

Henry George News

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In This Issue:

- Spring Graduation*.....p.2
From the Archives.....p. 3
LVI in Connecticut?.....p.3
In Memorium.....p.4
Results of our Fundraising.....p.4
Teacher Faces Tough Questions...p.5
Upcoming Seminars.....p.6
*The Diggers: Predecessors
to Henry George*.....p.7

Welcome to the *New* Henry George School

Full schedule of classes & seminars in renovated building

After a year of renovation, which included the installation of a completely new heating and cooling system and expanded classroom footage, the Henry George School reopened last Fall with a full complement of classes and seminars. With a new backyard garden, new carpeting and interior paint job, we should easily live up to our new motto: *A Meeting Place for Interested and Interesting People.*



Also new: look for major re-designs of many of our publications (including the one you now hold in your hands). In addition, you can now read about the School on-line (see below) and download our latest brochure and other course-related items. While there, write us and tell us what you think.

WWW.HENRYGEORGESCHOOL.ORG

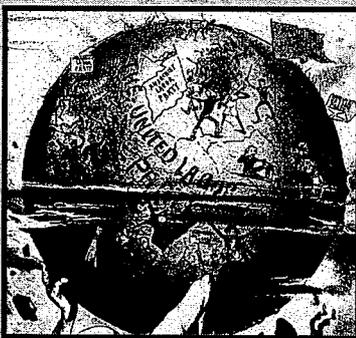
The School's New Web Site!

The Henry George School of Social Science now has a Web Site. Check out www.henrygeorgeschool.org for the latest information about the school - new classes, seminars and movies.

The first of the School's programs to debut at our new site is the High School Program. The Program, now in its 10th year, provides free lesson materials, including its own quarterly newsletter, to over 1400 high school teachers around the country. Focusing on a socio-economic approach to the teaching of history, the program's three basic lesson packages, *American History*, *World History* and *Economic Studies*, present the land-issue as crucial to an understanding of history and social problems. Three supplementary lessons, *Understanding Today's Economy*, *The Industrial Revolution* and *From Confederation to Federation*, continue the basic theme and present the relevance of the Georgist message to contemporary issues.

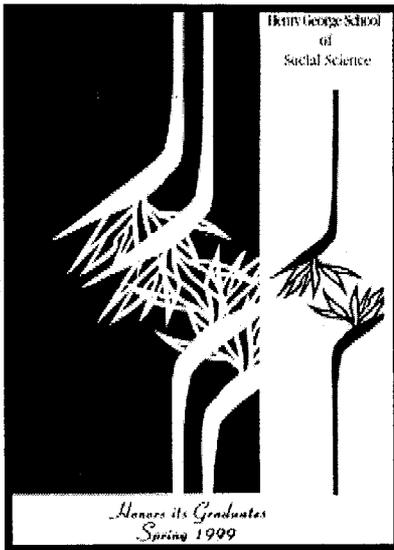
Future additions to our Web - Site will include our Library and Archives, our Spanish Affairs Department and the Social Science Forum. So, check out www.henrygeorgeschool.org. It will be updated prior to the beginning of each new semester. So, stop by and leave your comments. We'd love to hear from you!

From the Archives

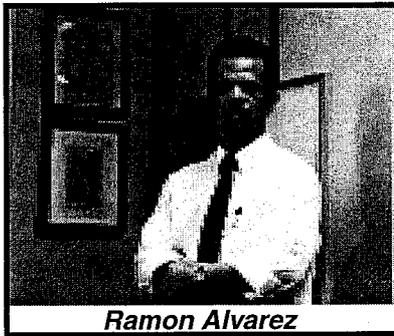


With this issue we begin a new feature, *From the Archives*, in which our librarian Vesa Nelson retrieves artifacts, records of note and documents from the School's collection. *See page 3*





Graduation Program



Ramon Alvarez

The Henry George School says goodbye and good luck to Ramon Alvarez, who moved with his family to Florida this past August. Ramon, wore many hats - including official photographer, database wizard, assistant coordinator of the Spanish Affairs Department, and many others. Ramon, originally from the Dominican Republic, worked at the School for 7 years, helping and guiding in almost all aspects of the School's day to day activities. Good luck Ramon!

Henry George News

The Henry George News is published four times a year and is available free to contributors. The opinions expressed herein are the sole responsibility of the Henry George School, a non-profit institution of adult education.

