of nature and natural rights which at first sight seem to be fundamental in the social philosophy of Henry George. For, as I see the matter, these conceptions are symbols, expressed in the temporary vocabulary of a certain stage of human history of a truth which can be stated in another language without serious injury to the general philosophy implied" (pp. xi-xii). Geiger's emphasis on the role that ethics play, or should be allowed to play, in social and economic questions foreshadows much of his later work.

Professor Geiger is spoken of as being somewhat shy. Despite this, he wrote a letter in 1933 to Albert Einstein with the intent of correcting a portion of Einstein's stated view of land-value taxation. Einstein had responded to a request to state his opinion of Henry George. He reported he had read *Progress and Poverty* with "extraordinary interest" (p. 59).

Einstein disagreed with George's theory of interest; Geiger replied that many followers of George did as well. Geiger's key point was that Einstein had not understood George's usage of "common property," misinterpreting it to be common ownership of land. Geiger pointed to several passages from Henry George's books to clarify the idea that it would be economic rent or land value that would become "common property." Einstein is not known to have replied.

Geiger had dedicated his first book to his father. His second, *The Theory of the Land Question*, he dedicated to the memory of his father, who had died in 1934. The subject of this book leads him practically into the fearsome area of capital theory in economics. Three of his chapters were titled Land Value, Land and Capital, and Socialization of Land Through Taxation. He had, however, a guide in the person of Harry Gunnison Brown of the University of Missouri. Brown, a veteran in these areas, was believed by Geiger to be the leading academic economist in questions of land-value taxation. Brown offered advice on the manuscript and was quoted *in extenso* in the text. Yet the book was Geiger's own. His research was extensive and his understanding of the economic concepts he dealt with was remarkable for someone with little training in the field. (Though perhaps not for the son of Oscar Geiger.) The book became an outstanding point of reference for those who would consider land-value taxation.

In the epilogue to his book, Geiger openly displayed his irritation with what he called "leaders of radical and liberal opinion," and in parentheses suggested as candidates R. G. Tugwell and the editors of the *Nation* and the *New Republic*. Geiger's irritation stemmed from their general indifference to the land question and specifically to "their sly contempt and patronizing dismissal" (p. 220) of any reference to the single tax or Henry George. In 1941 Geiger's irritation turned to anger in a free-ranging article in the *Antioch Review*, titled "The Forgotten Man: Henry George." (Stuart Bruchey would honor this essay in 1970 with one of his own: "The Twice 'Forgotten' Man: Henry George.") Geiger's ire was directed again at the "radical liberals" of the time and more so at a version of Georgism that had recently emerged under the leadership of Albert Jay Nock. Nock's position, which Geiger described as "right-wing" Georgism and anarchism of a kind, clearly distressed Geiger. Although he pointed out that it was impossible to predict what George's views would be contemporaneously, he argued that the form of government that would come out of Henry George's pro-

gramme would be more “socialist” than “laissez-faire” (p. 306). In his last published comments on George, Geiger found novel Barker’s depiction of George as simultaneously a thoroughgoing capitalist, a radical but typical opponent of monopoly, a radical but unusual advocate of land reform, and a conservative with respect to religious and political institutions. This admixture, Barker found, was consistent with a moderate intellectual stance for George wherein the “mixed economy” would find favor (pp. 509–10).

One might speculate that this libertarian/liberal split among followers of Henry George may have contributed to Geiger’s “loss of interest,” along with the obvious general lack of interest, not to mention the scarcity of supporters in academia. He may well have also reflected on the hardships, of which he knew intimately, of obsessively promoting a cause, and simply chose, as his father before him had done, a different future. However, despite Geiger’s virtual silence for decades on Henry George, his was not an apostasy of Georgism but a resignation from its advocacy. Dr. Paula Treichler, a devoted student of Geiger, relates his “outrage” upon discovering that she was largely ignorant of the teachings of Henry George: “Your Antioch degree should probably be revoked, your Ph.D. too, and possibly even your U.S. citizenship” (p. 2). Dr. Treichler further relates that she scurried to fill this gap in her otherwise excellent liberal arts education.

