

REVIEW OF THE BOOK:

Land & Liberty: Henry George and the Crafting of Modern Liberalism

By Christopher William England

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Reviewed by Edward J. Dodson / April 2023

What follows is less a review of Christopher England's book than what I find to be some of the more important factual information he provides to readers. As someone who has written similarly and for almost fifty years lectured on Henry George's life, his system of political economy and about many of those who fought with him (and against him) in the campaign for social and economic justice, this book covered very familiar territory. And yet, there were important surprises provided by the author's in-depth research. This is a book that is accessible to readers who possess little or no knowledge of who Henry George was or what he tried to accomplish. Those who already have a long association with the author's subjects will, I am certain, find that the book strengthens their appreciation for the role played by George and those who followed in his footsteps seeking to change the course of history.

Christopher England begins his story with a succinct but appropriate description of how quickly the promise of *The American System* had disappeared from the time Alexis de Tocqueville had toured the new nation and Henry George's arrival in New York City from California in 1880. However, when on the first page of the introduction he introduces readers to the term "rent" he takes a huge leap of faith that readers will understand he is not referring to the monthly payment one might make leasing an apartment or residential property from another person or entity.

Our author then lays the foundational groundwork to explain how the mission for social and economic progress initiated by Henry George was overtaken by ostensibly more radical calls for the dismantling of republican forms of governance and the elimination of the private ownership of nature and capital goods. As he introduces readers to Henry George's remedy for the problems caused by the concentrated control over nature, his choice of words introduces a potential analytical inconsistency:

"A tax on the full rental value would cause land to lose all value, creating a situation analogous to government leasing." [p.3]

What will fall to zero is not the *value* of land but its *potential selling price*. If price is, as economic theory argues, the capitalization of an income stream, then the public capture of land's full potential rental value leaves no income stream to be capitalized. What Henry George sought to bring before the public was the moral argument that land and all natural assets are not commodities to be bought and sold. Land and natural assets rightfully belong to all, as does whatever amount in rent a given location would yield to the community or society when offered under a leasehold arrangement.

Henry George lived during a period of rapid change in how people lived and obtained a livelihood. In countries where most or all of the land was held by a privileged rentier class, rural regions became depopulated and cities overcrowded. Millions of people left their countries of birth hoping to find opportunity for a better life. What most discovered who came to the western hemisphere or other thinly-populated but Europeanized parts of the globe was that most of the better land was already taken. Those unwilling or unable to engage in sharecropping or tenant farming found themselves trapped in the industrializing urban environments. They simply traded one form of sharecropping or tenant farming for the urban equivalent – the tenement house landlord. The promise of the democratic

republic founded by rebellion against British subjugation had dramatically weakened. As Henry George observed, with great industrial and technological progress came worsening poverty:

“With more workers crowded in unsanitary urban conditions, Americans were on average shorter and sicker, with lower life expectancies, that belied the promises of industrial progress.” [p.18]

Henry George’s rise out of obscurity as a journalist in California into a leading figure in the struggle to rid republican democracy of destructive privilege is an important part of the story told here by Christopher England. George’s test market for his insights was Ireland. The Irish peasant population had a long history with the rack-renting demands of absentee landlords. Historian Cecil Woodham Smith provided the details in her books *The Reason Why* (1953) and *The Great Hunger: Ireland, 1845-1849* (1962). When the Irish radical Michael Davitt publicly embraced Henry George’s program, George almost immediately acquired a huge following by those who themselves or their parents or grandparents had been forced to leave Ireland to escape the despotism of land monopoly. “In 1881,” writes Christopher England, “George published *The Irish Land Question* to weave together the cause of Irish home rule and land nationalization.” [p.54] When George returned home from an 1882 trip to Ireland as correspondent for the *Irish World* he was warmly embraced as “a famous freedom fighter.”

In the long history of political economy as a basis for scientific investigation, our author points to Anne Robert Jacques Turgot and his fellow Physiocrats as sources of intellectual credibility to which George’s own independent analysis was attached. Locke and Smith could also be pointed to as sympathetic. Leading figures within the generation of American revolutionaries were students of physiocratic doctrine. Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours eventually arrived to establish a family dynasty in the new state of Delaware. In *Agrarian Justice*, Thomas Paine left for future generations to consider what was the most comprehensive statement in defense of equality of opportunity produced during the eighteenth century. Many other writers argued similarly, but the defenders of the status quo had their own cadre of intellectuals, none more accommodating than Thomas Malthus.