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Springing Forward: The Class of '99

At the end of the Spring 1999 semester, a graduation ceremony was held for those students who completed the three-course curriculum of Principles of Political Economy. The celebration of the completion of the program, which consists of *Progress & Poverty*, *Applied Economics* and *Economic Science*, was attended by nearly 50 students - some with family members. This year's graduation theme was *The 21st Century: Freeing the Land*.

Presiding over the graduation were Sydney Mayers, Henry George School President, and Tom Smith, the School's Director of Education. Some of the speakers at the event included Dr. Drew Harris, President of the Council of Geogist Organizations and Mr. George DeShields, a popular instructor.



Henry George School President Sydney Mayers addresses the audience at the opening of the evening's program. (Photos by Ramon Alvarez)

The ceremony lasted about an hour, with refreshments following. The evenings entertainment was supplied by musicians Guillermo Cardenas and Shani Andrews, who donated their talents in appreciation for the service the School has been performing.

When notified of their having qualified for graduation honors, students were encouraged to say a few words after receiving their diplomas. The sentiments ranged from "sincere appreciation for the School's work" to "It is my desire to take these ideas back to my country." We sold that last person a copy of *Progress and Poverty* in French. His intent is to explore the prospect of opening a School in French-speaking Africa. The work of the School knows no geographical boundaries.

Memo

From: The Director of Education

When decisions were made to upgrade the physical structure of the School, no one foresaw just how lengthy and disruptive the process would necessarily become.

To create a more comfortable and efficient environment for working and learning, walls were opened and ceilings removed as the staff continued to work around the clamorous activity of carpenters, window replacers and heating and air conditioning installers. During the winter months space heaters barely warmed a few scattered work areas as the staff prepared materials for classes being held off-site, first at Washington Irving High School and then in the Con Ed building.

But difficult times often clear the way to new beginnings!

It is encouraging to report that the first year of activity in the renovated building at 121 E. 30th Street saw numbers of students participating in the School's curriculum which compare very favorably with the all-time high numbers of previous years. Beyond quantitative measurement there was an observable broadening of interest in the School by geographically and ethnically diverse populations.

More students live in boroughs other than Manhattan and some reside in New Jersey and Westchester and Rockland counties. They have made a considerable commitment to the social and economic ideas of Henry George.

Too, we have expanded course offerings with more historical analysis. *The Genesis of Modern Economics* fills a void in the teaching of global economic development and offers a fresh and stimulating insight into the deception of treating land as if it were capital.

Friday night seminars and film offerings have attracted a wonderfully diverse cross-section of New Yorkers with many more young people than previous years. We'll work to continue that trend and encourage you to offer ideas which you think would be appropriate for examination and discussion in a Friday or Saturday session in the School's auditorium. The brochure identifies the School as a "Meeting Place for Interested . . . and Interesting People!" And it is!

While this publication has been resting, the School and its advocates have not. Your interest in the Henry George School of Social Science is always appreciated. And we will endeavor to bring the *News* to you on a regular basis to keep you close to a place, idea and commitment which can, and someday will, be totally transformative in the name of social justice.

Connecticut Poised to Enact Land-Tax Reform

According to a recent issue of the *Georgist News*, edited by former Chicagoan Adam Monroe, the Connecticut State Legislature is about to vote on Georgist land-tax reform. Quoting Josh Vincent, Director of the Henry George Foundation of America and the Center for the Study of Economics, the article points out that "Connecticut State Legislator Jefferson Davis has, for the past four years, been promoting the sensibility of shifting taxation off of the productive activities of the people and onto land value speculation." **House Bill #6904**, recently approved by the Connecticut House of Representatives, should soon come up for a full House vote.

The following is the full text of the bill, taken from the state's General Assembly Website (www.state.ct.us):

An Act Concerning Land Value Taxation.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives in General Assembly convened:

Section 1. Section 12-62a of the general statutes is repealed and the following substituted thereof:

(a) Each municipality, as defined in section 7-381, shall establish a uniform assessment date of October first.

(b) Each such municipality shall assess all property for purposes of the local property tax at a uniform rate of seventy per cent of present true and actual value, as determined under section 12-63. For assessment years commencing on and after October 1, 1999, any targeted investment community, as defined in section 32-222, by ordinance adopted by its legislative body, may (1) classify real estate as (A) land or land exclusive of buildings, or (B) buildings on land, and (2) establish a different rate of property tax for each class, provided the higher rate shall apply to land or land exclusive of building.

