

Editor's Introduction

Beyond Modernity

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THE LAUNCH of *Geophilos* is timely. Mankind once again finds itself at a crossroads. Choices of a radical kind need to be made, and that requires the fullest possible information if wisdom is to prevail. From the errors of the past century, we may conclude that wisdom has been in short supply.

Geophilos will favour a multi-disciplinary approach to addressing the problems of the new millennium. Such enquiries necessarily begin with past performance, which is why this first issue goes back to the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment originated a new mind-set. Arguably, the potential of that mind-set has now been exhausted. If this is the case, we need a new paradigm with which to re-examine existing problems and formulate new solutions. Whether the Enlightenment is an incomplete project – if so, what has thwarted the achievement of its full potential? – or a completed one that has now fulfilled its purpose, is a question that will repay exploration.

In this issue, some of our contributors address the problem of progress, which was one of the Big Ideas of the Enlightenment. This materialistic notion was based on the concept of science, but it did include a moral component. Progress was deemed to have a direction – a development that favoured the qualitative improvement in the condition of mankind. Formally, at any rate, it was underpinned by a value system. But *whose* values? This is one of the questions that needs to be addressed by social scientists and policy-makers, for the sake of greater effectiveness in the formulation of problem-solving strategies. I wrestle with the problem in my essay on Francis Bacon.

The failures of the 20th century strongly imply an epistemological problem. We have just passed through the age of Labour and Capital. The two were placed in opposition by the socialist ideology, which favoured a theory of social conflict. This doctrine imposed on the politics of the liberal democracies a formula for overcoming the grotesque shortcomings of 19th century industrialised society which blurred the boundaries between the public and private spheres of life. But despite the specialisation of labour and the

intervention of government to tame capital, the century bequeathed us some huge problems.

The empirical evidence indicates, for example, that the condition of millions of people has not improved. Dr. Miller's essay demonstrates that the gap between rich and poor in Britain has remained constant over the 20th century despite massive government intervention to foster "progress". The Welfare State was supposed to be a solution to poverty. People's expectations have not been fulfilled. Marx blamed capital for the deprivation of labour. One hundred years of academic and political investigation, and experiments such as the one staged by the Soviet Union, have not resolved the seemingly intractable problem of material inequality. In many respects, we are back to the 1890s, when a political choice had to be made about the course of social evolution.

Questions about the rules of society ARE THE RULES that constitute the foundation of society faulty? We now know that mobilising the power of the state to redistribute a huge part of people's incomes has not solved the problems that challenge the richest OECD countries. In 1960, their governments took, on average, 28% of their gross domestic products; in 1996, that share had increased to 46% – without commensurate increase in social and economic welfare. Two distinguished fiscal economists conclude, from this finding, that governments ought to revert back to 1960 levels of tax take.¹ But why should we be confident about the consequences of this advice?

Scientists are well advanced in decoding our biological heritage. Biology is one of the two major influences over human behaviour. We have still not reached a similar stage in uncovering the cultural laws of society. The further elucidation of social laws is one of the projects of this journal. With the eclipse of Marxism as a viable ideological tool for improving the world, we need an alternative social paradigm with which to assist in the improvement of public policies. For a brief moment around 1990, social commentators were attracted to the idea that there was no need for an additional paradigm: the liberal doctrine inherited from the Enlightenment provided all the conceptual tools that were required for the era of globalised trade and a One World system of governance. The 1990s afforded the West the opportunity to apply its doctrines in the laboratories of the former Soviet countries. The demographic tragedy that has befallen the people of Russia, as well as the economic crises in Asia, dissolved much of the philosophical complacency. It appears that policy-makers need the assistance of

more robust insights into the laws of human nature and society, on which to build new communities in the 21st century.

