

One thing that the Georgist movement lacks is a good villain. Our efforts in support of political-economic goals, however laudable, however buttressed by logic, miss one element that would give them popular punch: a bad guy, someone to go out there and get. The Libertarians have one: government, the venal, greedy, bloated, ineffective, self-perpetuating, arrogant public sector. The Left, of course, has basically the same things to say about its own capitalist villains. "Workers! Smash your chains! Seize the means of production!" has a good beat, and you can dance to it. "Organize economic relations according to the natural laws of production and distribution and the moral basis of ownership" lacks drama. Even "Tax land, not labor!" sounds pretty tame on a bumper sticker.

Who do we have to play the villain's role? The landowner? But **everybody** wants to be a landowner; it's the universal dream. One oft-cited statistic around here is that 97% of the privately owned land in the United States is owned or controlled by 3% of the population. It's also true, however, that nearly a quarter of the people in the US own some land - not much, but some - and our students often come from that much larger group. Should we vilify them? Let's not forget the Henry George School itself - an organization that has been compelled (as have many others) to rely on real estate appreciation to fund its efforts to educate the public on the evils of land speculation.

Searching for a villain will not help us, and the general inclination to do so can lead to serious misconceptions. It might be helpful, incidentally, to consider the original meaning of the word, villain: "a member of a class of half-free persons under the feudal system who were serfs with respect to their lord but had privileges of freemen with respect to others, hence, a low-born rustic..." The evil is not that people act in their own self-interest; rather, it is in those legal and social arrangements that allow them to do so at the expense of the rights of others.

The habit of hunting for "bad guys" is, I think, one of the big obstacles blocking our students' understanding of the laws of

TEACHERS' CORNER



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wealth distribution. The laws of rent and wages, for example, describe tendencies that determine the proportional distribution of aggregate production. The "general level of wages" and "potential rent" do indeed have important impact on individuals in the economy - but no more on one individual than on any other.

A common example of the kind of confusion that can arise is when students start thinking about landlords they know. Most people who own property have plenty to worry about, to maintain, to pay out. Certainly they don't seem responsible for skimming all the cream off of our economy. We respond, of course, by pointing out the need to eliminate taxes on improvements - but the student is all-too-often left thinking, "Big deal." In the micro-economic place where we all live, it is often difficult to see how these macro-economic tendencies work.

It is the macro-understanding that holds the power for meaningful change, though. This puts us in a bit of a tough spot as teachers. For examples of the bad effects of land speculation, we really have nowhere else to go but specific places, such as surface parking lots, slums, grand and inefficient cattle ranches, and so forth. Our students, then, envision those places in terms of their specific proprietors and think, "What choice do they have but to collect land rent - that's their livelihood!"

In other words, that "class" of people which we are (apparently) trying to vilify have, more often than not, the sympathy of our students. In truth, of course, we have no intention of vilifying any class of people. But that sort of thing - identifying, and vilifying, the villains - is what people tend to expect from social reformers.

Therefore, we need to be very clear on this point - clear enough for real-estate agents who happen into our classes to feel comfortable about staying.