Josh himself is enthusiastic, saying that 1999 "Looks like *the* year."

From the Archives

Vesa Nelson, *Librarian*

Land Jobbing as a Frontier Skill

In researching materials in our archives for a new course I've begun teaching at the School, I ran across two fascinating books that give a provocatively different view from the traditional one of America's pioneer past and westward expansion. The first book, John W. Reps's *The Forgotten Frontier; Urban Planning in the American West Before 1890*, details the crucial role that land speculation played in the early development of our country. The second, Stewart H. Holbrook's *Dreamers of the American Dream*, adds crucial elements to the story, revealing treachery and fraud on a grand scale as land speculators bought up huge tracts of western land, often ahead of the "pioneer" settlers, and created large cities and parcels of farmland which they sold for profit to settlers coming West. Both books go against the grain of our traditional romantic and sentimental views of a West carved out by rugged individualists with "pioneer spirit" and visions of free land and a stateless society.

Filled with plans, maps and historical sketches, John Reps' book argues that planned towns built on the grid pattern spearheaded Western expansion. Agricultural workers frequently lagged behind, following after much of the land had been bought up. Town founders and their camp followers, mostly *land jobbers* (middle men between large land owners and would-be settlers seeking small plots of land), smoothed the way into the unknown West for most farmers. The towns provided services, amusement and outlets for the farmers to sell their products. While Reps confines his analysis west of the 98th meridian, or the trans-Mississippi West, he intimates that tantalizing clues exist suggesting that the same pattern might hold true for the older trans-Appalachian west.

Holbrook's work without hesitation interlaces "lurid" anecdotal evidence with scholarly investigation. One especially vivid account tells the story of Stephen Douglas Puter and what

became known as "timber fraud."

Writing his memoirs while in jail awaiting sentence, Puter styled himself as "King of the Oregon Timber Fraud Ring." His revelations of deceit astonished even veterans of the Cr dit Mobilier affair. Puter made his start working for a US Government surveying crew and made mental notes of all the potential desirable claims he ran across. Later, independently, he would offer for a fee to "locate" good claims, and for

an additional fee, erect a structure passable in law as an improvement to hold the claim against rivals.

Eventually Puter worked his way up to the batch processing of huge numbers of fraudulent claims. With the promise of a gold piece to each person Puter, recruiting in saloons and dives, would march to the courthouse with unknowing and uncaring recent immigrants-*en*

masse. The immigrants would sign letters of intent to become citizens and settle land. Puter next took them to the land office. Here, with the collusion of corrupt officials, the immigrants transferred over a blank land claim to a recipient yet to be named and collected one gold piece. A corporation interested in prime redwood forest would pay Puter a handsome sum for each such batch of claims, filling in the necessary legal details later. The immigrants wound up with one gold coin; the corporation, at the end of the day, would have vast tracks of land and Puter would have a handsome profit.

Puter was later one of hundreds to fall in a cleanup campaign targeting land-grabbers which was spearheaded by Ethan Allen Hitchcock, a great-grandson of Colonel Ethan Allen of the "Green Mountain Boys." Hitchcock, as Secretary of Interior for President McKinley, dismissed many corrupt government officials and sent several hundred *land jobbers* to jail.

Holbrook tells another interesting story concerning one William Butler Ogden whose brother "invested" \$100,000 dollars in the "frontier town" of Chicago. As Holbrook begins recounting Ogden's story, Ogden arrives in



Land jobbers plotting Westward expansion ahead of the pioneers

In Memorium

Within the last year, the School lost two longtime friends and guiding forces. Printed below are two Board of Trustee resolutions commemorating their passing.

Constance Weinstein

RESOLUTION:

"WHEREAS: In the untimely passing of Constance G. Weinstein the Henry George School of Social Science has lost a warm friend, a generous supporter, and a dedicated Member Trustee and Secretary/Treasurer,

"BE IT RESOLVED: That this Board hereby expresses its deep regret and its appreciation for the valuable contributions she has made to the School and its cause, and

"FURTHER RESOLVED: That when this meeting of the Board of Trustees adjourns, it shall do so in grateful memory of Constance G. Weinstein."

Ms. Weinstein died on May 8, 1999.

Thomas Larkin

"The death of Mr. Thomas A. Larkin on June 2, 1999, was an irreparable loss to the Henry George School of Social Science. During his many years of service to the School we all learned to admire him not only for his wise counsel but the grace and pleasing manner with which he dealt with all of us.

