

"Participatory Democracy" The Ideology of the '60's

by PETER G. JOHANSEN

WHEN Max Eastman was interviewed in The New York Times on the occasion of his 86th birthday, he weighed the student revolutionaries of the 1930's against those of today and found the latter to be wanting. His disapproval of our current radicals stems from his belief that they do not have the well-defined ideology of the rebels of a generation and a half ago.

Back then, the students who caused unrest knew what they wanted—a socialist or communist society to supplant or overthrow the capitalistic order. Today students—or at least the ones who are raising a ruckus—don't know what their goals are and consequently much of their activity, while perhaps well intentioned, has degenerated into unavailing and even destructive thrashings about. Eastman, the old radical, feels sympathy for them but sees them as one might see determined beginners in a swimming pool—a lot of energy and motion being expended, a lot of waves being created, but no forward progress.

I believe Mr. Eastman has a point. Many of our "campus revolutions" lack a concrete ideology with ends delineated sharply enough to inspire the faithful to long-term efforts on its behalf. Compare Columbia's upheaval of a few weeks with the twelve-month battle at Tokyo University, where the contestants stressed their competing ideologies above all else. And consider the fact that after only a year or two many older American radicals of the '60's appear to have lost their earlier fervor.

But on the other hand, Eastman's ideology was a colossal failure, a disaster in fact, for a third or more of the

world. The Middle East situation is but one of our insoluble problems attributable in large part to the fact that the combatants have framed their disputes within the context of competing religious views. The Tokyo student radicals soon lost sight of what originally distressed them about their university—a rigid, old administration—and spent the better part of a year destroying each other because their communist ideologies differed.

What do the dedicated young revolutionaries of today believe in? What motivates them to leave the quiet security of a university library if it is not an old-style ideology which would do Max Eastman proud? I submit that the common thread joining most of the concerned radicals—the men of good faith who sincerely want to improve society, not the "crazies" who have no goals but to hate—is a belief in "participatory democracy."

It is not possible to define this with any degree of exactitude, and there is no latter-day Karl Marx or V. I. Lenin who is considered by its adherents to embody the essential Truths. However, participatory democracy is not intended as an ideology of firmly-defined ends.

The term expresses what its believers consider to be the means by which they can break down the restrictive structures in our society which, through defying freedom of action, deprive them of individual happiness and fulfillment. Regarding national elections, for instance, it suggests that individuals would, on their own initiative, go out and ring doorbells to win favor for candidates of their choosing, rather than accept the nominations made by party wheel horses.

Participatory democracy demands, and provides the motivation for, opening and keeping open channels of communication between students and administrations, so that administrators will be aware of and responsive to the continually changing needs and desires of student bodies. It inspires and points the way to organizing the poor so they will be able to change the methods of treatment by the ingrown government bureaus hovering over them and the illusive landlords making a fast buck on their low-upkeep, rapidly-depreciated buildings.

In short, participatory democracy is an inversion of such ideologies as communism which impose upon the adherents an all-encompassing conception of how the world should be: and where the ideology is on top with its earthly disciples below, working diligently and obediently to bring about certain ends.

Participatory democracy is the other way around—the people are on top and the ideology below. It does not presume to tell men what their utopia will be or

what kind of order will fulfill them. The ends are up to individuals—they may vary from man to man. It is concerned essentially with making available a means for obtaining those individual goals—participatory democracy is directed more to the *pursuit* of happiness than to happiness itself.

To this extent the new ideology is in the main stream of early American political thought. The Bill of Rights provided various kinds of freedoms to insure that men would have the wherewithal to progress toward their ends, but it was quite silent on what men should seek to attain. Modern-day "liberalism" is, in contrast, more end-oriented than means-oriented.

The goal for the Georgists, I think, would be to recruit some of today's potential kindred souls—the radical followers of participatory democracy—and urge them to devote some of their efforts to freeing land. This freedom would provide one of the most crucial means by which men would be enabled to strive for their individual utopias.

Isaac Lagnado took the basic course at New York HGS in 1967 and won the Ezra Cohen award for the best essay (Dec. 1967 HGN). Now in his first year at Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine, on being asked how he felt about the Henry George philosophy, he replied:

"It was good to hear from the school—a long lost friend. By the way, I would like to subscribe to HGN. The theory taught here is more sophisticated than the classicists! At this point my interest is not as fresh as it was a year ago, probably because I am not as close to the [Georgist] movement as I was then.

