A Blueprint for Freedom?

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(The author of the following rejoinder to Mr. Thomas F. Woodlock, whose views and questions concerning Georgist doctrine appeared in recent issues of The Freeman, is a teacher in the Henry George School of Social Science in both New York and New Jersey, and a writer and lecturer on social and economic subjects. Mr. Matteson was graduated from Brown University in 1933 and his scholastic background includes a year at the Sorbonne in Paris. Since finishing college he has been connected with a New York credit reporting agency servicing banks and other lending institutions.—The Editors)

Readers of The Freeman will recall the questions posed by Mr. Thomas F. Woodlock of The Wall Street Journal in the June issue of The Freeman. Since then he has written two more columns inquiring about Georgist doctrine. Of these, the first was a logical analysis of the Georgist position on community rights in land. The second, which was reprinted in the August Freeman, asks what Georgists propose to "do about it."

This, of course, is one of the classic questions asked of Georgists, not alone by those who dwell in outer darkness, but as well by those who, accepting the principles of economic freedom as enunciated by George, ask themselves how those principles ought to be legislated into practice.

I am glad to say that there is no discernible agreement among the followers of Henry George. There have been the arguments between the Single Taxers, Unlimited, and Single Taxers, Limited, like Thomas G. Sherman and Charles Fillebrown, as to the desirability of the full economic rent going to society. And there have been those who, like Spencer Heath and Raymond McNally, envision a society in which all social services are provided by landowners. From the side of practical politics, there has been schism after schism. One group espoused the Initiative, Referendum and Recall as an "entering wedge," to the disgruntlement of another group. There was the split between those who, in the United Committee in England, advocated "a penny in the pound" as a slogan calculated to dispel uneasiness among middle-class listeners, and those who, in the Commonwealth Land Party, said they weren't interested in how much rent there was, so long as they got all of it.

There has been no change at all in this state of affairs, as far as this writer knows. There are "step-by-steppers" like Will Lissner, and "9 o'clock tomorrow morning" people like Margery Warriner. There are respectable Georgists and ungentlemanly ones, socialistic ones and anarchistic ones, temporizing ones, unreasonable ones, nationalistic ones, internationalistic ones, universalist ones. The war issue divides many of us today, as did the first world war.

In the absence of control from the top, or a directing mind of some sort, is there cause to expect anything different? I for one should be most uncomfortable if I belonged to a movement in which I might not change my opinion. And, as my views are strictly my own, and I consider myself a Georgist, I dislike exceedingly to read sentences which begin: "The Georgist calls for ..., the Georgist would approach full social appropriation gradually ...," et cetera, because I do not like people to speak for me, however thoroughly their views may accord with mine.

I trust that I have made sufficiently clear the fact that the ideas which appear in this paper are my own. Anything I say, dear reader, will not be held against you. And if, on the other hand, you recognize as your own some illustration or development of thought, please consider these lines sufficient acknowledgment, for they are all you will get from me. This particular Georgist believes in the free exchange of goods, services, and ideas.

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"What this writer would like to know is the series of steps which the believers in the (George) gospel have in mind to transfer land ownership from the individual to the community," writes Mr. Woodlock. If I were king, I should administer all sites used for farming, manufacturing, commercial and residential purposes in accordance with a system of bidding. Stability of tenure would be assured by requiring bidders to post bonds, and an appraisal system would be set up to protect the right of the occupant to his improvement in the event a site changed hands. Bidding would be required annually or less often, depending on its apparent necessity.

No householder would have to pay any more rent than was bid by others for his site; and if no bid were made for his site, he would occupy it rent-free.

Funds received by the community as rent would be administered locally for the most part; such amounts as were deemed fitting would be allocated for State or Federal use. Not I, but the people would decide these matters. The powers and functions of the central government would be inconsiderable. As there would be neither indirect taxation nor public debt, the central government would not require a coast guard or time over the radio. Certain very large public utilities, in my view, might operate under Federal charter as co-operative authorities, and any nationwide subsidies which might be deemed worthwhile would be administered nationally. (I am dubious about these last, but they might include encouragement to artists, inventors, research).

To get to the series of steps by which I should bring this state of affairs about, here they are: 1) I should persuade everybody that I had the right idea; 2) We should frame an enabling amendment to the Federal Constitution, by which the

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several states would be encouraged to pass uniform legislation covering the method of setting up and administering rent-bidding, and abolishing all taxation; 3) We should pass our laws and put them into effect.

The foregoing may hardly be expected to satisfy Mr. Woodlock; indeed, the procedure I have outlined can doubtless be torn to shreds by any competent person with administrative experience. Still, they are my ideas on the subject. I refuse to be drawn into an argument in support of them, for at the present time they are not of the slightest importance.

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To Mr. Woodlock I will state my opinion that there is no principle available other than what the 19th century called "the higgling of the market" to determine rent; that I believe in taking the whole rent for society just as soon as I can get permission from the majority; and that the disturbance to existing conditions would be tremendous and at the same time relatively unimportant.

The nature of this disturbance would not be simply that of the landowning class being bereft of revenue. Institutions have replaced classes to a large extent, and the institutions would be hit, although not too hard. Savings banks and insurance companies would find it difficult to invest their funds along previous lines, for I should soon make it impossible for them to buy government bonds. The physical nature of such a city as New York would undergo tremendous changes as the speculation was squeezed out of the land values and taxation was removed from improvements.

Little people who had built small houses in far Queens would turn them back to the mortagee and move nearer to the center of things. Manhattan would lose that drab and down-at-heel look; land use would become an art by virtue of economic necessity. Brooklyn would be shaken by severe paroxyms as her outlying sections reverted to pastoral and agricultural pursuits. At the same time, downtown Brooklyn would boom.

All of this would be nothing more or less than people discovering that there were easier ways to do things than they'd realized, and that there was nothing to prevent them from changing over to the easier ways.

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Finally Mr. Woodlock confesses to a good deal of skepticism. He doubts that the problem of poverty is susceptible of quite so simple a solution as the collection of ground-rent by society. Equally skeptic concerning each and every other anti-poverty panacea that have ever come his way, he asks "Is this claim really part of the George 'deposit of faith'?"

Asked once whether he considered the single tax a panacea, Henry George said no, he did not; but that freedom was, and that his proposal seemed to him a prerequisite to economic freedom. I believe this is true. Furthermore, I do not believe that the problem of poverty is complicated at all. At no time in the past has it ever been found except in conjunction with stoppage of production and exchange. At one time men believed Nature was niggardly, but it has been pretty well established that she is not; the stoppage is, then, a creature of human institutions.

Private property in land is the most fundamental of these antisocial arrangements, which constitute a large family; others are "protective" tariffs and other indirect taxes. national debt, and a host of "health regulations," ill-mannered restrictions, quotas, edicts, and Jim-Crowisms.

They all have this in common: that they enrich one group by taking from another; they are essentially political or distributive. This function of government it is my will to destroy. I do not consider myself primarily a land reformer. I want justice in freedom for all men, a condition which, I am convinced, will completely eliminate poverty.

Henry George formulated what he termed the Law of Human Progress, that Association and Equality are thee factors of Civilization. To the degree to which men realize the ideal of the untrammeled marketplace, will they achieve liberty and justice.

I am, personally, very much obsessed with ideas of individual rights and individual freedom, and do not think a person can be much of a Georgist who does not share them. Furthermore, free will being what it is, I do not think that one person can do very much in the way of working up a blueprint for the freedom of another. This would be rank moralism, in my opinion.

I am afraid that Mr. Woodlock must make his own plans for a free society. And immediately fear gives way to delight at the thought—will he not be persuaded to do this?