"His knowledge of finance was of great help to the School in the conduct of its financial affairs. At all times he was ready to help in whatever manner was needed to further the School's work in educating the public in the principles set forth by Henry George. He had an excellent understanding of the philosophy which helped him in advancing its tenets.

"He was dedicated to the School and did all he could to make it a success. Because of the great esteem in which he was held, it is only proper that this tribute to him be made."

Contributions

1998 - 99

We would like to express our heartfelt thanks to the following people who have contributed financially to the Henry George School over the past year. (We have recently changed our database program; if we have misspelled your name, please let us know.)

Sophia Abeles	Gaye Markson
Robert E. Allen, Jr.	Radames Romey Maturell
Allen Alter	Bruce Michels
Susan Alter	Mobil Foundation, Inc.
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Barby R. Hogue	Elizabeth Moore
Catherine Apothaker	Gizella Mullen
The Aramaic	Pauline R. Murphy
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Catherine Jackson	Carl Spanierman
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Jean - Marie Jeanty	Joan Sumamer
James Z.M. Jjiang	John R. &
John W. Jordan	Nadine W. Stoner
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Frederick I. Kahn	Mae I. Tabbanor
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Gerald & Christine Labelle	Sue Ellen Williams
Richard Laguerre	Simon N. Winters
Herman A. Lazaar	Eugene & Dorothy Wolin
Donald Levor	Arthur P. Yeatman
Renee Linsky	Constance Zhang
Laraine Joan Lippe	Gina Zuckerman
Herbert J. Lurio	Bernard & Michele Zwim

Terminology

The following are some terms in Pocial Economy that occasionally need repeating.

Land: *The entire material universe, excluding people and their products.*

Rent: Rent, in the economic sense, is that part of wealth which is the return for the use of land.

Law of Rent: The rent of land is determined by the excess of its produce over that which the same application of labor and capital can secure from the least productive land in use.

Interest: Interest is that part of wealth which is the return for the use of capital, excluding compensation for risk.

Law of Interest: The return for capital depends upon the increase of capital at the margin of production.

Distribution: The division of wealth among the factors that produce it.

It's Not Too Late... 

To make your contribution to the Henry George School

You can make a difference.

Though a number of people have given more than once this past year, a simple contribution of \$10 will be appreciated. And to show our gratitude, if you contribute at least \$10 you will receive *The Henry George News* for one year. That's 4 issues of the latest news about the School, the Georgist movement world-wide - plus much more!

So, join the growing ranks of those who have made a contribution to the Henry George School.

If you would like to *volunteer* your time to the School your call is welcome call 212.889.8020

Teacher Talk

Max Panzner

Max Panzner is not new to the School, but he has only recently begun to teach Progress and Poverty, which he is doing again this fall term. As a Hunter College student with many academic achievements to his credit, he also does computer design and manages off-Broadway productions. Still, he takes the time to answer his students questions. One of his students, Riva, was given the following response to one of her inquiries.

What about Riva's very strong feeling that government should provide housing for those without?

There's certainly plenty to be said about how the government should and shouldn't be spending our tax dollars, most of which is (unfortunately) a matter of personal opinions and special interests. It seems that in this class we're all pretty much in agreement about the need for public housing and for improvement in the living standards of the unemployed and working poor. What is desperately needed is an analysis of the current dilemma that transcends opinions and mere habits of thought; an understanding which explains the problem and offers solutions based solely on the observable facts. So what are the facts pointed to in Riva's argument for government intervention on behalf of the homeless and the poor? What are we saying exactly when we talk of "affordable housing?" Where does homelessness come from; when did it begin? (And what does it mean when the word "homeless" becomes a regular part of a society's vocabulary?)

The problem begins to look almost deceptively simple when we examine it historically. We know there were not always homeless people in this country (or anywhere else in the world for that matter). If you came here as a settler, you went to live with relatives or, more likely, you claimed some land as yours and you built yourself a home. Of course you also claimed much more land than you could put to use, but that land will have its use one day, as people keep emigrating and the population reproduces and multiplies, putting greater demands on less and less available lands. So what happens when all the land is claimed? People are forced to pay

rent, forced to hand over a part of their labor to someone else just for the right to occupy a little bit of space that the first person got for free. Now we know that homelessness is not as simple as all the land being taken up and people not being able to afford the rent. But we do know that this is one of the two principle factors contributing to the lack of affordable housing. The other has to do with labor in constant competition against labor for those scarce jobs mentioned earlier.

