

# Strategies for Changing the World

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## Comments on Issues Raised by Alanna Hartzok: Reflections for the IU Executive

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THIS assessment is in response to Alanna's proposals for developing the work within UN NGO circles. I refer to her memo of August 15; and, now, Godfrey's suggestion that the IU fund a presence at a conference in South Africa next March.

I maintain that, on the basis of the current Georgist narrative and the tactics employed by activists, we are *in principle* not able to achieve our ambitions. And, therefore, money spent on continuing with current approaches is money down the drain.

I offer an analogy to indicate the current futility of approaching individuals and institutions with the offer to enlighten them on the fairness and efficiency of LVT. This is the approach I have used hitherto, so any implied strictures on the shortcomings of this approach apply to me up until a couple of years ago.

The standard Georgist approach is as effective as going to a chef and offering to teach him how to prepare and cook pork. You would think that this was a reasonable proposal to offer a chef whose culinary repertoire lacked knowledge of how to present a cordon bleu dish with pork at the centrepiece. But this chef, as it happens, is a freelance whose exclusive clientele are all orthodox Jews. He may well be willing to talk about how to prepare and cook pork – his pride may even persuade him to take a lesson from an enthusiastic advocate of the delights of this particular meat, by inviting a fully elaborated account of how to cook the meat. But when he visits his clients to prepare their meals for bar mitzvahs, or whatever other occasion is being celebrated, the last thing the chef would have on his mind is pork. He will not propose this meat for the menu, because he wants to retain the goodwill of his clients who pay his wages.

Why is this analogy relevant? As Georgists, our proposal for LVT is the ideological equivalent of challenging a fundamental tenet of someone's religion. Our proposal to tax rent is *sacrilegious*. And, if you wish to make friends, you don't offend people by proposing that they change their deep-seated beliefs. That's why we have failed. Naively, we offer to kick *the* key plank from underneath the belief system that is the edifice of our society, *and we operate as if we really believe that it is possible for the guardians of that society to be our accomplices in that project!*

### Reality Check 1

THE WORLD as it is now constituted, and as it has now been globalised, does not want LVT. We are promoting a solution to a problem which people don't even recognise as existing. And we are presenting our solution in infantile terms.

Why would we go to South Africa to propose LVT? Their extensive slums are notorious from the days of apartheid. Yes, they have a radical government (ANC). Yes, you would think that this has the makings of a good reception for LVT. Go to Pretoria and present the case for LVT in standard terms *and they would laugh you out of town*. The ANC government deleted LVT from its statute book in 2004. What on earth makes us think they would now reverse that decision?

New Zealand has gained a widely respected reputation for innovative public policies these past 30 years. Its “reforms” have been implemented in tandem with the continued erosion of LVT.

And let’s not mention Pittsburgh...

The trend is towards deepening the privatisation of rent. We all know what happened in Russia and Eastern Europe.

## Reality Check 2

GOVERNMENTS do not need to be taught how to make LVT work.

Officials in UN Habitat are apparently keen to learn about LVT through its new Global Land Tool Network (GLTN). Good News, or a way of sidetracking the energies of Georgist activists?

I have now personally experienced many occasions in which government, quasi government and private institutions have invited submissions on how LVT would work. In no case has that led to anything that was remotely worth the effort.

If a government was *seriously* interested, it would not seek advice from Georgists. It would do two things. First, it would hire professional consultants at fat fees to prepare a literature review. Second, it would send a working party to Australia and/or Denmark. Having invested its money in empirical research, its own finance ministry people would explain to ministers what is practical. And the last thing that those bureaucrats would want, was to feel that they were assisted by amateurs. Georgists would not get a look in.

Our naïve efforts at offering instruction on LVT are a waste of our time. *Governments don’t want to know.* When their commissions of enquiry invite us to prepare documents for them to consider, this is a tactic to prove that they went through the motions. They have no intention of reaching a conclusion that bears any resemblance to what Henry George advocated. Two examples coming up in the UK by the end of this year: the Lyons report for England and Wales, and an equivalent report for Scotland. Both of these were enthusiastically assisted by Georgists, an effort that will not have made a blind bit of difference to the predictable outcome, which was predetermined when the commissions were set up. That is not surprising, since they were established *precisely to enable the politicians not to make hard or informed choices.*

## Reality Check 3

I AM NOT saying that officials, politicians or NGO agency activists are all insincere when they invite an enthusiastic Georgist to offer them an exposition on the principles of LVT. Some of them are, genuinely, intellectually curious about our curiosity; but ours is no more than a curiosity. It does not represent a challenge, because *it is not seen as a challenge* to the collective consciousness or political interests.