IV

In Defense of Dewey

GEIGER DEDICATED HIS *Toward An Objective Ethics* (1938) and *Philosophy and the Social Order* (1947) to John Dewey. The second book was intended to be an undergraduate textbook. It was thoroughly Deweyan but it emphasized Geiger’s concerns with values and methodology in the social sciences. “There is only one way for the social scientist to be objective—objective, that is, in the artificial sense of being morally indifferent. It is to acknowledge uncritically and almost unconsciously the status quo. He cannot abolish values from his field even if he wants to, because values are the long-time decision of the human animal; but what he can do is to make the implicit and unrecognized assumption that the institutions and practices with which he deals are to be accepted as they are. . . . The danger lies in the deception that although a man may say or indeed think he is having no traffic with moral values, he is instead conserving, even if unknowingly,

the existing system of values” (pp. 224–5). In a chapter titled “Economics and a Democratic Society,” Geiger demonstrated a broad familiarity with contemporary economic literature and issues—greater than that of his mentor, Dewey. While not ignoring the arguments of L. von Mises, Hayek, and Knight he sided with Keynes, Hansen, and Beveridge in opining that some degree of “planning” was necessary to obtain the goal which he termed (economic) “security.” In this he seemed most influenced by Clarence Ayres’ *The Divine Right of Capital* (1944) and, lingering in the background of Geiger’s mind was the figure of Henry George.

In 1958, for the occasion of the centennial of John Dewey’s birth, Oxford University Press asked Geiger to write about Dewey. He responded with *John Dewey in Perspective* (1958, 1964). Dewey’s place in philosophic thought had fallen into a decline from which it would not recover for over two decades. Geiger acknowledged this in his preface and announced his intentions: “In the present work the misconceptions, the stereotypes, the criticisms will be examined in the light of Dewey’s own writings. And to correct the sometimes narrow and occasionally vulgar interpretation of his philosophy there will be deliberate emphasis on the consummatory and esthetic aspects of Dewey’s philosophy of experience” (p. v). Geiger wrote with great confidence that Dewey’s insights were not to be long lost: “We may say instead that when men are finally ready to apply intelligent inquiry to the solving of their problems—and if they never are, nothing more need be said—the thought of John Dewey will be there” (p. 223). Geiger’s confidence was not unfounded. Dewey’s contemporary recovery of stature in the discipline is explained by one Dewey scholar, James Campbell in his *Understanding John Dewey*: “A third, and perhaps the most important, factor in the contemporary reconsideration of Dewey is the growing dissatisfaction with much contemporary philosophizing, with thinking that neither grows out of the problems and issues of our broader society nor is able to offer any assistance to that society as it attempts to address its difficulties. Creating a philosophy that was connected to society in both of these ways was a major concern for Dewey” (p. ix).

Geiger, truly as a journalist of philosophy, chronicled the vicissitudes of his discipline in a long series of articles and book reviews in several journals, principally in the *Journal of Philosophy*, the *Antioch Review*, and the *Humanist*. In 1965 he welcomed Paul Kurtz’s *Decision and the Condition of Man* but caviled against the insufficiency of reference to Dewey. In 1964

Geiger was honored by his alma mater with the 40th Anniversary Award “for distinguished professional services in Philosophy.” In 1975 he was cited as a Humanist Fellow by the American Humanist Association. Edwin H. Wilson, founding editor of the *Humanist*, said at the presentation: “Dr. Geiger faced the reactionary spirit of the past two decades with realism whether found in the atmosphere created by the late Joseph McCarthy, in the development of neo-orthodoxy, or in the assault on progressive education as overly permissive, as efforts to discredit naturalism and scientific humanism” (p. 3).

V

Concluding Notes

UPON REACHING RETIREMENT AGE IN 1968, Antioch named Geiger to the John Dewey Professorship in the Humanities, which enabled him to continue teaching for five more years. From 1973 to 1987, he taught *gratis*. Geiger used the professorship to initiate an annual John Dewey Lecture Series and he invited his friend, Sydney Hook, to be the series’ first lecturer.

