

Georgism and Liberty - Objective Truth

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Some months ago I received, from Steven Cord, President of the Henry George Foundation, a copy of a letter he wrote you concerning land ownership, and your printed reply. I would like to offer several points that deserve consideration, from those who value liberty as well as from those who value justice.

To my mind the heart of the matter rests solidly on objective moral principles, which serve as the basis for all human law and require opposition to moral relativism. For relativism, when combined with democracy, suggests that whatever rules acquire the consent of a majority are just. On the other hand, objective morality suggests a better benchmark. The overwhelming majority of people ought to have an equal opportunity to obtain the goods of a decent human existence. This includes adequate clothing, shelter, education, medical care, leisure, and culture. One is hardpressed to identify any society that meets this objective test of justice.

When Henry George clearly understood, as did Thomas Paine before him, is that the opportunity to apply one's labor to the earth is essential to the survival of any individual, for this labor is how property is legitimately acquired, even in the simplest of producer economies. In an exchange oriented economy, some of this legitimate property goes by the name "wealth."

When any group of people claims a portion of the earth as its own it grants to itself what John Locke tentatively called a "privilege," to the exclusion of all outsiders. In great measure history is the warfare between different groups who compete for control over the same portions of earth. The victorious group then issues titles to an even more privileged few who use them to extract wealth from everybody else — those who need sanctioned access to land in order to live, if only because a lifetime of floating in thin air is such a difficult trick!

Paine saw through this system and declared that justice requires that any recipient of a license to monopolize nature pay a "ground rent" as determined by the pricing mechanisms of a market economy, to everybody else, everywhere, for this privilege.

Henry George built on that insight and added that the confiscation of the wealth an individual produces is theft, is unjust, and ought not be permitted, both when that confiscation occurs at the hands of private landlords and is called "rent," and when this confiscation occurs at the hands of the state and is called "taxation."

Paine and George espoused very specific theories of value and property. Natural property comes from labor; unnatural property comes about when the group distributes privileges that interfere with the distribution of natural rights in one's own production. The value most important in a discussion of property is exchange value, because my property is my wealth to the extent to which other people are willing to give of their natural property or labor in exchange for it. The time, energy, and material that goes into the production of an item of property is immaterial to its exchange value.

Now I can answer the question that Mr. Amador directed at Mr. Cord. No, we cannot own nature. But after we have compensated all others for the monopoly privilege we have been granted to extract wealth from natural resource lands or to build a home or business on a site with locational value, we have satisfied our moral obligations to one another. The minerals we extract, the trees or crops we harvest, the fees we extract from tenants, the money we earn from commerce in which we engage or from the occupants of the buildings we've constructed—all are our natural property—acquired by our physical and mental labor, the labor of persons in our employ, and the capital goods (tools) employed in that task. A fundamental injustice is perpetrated, a human right is denied, when any of these earned goods or their monetary value is taken from us by coercion.