

An Academic Psychosis

By Harry Gunnison Brown

A distinguished friend who teaches economics in a well-known university asserts that "most economists don't understand the single tax." Whether or not this is a correct diagnosis I shall not here attempt to say. But considering what is offered to them in their courses as undergraduate and graduate students—now brief summary followed by "refutation," and now silence—we ought perhaps to feel surprise if any appreciable number of economists *did* understand it.

There just doesn't seem to be any special inducement to the budding young economist to try to understand the land-value-taxation argument, even if he happens to learn that such an argument has been seriously advanced. For one thing, no attention is commonly paid to it in the conferences of his professional confreres. Conceivably, the reason is that the subject would generate too much heat. But it is perhaps a better guess that the land-value-tax topic—so seldom adequately discussed in the text books or taken seriously in the academically "best circles"—is not, to the present generation of economists, a live and exciting issue. It is not one of those subjects, such as "institutionalism," "liquidity preference" and "monopolistic competition," awareness of which stamps an economist as "up to date." And so it very likely never occurs to the program makers to find a place for it on their programs.

If nevertheless an occasional young economist vaguely wonders whether there might possibly be more in the "single tax" idea than he has been taught, the chances are that he will be less inclined to pursue the subject further when he senses that to do so will merely cause him to be looked at, by many of his fellows in the craft, with "high-brow" suspicion. Only recently I was told in personal conversation by an economist

author who had expressed himself favorably towards Henry George and the single-tax idea, that he had taken considerable "razzing" from colleagues on account of it.

In March, 1922, an article by Professor John R. Commons of the University of Wisconsin, entitled "A Progressive Tax on Bare-Land Values," appeared in the *Political Science Quarterly*. This is one of the "learned" periodicals in the field of politics and economics, and is published by Columbia University. In the case of Professor Commons' article, the editors seemed to feel obliged to protect themselves from any suspicion of harboring ideas favorable to land-value taxation. They therefore inserted, as a footnote to this article, this statement: "In accordance with the custom of the *Political Science Quarterly*, the Editors disclaim responsibility for theories or policies advocated by contributors."

The "learned" periodicals publish articles both good and bad, both logically coherent and fallacious. Not infrequently different writers participate in controversial discussion in their columns, expressing widely divergent views. Readers certainly have no right to assume and, I am sure, do not commonly assume, that the views expressed by contributors are therefore the views of the editors. And editors do not ordinarily feel it necessary to warn readers against such an assumption. Indeed, I cannot remember any other time when I have seen any such warning in connection with any article in any such periodical.

Is not the appearance of such a notice to readers, in connection with an article dealing with the taxation of land values, when such a notice appears in connection with no other article, evidence of a peculiar fear as regards this subject? Is this fear, perhaps, just a fear that the editors, through suspicion of too close an association with the land-value-tax proposal, might be

in obedience to natural law.

If we are looking for solutions that are to be permanent, we cannot remain superficial in our investigations. We must be fundamental. Sex

and the sex urge are facts, not problems. The conditions under which the sex urge is expressed (or repressed) are the problems confronting us. Eliminate poverty, want,

and the fear of want, and you eliminate bachelorhood, spinsterhood and unhappy marriages. Eliminate poverty and you have solved the "sex problem."

regarded as having violated the best intellectual traditions and social etiquette of the academically elite! Or could it possibly be something like the fear which, in a pre-civil-war Southern university, might have made even somewhat "iberal" faculty members desire to protect themselves against any suspicion of harboring "abolitionist" sympathies?

Anyhow, is it reasonable to suppose that the average college or university graduate, even though he may have "majored" in economics, will have any understanding whatever of the reasons why a system of public appropriation of community-produced land values is desirable? Is it reasonable to suppose that he will understand why such appropriation would tend to increase the marginal productivity of labor, to relieve workers of heavy tax burdens, to facilitate slum clearance and diminish tenancy, to encourage the accumulation of capital, or to bring savings from other places into the land-value-taxation area?

Everyone who is well acquainted with student habits knows that few students read anything in relation to their college courses **except what their professors assign**. Some of them—working their way or otherwise busy—cannot. And so the college student is perhaps very much less likely, in most colleges, to become familiar with the really significant arguments for the public appropriation of the rental value of land than a modern German youth is to become familiar with the arguments in favor of democracy and against Nazi dictatorship or to learn of the good qualities of Jews!

Quite commonly, too, when students pursue their work in economics into the graduate school, nothing whatever is added to what they already know—or, rather, don't know—about Henry George and the taxation of land values.

If, therefore, you do really desire some understanding of this problem, than which nothing in the field of economics is more fundamental, wouldn't it be wise to enroll in **The Henry George School of Social Science**?

I am inclined to think that we have, in the situation I have been describing, at least a partial explanation of the fact that the modern "liberal" has no apparent interest in the land question or the question of who should enjoy community-produced location values. The liberal of one or two generations ago frequently did have. The liberal of the older generation did not get this economics—at least he did not get so much

of or all of his economics—in college. The day when the "social sciences" were to dominate the curricula of the universities had not yet dawned. Also, Henry George had but recently been prominently in the public eye and the influence of his writing and speaking had not died out in liberal circles. And the insidious propaganda of representing his views as "out of date" and generally abandoned and thereby making a considerable number of "intellectuals" feel it useless to investigate them, had not been extensively carried on.

Brought up on the modern brand of intellectual fodder, the present-day "liberal" is subtly steered away from serious consideration of a free economic system and a free earth and is easily led—by the socialist and near-socialist literary intelligentsia—to put his faith in various types of government interference and compulsion. And so the **Nation** has words of praise for cities that are "tax free," i.e., cities which, by owning the local public utilities, such as electric light plants, water works, etc., and charging their citizens rates that yield a substantial profit, are able to avoid taking in taxation from the private owners of valuable sites, any part of the community-produced annual location rent of land. And Raymond Moley, in his magazine, **To-Day**, refers to the land-value-tax proposal as "such crackpotism." And magazines like the **New Republic** and so-called "liberal" newspapers and "liberal" publicists give consideration to every conceivable reform and bizarre theory and proposal **except the proposal that we try to do away with a system under which some must pay others for permission to work on and to live on the earth, in those locations which community development has made economically productive and reasonably livable. This is the subject that the "reputable" present-day "intellectual" seemingly will not discuss,—at least not further than hastily to disavow any sympathy for Henry George and the "single tax." It is the subject of the great silence.**

If the condition here described changes in the near future, such change will probably come mostly as a result of the growing enrollment and influence of **The Henry George School of Social Science**. A new generation, containing many idealists who really understand Henry George's philosophy of a free earth and its significance for the common welfare, may then bring an end to the (not always entirely conscious) **conspiracy of silence** from which this philosophy has so long suffered.