David Ricardo, on the other hand, provided Henry George with a scientific explanation for the inevitable concentration of wealth wherever landed property was introduced. John Stuart Mill later came up with the term *unearned increment* “to describe how idle landlords profited from the rising value of land.” [p.13] George came along at exactly the right time in a United States of America where, as Frederick Jackson Turner recorded, the frontier was now closed. Turner “argued that the disappearance of free land in the West would undermine the traditional foundations of American democracy.” [p.21] The opportunity for the landless to easily become a member of the propertied class was if not closed was fast disappearing.

As Christopher England reminds readers, the situation in the United States was worsened by the continued existence of an enslaved population working for “the southern planter class.” Reconstruction after the end of the Civil War only temporarily alleviated Black landlessness. Additionally, a large number of immigrants ended up living and working in company towns, more or less enslaved. Henry George’s America was certainly a work in progress with huge problems to overcome. Christopher England quotes George as someone who still had great hope for the young republic:

“I love the American Republic not for what it is but for what it was intended to be, and for what in fullest measure it yet may be made.” [p.23]

We are provided with considerable insight into the development of Henry George's thinking, his efforts at self-education as he accumulated a large personal library, and how his observations of real world dynamics caused him to refine and even change his views. This was apparent in what he wrote about the immigration of people to the United States he initially thought could not be assimilated within the dominant European-American culture. And, as Christopher England explains, George challenged the assertions made by the leading lights of political economy and philosophy, not just Malthus but Herbert Spencer. George not only saw what the American Republic could be, he saw how cities could become centers of lives well lived – for every resident. The key was to rid society of the private appropriation of rent. If the nationalization of all land proved to be politically impossible, then the next best solution was to collect rent via taxation. A new social dynamic would result:

“Land rents would constantly grow with the progress of society, offering ever-larger resources with which to provide citizens with the intellectual tools to engage constructively in shaping public policy. The expropriation of rent would allow the state to encourage the lifelong education necessary for a vital republic ...” [p.44]

The state envisioned by Henry George was governed by laws that sought the just balance between rights to property and basic human rights. In a lecture I attended many years ago, the historian Paul Gaston, son of one of the founding members of the single tax enclave of Fairhope on Mobile Bay in Alabama, made reference to the community's founding principles as those of *cooperative individualism*. This phrase, I believe, aptly captures what Henry George argued for. From my perspective, George's cooperative individualism ...

“... salvaged liberalism by modernizing it. Under his guidance, a tradition of land reform designed to promote yeoman farmers became the redistribution of rent to fund a modern welfare state.” [p.51]

We are reminded that in 1886 Henry George was offered the unique opportunity to potentially establish a *best practice in governance* for the world to observe. He agreed to stand for election to the office of Mayor of New York City. The votes counted (or at least some of the votes counted), Henry George finished second to the favored Democrat, Abram Hewitt. In this election campaign, Henry George was put forward as a champion of labor, of the working man, in what was essentially a class struggle. But, labor was increasingly turning to socialism and away from George's ideals of cooperative individualism:

“After 1886, George's movement changed drastically. As its working-class support dwindled, it was reinvented as the 'single-tax' movement, using anti-tax sentiment to appeal to the liberal middle class. It abandoned independent politics for the Democratic Party.” [p.75]

The next year, George was soundly defeated in a bid to become Secretary of State of New York. George and his supporters then campaigned for and helped bring about the adoption of the secret ballot. Working for such reforms, they hoped, “would democratize the nation and undermine the corrupt machines that stood in their way.” [p.76] Not until 1897 would George again agree to seek elected office. Within the revamped movement, Henry George now shared the public stage with others more committed to tax reform than to land nationalization. As Christopher England explains, George pragmatically accepted the inevitability of incremental reforms:

“While he suggested that a land value tax could be effected at the time, he also offered a variety of alternatives to regressive tariffs on consumer goods. In *Protection or Free Trade*, he proposed printing paper money to fund the government. He discussed income and inheritance taxes.”[p.78]

Political strategy within Henry George’s circle fell to Tom L. Johnson, elected as a Democrat to the U.S. House of Representatives. And Johnson “redoubled his efforts to make free trade the primary issue of the 1892 election.”[p.79] Using their franking privilege to send out mail to constituents, Johnson and five others mailed out over one million copies of *Protection or Free Trade*. What occurred at the Single Tax Conference of 1893 confirmed that George’s macroeconomic social mission was not embraced by many single taxers, who, George believed, were “swayed by what George characterized as ‘a strong tendency to anarchism’.”[p.81] Increasingly dismayed, George was now convinced that change would come only as each individual came to “correct thought” and not by any “collective action.”

