

Popular Education: What Good Is It?

For many years the advocates of the Georgist philosophy have been debating tactics. Again and again the question is asked, "Why spend all this time and money on education, when what we really want and need is activism? Other movements don't do this! How wrongheaded and misguided are we Georgists, educating and educating and educating, while society's need for the reform we advocate grows more desperate by the hour.

Undoubtedly we need more activism toward real-world application of the Georgist remedy. But consider for a moment: what action are our activists to take? What is it that they are to "toil for... suffer for... if need be, die for?"

The cause is: "to abolish all taxation save that upon land values," and in so doing to establish a just and prosperous economic order! But that seems quite a lot to tackle all at once. We need a first step, something concrete, something do-able.

Traditionally we've been given two alternatives: 1) Two-Rate Property Tax Reform, and 2) Something Else. Let's examine each of these in turn.

It might be observed that two-rate tax reform lacks that certain something that political consultants would call "sex appeal." The claims made about it in *Incentive Taxation* are perfectly true and important. They are also spectacularly uninteresting, save to a particular audience: officials and planners in cities, without too powerful a real estate lobby, in states whose laws permit differential taxation of land and improvements.

But that is not a problem in itself. Teams of diligent, well-organized Georgists have made the plan interesting enough to mayors and city councils. Collecting more land rent and lowering taxes on improvements is perfectly sexy to Georgists, after all. The problem comes when we start to believe that two-rate reform, by itself, is enough. It isn't — not until it actually begins to reduce land speculation and raise wages. In fact, if a two-rate tax creates, through stimulating new construction, a higher percentage increase in land values than its increased levy on land rent, it will actually make land speculation more profitable.

So ought we to stop working for two-rate reform? Heavens, no! Let's just be clear about what we're actually accomplishing. Dr. Steven Cord, for years the leading expert on two-rate reform, has never said anything less in his published work; he has always held that two-rate is the first step toward the goal of full collection of land rent by the community and abolition of taxes on wages and interest. (Whether most people listened when he said that is another matter.)

So, then, what about the other option for Georgist activists, 2) Something Else?

It has been argued that if we're really interested in the public collection of land rent, we ought to be lobbying for an increase in the capital gains tax, since the lion's share of so-called "capital gains" is actually land rent. (It is counter-argued, however, that land speculation won't be deterred by such a measure, since it collects the rent after the fact.) It has also been noted that green taxes, that seek to charge the social cost of pollution to the polluters (rather than to

the society at large) are also a form of public rent collection, since our common right to the earth includes a right to breathable air and nontoxic groundwater. And we can go on in this fashion, showing the vital importance of "the land question" to every social and economic problem you can think of. All this would argue for working to link our movement with other groups whose goals are (more or less) compatible with ours. And, many courageous and capable — and underfunded — Georgists have been working hard to do that.

Still, we have something absolutely vital to offer to all of those other movements. And some Georgists stand a zealous guard, lest in seeking "linkage" we dilute our message beyond recognition.

The fact is, we must educate people, because people don't understand what we're saying. So, the second option, the "Something Else" for Georgist activists, is education. In our movement, at this point in history, education IS activism.

Ah, but no sooner is that point is conceded (if it is!) than a whole new debate starts up about who we should educate. And here again we are offered two basic options: 1) Anybody Who Will Listen, and 2) Important and Influential People.

The Henry George School, in its traditional role of teaching general-knowledge courses based on Henry George's works, has often been criticized as being merely a "folk school" whose programs are ill-designed to reach the Powerful and Influential people we need to reach.

Indeed, the so-called traditional Henry George School program has not been consistently practiced at the HGS over the last 25 years. Various efforts to court the favor of Great Ones have been made by the School and by other organizations in that time, by commissioning research, underwriting scholarly conferences, etc. Although most of these efforts were sincere attempts to make headway by the efficient tactic of "teaching the teachers," nearly all of them became so compromised in their pursuit of academic respectability that they lost focus, becoming diffused and irrelevant.

Efforts to court academic respectability have not destroyed our movement, it's true, and have done some obvious good. Nevertheless, we'd do well to remember that in the late 60s the "folk school" program at the Henry George School saw over 600 students per year complete the *Fundamental Economics* course in classrooms, while each year some 600 more took the course by correspondence, in five languages, and the school maintained active extensions in 22 cities in North America. What might have happened, had that kind of momentum been allowed to continue through the 70s and 80s, rather than being cut off in a vain attempt to seek a more "influential" class of students?

Is being a "folk school" something bad? Not at all! Why have Great and Influential people not been willing to treat with us? Because we — gasp! — deign to teach political economy to working people? No, let's get it straight before we waste another twenty years: politicians and academics have ignored us because there was nothing in it for them — because there was no energized grass-roots constituency who understood the nature of land monopoly and called out for justice! And to establish such a constituency, a "folk school" is exactly, precisely what is called for.

TEACHERS' CORNER



by Lindy Davies

(continued from previous page) with the provoking thought that "If you want peace for yourself, you can have it, at any time.... Whether you are treated justly or not, you are a part of the being that is all humanity. Each person's joy is your joy. Each person's grief is your grief. You don't have to wait until you are treated justly to see this.... If you want peace for yourself, simply have it."