If the major problems and solutions are not rooted in "capital", where do we turn for further exploration? The choices are few, but most of them point in the direction of the resources of nature – our natural habitat. Have we neglected this sphere of experience? Rather than reinventing the wheel, it may be appropriate to retrieve some of the hypotheses that have been neglected. One of these that warrants a revisit was articulated by the American social reformer Henry George. He emphasised the association of progress and poverty, which he connected with property rights and public finance. One of his key hypotheses, which economists have failed to investigate, is the claim that, through time and the growth of the economy, an increasing proportion of national income finds its way into rent. If this is true, the outcome is good or bad depending on who claims the right to dispose of that revenue.

This question, of the fate of rental income, warrants public discussion for a variety of reasons. On the whole it is agreed that the rent of land and natural resources is, distinguished from the other categories of income. It originates from a source outside of individual human labour. It is the product of the collective efforts of communities. Furthermore, rent is the net income of society. Previous societies funded cultural activities directly out of that net revenue. If rent is privatised, how is a complex society such as ours to finance the social space that we occupy? These are questions of fundamental importance, which are neglected by mainstream social scientists. They offer a rich field for further research.

A CENTURY AGO, the Georgist paradigm was politically more significant than the Marxist model. The two were in contention as alternatives to major components of the liberal doctrines of the 19th century. Academics and politicians were to find greater favour with the Marxist model. Are there theoretical and empirical reasons why we should now retrieve the Georgist paradigm? The world, today, after all, is significantly different in its *appearance* from the one observed by Henry George in the 1870s.

Rents in the "new economy"

Philosophically, the values that underpin the Georgist paradigm are being rediscovered by the millions of people who are actively concerned with the need to respect and protect our natural habitat. But what of the economics of this model? George claimed that

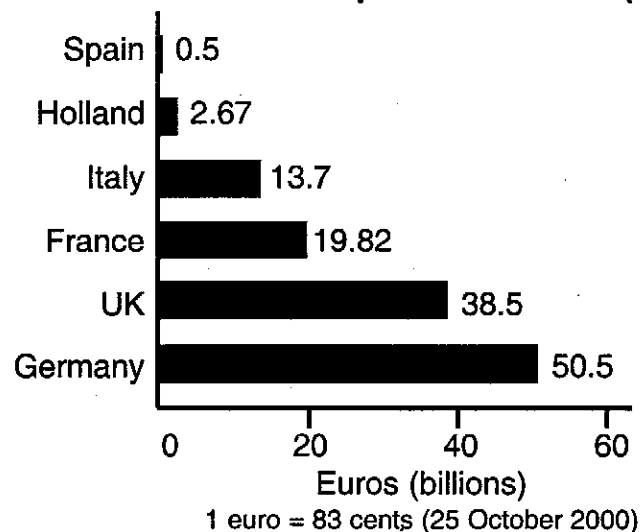
...every increase in the productive power of labour ... increases rent – the price that labour must pay for the opportunity to utilise its powers; and thus

all the advantages gained by the march of progress go to the owners of land, and wages do not increase.²

If correct, this testable hypothesis has startling implications for public policy. Tony O'Brien scrutinises the theory by drawing on the evidence of the past 50 years in Australia, where the data on land values is superior to that found in most European countries. His findings favour George's hypothesis. But on what grounds does George justify the claim that "rent swallows up the whole gain and pauperism accompanies progress"?³ How does his theory of rent as public revenue integrate into 20th century realities, in which much of the rent of land and natural resources was disguised by the financial sector through mortgages and the other imaginative instruments?

As for the 21st century, it appears that much of the "New Economy" of North America and Europe is built on the ability to gain access to new layers of natural resources. The payments for these are pure rents of the kind described by David Ricardo in his original famous theory. The radio spectrum, for example, has endowed the treasuries of Germany, France, Italy and Britain with huge windfall rents as a result of auctions in the past 12 months (*Fig. 1*).