George was not alone in reaching this conclusion. Others recognized the need for sustained, public education. However, by the 1890s the formal teaching of classical political economy was being replaced in colleges and universities around the world by specialized programs in the social sciences. Few were those who acquired academic credentials willing to attach their reputations and futures to an analysis coming from a journalist with no formal education. George decided the best use of his remaining years was to lift political economy back up to its rightful place. He began work on what would be his final book, *The Science of Political Economy*. His death, prior to completion and publication of the book, meant that whatever challenges there would be to the new economics would be coming from those who saw private property capitalism as the enemy of social progress. Henry George did not see this coming. As Christopher England writes:

“George, for his part, died confident that he has inspired ‘movements whose practical success is only a matter of time’.”[p.93]

The author follows the activities of individuals who after Henry George’s death dedicated themselves to some or all of the reform measures George had proposed. Tom L. Johnson takes center stage after he is elected Mayor of Cleveland, Ohio in 1901. Johnson recruited the attorney Frederic C. Howe and Newton D. Baker to support his efforts to make city government responsive to true public interests. Single taxers were in the mix as candidates for local, state and federal offices. One, Lucius Garvin was elected Governor of Rhode Island in 1902. Baker became Mayor of Cleveland in 1911 and in 1932 almost became the Democratic Party’s nominee for President of the United States. However, during the first two decades of the twentieth century, journalism served to keep the single tax cause alive:

“Six months after George died, Tom Johnson funded the new journal, edited by Louis and Alice Post, *The Public: A Journal of Democracy*.”[p.124]

As Christopher England tells us, “*The Public* placed single-tax- thought within the broader context of democratic movements.”[p.125] Contributions appeared regularly from correspondents around the world. *The Public* reprinted articles, sermons, and speeches on every issue of concern to the body politic. For the better part of two years now, I have been going through the weekly issues of *The Public*, pulling out editorials and articles and adding them to the School of Cooperative Individualism’s “Biographical History of the Georgist Movement” archive. Signed articles by Louis F. Post and the long list of other contributors are brought together as they appeared chronologically to reveal the reaction of

single taxers, land value taxers and others who were written about in the pages of *The Public*. This is a work in progress with nearly a decade of issues still to be worked on. *The Public* is a treasure trove of material for historians.

Personal sacrifice on the part of many single taxers and fully-immersed Georgists is described throughout this book. As Christopher England documents, “Georgists often paid a heavy price for their beliefs.”[p.139] They were in a very real sense running against the wind. “*The Public* asked, ‘What is it that leads men to brave the scorn, the hate, the persecution of mankind?’ It answered: ‘The servants of Truth are paid by the knowledge of the Truth, for them alone is it given to know the good from the bad, the right way from the wrong.’”[p.139] There were still members of the movement’s second generation of leaders active when I first learned there was something called the Georgist movement back in 1980.

The remainder of Christopher England’s book records the disappearance from public memory of what Henry George and his followers had undertaken over roughly a half century. By the time the world fell into the depression of the 1930s, the macroeconomic solutions Georgists proposed were no longer even seriously discussed. Land values and land prices were rolling back after the orgy of speculation that characterized the 1920s. Thousands of banks failed. Those who argued against government intervention gave ground to those who recognized that *The American System* was at the brink of collapse. The arguments made by British economist John Maynard Keynes were finding a receptive audience. From within the Georgist community, “John Dewey, and a council of old-timer Georgists such as Jackson Ralston and William O’Ren”[p.256] became vocal opponents of the more invasive New Deal programs, most importantly the National Recovery Administration. Others, such as Albert Jay Nock, laid the intellectual groundwork for an individualist expression of Georgist principles:

“In his seminal attack on the New Deal, *Our Enemy, the State* (1935), Nock used the theories of the Georgist sociologist Franz Oppenheimer (father of the Israeli kibbutzim) to validate his ideas that the democratic state should be resisted if it fell short of George’s ideals.”[p.258]

The book’s final chapter makes clear that while there exists today little more than a remnant community of like-minded individuals who have found inspiration from reading and studying the works of Henry George and many of those highlighted in this book, the ideas continue to generate interest, support, acceptance and real world implementation. “George’s economics have likely stood the test of time better than his politics,”[p.270] concludes Christopher England.

I concur with the comment made on the book’s jacket by Jonathan Levy that: “With this excellent book, the Georgists have finally found the talented, sympathetic-yet-critical historian they have long deserved.” At the same time, there is another part of the story that deserves similar coverage. There were those who agreed with the conclusion reached by George that just societies would only come about when a general understanding of what justice requires existed. Their answer was the founding of the Henry George School of Social Science (HGS) in 1932. HGS, its affiliates and sister educational organizations were reaching tens of thousands of people each year well into the 1960s. Enrollments then dropped dramatically as other opportunities for advanced education became available at community and state-funded colleges and universities. Although the Henry George Schools offer classroom education in only a few surviving locations, technology now makes it possible to reach an ever-growing audience from the school’s headquarters in New York City. There is also valuable work being done by other organizations comprising a vibrant and active Georgist community.

