

# Justice For All?

## Toward A Geoist Political Strategy

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**'There is danger in reckless change; but  
greater danger in blind conservatism.'**

**Henry George**

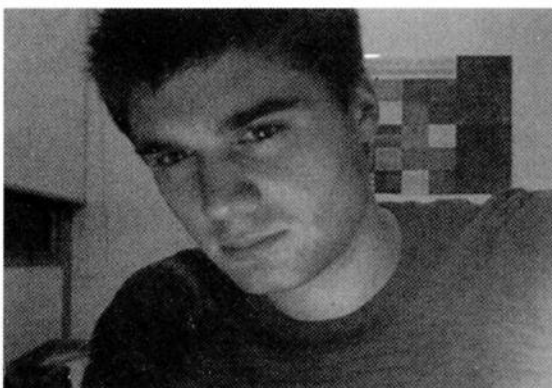
Despite a long history and many fervent advocates, Geoism is no longer popular. Support for Geoism as a political ideology has largely disappeared, and its economic proposal of a resource rental system remains unrealised. Geoism has not succeeded. Yet, the idea of Geoism remains as relevant as ever. The global financial crisis affects nation after nation, the impacts of unmitigated climate change loom, and global poverty remains. So, why has Geoism disappeared as a political movement? And what can be done to resurrect it?

When Henry George first outlined his philosophical view—that each person has an equal right to the use of natural resources—his call to action was clearly situated within the political and cultural framework of the time. Religion, natural law, and the rhetoric of liberty are central themes in his ideas; while his discussions of labor, class, and social change are deeply rooted in a society that has long since disappeared.

Indeed, George garnered widespread support and a level of popularity now reserved for very few politicians or social reformers. On a tour of Australia in 1890, George was greeted by large crowds across the country, honoured at ceremonial dinners in every city he visited, and delivered over fifty formal speeches. Never abandoning his basic principles, George spoke with a conviction that was respected even by those who opposed his views.

It is not surprising then, as economist Jerome Heavey notes in his critique of the movement, that 'there [has been] a certain religiosity associated with George...At the funeral of Henry George, Dr. Edward McGlynn, the Catholic priest who was George's comrade in the founding of the Anti-Poverty Society, eulogised George with these words, "As truly as there was a man sent of God whose name was John, there was a man sent of God whose name was Henry George!" It is reported that the congregation gasped and then burst into a storm of applause.'

Such misplaced zealotry, while an interesting feature of the Geoist movement, does little for the acceptance of Geoism today. Outside of the movement, awareness of George and his ideas are minimal. Yet, within the movement,



a reverential attitude toward George and his political philosophy remains.

Such piety, I believe, is damaging the reconstruction of Geoism as a significant ideology. From the careful reproduction of George's ideas—without thought to their contemporary relevance—to the structure of the movement, Geoism has failed to adapt to the rapidly changing landscape of politics and economics. Although the influence of modern environmentalism has forced many Geoists to see the value of including the preservation of natural resources as a key theoretical element, the hope of expanding Geoist critique

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beyond the narrow confines of land value in any radical way—to intellectual property, for example—has not yet been fulfilled. Moreover, the failure of Geoism to attract public awareness to the pressing issues of resource use and speculation is frequently assigned to others.

While it is undeniably the case that speculative interests are represented politically, we must also recognise the need to offer Geoism in a way that invites comprehension. The current conservatism of Geoist thought must be abandoned. What, then, should we do to rebuild Geoism? I believe there are three main changes that must be enacted by Geoists if

the political movement is to survive. Firstly, we must simplify Geoist theory. Or more importantly, we must simplify the presentation of Geoist theory.

Despite the fact that Henry George considered a resource rental system—chiefly a system of land taxation—to be only one feature of his broad political philosophy, the modern Geoist movement has focused almost exclusively on this idea. Some critics of contemporary Geoism have suggested that this narrow approach has damaged the movement, but I disagree.

As I outlined above, I think that Geoism should be adapted and reformed in order to better serve as a tool to analyse the current state of political economy. However, having a clear, simple message is vital. The problem so far has not been the basic policy proposal of a resource rental system, it has been the refusal to extend and apply that proposal to the range of monopolistic privileges that now exist. Furthermore, despite (or maybe because of) a high level of economic comprehension amongst Geoists, the concept of a resource rental system has not been presented with much clarity.

The use of jargon—both technical language specific to Geoism and other terms more widely used by economists—has become an unfortunate practice within the movement. Instead of plain terminology, a collection of portmanteau words and assumed concepts has emerged. In order for Geoism to gain a foothold in public discourse, we need to strip Geoism of confusing language. For many Geoists, familiarity with the idea seems to prevent it being easily explained to others. If Geoism is to succeed, accessible language must replace economic obscurantism.

Secondly, we must build strong connections with other social and political movements. In my view, one of the strengths of the Geoist idea lies in its broad appeal to people from diverse political positions. From right-libertarians and classical liberals to socialists and those involved in green politics, Geoism can remain largely uncontroversial.

Moreover, issue-based movements—indigenous struggles for self-determination, campaigns against homelessness, housing affordability, poverty, and environmental destruction—are all potential allies of Geoism. Through attempts to remain independent of political influence, the Geoist movement has largely bypassed the interactions of progressive politics. While some may not regret such attempts at impartiality, I see it instead as a failure to envision Geoism as a radical political movement—one that can more readily challenge the privilege of resource monopolisation.

Lastly, Geoists should recognise the inherent difficulty of working within the system of institutional politics. In attempting to realise a system of resource rentals on a

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local, state, or national level, Geoists have focused heavily on government as the means to enact political change. I do not want to deny the importance of policy advocacy within Geoism, but instead prompt consideration of non-institutional tactics that have not been part of Geoist activism. Perhaps most significantly, the development of community land trusts are an exciting avenue for Geoism.

Having emerged in the United States as a means for African American farmers to gain secure and affordable access to land, community land trusts are a practical way to implement Geoist ideas and strengthen communities based on equal access to natural resources. The future success of Geoism is reliant on its implementation, and political change may be better sought through community-based change than the frustrating process of influencing legislation.

The suggestions I have outlined above are not comprehensive, nor do they accurately reflect the many reasons why Geoism has not succeeded. Instead, I have presented these thoughts on strategy in order for them to be developed further. A range of tactics are necessary if a resource rental system is to be realistically implemented, and discussion about political strategy must continue to evolve. For, if Geoism is to seek justice for all at all, the Geoist movement must become an effective force for political and economic change.



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