GEO-LIBERATARIANISM; ACROSS THE LEFT-RIGHT DIVIDE

Toward a World Governed by the Principles of Cooperative Individualism

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Thoughtful people can and do disagree over the extent to which government ought to be authorized to intervene in the behavior of and between individuals. The debate received intellectual depth from John Locke, who sparked the debate that is fundamental to the quest for the just society:

Do we possess natural rights? If so, what are our rights? Is natural law a just basis for positive law? Or, are natural laws merely descriptive rather than prescriptive? Locke offered his view:

“The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it which obliges every one; and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind who will but consult it that, being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions; …”

The deep problem for us today, is that the laws of the societies in which we live have their origins in a time when hierarchical privilege was an accepted norm and rights were defined for the defense of privilege. Bravely, Locke argued that as members of society we have the moral authority (if not the practical means) to rise up against those who exercise licence in violation of our liberty:

“The reason why men enter into society is the preservation of their property; …Whenever the legislators endeavor to take away and destroy the property of the people, or to reduce them to slavery under arbitrary power, they put themselves into a state of war with the people who are thereupon absolved from any further obedience…”

Even a superficial knowledge of human history reveals that few societies have escaped the establishment of hierarchical privilege, the origins of which are to be found wherever groups settled in one place and began to develop rules governing access to what nature provided to support life.

Fast forward to the sixteenth century and our forefathers began to migrate in large numbers.

In the emerging conflicts over territory and resources, the victors imposed their system of socio-political arrangements and institutions on the vanquished survivors. These systems – of law and taxation – encountered practical obstacles to enforcement, not the least of which were the vast, unsettled (unsettled by the newly-arrived invaders) lands beyond the established settlements.

An American historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, observed that in the process of settlement, conquering indigenous peoples and subduing nature, the attitudes and values of generations was forged:

“In this advance, the frontier is the outer edge of the wave – the meeting point between savagery and civilization.”

“The most significant thing about the American frontier is, that it lies at the hither edge of free land. …The stubborn American environment is there with its imperious summons to accept its conditions; the inherited ways of doing things are also there; and yet, in spite of environment, and in spite of custom, each frontier did indeed furnish a new field of opportunity, a gate of escape from the bondage of the past.”

And, it is from the centuries of frontier conflict and settlement that emerges the myths of rugged individualism, the deeply-held perspective that government is an instrument created to restrict the exercise of individual freedom, one such freedom claimed being the freedom to gain and retain ownership and control of nature, of land.

Such was the state of the world in which Henry George emerged as a profound observer and analyst of the human condition. And, by 1868, in his first published writing, an article titled “What the Railroad Will Bring Us,” young Henry George had already come to understand what the future held for most people:

“Increase in population and in wealth past a certain point means simply an approximation to the condition of older countries, the Eastern States and Europe. …[I]t is certain that the tendency of the new era -- the more dense population and more thorough development of the wealth of the State -- will be to a reduction both of the rate of interest and the rate of wages, particularly the latter.”

“We will have to deal, in time, with all the social problems that are forcing themselves on older communities, (like the riddles of a Sphinx, which not to answer is death) with one of them, the labor question, rendered peculiarly complex by our proximity to Asia. Public spirit, public virtue, the high resolve of men and women who are capable of feeling the "enthusiasm of humanity," will be needed in the future more than ever.”

The solution Henry George came to was deceptively simple: the public collection of the potential annual rental value of all locations as well as those land-like assets with a supply fixed by nature, such as the broadcast spectrum or even take-off and landing slots at airports.

Of course, Henry George went much further, calling for the elimination of the taxation of all capital goods, of the income earned by the use of capital goods or from labor employed in the production of goods or delivery of services. Further, he argued the case against tariffs, quotas and other restraints of trade but with a warning:

“[T]hat violation of natural rights which imposes tariff duties is inseparably linked with that violation of natural rights which compels the masses to pay tribute for the privilege of living. The one cannot be abolished without the other. …”

All around the world, others began to pay attention. The rising tide of resentment against the tyranny, despotism, colonialism, imperialism and social Darwinism of the 19th century included many leading figures. Thomas Paine’s plan detailed in *Agrarian Justice* set the bar for others committed to ending hierarchical privilege. As Lincoln wrote: “Labor is prior to, and independent of, capital. Capital is only the fruit of labor, and could never have existed if labor had not first existed. Labor is the superior of capital, and deserves much the higher consideration.”

