

Land (Like Elvis) Is Everywhere

by Lindy Davies

A few thoughtful Georgists have asked, now and then, "If the land question is as pervasive as we say, then why has our movement remained fixated on classical economics and "mere" fiscal reform? Why are there not Georgist contributions to sociology, criticism, aesthetics?"

Well, there are. Or at least, such a world-view has been quietly evolving for quite some time. Leo Tolstoy may have been right when he said that to know *Progress and Poverty* is to agree with it, but getting people to know it has been our multifarious task for many decades, and our resources have been meager. Nevertheless, a great many people recognize that fiscal reform is but the tip of the Georgist iceberg; they take seriously the notion of a "Georgist Philosophy." Oscar Geiger, the founder of the Henry George School, was among the first to expand on Henry George's worldview; Robert Clancy recorded it, and a course based on his *A Seed Was Sown* draws enthusiastic students today. Many have asked and answered the land question in theological or Biblical terms, including Robert Andelson and James Dawsey, Michael Hudson, and Rev. Archer Torrey. A growing cadre of "Green Georgists" articulate a way toward a sustainable economy based on the moral basis of ownership, *ala* George: a Geonomics. Even the interminable, irksome debate over whether it's a tax displays a

broader philosophical sweep: for of course the "single tax" is not a tax; taxes are parasitical confiscations and the land rent belongs to all. That truth can only be denied by the threadbare proposition that there shouldn't be any "shoulds" in economics (which, of course, is itself a "should!")

We have made a start - but there is a whole unbounded savannah of social insights to be gleaned and examined. The land question is closer to our everyday psyches than we would like to think. Think of the last time you rode a crowded Amtrak train. On most trains, tickets are sold without regard to space. Those who get seats are comfortable, and rather smug. They surely expect that seat to be waiting for them when they return from the refreshment car. They also expect the poor wretches in the aisles and doorways to get out of their path - what nerve, lodging hobo-like in a public aisleway! Sure, a seatless train ride is a whole lot less amiable and comfy than a seated one, but that's not my fault! That's my seat. The economy of Amtrak is truly Malthusian.

Fortunately for us, though, the train ride is over eventually, and the analogy doesn't really hold. Riders of our planetary train can simply build more seats - if only they can get on the track.

Here is a grab-bag of notes in the news that engage our expanding paradigm:

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Land (Like Elvis) Is Everywhere *(continued from page two)*

From Serbia, where nothing good seems to be happening, we have the odd and wonderful news of the *Zitzer Spiritual Republic*. Last spring in the village of Oromhegyes, 200 men received draft orders from the Serbian army. After a protest demonstration, tanks massed around the village. The draft resisters and their supporters holed up in a rustic village bar, the Zitzer, for two months. During that time, they claimed an unorthodox kind of sovereignty: they established a *Spiritual Republic*. A constitution was adopted; a national anthem was chosen (Ravel's *Bolero*, the only record on hand in the bar,) and a flag (a pizza flanked by three billiard balls) was sewn. The Zitizers' Constitution offers citizenship to all applicants who "participate... in the realization of the Objectives of the Republic." Thus, the republic has all the customary attributes of a nation, save one: it has no territory.

Their protest was successful; most of the men avoided being drafted. Some chose the alternative of civil service. Five men, however, were captured by the police and forced into uniform. Since then, perhaps a thousand people from many countries have joined the republic.

Have the Zitizers seen the cat? It could be argued that the main point behind their "spiritual republic" was simply to avoid being drafted. But the way they chose to express their opposition to war - the notion of a nation without territory, in the midst of a disastrous war of "nationalism" - sends a Georgist message. Nations exist, according to Thomas Jefferson, to secure the rights of their citizens, including the rights of ownership and land use. Nations don't exist, according to the Zitizers, to engage in genocidal land-grabs.