"Right off the bat I would not seriously now defend the Henry George method if interpreted strictly (i.e., a single tax on land), as the panacea it could have been when things weren't so frightfully complex as they are now. I think H.G. was relevant in his time, and I am sincerely indebted to the school for their work with me. I think

I could never have acquired a social conscience or any social perspective had I not studied Georgist economics. But I don't think I can apply strict Georgist remedies to the problems that I see around me today.

"Please, however, send me the work of Georgists who do see relationships to their problems (you mentioned the housing situation). Frankly the whole idea of thinking and applying George all over again is so new I do not think I should attempt an opinion. Anyway, send me more material. I need to be informed—I am quite interested. Could you also send me some forms for your correspondence course? I think I could do some preaching here."

"Can We Enlist College Activists in the Georgist Cause?" This answer came from Stephen B. Cord, author of *Henry George: Dreamer or Realist?*—a professor at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania and a member of the Academic Advisory Council of the HGS. He took the basic course 18 years ago in New York and was an instructor on the headquarters staff for several years:

"Much youthful energy and idealism are being spent in the colleges across our land on various reform projects—some worthwhile, others questionable, many destructive. Reform is in the air. College study should be relevant to the problems of the day. Everyone should be emotionally committed. Naturally, Georgists, reformers all, wonder how we can tap this surging energy.

"I don't see any easy answers. The new philosophical trends are anti-rationalist—"the world is absurd"—and Georgist emphasis on natural law and objective ethics is out of step with this new existentialism. The devastation of war and the denial of civil rights to Negroes here at home—this has emotional impact requiring no involved intellectual analysis. It is much more difficult to make emotionally vivid the injustice of untaxed private property in land.

"But we can't let this stop us from recruiting in the colleges. No movement was ever long successful without the support of the intellectually active youth. There are many good approaches but let me suggest one right now.

"Before we reach out of our own circle to recruit among the college activists, let us be sure of our own doctrines. For instance, in *Progress and Poverty*, George set out to solve the problems of poverty and depressions, and concluded that without the taxation of land values these problems would get continually worse. Many Georgists still agree with this prescription, but the facts do not. We haven't had a depression in thirty years (although we have had some recessions) and while poverty is still with us, we've never had it so good, not only us but practically every country in the world

as well. G.N.P. capita has never been so high, nor has the distribution of wealth and income ever been so equal (Negroes, for example, in the 60's have increased their wealth and income faster than whites and this is especially true of the blue-collar group, contrary to some public opinion*). This is the Age of Affluence, despite the private appropriation of most of the land rent. The desire for material improvement and the new technological forces are difficult to contravene.

"Some Georgists claim that privately appropriated land rent is the root of all evil, but this is not substantiable. There are so many other causes of poverty: antiquated cultural attitudes, old age, ill health, natural disaster, war, riot, race prejudice, inadequate childhood attitudes, improper fiscal and monetary policy, and assorted forms of irrationality and veniality.

"My point then, is this: as a matter of justice, land value taxation is worth fighting very hard for, and also the twin causes of urban renewal and land reform in rural and underdeveloped areas. These are important present-day concerns and our proposal can make giant steps toward their improvement, giant enough to justify the expenditure of much time, effort and money on our part and on the part of our audience. But if we claim too much for our proposal, such as the abolition of poverty and depressions, then we are handicapping ourselves in trying to convert the college activists or most anyone else.

"We needn't exaggerate our case. It is quite good enough as it is."

*New York Times, January 12, 1969, pp. 1, 84, quoting U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics figures, 7/68.

Stan Rubenstein, director of the HGS Long Island Extension, would avoid emphasis on the philosophical approach and pay more attention to getting the students' attention. Here are some practical pointers for those who wish to appeal to students, based on his experience as a high school teacher of social studies:

"Economics is usually taught as a discipline during the senior or twelfth year (as in New York State) and is a one-half year course. A list of the names of economics teachers and social studies department chairmen may be obtained either from the local school or from pamphlets issued by educational agencies. Send a letter to these individuals and offer your services as a guest speaker in their classes. Mention various areas of special interest — such as poverty, welfare, decay of cities, etc. Then integrate Georgism into the topic when speaking.

"Try to meet first with the chairman of the social studies department rather than the teacher inasmuch as he usually has a less rigid teaching schedule. Explain the purpose of the HGS very briefly, and tell him what you can offer his school in the form of materials and speakers. Many teachers are looking for supplementary material, for this is the current trend in the social studies (avoid *Progress and Poverty* at this stage).

