



# Henry George and Modernity

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The thought of Henry George (1839-1897), the once famous American social and economic philosopher, is systematic and integrated. A principal assumption of modernity is that as knowledge increases it necessarily becomes

more specialized and diversified. Historically, philosophers have tried to understand the ground of specialization in a synthetic theory that contextualizes its sub-disciplines and specialized insights within a whole that somehow sheds substantive light on what the theory synthesizes.

The philosophy of Henry George, as found in such works as *Progress and Poverty* (1879), *Social Problems* (1884) and *The Science of Political Economy* (1898) is not one for modernity because our culture and civilization, in both theory and practice, focuses on ever smaller segments of knowledge. Its science is hypothetico-deductive or, perhaps more accurately, the art of revisionary modelling. Knowledge in modernity is never before us in a complete or conclusive fashion since it is forever revisable and fungible - a datum or quantum interchangeable with similar data and quanta. George advocated a single solution for most of the economic and social ills that plague society. It is a simple and transparent solution for a vast complex of affronts to the common good. Today it is widely believed that complex problems can only have complex solutions.

The politics of modernity are the skills of compromise, the pathologies of mass opinion and the manipulations of piecemeal engineering. Ours is not an age of political rationality. The terms of its various dialogues are primarily emotional, peer-induced and interest-based. Its operational mechanics are no different from the merchandising and branding of medium-sized drygoods. As some philosophers have noted, words camouflage as well as reveal the truth. In an era of unprecedented concern for language we have all but forgotten that language reflects thought - thought itself is now viewed as an epiphenomenon of language. In a sense performatives, language and action have become primary - thought a residual. George is in the classical tradition of viewing thought as primary, action as residuum. Towards the end of *Social Problems* he declared that right action can only follow correct thought. And at the beginning of *The Science of Political Economy*, in his most speculatively philosophical passages, he declares the spiritual to be primary - the existence of civilization is in the mental and the spiritual.

The philosophy of Henry George is not reducible to one of its constituents. Such intellectual dishonesty is the hallmark of his opponents, as it is of all commentators who fail to remind their audience that the critic's task often tends to reductionism. George is neither a free-booting capitalist nor a communist. He did not espouse absolute, unlimited property rights to the detriment of the commu-

nity, nor did he promote the nationalization of land and other natural resources to the detriment of individual initiative. In his writings there is a panoramic interrelation of ethics and economics, individual and societal rights, equity and efficiency.

The ethical principle, reverence for life, anchors a wide range of moral practices - equal access to nature, equality of opportunity, relief of poverty, the dignity of the individual and preservation of the environment. This side of Georgism is condemnatory as well as creative of positive precepts for how to live the good and just life. It is directed primarily inward toward private life and conduct.

The economic principle, a circular balance of industry and reward, based on properly demarcated property rights, safeguards public policy decision-making from the ravages of the first maxim of political economy, that people will always seek to satisfy their desires and needs through the least amount of effort, and from the mephitic effects of designing public finance systems on the basis of what appears to be just but which in fact promotes discriminatory privilege and unjust private enrichment. This aspect of Georgism necessarily works at many different levels of practical life. It exposes unearned privileges and monopolies that reward the few at the expense of the labours of many. It proposes intelligent economic arrangements and goals for all manner of public revenue generation even if at times such methods of levying taxes fall short of the Georgist ideal. It is directed primarily outward toward public discourse and the formulation of just laws.

The frequent noting of the absence of Georgist principles in modern civil society is a lament for their lack of systematic application. For those versed in these principles there must be a continual vigilance to have them invoked and implemented whenever the opportunity arises. In other words, there are practical consequences to taking these principles as inviolable. One would oppose the privatization of water, for instance. Or in California one should support reforms to the disaster of Proposition 13 by critiquing acquisition-value taxation and assessment systems that seem to be gaining in popularity. In Ontario, current value assessment should be supported within the context of a critique of the proportional tax on total property value, which distorts the efficient development of cities, makes public transit a financial black hole and contributes to environmental degradation.

The philosophy of Henry George, a doomed prophecy for the twentieth century, may flourish in the twenty-first regardless of whether or not it is explicitly championed and implemented as a just philosophy of socio-economic salvation. It is in the very nature of things that those people and organizations that dominate nature for their own private interests without adequately compensating the rest of society will find their edifices built on uncertain ground. George articulated abiding principles for a just and civil society. We ought to preserve this tradition by imaginatively creating it anew.