Marx agreed, but argued this would require an uprising by “the proletariat” to take control of the means of production. Yet, from Marx came a good deal of accurate observations, including: “The oppressed are allowed once every few years to decide which particular representatives of the oppressing class are to represent and repress them.”

Surrounding Henry George as the momentum of the Single Tax movement rose and fell, were many people attracted to the man, Henry George, because of his strong, moral character. However, the political world into which George by necessity was thrown made him both friend and opponent of worker and capitalist interests. George offered all equality of opportunity; what they all pursued was special status under law.

Without Henry George’s presence after his death in October of 1897, the movement he initiated splintered and quickly disappeared as a counter to the mass appeal of democratic- or the more extreme state-socialism, or the reactionary attachment to ultra-conservative strains of social-Darwinism. The Left-Right ideological framework that has dominated public discourse ever since took over. Single-taxers found themselves marginalized and essentially ignored.

Rising to a position of influence in the surviving Single Tax movement, Max Hirsch took on the job of explaining what Socialism would mean to people if adopted. In 1904 he spoke to large audiences brought together in the Athenaeum Hall in Melbourne. He had come to the conclusion that Socialism presented huge risks to the liberty of the individual.

For the first three decades of the twentieth century, surviving Single Taxers struggled for standing in the political realm of country after country. By 1909, Henry George’s work in Ireland was forgotten as Irish leaders focused all their energy on Home Rule. In Australia, Labour held power. Robert Donald, editor of the Daily Chronicle, in a letter to the movement’s principal financier, Joseph Fels, described the result:

“Its policy generally is a kind of mongrel Socialism combined with the most hopeless conservatism. The Party, as a party, profess no particular fiscal faith, but at the same time are strongly protectionist. They profess to believe in the nationalization of the land, and at the same time hold to the old lunacy that the nationalization of machinery is equally essential.”

Australian Single Taxers had reason for hope when, in 1904, Joseph Carruthers became Premier, remaining until 1907. Labour won the 1910 federal election and introduced a land tax in an effort to break up large estates and encourage small-scale farming.

Australians elected Edward Craigie, an independent, a free trader, and a land taxer, to the South Australia House of Assembly in 1930, serving several terms until defeated in 1941. Liberals and Labour members paid little attention to his efforts to put single tax theories into legislative form.

The movement in the United States was, perhaps, the most divided over ideological principles as well as how to achieve even a modest degree of success. Those still committed to challenging the existing political party dominance met in New York City during June 1919 to found a national Single Tax Party. A year later the party offered its slate of candidates for election to the nation’s highest offices.

Others disdained political activism in favor of public education and began to self-describe themselves as “Georgists” rather than “Single Taxers.” In 1914, Oscar Geiger urged the creation of Reading Circles, attracting individuals who would begin with various Single Tax readings. It took until 1932 for his vision to evolve into the founding of the Henry George School of Social Science.

In the United States, the school found a receptive and growing audience within the remnant of classic liberals, such as Francis Neilson and Albert Jay Nock. A dedicated Single Taxer turned Georgist named Frank Chodorov fully embraced Geiger’s campaign to establish Henry George Schools everywhere possible. In an issue of Land and Freedom (successor to the The Single Tax Review) in 1935, Chodorov challenged Georgists to take responsibility for the survival of the movement.

“The task is yours. It is not a question of ‘what are we going to do about it?’ but ‘what am I going to do about it?’ The problem is an individual one, and its solution is directly dependent upon, and in exact ratio to, the effort and ability of every one who has acquired a knowledge of Henry George to spread this knowledge. Do not wait for somebody else. Do not waste time in praying for a leader. Progress and Poverty is your guide, Henry George is your inspiration, and you are the disciple on whom the mantle has fallen. Go forth into the highways and the by-ways and teach the gospel of economic liberty.”

Two years later, Frank Chodorov was appointed Director of the Henry George School in New York City. With the expanding influence of communist ideology among intellectuals as well as workers disenchanted with The American System, Chodorov saw Georgism as the only credible response. In the February 1938 issue of The Freeman he wrote:

“Democracy – this is the ideal to hold up to youth. But a real democracy. Not one identical with the laissez-faire doctrine of the last century, the doctrine of robbery within the law made by the robbers. Rather, the democracy of a fair field and no favor. Economic democracy.”

