

The Meaning of Meaning Fad

By George R. Geiger

There is a great stir these days in both academic and popular circles about "semantics"—the science of meaning. Stuart Chase and Thurman Arnold, to mention no others, have been reviving an interest in the use and reference of words, and they have been very severe upon the "high-power abstractions" and the "mythology" and "folklore" of classical philosophy, economics, and law.

This new concern with what we really mean when we speak or write is a very healthy and shrewd one, despite the fact that many reviewers, especially in connection with Chase, have been inclined to be rather patronizing. True, in philosophy and logic, semantics has been discussed for many years, and in economics and law a similar interest can be traced back to institutionalists like Veblen. But it seems quite unfair for critics to disparage the contributions of books like "The Tyranny of Words" and "The Folklore of Capitalism" just because they are not examples of "pure" originality. After all, these books have set people thinking and talking about the abuse of abstractions. This alone is a valuable type of public discussion which philosophers themselves have never been able to stimulate.

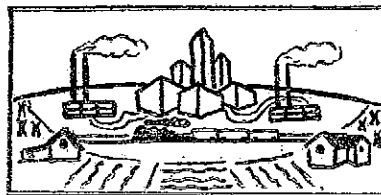
Does this interest in semantics have any bearing for those who follow the land reform orientation? I think it does from both a negative and a positive approach. For one thing, sensitivity to the dangers of abstract concepts may prevent the too easy relapsing into blanket terms like "individualism" and "socialism." The follower of Henry George likes to think of himself (and the present writer is certainly no exception) as a compromiser between these two "isms," just as he perhaps feels that his reform is a justification of "democratic capitalism" as against the attacks of both "communism" and "fascism." He argues that his interpretation of *laissez-faire* is one which, by pointing to the fundamental monopoly of land, suggests the possi-

bility of real and legitimate "competition." Now, this compromise, upon purely abstract and theoretical grounds, seems a very neat one, and must appeal to anyone interested in "the theory of the land question." But is it not healthy to realize that these high-power abstractions like "individualism," "socialism," et al., are very slippery things? What does any one of us really mean when he uses them? Indeed, is it safe or fair to use these symbols without a careful consideration of what, objectively, they refer to?

Of course, there is an approach to the land question which is not particularly interested in pure "theory"—an approach, to be sure, that has always been regarded as rather suspect by the theorists of the movement. This is the specific one of concentrating upon tangible programs here and now, forgetting ideological compromises between "individualism" and "socialism."

In this dimension, the land reformer busies himself with hitting out at the anomalies of our present absurd tax "system," with laying bare the senselessness of housing plans which fail to consider the phenomena of land speculation and inflated land values, with insisting upon increasing taxes on land value here and removing taxes on improvements there.

This type of individual has often been vigorously criticized, in England, as a "penny-in-a-pounder," and, in this country, as a mere "Pittsburgh planner." He has been accused—and the writer of this article has helped to accuse him—of being interested only in the fiscal aspects of land value taxation, and of ignoring the "philosophy" of the movement; of being an "opportunist" and a "pragmatist."



Well, is it not possible that a knowledge of semantics would help prevent such ill-advised attacks? For such a knowledge would make clear that names themselves should be neither hindrances nor encouragements. These names may be no more than the working myths and symbols of our present social generation, a helpful (or harmful, as the case may be) folklore which may evolve into something quite different.

In any case—and this seems one of the most important contributions of Thurman Arnold's work—we should never refuse to do something specific along the lines of our major endeavor, say, land value taxation, just because it seems to clash or jibe with certain names or "isms." To be more specific, it may be suggested that Georgists should guard against being stampeded by terms like "communism," "fascism," "socialism," "individualism." The "individualist" welcomed by the Georgist may be a flagrant abuser of the label; the "socialist" snubbed, may be a very useful contributor. Names themselves are neither recommendations nor indictments.

From another point of view, the meaning of the land question is definitely buttressed by an insistence upon the careful use of words. "Land" is a term that has a specific and concrete referent (unless, of course, one has become a convert to the Ely or Fetter school which professes to see no meaning in the word at all...) There is nothing metaphysical about land, and reforms based upon it should connote no abstract "isms." It would be but carrying coals to Newcastle to define land for the reader of *The Freeman*, but the realization that land refers to a tangible, obvious—yet how neglected!—factor in the economic process, and that a social proposal based upon land value taxation affords an objective and verifiable program for political action—these realizations should give increased strength to our concentration upon the importance of the land problem and upon its solution through the method proposed by

Henry George. (And was not the title of a very recent book by Stuart Chase, "Good Land, Bad Land"?)

positively, as emphasizing the realistic implications of the land question, or, negatively, as warning

cepts like "individualism" or "socialism," the newly popularized science of semantics has a welcome relation to the activities of Georgist movement.

Therefore, whether looked upon, against too quick reliance upon con-