

HENRY GEORGE, ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

For how could there be greed where all had enough? How could the vice, the crime, the ignorance, the brutality, that spring from poverty and the fear of poverty, exist where poverty had vanished? Who should crouch where all were freemen; who oppress where all were peers?

- Henry George, *Progress and Poverty*

ECONOMIC MODELS AND LANGUAGE

If Henry George was concerned with the paradox of poverty amidst wealth, growth and economic progress in the latter part of the nineteenth century, he would be more concerned today. This is because, in addition to the further intensified disparity, as we shall explain, there are other unexpected challenges. If he were sitting here with us, the first thing he might well say is that he was not at all surprised that this poverty-progress paradox remained. He would no doubt remind us that our present laws and economic practices have not achieved his vision of fiscal reform reserved especially for the common good, nor have they expressed our natural longing for community which he believed should define humankind. Perhaps he would accept that the reason that none of this has happened is because modern neo-liberal doctrines have eschewed the common good and allowed a selfish, myopic and harmful mode of economy to arise and persist. In our separated, isolated, atomic state as individuals, we fail to take into account the fact that real society is human collaboration and friendship, and the true ends of our economic endeavours are dignity, livelihood and well-being. Hence, we are left with the enslavement of labourers, the blind pursuit of capital and ever-increasing disparity between the rich and the poor.

Moreover, we are witnessing a second paradox – the expressed need for growth and progress to reduce poverty, and the degradation of the natural environment in the depletion of resources, the extinction of flora and fauna and the consequence of global warming and climate change. Much of the discussion of Henry George's ideas, at least throughout the twentieth century, was about the extent to which the private ownership of land held back its necessary development, causing unemployment and thence poverty. However, this was not sufficient to address the rising tendency and appetite for unlimited development.

Although being deeply concerned about it at the time, Henry George would have been shocked now by the manner of growth that is detrimental, dangerously detrimental, to the very resources upon which all of us depend.¹ We now see it clearly, echoing George's earlier concern, that the relentless pursuit of profits has not liberated humanity from suffering and destitution, but only caused irreversible damage to the environment. In pursuing seemingly limitless growth, we have failed to comprehend and account for the external or communal costs of growth – the integrity and wellness of society and our environment.

Connected to the above is a third paradox, which is becoming more apparent in the process of globalisation: a traditional view sees the commons as the property of the state and at the same time an imperative to conceive the commons from the perspective of the whole planet.² Although Henry George opposed the nationalisation of land, more recent responses to the need to 'capture' its value 'for the people' have done so. And now, with globalisation, public ownership in the form of ownership by the national state is sometimes seen as a necessary part of protecting national interests. However, wild life, other beings, and our collective habitat, such as oceans, seas, land, air, water, space, which are constituted in the notion of the commons, cannot be merely viewed as the property of the individual nation state. They belong to the global commons. This paradox necessitates a re-evaluation of the state's role in safeguarding the commons for the interest of the entire humanity.

For Georgists, these shifts in challenges and controversies provide an opportunity for the matter of 'rent' to be understood within the broader philosophical arguments and social values that underlie Henry George's ideas. This suggests the need especially for a renewed appreciation of his conception of social justice and what

it means for humanity to care for each other, for the Earth and live in harmony in global commons. His insistence on our equal access to the goods of nature and the community's entitlement to the yields of our commons invites us to reconsider what we might mean by right relationships with each other and with the Earth³. This reappraisal and reconsideration is necessary since, as Joseph Milne said in his talk at the Henry George Foundation's meeting in March 2017:

...there are proponents of George who sweep away his appeals to natural law or justice and reduce his work to a mere fiscal policy. They seek to bring George's thinking in line with modern economic models.

