

A Word With You

OSCAR GEIGER, founder of the Henry George School, used to say that the economic thinking prevalent in his day was comparable to the "witch doctor" stage in the development of medicine. This seems like a harsh thing to say, but let us take a closer look.

The witch doctor was not all bad. For minor illnesses, his herbs and potions probably did some good; and insofar as the illness was psychosomatic his masks and incantations sometimes had the proper effect. The ineffectiveness of the witch doctor came when something happened beyond his limited scope—a blighted crop, a drought, or an epidemic due, say, to polluted drinking water.

In this context, the comparison with economists is not too bad. Economists do know something. They can tell us about supply and demand, savings, investment, corporate growth, etc. It is when the economy suffers those frightful periodic catastrophes, "booms and busts," that our economists begin to show like witch doctors. It was with masks and incantations that the depression of the 1930's was exorcised. We are told on high authority that we must not be afraid of depressions, because that fear will bring on a depression. Other high authorities tell us that we *should* be afraid of depressions, because our fear will *keep away* depressions.

If our television set isn't working properly, we don't bow our heads and pray that it will work; we call the repair man. If our car breaks down, we don't sprinkle incense on the motor and mutter incantations; we're more likely to mutter imprecations and try to get it to the nearest service station. But in our national life a popular slogan is "Pray for Peace," while everywhere are the sounds of war. And dozens of conflicting incantations are chanted over a falling stock market.

A good deal of the public counsel of economists is like the "sympathetic magic" of witch doctors—that is, imitating the effects that are wanted in order to induce the actual occurrence of those effects—instead of looking for causes. On the esoteric side, another kind of magic is practiced—the jargon, graphs, charts and mathematical formulae of professional economists when talking to one another. This procedure is in imitation of the established sciences without the trouble of really being scientific. No new laws are discovered, no systematic progress is made, no knowledge of the unknown is carved out bit by bit.

And so, while certain techniques for compiling information may have improved since Oscar Geiger's day, our economists by and large have not come a very long way out of the witch doctor stage.

—Robert Clancy

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The Henry George News, published monthly by the Henry George School of Social Science, 50 E. 69th Street, New York 21, N.Y., supports the following principle:

The community, by its presence and activity, gives rental value to land, therefore the rent of land belongs to the community and not to the landowners. Labor and capital, by their combined efforts, produce the goods of the community—known as wealth. This wealth belongs to the producers. Justice requires that the government, representing the community, collect the rent of land for community purposes and abolish the taxation of wealth.

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