How did working opportunities become scarce? The same way as all others: by the ownership of the land. What is labor without access to nature - to the land, to the resources from

With access to land prohibitively expensive, labor has no choice but to compete with each other for the opportunity to work for others.

which all wealth is generated. This relationship between labor and the land seems outmoded today, but it is really obscured by a highly specialized and incredibly complex economy, where the base forms of production that are the foundation to all other production, such as agriculture and the extractive arts of mining, tapping crude oil, fishing and herding, and so on, have become so advanced that very little direct human labor is required. This is why catch-phrases such as Information Age and Service Society hold such sway in our minds - we are very far removed from but no less dependent on the forms of production which still come first, those which are absolutely essential to our survival. So we are dependent on access to the capital of others for work opportunities since we no longer have access (or are compensated for our lack of access, which is essentially what land value taxation is) to the land and its resources. This is essentially the Marxist point: that the owners of capital control the means of production and thus the standard of living and livelihood of labor. Now we can accept that production today cannot carry on without capital, but there is an essential difference between land and capital: we can produce as much capital as we need (or want), while land is absolutely fixed in supply. With access to land being prohibitively expensive, labor has no choice but to compete with each other for the opportunity to work for oth-

ers (a mix of capitalists, landlords, and capitalist/landlords) just to pay someone (landlords) for the right to exist. The competition among labor drives wages down as those without work are willing to accept less and less to survive. With land in private hands, increases in population and technological improvements in production only worsen this situation, putting more people out of work and increasing the demand for jobs and access to land...

The tiny trickle of government money that finds its way to the poor, the unemployed and the homeless is, in a sense, a portion of what is in fact due to them by the owners of land for allowing them to put that land to their own use. In other words, the percentage of the value of the land that is collected by the government in real estate taxes is already a version of land value taxation, although this is nowhere near the amount which should be paid to the community for permission to put that land to some specific use, restricting others, like the unemployed and the homeless from the opportunity to use it themselves. By now I must be sounding like a broken record, but I hope this repetition is forcing us to shed our biases, if only for a moment, and to think through these relations for ourselves. Like Riva, I am all for providing affordable housing and jobs and health care and education opportunities to everyone, but even if we were to devote all of the government tax revenue to these programs the fundamental problems would remain firmly in place. Labor would still compete against labor (you can imagine millions of brain surgeons and rocket scientists, all highly educated and living in concrete housing projects working for minimum wage), in-

All we have to do is understand the problems we do have, and their causes, and formulate a solution that is fair; that is most just.

stead of landowners competing against landowners for the right, granted by the rest of the society (the true landowners), to put the land to use. And of course this means they could do whatever they wanted with the land so long as they could afford to pay its full value in rent - unquestionably an incentive toward improved pro-

continued on p.6

Panzner continued from p.6

duction. We also shouldn't lose sight of the fact that when I say they can do whatever they want with the land, this is still subject to the laws of supply and demand; if people don't want their goods or services they won't have a viable business and thus won't be able to afford the rent on that land. So the needs and wants of the society figure prominently in what we mean by the best use of the land. And yes it's true, many jobs would disappear, but just as they should! The cashier and the bank clerk and in some areas the small farmer would go the way of the blacksmith, the wainswright, and the magician, as advancements in production and the growth of the economy demand a better educated work force freed from the burden of unjust taxes and rewarded their share of the value of the land. In other words,

you can expect to see an increase in the value of educators to the society, along with all sorts of other occupations - writers, artists, counselors, lecturers, entertainers, athletes, scientists, engineers, etc. - as well as the growth of new fields and industries we can't even imagine. Okay, sounds too good to be true. Utopia, right? Well, it isn't necessary to conjecture all of the changes which land value taxation would bring about. All we need to do is understand the problems we do have, and their causes, and formulate a solution that is fair; that is most just. We may also want to figure out the simplest, and least disruptive way to implement any solution, though even this is not necessary. Just think it through, and we'll yell about it for two more weeks.

FALL CLASS SCHEDULE

Progress and Poverty

(Fundamental Economics)

PART I: Principles of Political Economy

(All classes 6-8 pm)

Mondays: Max Panzner
Tuesdays: Alton Perilla
Wednesdays: Vesa Nelson
Thursdays: Paul Kahane
Thursdays: Nivaldo Aguilera (in Spanish)

◆ Learn how our economy is structured to ensure an imbalance in the distribution of wealth and opportunity.