It is, indeed, difficult to escape from these 'modern economic models', since in our time they have spread from the narrow confines of the market place to dominating every aspect of our living. Not only do they direct commercial enterprise, they also preside over the running of schools, hospitals, organisations and communities. More than this, the language of business management and cost-benefit analysis seems to have become the *only language deemed appropriate* for governance, be it public or private. Here, therefore, lies the controversy: whilst this norm is compatible with the property law that forms the foundation of a capitalist political economy, it is incompatible with the common good. The belief in a neo-liberal economy, based on ever-rising consumption and growth, is increasingly colonising our private and public desires and aspirations and damaging the shared environment or commons. Unless we challenge this model, its language and its values, it will continue to define who we are and who we become; and determine the way of life we ought to live.

Henry George would not have liked the neo-liberal language. It was justice and not profit that he saw as paramount. This moral dimension of our relationships and with the order of nature is one of the areas of dispute between Georgist thought and modern economic theories.⁴ In the quote at the beginning of this essay, George was clearly committed to values such as well-being, compassion and mutual caring, and to human bonds and fellowship. Yet, as we have highlighted, these values, which lie at the core of the principles of the commons, are being placed at risk by the uncontrolled pursuit of profit. They fall victim to self-interest and greed of both private and public owners of property, including states as owners of the global commons. The greatest tragedy is that, without a change in understanding, few economic arguments can take us out of this impasse.

Therefore, in this essay, we shall attempt to expand on George's idea of justice as a way to move beyond the clashes of values that are manifested in the three paradoxes or controversies of which we have taken note.

JUSTICE AND WELL-BEING

George's idea of justice regards true wealth as a value that springs from the growth of the community, for the improvement

of the community, the thriving of the whole people. Growth is not equated to wealth, for growth can become greed which is the drive for some people to 'trample upon their fellows lest they be trampled upon.'

This greed for wealth that leads men to turn their backs upon everything that is just and true, and to trample upon their fellows lest they be trampled upon; to search and to strive, and to strain every faculty of their natures to accumulate what they cannot take away, will be gone, and in that day the higher qualities of man shall have their opportunity and claim their reward.⁵

Taking on George's perspective, we may suggest that justice truly lies at the intersection of the way we understand well-being and the way we appreciate dignity and self-respect. As already addressed by George, there have been contentions between perceiving justice as rights-based, and perceiving justice as an expression of care or duty. The preference of one over the other can determine the ways that society is organised and social institutions are structured, and any preference can further determine how laws and legal systems are designed to ensure justice.

For instance, rights-based distributive justice is the idea that the distribution of goods and resources should be fair, whereby 'fair' usually is taken to indicate that unequal distribution is only imposed for good reasons. An example would be the idea that extra compensation should be due to persons who have worked harder or have produced more than others. Indeed, the existence of power-imbalance has prompted the difference principle where *inequalities* in the distribution of goods and opportunities are permissible only if they offer advantage to those who are least well-off in the society.⁶

The concept of distributive justice is contested. Some writers claim that a distribution will be unjust if it does not allow some people to satisfy their fundamental needs.⁷ In contrast, other thinkers argue that property rights override such need-based distributive justice claims, given certain conditions.⁸ The idea is that a distribution of resources may be fair despite being unequal depending on the nature of the past economic transactions or processes that led to the distribution: existing ownership patterns without fair provenance.⁹

However, we can see that justice for George is not a purely legal concept. In *Progress and Poverty* he writes: "Justice is the natural law — the law of health and symmetry and strength, of fraternity and cooperation". And further he observes that "economic law and moral law are essentially one". For George, the study of society and economics cannot be separated from the study of justice. According to Plato, justice is an inner harmony of the parts of the soul and an outer capacity to fulfil one's specific duties in accord with Nature. Justice is at once an internal virtue and a social or political virtue, and therefore a key to understanding the nature of individual and society. In this sense, only a just life is a good life.