Chodorov was forced to resign during the Second World War. A pacifist, his views ran counter to the majority of those who served as trustees of the school, sensitive to any criticism of not being sufficiently patriotic. Over the next twenty-five years his writing focused less and less on the philosophy of Henry George and mainly on individualism.

This individualist contingent existed within the Georgist ranks but was growing elsewhere as a result of anti-statists who embraced quite divergent views on almost all matters relating to the limits to freedom. One of the most influential writers was the German professor of economics and sociology, Franz Oppenheimer, who emigrated to the United States in 1938. Three years later he became one of the co-founders of the American Journal of Economics and Sociology and frequent contributor to The Freeman until his death in 1943. Franz Oppenheimer certainly admired and respected Henry George. However, he had his own solution to the land problem, as explained in a 1948 article:

“The land monopoly can be broken. All that is needed is to stop the proletarian migration from the rural districts into the cities by offering the foot-loose people much better chances in the country itself. This can be done by creating agricultural co-operative settlements of the type this writer created in Germany – settlements which were acknowledged to be an unqualified success by the pre-Hitler German government.”

Headquartered in New York City, the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation and the Henry George School had board members, directors, teachers and students who were in some way intellectually involved in the dynamic cross-fertilization of ideologies that blossomed there.

New York City became home to Alisa Rosenbaum, who escaped from Bolshevik Russia in 1926, changing her name to Ayn Rand. Her first successful novel, The Fountainhead, was published in 1943. And, in 1957, her fame as an intellectual of the Right was secured with publication of Atlas Shrugged. Reviewing Atlas Shrugged in 1960, the stalwart individualist Georgist Oscar Johannsen wrote:

“The book is a brilliant, fighting defense of the dignity of the individual and of private enterprise. …This is not to say that she is without faults. …Unfortunately, Miss Rand suffers from the same misconception of the rulership of the world that Plato, the socialists and the libertarians have. All of them believe that the mass of people must be led by some ruling intelligentsia.”

Oscar Johannsen (an electrical engineer), Sydney Mayer (an attorney) and Jack Schwartzman (an attorney and professor of English literature), formed a Georgist cadre of surviving individualists huddled in New York. Jack Schwartzman’s world view is aptly expressed in a brief article he wrote appearing in a 1964 issue of Fragments:

“But what are morals, health and safety except personal concepts? Only the individual can ever determine their meaning. No ‘absolute’ power can do so. Does it mean, therefore, that there are no absolutes in the universe? Far from it! The cosmos is regulated by inexorable natural laws. Adherence to them would – of necessity – cause each person to act in harmony with absolute morality and hygiene.”

To Professor Schwartzman, natural law is both descriptive and prescriptive. In his usage, he adheres to the same logic as did Henry George, that the natural law is also the moral law.

When Frank Chodorov died in 1966, a long list of individualist, conservative and libertarian intellectuals reflected on Chodorov’s importance to the development of their own thinking. One of these was, in fact, a family friend, William F. Buckley, Jr. In Buckley’s remembrance of Chodorov, he conveyed Chodorov’s concerns over what was happening – as he saw it – within the community of people who continued to claim Henry George as their guiding light:

“One cannot truly understand George, he once remarked, without understanding his antipathy to socialism. But George’s most modern exegetes, he feared, were disposed to traduce George, to put his social philosophy at the service of the state. And it was the centralized state that Frank Chodorov was born, and lived, to oppose.”

Fast forward to the year 2000. Interviewed about his latest book, Buckley responded to a caller who asked:

“I’ve heard you describe yourself as a Georgist, a follower of Henry George, but I haven’t heard much in having you promote land value taxation and his theories, and I’m wondering why that is the case.”

To which Buckley responded:

“It's mostly because I'm beaten down by my right-wing theorists and intellectual friends. They always find something wrong with the Single-Tax idea.”

“Anyway I've run into tons of situations where I think the Single-Tax theory would be applicable. We should remember also this about Henry George, he was sort of co-opted by the socialists in the 20s and the 30s, but he was not one at all. Alfred J. Nock's book on him makes that plain. Plus, also, he believes in only that tax. He believes in zero income tax.”