◆ Make a distinction between the natural opportunities of the Earth and those values produced by human labor.

◆ Explore the relations between the individual and society and principles of private and public property.

Applied Economics

PART II: Principles of Political Economy

Wednesdays: George DeShields 6 to 8pm
 Beneath political problems often lie social problems caused by the maldistribution of wealth. This course confronts those problems directly and examines the current global economy and free trade initiatives. Will NAFTA and GATT increase your wealth or reduce your wages?

Economic Science

PART III: Principles of Political Economy

Mondays: Dan Kryston 6 to 8pm
Thursdays: Manuel Felix (in Spanish)

This course enables students to understand and evaluate economic theory and demonstrates how economic behavior is the engine of civilization's development. This class may be taken as the second part of the three course program.

Critical Thinking: II

Toward the Good Society

Mondays: Vesa Nelson

6 to 8pm

This class will focus on the skills necessary for critical thinking and interpretation. A place to discover the joys of reasoned thought, intellectual exchange and open-minded consideration of new points of view. You will come away with a better understanding of people and ideas.

The Genesis of Modern Economics

Tuesdays: Paul Kahane

6 to 8pm

This course reviews the theories of the world's great economists. Learn how socially created land rent is stolen from the community and that crime is justified by modern economists. This in turn perpetuates poverty and low-wage bondage, the slavery of our times.

Public Speaking

Thursdays: Sydney Mayers

6 to 8pm

Stage fright? Mike fright? Nervous when you have to face an audience? Don't panic. There are simple ideas that can bolster your confidence and help you overcome your phobia. This course offers a systematic method of oral presentation in public, based on tried and true techniques. Learn to stand-up and speak-up!

Great Decisions

Tuesdays: John Bruschi

12:30 - 1:30 pm

Wednesdays: Bruce Oatman

6 to 8 pm

For 75 years, the Foreign Policy Institute has been producing educational materials in order to enlighten the public and inform debate on the complex issues of our time. From the new Information Age to the New World economic order, the Great Decisions course follows the flow of world conflicts and resolutions.

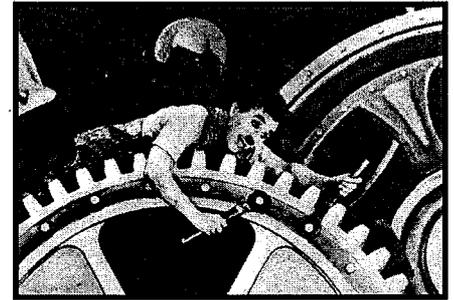
Money & Banking

Thursdays: Billy Fitzgerald

6 to 8 pm

An introduction to the function of money and credit in the modern economy. Beginning with the origin and nature of money, this course explores the Federal Reserve System, banking, the money supply and price levels.

UP COMING SEMINARS



MODERN TIMES

FRIDAY FILM FORUM Oct. 8, 7pm

Charlie Chaplin's satiric look at the machine age and its effect on social relationships and personal anxiety.



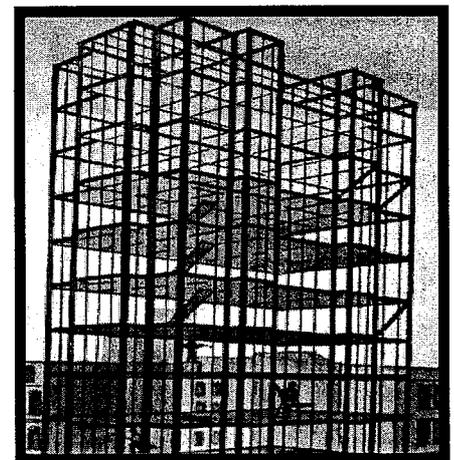
JOBS

YOU & the LABOR MARKET

Bring your resume!

Henry Silverman, a manager in the Community Services Division of the NY State Department of Labor, will illustrate the dynamics of the job market, including your skills assessment, resume construction, resources and skills pricing. This seminar is by registration only and is limited to the first 25 students.