Similarly, says Kant, we have the rational capacities to ground the notion of justice: a respect for the intrinsic value of being a person or of our humanity. For this reason, justice has its conceptual roots in well-being. Hence, the well-being of society cannot be equated simply with wealth accumulation, especially wealth for the sake of wealth, which, as George demonstrates, will tear the community apart. In recent years, societies across the globe show that a purely wealth-driven economy is inherently violent because it enslaves and instrumentalises people and violates the integrity of our ecosystems. George offers us a glimpse of his idea of the good life where justice is established in the following passage:

*There shall be work for all, leisure for all, abundance for all; that day in which even the humblest shall have his share, not merely of the necessities and comforts, but of the reasonable luxuries of life; that day in which every child born among us may hope to develop all that is highest and noblest in its nature.*¹⁰

George implies that a good and just life of well-being contains the richness of our activities, including work and leisure, both of which should be meaningful in their own right.¹¹ Through these activities, we experience dignity, respect and self-worth, brought about by the living conditions, environment and the provision of society, as well as the opportunities to cultivate our noblest qualities, especially our humanity. It suggests that our well-being must be understood holistically, an overall spiritual, psychological, social, economic and political wellness, the missing of any aspect of which would mean that a person is not living well, not living a just life or good life.¹² Following George and Plato, justice is the bond that joins us together in society.¹³ For George, human nature is essentially cooperative.

For this reason, justice must be considered an essential feature of our economic system, socio-political structure, and ecological order.

The intimate connection between justice and well-being seems to be able to help us solve George's observed paradox of increased poverty and greater progress. Progress aimed at a mere accumulation of wealth sacrifices people's well-being and their dignity.

However, as we shall further illustrate, a caring and just economy must go beyond human well-being to embrace the flourishing of all other beings on the planet and our planet itself. One way to approach such caring is to see the wellness of Nature as constituted in our well-being.¹⁴ We shall now turn to this.

JUSTICE AND INTEGRITY OF WHOLENESS

Henry George's focus upon justice allows everyone to contribute to the commons and, in turn, for the commons to thrive from the care of those who have benefited from the commons. At first glance, it would seem that the fundamental principle that underlies George's proposals for fiscal reform is 'Self-realisation',

a principle that Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher, called an ultimate 'norm'.¹⁵ Naess conceived that Self (with a capital 'S') embraces "all the life forms on the planet,"¹⁶ indicating that all life is essentially *one*. Hence, Self-realisation characterises the blossoming of organic wholeness.

Naess's deep ecology suggests that it is the integrity of wholeness that denotes justice, and justice is reflected in the mutual thriving and flourishing of all, or the whole. This is the "principle of equilibrium and harmony."¹⁷ This idea of wholeness dissolves the human-environment dichotomy. In other words, humans and other beings are mutually constituted in the larger wholeness. So, in George's notions, we are not outside of our commons, but instead, we identify with the commons, which have intrinsic moral worth and should be respected as such. Justice accepts that the commons and humans are together constituted in a greater wholeness, and implies that there is integrity, stability and beauty in the wholeness of which humans are a part.¹⁸

An economy that is structured around a pursuit of unlimited growth tends to define the planet and its environment as a mere resource for satisfying human desires and needs. This is an erroneous view as it instrumentalises our natural world and places us outside the eco-system of which we are part. On the contrary, our world or our commons is a valuable whole in its own right, and it is already constituted in our well-being. Therefore, for us to exploit the environment for profit alone is to invade the integrity of this wholeness and equally negate humanity's and the planet's mutual constituted-ness, and the reciprocal nature of flourishing. Whilst Naess insists that we, humans, self-identify with the Self or the greater whole, which is compatible with who we are, we can also argue that our identifying with the Self illustrates the kind of being we want to become. This implies that a caring attitude towards and appreciative attention to our planet Earth is not only an integral part of our well-being, but most importantly defines the kind of people we aspire to be and how we might act in the world.¹⁹ That is to say, our respect for and appreciation of the natural world of which we are a part can become our irreducible ethical commitment to the kind of beings we aspire to be. It indicates that Self-realisation is situated within an awareness of our identification with holistic and harmonious living.²⁰

