

HENRY GEORGE AND THE AMERICAN ETHIC

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It is a pleasure and a privilege to participate in this important celebration of the 100th anniversary of one of history's greatest classics, Progress and Poverty.

Irving Kristol recently said, "The leverage of ideas is so immense that a slight change in the intellectual climate can and will -- perhaps slowly, but nevertheless inexorably -- twist a familiar institution into an unrecognizable shape."

Why, if ideas are so powerful, and history shows clearly that they are, is the idea of land value taxation still dormant?

To answer this puzzling question, it is helpful to examine the history of American political theory. My summary of that history is based on 16 years of intensive research by the Thomas Jefferson Research Center.

This research leads to the conclusion that the United States achieved its unparalleled technical and material success because the ethical principles upon which it was founded were generally sound. These principles, which we have termed the American Ethic, were sound because the Founding Fathers were unusually well informed regarding history, government, economics, religion, philosophy, ethics and logic.

Most Americans have been taught to call our philosophy the Judeo-Christian or Protestant Ethic. This is a serious linguistic error. The United States was founded on a unique moral philosophy compatible with Judeo-Christian principles but including ideas about law, economics, education and government derived primarily from the study of history and philosophy.

The principles of the American Ethic were considered to be universal and applicable to men of all faiths or no faith at all.

The basic assumption which provided the foundation for the American Ethic was Natural Law. It is stated explicitly in the Declaration of Independence, "...the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God."

"Natural Law," wrote Robert Hutchins, "if it means anything, means that the principles of social organization can be derived from the nature of man, a nature that is insusceptible to change, that is the same the world over.... The premises of natural law are that man strives like every other organism, towards the perfection of his nature."

The universality of Natural Law is demonstrated by its mention in the writings, not only of the Founding Fathers, but also those of Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Cicero, Marcus Aurelius, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Locke, Adam Smith, William Blackstone, and many, many others.

Henry George was a Natural Law philosopher. His great contribution to the American Ethic was his recognition and clarification of the distinction between land (natural resources), labor and capital.

The lack of acceptance of land value taxation is directly related to the gradual abandonment of the ideas of Natural Law and the American Ethic.

This abandonment, incidentally, explains present exploding social problems such as crime, violence, taxes, debt and inflation.

What has caused the decline and fall of the American Ethic? Growing intellectual acceptance of an alternative viewpoint, moral relativism -- the denial of the existence of enduring ethical principles.

The major source of antagonism towards America's traditional ethical system is the social and behavioral sciences, headquartered in our institutions of higher education.

The Founding Fathers, as previously discussed, based their ideas about society upon their knowledge of history, philosophy and religion. Behavioral scientists reject these sources as "unscientific" and base their ideas about human nature on laboratory studies, statistical averages and the behavior of rats, pigeons and monkeys.

This relativistic point of view has flourished and gained tremendous influence because it claims to be "scientific." It has great appeal because it permits people to deny responsibility for their own behavior.

Value-free, permissive psychological theories have, during the last 60 or 70 years, caused tremendous damage to our society by encouraging unlimited government, deficit spending, excessive welfare, overregulation of business, permissive child rearing, permissive schools and courts, and contempt for law, order, authority, religion and tradition.

Today, the failure of these "scientific" ideas is becoming increasingly obvious.

Fortunately, sparked by the theoretical work of Abraham Maslow and others, a small but growing number of scholars are discovering the existence of enduring, species-wide psychological needs which provide the basis for a science of values -- Natural Law.

What is the significance of all this to Georgists? The significance is that, for the last 100 years, Natural Law philosophy has been UNACCEPTABLE to the "experts" in the social and behavioral "sciences." Maslow has provided a viable scientific theory capable of re-establishing the soundness of Natural Law.

This is the Age of Science. Science is more powerful than religion or philosophy. Georgists can and must conform to this new reality. We must learn to understand Maslow's theory and how to make Henry George's work compatible with it.

Furthermore, Georgists must study and understand how to sell ideas. It is a grave mistake to think that we must sell ideas to a majority of the electorate. This is the ideal but it is not essential.

Ideas in the United States are acted upon when they are accepted by leaders in our society. Intellectuals know this and concentrate on influencing those in positions of power.

John Maynard Keynes is an example. His ideas are in use all over the world and yet the average voter knows little or nothing about his ideas.

In case after case, our society operates with policies which do not have majority approval. Examples are: busing, permissive schools, permissive criminal justice, abandonment of capital punishment, bi-lingual education, excessive welfare and deficit spending.

In other words, in all too many cases, a few professional sociologists, economists, political scientists, criminologists and educational theorists, because they claim to be scientists, unless there is massive vocal public resistance, quietly establish many national policies.

Georgists must understand this and act accordingly.