

The Challenge to Georgism

The author of this inspiring article, RAYMOND HAMMOND, of Jackson, Tennessee, has furnished the following thumbnail autobiography at our request:

"My economics professor in college introduced me to Georgism. He gave me the announcement of the free course in fundamental economics when I showed some interest in Progress and Poverty, which was mentioned briefly in the textbook we used. With much skepticism (I refused to buy a book from the school thinking you were just trying to sell books) I took the course; argued with the instructor on every lesson; was converted on the tenth lesson. Since then (1938) I have been constantly reexamining George's philosophy in the light of present day events and still consider his analysis to be correct; his solution, sound.

"I live and work in a typical Southern town. As an employee of a cotton buyer and shipper, I aid Southern landlords collect rent. (Ninety per cent of the checks we write to farmers for cotton are divided, one-third to landlord, two-thirds to tenant.)

"I am twenty-six, married, have a small boy and girl. Wanted to name the boy Henry George but was overruled by wife. She says she hears the name often enough as it is."

* IN 1812, DURING THE violent earthquakes which formed Reelfoot Lake in the northeast corner of Tennessee, it is said that the Mississippi River ran backwards for twenty-four hours. Where one day a virgin forest flourished, almost overnight a good sized lake appeared as a result of the quake.

Today our American economy is undergoing something not unlike that earthquake. The steady flow of goods and services has been stopped by the heavy hand of government and sent plunging into uncharted paths. It is futile, for the purposes of this discussion, to point out that this is a man-made earthquake and therefore preventable. The point is: the quake is here. We can hear the rumbling. We can feel the trembling. The stream of American economy which surged at flood stage in 1928 and dwindled to a trickle in 1932 is leaving the old channel.

What significance has this for Georgism? Let us carry the analogy a little further.

Georgists have always respected the force and strength

of the river; they recognized its power. But they disliked the narrow man-made channel which hampered the free flow, producing floods during some years and allowing only a feeble stream in other years. They believed that the dykes of law and custom should be removed so that the river would flow back into its natural channel. However, the fear of the inhabitants of any change and the vested interest in the dykes prevented any real action.

So much for the analogy. Its meaning suggests itself at once. Now, if this is a true picture, what can we do about it?

The social upheaval, which we call World War II, is in itself destructive and productive of no good thing. To say that it is a terrific jolt to our economy is putting it mildly. However, as a by-product of this war, there comes an upsetting of the status quo out of which it is possible that great good may come. It is important that we bear in mind that this opportunity for good does not flow from the war itself. We cannot expect the good society to arise Phoenix-like out of the ashes of a military victory. Nor can we expect the peace treaty which terminates this struggle to be the instrument which will write finis to war for all time.

This may seem discouraging but there are compensations. For, it follows that we need not wait on a military victory to work for a program of free land and free trade; we can start now. Furthermore, and this is the point of this article, we can start with the assurance that the mind of the people is prepared. The old taboos and conventions are being broken down and public opinion is receptive to ideas which only a year or two ago would have been ignored or shouted down.

In view of this, it seems to me that it would be a wise move on the part of those charged with presenting the principles of Georgism to reexamine our program and adjust its message to the needs and temper of the time.

I think that a good start would be to drop the phrase "Single Tax" entirely. It is a subterfuge to which we need no longer resort. Let us state boldly the sweeping assertion which George said was the "true remedy" for social maladjustment: "We must make land common property." The single tax idea was appended only because, to quote George, "this truth in the present state of society, will arouse the most bitter antagonism and must fight its way, inch by inch."

But that "present state of society" is crumbling and George's axiom of statesmanship is subject to qualification. There are many straws in the wind which indicate that the people of America, and of the world, want something new and radically different from the old order. The popularity of post-war plans for World Federation points toward a willingness on the part of the people to venture out in new paths. When society is solidified in its customs and laws, it can best be changed by the

chisel of reason; when it is in its present fluid state it can best be remade by the mould of faith.

The people want broad, inclusive, optimistic plans for a "New World Order." (Sometimes it seems the broader and "foggier" they are the better they are received.) They also want as the next President (according to a recent Gallup Poll) the leading exponent of broad and hopeful assertions, Vice-President Wallace. Even the well-known contract bridge authority, Ely Culbertson, is thinking along the lines of a future world order.

And what are Georgists doing? Are we thinking and talking in terms of revolutionary principles? Or are we plodding along in the rut of scholastic economics, hair-splitting on the subject of interest; writing logical and correct but futile, and easily misunderstood, articles on the \$25,000 salary limitation? We have the best and simplest plan ever devised for World Federation—free trade. Let's present it in present-day terms as the answer to World Federation. In the national arena the people want security and the Beveridge plan becomes popular. Here, too, we have the answer but it must be presented in its true radical nature to achieve popularity.

What I am advocating is not a change in principles but a change in emphasis. Instead of hiding the radical nature of our program behind a "tax reform" let us glorify it. Especially let us emphasize its moral justification and its Christian basis. The type of reasoning that George employs in the following quotation is what fits the popular mood: "The equal right of all men to the use of land is as clear as their equal right to breathe the air—it is a right proclaimed by the fact of their existence. For we cannot suppose that some men have a right to be in this world and others no right."

Above all let us not become identified with the forces of reaction. While we may well continue to regard Socialism as unworkable, let us have done with a contemptuous attitude toward Socialists, who, like us, are working toward a better world. We would do much better to emphasize our points of likeness. Henry George recognized our common goal. He said, "The ideal of Socialism is grand and noble; and it is, I am convinced, possible of realization. . ."

I can still remember with a wince the taunt of a friend of mine, a German refugee who taught political science. He referred to me with a slight curl of the lip as a "capitalist," (a word, I am convinced, that cannot be retrieved from its evil, though improper, connotation.) To him I represented the forces of reaction trying to salvage the pieces of a wrecked and bankrupt economic order while he and the dreamers of a brave new world built a totally new structure in which humanity would live in eternal peace, prosperity and happiness.

Granted that this is a misconception based on ignorance, it is by no means an uncommon opinion of Georgism. It is small comfort to know in our secret heart that the picture is false. We can change this pic-

ture and ally ourselves with all those groups working toward a better world without doing violence to our beliefs. A change of emphasis will accomplish it.

I still believe in clear and incisive argument. I still think that education is the safest and in the long run the best way to advance Georgism. I still believe that, during war and after war, the ill-will and intolerance generated by the struggle make it difficult for a philosophy based on education to spread and flourish.

But, on the other hand, I see an unexpected opportunity for political action opening here and now. I see a need and a desire on the part of the people for a new world order making itself felt. I see a willingness to adopt radical and revolutionary schemes. I see a good chance for at least one Georgist ideal—free trade—to be realized.

Georgism can meet the challenge and supply the need if we will gear ourselves to the present mood of the public,

TEN POINTS

They COST so little

They are WORTH so much!

1. *You cannot bring about prosperity by discouraging thrift.*
2. *You cannot strengthen the weak by weakening the strong.*
3. *You cannot help small men by tearing down big men.*
4. *You cannot help the poor by destroying the rich.*
5. *You cannot lift the wage-earner by pulling down the wage-payer.*
6. *You cannot keep out of trouble by spending more than your income.*
7. *You cannot further the brotherhood of man by inciting class hatred.*
8. *You cannot establish sound security on borrowed money.*
9. *You cannot build character and courage by taking away a man's initiative and independence.*
10. *You cannot help men permanently by doing for them what they could and should do for themselves.*