The recognition of ourselves as in part constituted in Nature or the commons, and likewise, the awareness of our well-being to consist in the flourishing of all, suggests Love, a deep commitment to a strong bond with all that is. Hence, a just, loving and caring economy oriented towards human well-being and the flourishing of all could be structured in such a way that it does not encourage a mindless, limitless and fearful pursuit of growth and accumulation of wealth. George understood that progress is not equated merely with growth and accumulation of wealth. He would surely approve of what has been pioneered by some,

such as an 'economy of love',²¹ the 'principle of enough',²² and the 'principle of meaningful consumption'.²³

For instance, the proposal for an economy of love is predicated upon the assumption that there is no absolute economy, only economies founded upon different underlying values, aimed at serving the common good.²⁴ So that, for example, an economy of love would counter an addiction to growth with principles of steadiness and sufficiency; it would accept limits to growth; it would seek to reduce debt and favour localisation rather than globalisation. It would nurture compassion and collaboration rather than selfishness and competitiveness. It would cultivate a *with-ness*, with all that is. Similarly, in a just economy, where *the principle of enough* is applied, we would identify with enough or with sufficiency or with satisfying rather than maximising.²⁵ Neoliberal principles of economy associate progress with growth or the production of more of the goods, even at the cost of the well-ness of nature. The principle of enough radically shifts this view and enables us to exercise ethical choice and to harmonise our priorities with those of other people and other beings on the Planet. Furthermore, in some modern economic thinking, all economic activity is conceived in purely monetary, and hence instrumental, terms. Thus we have seen increased consumption/spending as a necessary means to boost the overall economy; instrumental for instrumental's sake. It leaves meaningful ends out of this money-growing cycle. *The principle of meaningful consumption* urges us to conceive consumption as serving human well-being as a whole, and the flourishing of all, an idea that echoes those of some Georgist scholars.²⁶

This understanding of our relationships with each other and with all other beings on the planet in a mutually constituted relationship and reciprocal flourishing can help us to resolve the second paradox that confronts George's land reform – the expressed need for progress to reduce poverty, and the degradation of the natural environment as the result of the ever-increasing growth. For this understanding is based on justice conceived within the integrity of a greater wholeness, of which we are all a part. It suggests that love and compassion are not abstract and romantic ideals, but are grounded in our everyday attitudes, values, institutional structures and practices, and personal actions. In other words, by being just and caring, we express and experience well-being.

Justice shapes the right relationship amongst all. We can have no doubt that George would have agreed that it is not simply about the ways in which resources or commons are allocated between us, but rather about *the manner in which we relate to the commons and care for them* for the greater integrity and goodness of the whole. So, if the concern of the twentieth century was for the freedom to develop land and natural resources fairly, the concern of the twenty-first must be how a just economy can nurture the flourishing of all that is, or our 'common community,' including the Earth as a whole.

JUSTICE AND THE GLOBAL COMMONS

During George's time, it was impossible to imagine the present global movement of people through, for instance, immigration of professionals and labourers, international students, trade and commerce, financial institutions, and so on. In addition, there is now the increased flow of refugees and forced displacement of communities due to wars and climate change. Such global movement of people, ideas, technology and goods seriously challenges the autonomy and sovereignty of nation-states. Indeed, our mobility around planet Earth is making it difficult for any people or community to claim absolute ownership of a particular land and its environment. Our collective suffering from wars and intercommunal violence as the result of competition for access to lands and their riches, and the emerging crisis of climate change are telling us that a fresh look at the ownership of the commons is necessary.

In addition, the commons can no longer be conceived within the confines of the borders of separate nation states. The discourse of sovereignty and the practices of geopolitics within the confine of national borders are increasingly tearing our world apart, fuelling fragmentation, conflict and violence. They do not serve the possibility of the de-territorialised commons, where any territorial power must be diffused to reflect the multiple senses of our belonging and identification. This indicates that it is only such commons that can be regarded as global commons, the common property and heritage of all beings, humans and other species on the planet. This is more than a mere recognition of those shared natural resources, such as the deep ocean, the atmosphere, outer space, and the polar regions. The conception of a global commons should consider all property within and without the bounds of border.