"In introducing the subject to the teacher and department chairman be patient and of course diplomatic, inasmuch as they usually know very little about George. Several letters or samples of our literature may have to be sent before an initial meeting can be arranged.

"Take an interest in the chairman and teachers and try to pick up the latest educational jargon, i.e., interdisciplinary approach, inductive approach, etc. It is important that you establish yourself as a fellow teacher. Remember that you are educators fighting on the

same team to overcome student apathy, the difficulty of teaching economics and the lack of cooperation.

"Once in the classroom never talk down to students but try to stimulate them. Talk on one subject briefly and do not try to give them the whole Georgist philosophy in one lesson, to do this is to invite disaster. Allow time for questions and answer them as well and pleasantly as you can. The favorable rapport you establish may be worth more than the depth of the contents on the initial meeting.

"A course for high school students after class is negligible in cost as compared to regular classes, but these must be arranged at the invitation and within the rules of the school.

"Teachers can get credit by taking certain courses in school and the credit can be applied towards their salary increment. Check and find out which administrators have the responsibility for granting such credit and work with the chairman. This will require a degree of subtlety and you will have to do the pushing and selling, but you may be able to set up an "in-service" course in basic economics.

"None of these things can be done overnight and they require a good deal of patience and humor. But once you penetrate the establishment in a high school you may find you have a welcome entree year after year. The reception from the students will depend largely on their teacher's attitude toward you. Youthful minds are eager, and one good suggestion dropped in a fertile field may prove fruitful in years to come."

Very busy people always find time for everything; people with immense leisure find time for nothing.
— Ernest Dimnet

Cholin H. Cholmondeley, a native scholarship student from British Guiana, now Guyana, at Illinois Institute of Technology, visited a class in basic economics at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Wilbur Johnson in Chicago. He borrowed a copy of *Progress and Poverty* and two weeks later turned in a five-page essay to his economics professor with this conclusion:

"TODAY, without a land tax, there is nothing to prevent the landowners from holding on to their land until the demand gets so great that they can sell for their exorbitant prices, making huge profits that they have not worked for in any way. It does not seem possible that the powerful and grasping landlords could have such a controlling hold on every decision-making apparatus of almost every economy of the free world. It certainly is one of the greatest puzzles of our modern life that a problem as monumental as this one, with as simple a solution, should be allowed to fester and grow into one of the greatest afflictions of mankind.

The land question is at the root of all our social, political and economic afflictions. Selfish hoarding of God-given land is the direct cause of poverty. No other factor can be said to be more responsible for the scourge of poverty than the ineptitude and basic unfairness of prevailing land taxation policies. The curse born of poverty is not confined to the poor alone; it runs through all classes, even to the

very rich. They too, suffer, they must suffer, for there cannot be suffering in a community from which any class can totally escape. The vice, the crime, the ignorance, the meanness born of poverty poison the very air which rich and poor alike must breathe. Poverty is the mother of ignorance and the breeder of crime.

"What then can we conclude about all this? What can be the consequences of inaction, of the preservation of our present seemingly senseless land taxation policies? The results of these policies are quite plain to see. That a select few should reap the largest rewards of progress and expansion to the detriment of the large majority is an intolerable condition that we cannot long endure. All of the measures of George's single-tax movement seem to be, in our contemporary society, designed towards providing the most powerful force for a better life for all the world's masses, a better utilization of the God-given land on which we all depend, and above all, a start, a beginning of the solution to all of our growing problems."



Long a devoted Georgist, Mrs. Ethel Stannard of Columbia, Connecticut called attention to several articles dealing with the tax situation in the *Willimantic Daily Chronicle*. The series was introduced on January 7th with a statement by the editor, E. M. Stannard, that "the complete alteration and revision of the Connecticut tax system has become the single most critical issue of all."

This was followed by a three-column story on the viable tax base, which quoted from material supplied by Noah D. Alper, president of the Public Revenue Council in St. Louis and an article on America's land boom by David M. Friedenburg in *Harpers Magazine* last May.

The Southfield Story as told by its assessor, Ted Gwartney, in the August 1968 HGN was reprinted next, and the third and fourth installments were further delineations of LVT by Perry Prentice, former editor of *House & Home* and consultant for Time-Life Publications. Mrs. Stannard notes that this is a section of the state where there is growing pressure for more development very soon.