So why is this time spent with a curious official a waste of time? We have learnt that no sooner has an official or politician been fully briefed than he has moved on to another job. And the new incumbent of his post will not share the inquisitiveness of his predecessor. His institution, after all, is immune to alien ideas.

Bear in mind the UN Habitat case. It included LVT in its declaration in Vancouver in 1976. It apparently repeated this reference in 1996 (Istanbul). In the in-between years it did *nothing* to canvass the wisdom of cities adopting LVT. But wait: what about the 2006 Vancouver celebration of 30 years existence? Wasn’t this an opportunity to explore reform by placing land on the agenda? Alas, according to the outgoing president of the IU (Tanya Roskoshnaya), land was excluded from the programme. It was not necessarily Habitat that

did not want land centre stage on the programme for all the delegates from all around the world to discuss. The agenda was overseen by the government that put up the money for the event (Canada). He who pays the piper calls the tune.

#### Reality Check 4

RENT privatisers control the agenda. And whoever controls the agenda determines the decisions that shape the laws and political policies.

Should we be impressed that a Swedish development agency is funding the GLTN project, with more money coming from Norway? I repeat: distinguish the hot air from the reality. Note, e.g., that Sweden is orchestrating and funding a *politically* relevant network to reshape property rights and advance the rent privatisation agenda in the name of Hernando de Sotro. Who tells me this? Tanya.

De Sotro's project is the privatisation of the land in the slums to hand the rents to the dwellers therein. Once they lay their hands on the rents, does anybody really believe that they would be interested in LVT? Certainly the Swedish/Norwegian sponsors won't be in a hurry to promote LVT. And neither will UN Habitat – because it can only do what its funding host governments regard as politically correct.

Am I exaggerating? Aren't the NGOs – such as the human rights groups that campaign for justice in continents like Africa – doing a fine, *independent* job? Gingering up governments? No. But don't take my word for it that **they are working within the existing paradigm, and therefore not disposed to the Georgist paradigm**. Read the words of one of them, writing about Africa (see box).

#### He who pays the piper controls the Agenda

Chidi Ansel Odinkalu assessed the quality of the human rights campaigns in Africa in these terms:

*“Local human rights groups exist to please the international agencies that fund or support them. Local problems are only defined as potential pots of project cash, not as human experiences to be resolved in just terms, thereby de-legitimizing human rights language and robbing its ideas of popular appeal...[T]he real life struggles for social justice are waged despite human rights groups – not by or because of them – by people who feel that their realities and aspirations are not adequately captured by human rights organisations **or their language**”.\**

\* Chidi Anselm Okinkalu, “Why more Africans don't use human rights language”, *Human Rights Dialogue: Human Rights for All? The problem of the Human Rights Box*, Carnegie Council on Ethics and International Affairs, Winter 2000: 2(1). On <http://www.cceia.org/viewMedia.php/prmTemplateID/8/prmID/602>

There you have it: the language is what matters – the point I have been making in LRT newsletters for some years, now, but which has not aroused any interest that I can detect within Georgist circles.

We have to *first* redefine our language: **until then**, we might just as well not bother to attend the conferences recommended by Alanna (in China) and Godfrey (in Africa).

We have to **stand outside** the existing governmental or NGO networks: otherwise, we become part of their agenda, and not able to promote ours as the politically relevant strategy for reform.

We have to **develop our own critiques**: those used by NGOs are framed from within the conventional intellectual disciplines and value frameworks, and which therefore prescribe solutions amenable to the current power elites.

We have to search for ways to **take control of the agenda**: which we **cannot do until we have a narrative that resonates with ordinary people's lives on the ground**.

In brief, we are a long way off from being politically, socially and ecologically relevant to the world today. We are still using the language penned on the page in the 1870s. That's why we still think in terms of *negotiating* a change to the religion of this age in terms of *efficiency* and *fairness*. How stupid I was to believe that this was possible! The guardians of the secular religion of modern society care not a stuff for either efficiency or fairness, which is why we have whistled in the wind for the past century.

## Reality Check 5

NO-ONE who knows me will conclude that I am saying we should give up. I am saying that we should give up on the failed strategies. I am saying: listen to the people who tell us – *Go away!* Two examples of how the world has made it patently clear that we don't have a chance:

- 10 or so years ago the Henry George School in NY paid a handsome sum to a fund raiser to go out and get money for the cause. His report back said, in crystal clear terms, that the Georgist message was not saleable to the philanthropists who do not hesitate to give money to every good cause you can imagine. Returns to the school's funds: *zilch*.
- Last year, the Henry George Foundation in London repeated the exercise. A sum that could have funded a monograph similar to *Wheels of Fortune* was paid to a professional fund-raiser pull in the loot for Georgism. This man had a commercially successful track record of raising cash for worthy causes – you name it, he enriched his clients by shrewdly selling their needs. Sum added to the HGF funds: *zilch*.