Increasingly, scholars challenge the political structure and economic system that is based on the ego-driven sovereignty of national interests, which tend to be violent and which disregard the world's wholeness. Fred Harrison, for example, poses questions such as: how to engender justice when people are driven from their homes; and how can the surplus from our labour be reinvested to sustain the well-being of the land and the rest of the community?²⁷ Freeing the global commons from the hold of national states may serve to meet three of George's concerns for justice.

First, the former division between landowners/landlords and landless would dissolve. The notion of global commons offers a home to all. This enables everyone, humans and non-humans, to share the commons. It is not about ownership as such, it is about community. Second, the exploitation of land for the sake of profit and a nation's self-interest would be replaced by a shared responsibility to nurture and safeguard our common Earth. Third, the survival of the fittest would be replaced by the imperative to collaborate. The greatest pathway to *self-interest* is to serve the *Common-interest* of all.

This proposal of global commons beyond the borders of nation-states is clearly radical, especially in our world where property, wealth and power are mainly configured through these boundaries. However, it may help us to resolve the third paradox that confronts George's land rent idea – the reduction of poverty in all people and the self-interest of those landowners and corporations who are concerned only with an increase in short-term profit. When justice is situated within the conception of global commons, it can inspire nation-states to play a positive part in collaborating with each other as and through a transnational (democratically accountable) alliance.²⁸

Recognising global commons as fundamental to the flourishing of all, the transnational alliance as a socio-economic and political partnership can serve the interests of all peoples, as well as all other beings sharing the planet.

JUSTICE, FISCAL REFORM AND HARMONY

For Henry George, whose primary concerns were justice, human well-being and the integrity of the commons, modern economic models and practices are unsatisfactory, and it is time that we returned to the conceptions and values that are key to his fiscal reforms and economic thinking. Modern economy, especially from the neoliberal perspective, prioritise growth and the accumulation of personal wealth over the interests of the commons. What has been privileged in this model of economy clashes hugely with the values that George's vision encompasses. When wealth for wealth's sake, and growth for the sake of more growth, becomes the core of an economy, what truly matters, qualities such as human well-being and the wellness of the whole, is sacrificed and diminished. Hence, we have suggested that such a clash of values has significant existential ramifications. Indeed, being just and being caring involve intentionally charting pathways for how we live our lives in the world so that our lives and the natural world within which they are lived can be improved. What George considered as a just economy requires reciprocal respect, mutual care, and integrity of our commons and our community. Justice is not the right of the stronger, but the effective harmony of the whole.

It is with these last two words, 'harmony' and 'whole' or 'harmony in wholeness' that we draw this essay to a conclusion.

The concept and practice of harmony takes as a given that everything is connected within a conscious and purposeful whole. It exhibits, and requires, balance and order – albeit that this condition of being is ever in flux. In this manner of being, as already indicated, it is not possible to consider any relationship other than on the premise of a systemic connectedness and interdependence.

One way to understand harmony is to see it as an expression of right relationships within wholeness, a way of looking at ourselves and at the world of which we are part. All is connected within



itself and with the other. Within ourselves, the spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical are integrated; peoples, communities and nations, too, are constituted in their environments, economic and social, built and natural; there is a deep and sacred bond amongst us all. Harmony calls for integrity, beauty, goodness and truth; and it invites a co-creative and generative process towards infinite possibilities of cooperating and flourishing.

So, to go back to Henry George's idea of justice in fiscal reform, one man's ownership of the land cannot be discussed other than in the context of the contribution it makes to the well-being of the environ as a whole. This right relationship with the land is not a mere instrumental matter of sustainability – how might we endure, what is right for us – the right relationship with the land is non-instrumental: it is right as an intrinsically valuable relationship, and it is right for the system as a whole, including human communities, non-human communities and the Earth itself. What is to be held in common cannot be decided from any one person's perspective, rich or poor; but from what is best for the whole. 🌱

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