Figure 1 Third generation mobile telephone radio spectrum licence rents bid at public auctions (2000)



THE CASE for a reappraisal of public policy appears to be justified, if only because of the repeated failures of government administration in the 20th century. But how responsive is government to the needs of people in what is nominally a democratic system? Does the culture of public administration need to be re-evaluated? Bureaucracies have private agendas that may not coincide with those of the peoples whom they are appointed to serve. The public's concern about bureaucracy was not ameliorated in Britain by the outcome of the two-year investigation into the BSE beef infection scandal, which exposed the population to a new variety of brain disease. The inquiry (Chairman: Lord Phillips) censured the civil service for its culture of secrecy. The 16-volume report revealed an inability to trust the public with information, inter-departmental turf wars and the tendency to seek to provide government Ministers with sanitised information. Attempts were made to guard the private economic interests of a section of one industry against the democratic interests of the whole population.⁴ How much more of an obstacle would the civil service be to good public administration if the challenge was of a systemic kind, one which (like land reform) entailed the prospect of qualitative social change? Ought the public to develop new models of civic action, to empower itself in what has become a complex society in which power is increasingly centralised? This is the theme of the essay by Peter Gibb, who documents the subtle hindrances placed in the way of meeting the democratic aspirations of the people of Scotland. A comparative study is required to determine whether the popular desire for social renewal with respect to the natural environment would be met with similar difficulties in other countries.

**The vital
role for
civic
society**

The need to re-examine the primary values and assumptions on which society is built is emphasised by the challenges that now confront nation-states. Difficulties primarily associated with the fiscal base, the need to create new geo-political alliances, the globalised scale of corporate activity, these and other developments suggest the need to revisit the principles that guide social systems. Central to a new appraisal would be the need to review the theory of social property. The modern version of property rights subordinated the public domain to a weak status relative to the rights of the individual. Is there a need to re-balance this relationship?

The traditional definition of public property derived from the belief that earth was created by God, and mortal beings could not presume to be its owner. Implicit in this view was the belief that it

was wrong to deny others equal access to those life-giving resources. That cosmological principle is to be found in all societies, and it continued in the Western tradition up to the time that John Locke wrote his famous treatise. All the philosophical knots that we have still not untied stem from that point. For example, when Francis Bacon and the empiricists vaporised the sacred from the landscape, it became inevitable that nature would be denuded of its social content. Nature became fair game for the privatisers: there was no coherent value system to strengthen those who sought to champion nature as part of the social space that we occupy.

If we are to establish order in the philosophy of property rights, which is a pre-condition for re-basing our relationship with nature on an orderly basis, it appears that we need to enrich the theory of property. Some of the elements of a new theory may be derived from the wisdom of the past. We need to assemble the components into a coherent definition that fulfils post-modern needs. One component continues to be the recognition that nature pre-dated mankind and must therefore be accorded a special status. The most acquisitive privatiser will acknowledge that he or she is a steward with an obligation to pass earth on to the next generation. But the value that is delivered to us by nature is now enhanced by the collective investments by society. Public investment in facilities such as transportation add to the value of nature. How do we apportion the benefits?

The pre-Baconian community embraced a cosmology that integrated people and their community into the landscape to produce a holistic relationship. Did the shattering of this relationship produce the alienation that is a destructive characteristic of modern society? Science, by itself, which required the abstraction of nature from people and their community, could not ensure integration of people and their personalities, and the meaning of nature, into the unity that is required for a healthy social system. Something was missing from modernity.

Kenneth Jupp begins to confront these profound issues. He expresses a concern with the way in which the concept of justice has been distorted. Is there a case for retrieving the notion of natural law? The European nations are now actively engaged in a discussion on whether to adopt a pan-European constitution. The fundamentals of justice need to be re-evaluated if the law-makers are not to bequeath us with the dangerous voids of the kind that can be identified in the sacred documents that were formulated over the past two centuries. Initiatives by the United Nations to engage

governments in a new discourse on people's rights and obligations are to be welcomed. The Open Letter addressed to Kofi Annan by Leslie Blake highlights some of the themes that warrant further democratic debate before the options are foreclosed.

That these are not abstract issues of interest primarily to theoreticians is emphasised by the recognition that concerted action on a global scale is necessary if we are to reverse some of the trends that are destroying the environment. Indeed, given the enormous scale of the crises that are accumulating – such as the destruction of species, the depletion of non-renewable resources, the regional wars over the control of valuable minerals, the looming cross-border conflicts over the access to water – visionary thinking on a grand scale appears to be necessary to assist policy-makers in establishing priorities for social action.