Browse through the various Georgist publications during the heightened period of anti-communism and one finds many views expressed that are anti-statist. Individualist Georgists embraced the sentiment expressed by Benjamin Franklin:

“Those who would give up essential Liberty, to purchase a little temporary Safety, deserve neither Liberty nor Safety.”

At the end of 1980, an article by Robert V. Andelson titled “Neo-Georgism and the Quest for Justice” appeared in Land & Liberty. Andelson, a professor of philosophy, made the case that Henry George’s fiscal reform was the most practical path to realization of the libertarian objective of the minimal state. However, Andelson suggested that accepting the term “Georgist” as descriptive of one’s belief system implied full agreement with all that George put forward. His own perspectives were better described, he said, as “Neo-Georgist.”

Andelson’s article was followed in 1981 by a second article written in support of Geo-Libertarianism, this one by Fred Foldvary, by then a member of the Libertarian Party in California. He explained to readers what distinguished Libertarians from most persons who described themselves as Georgists:

“To reconcile libertarianism to Georgism, we must return to the basic premises of libertarianism: that each individual has dominion over his own life, equal to that of others, and that the sole function of government is to secure the right of an individual to be free from the coercion of others. …”

“Geo-libertarians recognize that a tax on production is a blight on production, whereas a payment for the use of natural resources is a just compensation to humanity for the privilege of using part of our equal natural heritage. Moreover, the social inequalities arising from the private appropriation of ground rent can cause, and have caused, the destruction of the liberty libertarians cherish.”

As others self-described themselves as a Single Taxer, a Georgist, Neo-Georgist or Geo-Libertarian, I wondered what term Henry George might be comfortable with describing his moral philosophy. And, then, in the summer of 1988 I attended the annual conference of the Council of Georgist Organizations. One of the speakers was historian Paul Gaston. His topic was the origin and history of the intentional community of Fairhope, Alabama, the co-founder of which, Ernest Gaston, was his grandfather:

“E.B. Gaston came to what he called ‘cooperative individualism’ out of his original advocacy of a Bellamy-like socialist colony and his subsequent experience with the Populist Party. … [He] was searching for that elusive balance between unfettered individualism (which he regarded as the great curse of his time) and excessive community control.”

Cooperative Individualism, it seemed to me, was the one phrase that best described what Henry George was after. In my own writing about Henry George I began to describe him as one of the key architects of the philosophy of cooperative individualism. In 1997 I took the next step, establishing the online project, the School of Cooperative Individualism. These principles achieve, I believe, what Neo-Georgists and Geo-Libertarians have sought: the securing of individual liberty within a cooperative societal framework. Cooperative Individualism asserts:

That, all persons share the same species-specific characteristics and have a similar need for the goods (e.g., adequate food, clothing, shelter, nurturing, medical care, education, leisure, culture and civic involvement) for a decent human existence.

That, we join together in society to enhance our ability to acquire such goods and for our mutual benefit and enjoyment.

That, the source of the material goods necessary for our survival is the earth, equal access to which is the birthright of all persons, as is the full enjoyment of what individuals produce therefrom.

That, liberty is the basis for moral human behavior, inherent in which is the constraint that such behavior in no way infringes on the liberty of others.

That human behavior falls outside the realm of liberty and within the realm of criminal license when such behavior violates the liberty of others.

That, the orderly functioning of society requires the granting to individuals of licenses that distribute privileges not enjoyed by others. To the extent such licenses come to have exchange value in the marketplace, this value is acknowledged to be societally-created. Justice requires, therefore, that society collect this value as a fund for equal distribution to all members of society and/or for societal expenditures democratically agreed upon; and

That, a society is just the extent to which liberty is fully realized, equality of opportunity prevails, criminal license is appropriately penalized, the full exchange value of economic licenses is collected for distribution and/or societal use, and the wealth produced by one’s individual labor (directly, or indirectly, with the assistance of capital goods) is protected as one’s naturally rightful property and not subject to taxation or other forms of confiscation.

I end here, with an observation about the United States of America by Martin Luther King, Jr.

“This country has socialism for the rich, rugged individualism for the poor.”