The autumn issue of *The Geonomist* reprints an op-ed piece by Jeffery Smith, published on October 14th in the Santa Barbara *Independent*. Titled "Profit for Our Planet," Jeff's essay serves as a terse manifesto for radical eco-Georgism, and it deserves a look, especially from those who feel the danger of diluting our message in the attempt to link it with other causes. Jeff Smith's message here is not diluted. Some of his points may be debatable, but his logic comes in true line from *Progress and Poverty*, and he makes the connections that Henry George would very probably be making were he writing *Social Problems* today. He decries all taxes of all kinds as unnecessary, inefficient and immoral, leading to bloated bureaucracies - and subsidies for environmentally destructive industries. If, he suggests, instead of taxes, we were to collect the

full rental value of natural opportunities, we could tremendously streamline our government - and have some of the rent left over to distribute to the citizens. This dividend is what Jeff calls the "Natural Heritage Share."

Note that his word is "Natural," not "National." For the plan cannot achieve its goal of a just and sustainable prosperity unless some of the rent fund is shared internationally. This idea is not unique to Jeff. A variant of it - the idea of international marketing of pollution credits - has been articulated in detail by the United Nations Council on Trade and Development (see our reports in May-June and Nov. - Dec. '92). Georgists have always held that those who benefit from natural opportunities must satisfy the community's equal right to them: they must pay rent, internationally, in our truly international economic community.

Utopian, yes - but that doesn't make it wrong. Jeff comes down to earth at last, reminding us to "get clear on the need to own land. Our territorial imperative strives not for absentee ownership, the speculator's road to riches, but for owner occupancy, the Jeffersonian ideal." Jeff Smith's conception of "Geonomics" insists that no amount of tree-hugging or whale-saving will save our planet, without Henry George's remedy.

Between 1910 and 1920, there were about 32 million farmers in the United States - about one of every three people. But the 1990 U.S. Census, according to a *New York Times* story of October 10th, found so few farmers that "the cost of collecting and publishing statistics on farm residents and farmers... could no longer be justified." Their estimate of the farm population is 4.6 million, or about 2% of the population - even though just over 25% of the nation's people live in rural areas. Nor is the trend toward fewer farmers, which has gone inexorably on for eighty years, about to reverse itself. The median age for farm residents in 1991 was 39.1 years, compared to a median age of 33.1 for the rest of the population.

Is there a connection between these statistics and the pervasive sense of creepiness about the food we eat these days? We're constantly admonished to wash the pesticides off our vegetables, to scrupulously

cook the salmonella out of our meat and eggs. If land were easier to acquire, and taxes were lower, wouldn't organic and free-range farming would become more competitive, and our diet become more wholesome?

The "Information Superhighway" may have some toll booths. Between the lines of two articles in the *New York Times* Jan. 3rd supplement, "Outlook '94," we may read something very much like the old railroad land grants. The coming great global hook-up, which will integrate telephones, television and computers, may have as great an impact upon society as the railroads did. Certainly great sums are being invested, and great risks being taken. Not surprisingly, then, there is intense jockeying to create rent-collecting opportunities for the private firms willing to invest the billions needed to get it going.

To the horror of many in the computer-software business, a patent was awarded in December to Compton's New Media, a small San Diego-based software company, a subsidiary of Chicago's Tribune Publishing company, for software that runs a multimedia database. Although it has not yet become a big-ticket item, multimedia software, which seamlessly combines text, video and sound, is a key element in the communication networks that will soon be established. What has heads spinning in this case is that Compton's has not simply been given a copyright on a computer program, but a monopoly over the very idea of multimedia software.

Patent Commissioner Bruce Lehman has responded to the outcry and scheduled hearings to review this patent. But this is not the first time that overwhelmingly generous patents have been granted in the computer field. In two celebrated cases, patents were issued for ideas which other companies later developed and brought to market. Later, the patent-holders, without having taken the risk or done the engineering to market their ideas, sued the companies who did. This sort of "land-mine" patent is precisely what the industry fears in the Compton's Multimedia case. A number of companies, notably California's Oracle, Inc., oppose all patents for software, and it's easy to see why. According to John Kurtz, Vice President of Oracle, "Filing a single patent can cost \$20,000 or more.... Companies like Apple, which grew from two guys in a garage, would never have happened if they had to spend a bunch of money on patents."