*Have we got the message yet? Find something better to do with your time, like go fishing. Talking of which.....*

## Listen to the fish

NO, I am not saying that Georgists should pack their bags and go fishing (a prospect which I continue to dream about). I am determined to find an approach which, *in principle at least*, might work. No-one can guarantee anything, but we can say whether, *in principle*, a strategy *might* work. We need to go back to basics; or, in my case, go to the ends of the earth in search of the formula that *just might have a chance* of working, in the way that existing approaches, we now know, *won't work because they haven't done so for 100 years*.

I have just returned from the Arctic Circle. It was a cold experience, but it left me hot under the collar.

I wanted to know why the fish in the Barents Sea were disappearing; and ditto the communities on the edge of the world which, for thousands of years, have been able to rely on the fish stocks because of their sustainable approach to nature.

I took with me Norway's foremost anthropologist; not for help with interpretation, because most Norwegians speak English. Together, we had to figure out why an "enlightened" Norwegian government had privatised the fish stocks; handed them to the deep-sea trawler companies owned by corporations, and was crucifying the settlements on the edge of the world, at the top of the country inside the Arctic Circle.

The anthropologist helped me to penetrate deep into one of the ugliest stories imaginable – of political shenanigans by a Norway that is supposed to be wise in terms of social and environmental policies.

At the end of our investigation, the anthropologist was at a loss over what to do about a government that had privatised the fish rents without parliamentary sanction. (Yes, he already knew we were talking about fish rents – he recalled that his father had a Danish translation of P&P on his bookshelves. His latest volume of essays located Henry George within the framework of his critique of Norway.)

So: what does a Georgist do about what he found at the end of the world? Knock on NGO doors, or approach politicians, and tell them about fair and efficient LVT? And offer to brief them on how Denmark has used LVT these past 90 years? And quote some of the economists who had travelled to Norway to collect their Nobel Prizes? C'mon....*life's too short to waste it on failed methods...*

On my return to Oslo, I approached an independent documentary film maker. I spelt out a 3-part TV series. They loved it. I wrote a 2-page proposal, which they are now using to raise the money to make the documentary, confident that with the seed money they could get Norway's main TV channel to put up the rest of the cash and broadcast the "new" narrative of Norway that I had offered them.

If it happens, *the government will take notice*: because we will have attracted their attention in a way that might potentially hurt them – through the votes they need to stay in power. And the politicians will ask: "Okay, so what do we do about this mess?" Since the question will have been volunteered by them – and their voters would be listening for the answer - there is the prospect of an meaningful dialogue. *That's* when the "fair & efficient" stuff becomes relevant, as *part* of a practical, problem-solving plan for saving whole settlements from extinction.

I am not claiming that this will work. I *am* saying that the traditional approach would be pointless, and therefore we need to develop new approaches. (*Boom Bust* and *Wheels of Fortune* were handed to Norway's finance minister two months ago, when she was in London, by a friend of mine: but he needn't have bothered....because, as things stand today, she has *no reason* to push her mind – or her political reputation - outside the ruling paradigm that frames our collective consciousness. Why do you think she was in London? To absorb the latest thinking in the UK Treasury – a Treasury which can't privatise the nation's rents fast enough.)

## **Time to get real....**

WE need to mature our thinking. It's time to step back, do some thinking, and figure out how to take control of the agenda. (That's what I did, as a result of the Russian project.)

Whatever we do needs to be able to succeed *in principle*. That's as much as we can expect of anyone.

The standard Georgist approach – *in principle* – cannot succeed. Henry George was subversive. He knew it, and he was identified as such by his opponents. He approached the problem accordingly, and that's why he came within an ace of succeeding. And if he had succeeded, remember, it would have been *on a global scale*.

His acolytes, over the subsequent decades, became so frustrated with failure that they diminished their expectations to the point where anything said or done in the name of Henry George was so anodyne that it was no threat to anyone, and therefore *could not* succeed.

I fear that, in the end, it is unlikely that Georgist activists will change just because of comments such as those above. Someone has to go over the parapet and lead by example. My first step in that direction will be taken in two months time, when *Ricardo's Law* hits the shops. That begins my deliberate attempt to rupture the Georgist doctrine away from what is now a globalised collective consciousness. Or, to view my agenda in another way: that begins my conscious attempt to separate the people from the politicians.

I have no doubt that I will be given a rough ride by the guardians of political and economic orthodoxy. The reason why they will come hunting for me is that I make my intentions explicit: I intend to jeopardise their material and professional interests. It will be interesting to see who'll stand shoulder to shoulder with me.