THE GEOPHILOS mission is to explain the deep cleavages that rupture society, and which divide people from their natural habitat. We cannot move to a post-modern society until we agree on the nature of the forces that fragment our communities; and understand the basis of the conflicts that prevent people from fulfilling their personal and social aspirations.

Divining the deep cleavages

The cleavages manifest themselves at all levels, in our understanding of science, our attitude towards capitalism, our perception of poverty. If communism was the antithesis of capitalism, with its demise we would expect – according to Marxist dialectics – the emergence of a synthesis in the form of a higher order of social organisation. While that is the hope of many people today, we have yet to discern the practical mechanisms for achieving the alternative, sustainable, social system.

Is the generalised attack on capitalism, as in the castigation of "consumerism", hitting the wrong target? That profit-seeking enterprises are causing damage to the environment, our culture and the psychology of people who are drawn into their spheres of influence cannot be contested. But is the attack on the profit motive a distraction from something more substantial? The Captains of Industry did not intend to damage the environment or the culture of their communities. They genuinely wanted to increase the utility of the products they manufactured. The negative influences that were the by-product of their enterprises contradicted the liberating project of Modernity. Have the critics missed something important? Could it be that the founders of Modernity failed to build in a rule or rules that would either (1) correct an existing flaw, which was inconsistent with the modern

project; or (2) that they failed to refine the new modes of economics and politics to ensure a sustainable system – that the prototype was incomplete, and was not satisfactorily corrected? The modern project was an intentional rearrangement of our relationship with nature. In their desire to harmonise relationships between people in communities, did the founders neglect the rules governing what had been a triadic relationship – one that integrated the individual and society with earth?

Solutions to these issues may require a reshaping of the modern mindset – as with the need to calibrate the economy so that its use of the environment is grounded on sustainable principles. This problem is explored in the essay by Alastair McIntosh and Gareth Edwards-Jones. Is it possible to build a unifying theory that simultaneously resolves both social and environmental problems? The need to share and preserve natural resources is the single greatest challenge that nations now face. How this might be accomplished is suggested by Nicolaus Tideman, who claims that the solution is to be found in the way in which we dispose of rental income.

Public value, private property & personality THE CONVENTIONAL theories and doctrines that preoccupy social scientists today will be subjected to forensic examination by contributors to *Geophilos*. But how do we objectively evaluate conceptions that are taken for granted because they are embedded in the doctrine of Western liberalism? It is necessary to reconsider the role of morality, as well as the professional standards that are applied by scientists.

Some of the similarities between the present times and the age in which Francis Bacon lived are very strong. The choices for social development were opening up in the 17th century. Decisions – if only by default – had to be made. An important difference between now and then relates to the structure of power. In Bacon's time, choices could not be exercised by taking into account democratic considerations, for this was the heyday of the divine right of kings and the forceful evolution of aristocratic culture. For about 300 years, this culture had evolved by appropriating and privatising the income from the public domain. Political contests between the monarchs and their aristocrats – the stuff of pre-democratic historiography – were primarily concerned with disputes over this public revenue. This juncture in history needs to be re-evaluated in terms of new hypotheses of the kind that will inform the decision-making process in the 21st century.

Did the private appropriation of public revenue colour the minds of people like Bacon, and consequently pervert the character of new knowledge? *The policies that he was to support could not include everyone's interest, for the public funds were deployed to reinforce the private interests of a numerical minority.*

Was the modern personality shaped by the private appropriation of public income? We presume that much of the dysfunctional behaviour in our society stems from "human nature". *Could it be that, for survival purposes, people – especially the excluded – were obliged to narrow their attitudes, values and behaviour?*

Hypotheses such as these need to be tested by reference to Bacon's theory of epistemology; and the nation-state politics that saw James pursuing the subordination of Scotland and Ireland to the strategic interests of England. We can – with the benefit of hindsight – see these trends merging in a way that would set Britain on the path of a dysfunctional social development. Diffused throughout the world through the colonial project, they would be directly responsible for ecological crises; and they would divide civil society into the warring groups that were ultimately defined by their access to, or exclusion from, the net income of society.

