

## Henry George and Cooperative Individualism

By EDWARD J. DODSON

We are all born with an instinctive moral sense of right and wrong, nurtured from birth by those around us, and by society. Nature and nurture combine in some fashion to give each person a sense of self. Some accept the status quo. Some find refuge as "true believers" in hierarchical and rigid socio-religious-political collectives. Some are unable to cope and withdraw passively. Some, like me, are drawn to research, seeking universal first principles that perfect our moral sense of right and wrong. I found these principles in the philosophy of Henry George.

Henry George is often described as a "self-taught" political economist because he had no college training and did not attend classes with other students in pursuit of a degree. Instead, he embarked on a journey of skeptical research and discovery of his own design. What distances George from other economists is an "intangible" — he acquired a deeper (and to my satisfaction) a truer sense of right and wrong. Henry George saw more clearly than most others truths which he reasoned to be self-evident. His contribution to political economy (economics), important as it is, must be relegated to a subordinate position — second to his moral philosophy.

Political economy had always been a tool of the moral philosopher. However, by the time Henry George became a public figure, the modern era of specialization was already well under way. The military-industrial State, engaged in acquisitive adventures of an ever-expanding scale, required a cadre of technicians trained in the arts of planning and production. Success on the battlefield required that the State know what resources were available and how best to command their production and distribution. Modern economics serves this mission. The universities of today are funded to recruit and train people in economics to meet the needs of the State.

Although a Georgist global movement developed during his lifetime and after his death, involving tens of thousands of followers, such movement was irrelevant to the real struggle of the times — that between the industrial-landlord statists and the socialistic statists. Only a few of George's supporters grasped and accepted the essence of the moral principles

espoused by George. Most of them (but not all) were captivated by George's revelation that the cause of poverty was monopolistic privilege which could be eradicated by practical, financial measures. Moral issues were seldom discussed.

Among those whose thinking was influenced by Henry George was Ernest B. Gaston, an Iowa newspaperman who pulled together a small group of idealistic reformers and headed south to establish the community of Fairhope on the Alabama coast of Mobile Bay.

Gaston believed that communities must be constructed on the basis of justice. He used the term "cooperative individualism" to describe the ideals upon which Fairhope was founded. Historian Paul Gaston (grandson of E. B. Gaston) wrote to me some years ago that E. B. Gaston wanted to organize a "Bellamy-like socialist colony," with the collection of ground rents on land parcels as one of the key principles of the colony. (By the way, Henry George was NOT a socialist.) However, later generations of the founding families exhibited less and less interest in the Georgist ideals of their ancestors, and new arrivals sought nothing more than a comfortable existence and steady employment.

Yet, this term — "cooperative individualism" — struck me as the very essence of the moral principles espoused by Henry George. I adopted the term as my own. My quest was fully to identify and refine the principles of cooperative individualism, an effort that took the form of a course ("The Search for the Just Society"), which I developed and taught at the Henry George School in Philadelphia.

Drafting, discussing, and refining the statement of the principles over the last seven or eight years has often caused me to think of Thomas Paine and his commitment to truth in the face of unrelenting opposition. These are the principles I believe Paine and George would accept and defend. I have, in fact, described Paine as the "architect of cooperative individualism," even though he never used these words to describe his moral principles.

Here is a list of these principles — which I fully endorse.

1) All persons need adequate food, clothing, shelter, nurturing, medical

care, leisure, culture, and civic involvement for a decent human existence.

- 2) All persons must form a "society" to fulfill the satisfaction of such needs.
- 3) The source of the material goods necessary for human survival is the earth, equal access to which is the birthright of all persons, as is the full enjoyment of what individuals produce thereon.
- 4) Liberty is the basis for human moral behavior, provided that such liberty in no way infringes on the liberty of others.
- 5) When human behavior violates the liberty of others, such behavior falls within the realm of criminal license.
- 6) Orderly functioning of society requires the granting to individuals of licenses that distribute privileges not enjoyed by others. To the extent that 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.
- 7) A society is *just* to the extent to which liberty is fully realized, where equality of opportunity prevails, and where criminal acts are appropriately penalized. In a just society, the full exchange 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.

In 1997, I committed myself to teach these principles, and founded an internet-based educational project called The School of Cooperative Individualism. I invite the readers of *FRAGMENTS* to visit there often. I ask them the following question: Was Paine's torch of cooperative individualism lifted from the ground by Henry George — and its flame restored? Please reply.