

The Georgist Journal

Number 55

Spring 1987

WHY SOCIALISM AND NOT GEORGISM?

Guest Editorial

Not long after my initial study of Henry George's works, I began to wonder why it was that the Georgists had not been successful in capturing the reform elements that were predominant in the Progressive era. This did not occur, not in the United States, in England, or even in Ireland. I have researched this question at some length from the standpoint of the demise of classical political economy. Recently, however, I found what might be closer to the underlying reason in a book written in 1944 by George Bernard Shaw. In a chapter of Everybody's Political What's What on "The Land Question," Shaw offers some insights into the rise of Socialism.

"When a landless man," he writes, "agrees to take a plot from a landlord at so much a year, he does so voluntarily on his own initiative, content if he can make the sort of living he is accustomed to out of it, and thinking it as natural to pay for his land as for his umbrella. He does not understand the land question, and often looks forward to becoming a land proprietor himself; for there is always land enough in the market for people with money enough to buy it. Even if the purchaser has not money enough he can still purchase land and borrow the price on mortgage."

Shaw goes on to note that early political economists knew the difference between land and an umbrella. The Physiocrats proposed a single tax on land - which was laughed at by Voltaire who said that it would leave the "rent" of capital untouched. A century later, Henry George revived the idea in his book Progress and Poverty. "But by that time, the land question had developed into a capital question of such magnitude that Voltaire's criticism was stronger than ever." The economists became less than candid about rent.

The Frenchman Pierre Proudhon and the Englishman John Ruskin blamed both landlord and capitalist as inflicting "precisely the same injury on the community as a thief does." The Socialist movement arose "advocating the organization of industry by the State for the benefit of the whole people."

These observations by Shaw shows wherein lies the difficulty of our political reality. The wealthy landed were quick to become owners of capital where they could. The new capitalists were quick to become landed where they could. The two groups - one inherently productive, the other inherently monopolistic and privileged - are so intertwined that as a class they are indistinguishable. In the parlance of today's reformist creed, the object of scorn is now "big business" against which we must protect the "small farmer." Real success will come to us only as our brethren give more than lip service to the justice inherent in recognizing that the earth is the birthright of all mankind.

- Edward J. Dodson
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