

## Summer Vacation?

- by Lindy Davies

What did the Georgist say at the funeral? "If no one else has anything to say about the Deceased, I'd like to say a few words about the Single Tax!"

The school year might be on hiatus, but teaching about Henry George's remedy is something we cannot hope to avoid. We go to wedding receptions or summer picnics, and people ask. Unwilling to shirk our duty, we have all tried a thousand different ways to distill the single tax's ambrosial essence into a one-minute blurb that will educate before it alienates.

That is no easy task, for the theory of Henry George bears on two extremely passionate feelings: the deep yearning for real estate of one's own, and the intense distaste, aversion, even repugnance for economists and whatever it is that they do. "So Henry George is an economist who believes we can't own land? FEH!"

Starting out with Henry George's most famous *faux pas*, "We must make land common property," will win few friends.

No, the idea requires a more thorough development — something like, "We must begin by defining our terms. The rent you pay to your landlord is not rent. Well, it's not all rent, anyway, part of it is interest, but the interest you get on your investments is not interest, well, not all of it anyway, part of it is rent...." Right.

Could there be a middle ground? Yes there could, indeed! Do you know what to say, friends, when they ask, "Is Henry George a right-wing or a left-wing theorist?" Don't blow this one: the answer is "Yes."

I have occasionally had good times explaining Henry George to strangers. Every now and then you'll consider the land question through a whole glorious Amtrak run, your seatmate will point out examples of the evils of speculation in the passing countryside and sign up for a course upon arrival. Once I explained Henry George's theory to a woman while she fed her new baby. She listened attentively - politely, I thought. But then her husband, who had been off fixing dinner, ambled in and asked what we'd been talking about, and she proceeded to tell him, in correct sequence, the full tale of *Progress and Poverty*! She even made reference to the unbounded savannah! Think of the progress we could make, if only more people were such quick studies! But such successes, alas, are exceptional.

Mostly it's rough going. My sister, who holds an advanced degree in anthropology and is anything but stupid, is explicit about it. "Tell me later," she says, "My eyes are glazing over now." She has been saying that for years.

You can describe George's remedy in such a way as to alienate virtually anybody. Just make some cursory consideration of your victim's general circumstances and orientation. You can horrify your liberal friends, for instance, by describing the massive tax cuts that public collection of rent will make possible. And what better way to render a libertarian apoplectic than declaring that all natural monopolies should be run by the state?

But there is also something we can all agree on. Has not everyone you have ever talked to had respect for the notion of **earning a living**? People who are willing to work to earn a living, by golly, oughta have the right to do that. What they get, their living, is theirs — nobody should steal it from them. That is an excellent place to start. Everyone can relate to the struggle to earn a living; even the Landed Rich have relatives or friends or servants for whom it is an issue. After all, a large part of the reason why we never have time to sit around and discuss things like macroeconomic policy is that we are so dad-blamed busy earning a living. If we didn't have to work until April to pay our tax burdens, and then work until August to pay private landowners for the natural resources we need to survive, people would be so much more relaxed, and it would be so much easier to get a word in edgewise.

## TEACHERS' CORNER



*Sabbath is a voice of gift in a frantic coercive self-serving world. Land sabbath is a reminder that (a) land is not from us but a gift to us, and (b) land is not fully given over to our satiation. Land has its own rights over against us and even its own existence....*

*Landed people are tempted to create a sabbathless society in which land is never rested, debts are never canceled, slaves are never released, nothing is changed from the way it is now and has always been.... This is the meaning of the producer-consumer consciousness which tempts Israel to betray the meaning of the land.*

- Walter Brueggemann, *The Land*