GEOPHILOS will encourage scholars, professionals and social reformers to locate their concerns for the detail of local needs within an awareness of the cultural landscape that embraces us all. The modern scepticism needs to be challenged with evidence, to enlarge the range of meaningful questions that may be investigated by social scientists. General questions need to be defined of the kind that would assist researchers to determine the socially relevant issues, and structure the priorities for the allocation of limited resources.

**Democracy
and the
fate of
civilisation**

For example: to what extent has contemporary culture been tainted by the systemic errors of the past? In what sense are we not free to change the flaws that we have inherited? How might we contribute to the enhancement of the quality of people's social and private lives (and so possibly avoid the terminal fate of previous civilisations)? Large questions such as these are inspired by a concern for humanity. The answers need to be sought in the conditions that facilitated the emergence of civilisation – which, essentially, was contingent on the provision of an economic surplus. This surplus was what remained after people met their reproductive (child-bearing and rearing) biological imperatives, and their productive (capital creating and replacing) obligations. The surplus financed the labour and mental power that had to be

invested in the cultural innovations that culminated in civilisation. If that surplus was then privately appropriated, to what extent can we claim that the ensuing culture was a democratic one? To metamorphose into "the people's" culture, what changes were necessary? Has this democratising project now been completed? If not, what remains to be done? To what extent is it true that a democratic *culture* is contingent on a corresponding distribution of the net material resources produced by the community? If this division is not one based on justice – in the sense described by Kenneth Jupp in his essay – we ought to be able to track the transformation of culture into one that was exploitative. This line of enquiry leads us to a new consideration of the nature of power, and the content of culture. The Marxist project sought, but failed, to provide a theory of history that supplied the answers to such questions. Is it possible to elaborate a new theory of history? The elements of such a theory may emerge as we confront the sites of social conflict in our society.

The sites of social conflict EVERY SOCIETY built on, the unequal distribution of the resources that were required to establish and sustain civilisation is subjected to internal conflicts of an intolerable kind. That conflict takes place not just in the workplace, or the battlefield, but in all spheres of cultural life – language, social psychology, aesthetics, no corner of our lives is immune. These sites of social conflict display the phenomena through which the rich and the poor are inextricably linked.

There is a silent war that reflects the division of a population into distinct sections. The spatial separation is clearly visible in the urban environment – ghettos about the gated enclaves of the rich. Not so transparent is the tussle in which we are engaged for dominion over the language, the command of which conveys power over the minds of the outcasts. Given the intense degree of tension in modern society, could there be a general explanation? Has culture been privatised? Have the majority of people been excluded, tolerated on the margins of society, necessary as the ballast that keeps the productive system afloat in order to generate the surplus wealth that the few may continue to appropriate?

Questions such as these offer a glimpse of the rationale behind what are otherwise perplexing features of modern society.

- We can produce enough food for everyone, yet millions go hungry, many of them dying from the diseases related to malnutrition.
- We can earn our living in a fraction of the time that we devote to

work. Yet we push ourselves to stress levels that cause psychological suffering that results in the break-up of families and biological traumas such as cancer.

- The world is full enough of natural resources to enrich every nation; yet those nations still go to war over claims to territory, which results in the deaths of people by the million.

To understand what drives this nonsense, and to clarify effective strategies for remedial action, we need as a matter of priority to re-examine the nature of social space. This is part of the mission of Geophilos, to provide the platform for thinkers who are willing to raise their gaze beyond Modernity.

- 1 Vito Tanzi and Ludger Schuknecht, *Public Spending in the 20th Century*, Cambridge: University Press, 2000.
- 2 Henry George, *Progress and Poverty* (1879); New York: Schalkenbach Foundation, 1979, p.283.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p.244.
- 4 *BSE Inquiry, Vol.1: Findings and Conclusions*, London: Stationery Office, October 2000. <<http://62.189.42.105/index.htm>>

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