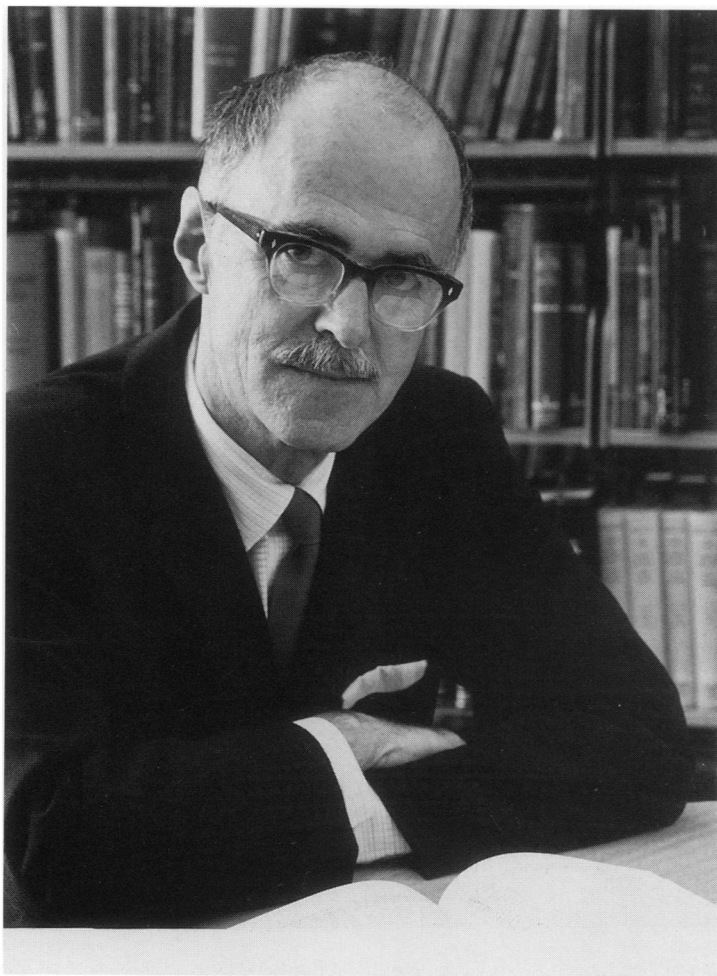
In the classroom Geiger excelled, as his colleagues and students have testified. These same colleagues recalled that at a reunion of Antioch’s most outstanding alumni a high percentage of them cited Geiger’s influence. He attracted the best students and profoundly affected them. In a tribute to Geiger, Paula Treichler referred to “George’s powerful, formidable, intelligent, continuing intellectual influence on who I am today—and of course on who countless other Antioch alumnae are as well” (p. 3). Frances Degen Horowitz called him the “most memorable” of teachers. Clifford Geertz, another student, recalled him as a “vivid” person. He taught in a rehearsed, dramatic form. This flair for drama was further expressed in his private life, as he was for three decades a stalwart of the local community theater. Benjamin Levi, Geiger’s last philosophy major at Antioch, provided a sample of Geiger’s wit. When told to “have a nice day,” his reply was, “No, I have other plans.” Levi further related that the extremely well-read Geiger was at times frustrated with students’ lack of reading background and would exclaim, “You cabbage heads, what have you read?”

He was married to Louise Jarratt, who taught Spanish at Antioch. She died in 1982. As the only son of an only son, George was reported to have felt alone in the world. Fate would smile on him in a few years as Joan L.

King, an early student of his, became George's friend and companion for the last ten years of his life. He loved classical music and was a skilled pianist. With regard to the vagaries of his career he was fond of saying: "Planning is great. No planning is better." Geiger's self-deprecating persona belied his pugnacious intellectuality. On occasion he is said to have regretted not having children, but his was a vibrant legacy of the heart and mind.

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Dr. George Raymond Geiger (1903–1998)