Friday, October 15, 7 to 9 pm



YOU CAN CHANGE THE WORLD

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 22, 7-9PM

A quiet revolution is underway. An increasing number of communities are discovering the secrets which vested interests have kept from us for so long. We can encourage construction and diminish speculation through shifts in the tax structure. Dr. Steven Cord, a leading exponent of this Georgist remedy, will show us how to make "real world" applications.

continued from p. 3

Chicago in 1835 by stage coach. He finds the town populated by 180 persons in shanties and cabins. There are only two major occupations in the town — the saloon/dive keeper and the land jobber. The land surrounding the town is a swamp dominated by the odor of wild onions. The day after his arrival, Ogden is standing dependently ankle-deep in swamp water, contemplating the dim prospects of recovering his brother-in-law's \$100,000.

To his complete amazement Ogden finds that by law his merely having *platted* (staking out subdivisions and presenting them to a land office) large acreage in the standard grid pattern and holding an auction, he can recover the entire investment just by selling one third of his brother's land. Returning several months later Ogden finds to his further amazement that he can dispose of the unsold land at enormous profit. Land prices have tripled, new streets have been built; the town is rapidly growing.

In the same year Chicago was incorporated as a city, Ogden became its first mayor. Somewhere along the line Ogden had acquired an intuitive sense for town-building. He went on to sell stock, travelling by horse and buggy, for a projected Galena & Chicago Union Railroad. Once the railroad was built it became an overnight success, later becoming the Chicago & North Western Railroad. Until Ogden's Chicago was built, Cincinnati, Ohio, had been known as "Porkopolis." Chicago soon wrested this title for itself. What had once been a shanty town at best, soon became a thriving metropolis, as Ogden made good on his brother's "bad" investment.

Both Reys and Holbrook, in their respective books, relate many similar stories and incidents. And both give sometimes startling alternative views to our quaint notions about the development of our country. Perhaps Holbrook sums it up best, saying:

For generations we have cherished the romantic idea that in colonial times, and early days of the republic, all a man who wanted land had to do was to strike out in any direction into the wilderness to cut himself a clearing, build a cabin, then lay a fence... This pleasant myth, based on the solitary American squatter, is one of the most satisfying we have. It has, however, little substance of fact, for it usually turned out that land sharks in one shape or another had got there ahead of him, not necessarily in person but in the form of a grantee-lord of whom he never heard, or of a corporation he did not know existed. In either case, the [would-be] squatter was heading into trouble.

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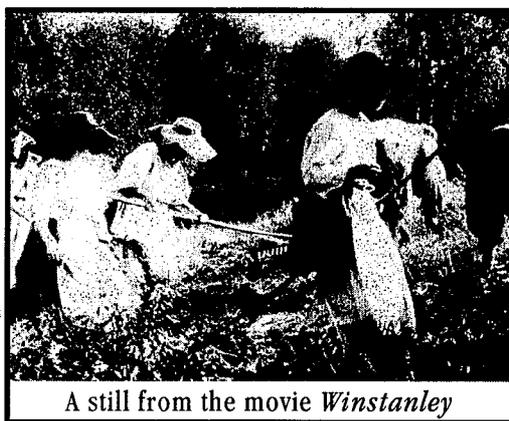
Puck Cartoon, 1887

Archival Illustrations

Reclaiming the Commons: the Diggers and the Covenant of Earth

David Domke

Among the effects of the land enclosures in 17th century England was the rise of radical agrarian movements, groups of peasants, small farmers and tradesmen left landless or otherwise disenfranchised by the enclosure act. One of these groups, the Diggers, held ideas about land ownership and the production of wealth very similar in spirit to those of Henry George. One of their leaders, Gerrard Winstanley, wrote: "The Earth, with all her Fruits of Corn, Cattle, and such-like, was made to be a common Store-House of Livelihood to all Mankind." He railed against the ruling class of landowners, saying "England is not a Freed people, till the Poor that have no Land, have a free allowance to dig and labour the Commons, and so live as comfortably as the Landlords that live in their Enclosures."



A still from the movie *Winstanley*

One of the effects of the large-scale enclosure of common land was the introduction of land into the open market, and this led almost immediately to a rise in land speculation and the dispossession of those families

who for generations had worked the land and considered it their natural birthright. Much of the newly "freed" land was not used for the growing of crops but for the grazing of sheep, whose wool was sold to the European mainland for enormous profits. A consequence of this change in land-use was the creation of a scarcity of corn and wheat and a subsequent steep rise in prices for those staples, putting them almost beyond the means of the poor.

The Diggers sought to organize the poor and indigent into collectives that would retake what had been common lands. Their activities, which included public preaching and pamphlet writing, alarmed the Commonwealth government and provoked the hostility of the large landowners. In April of 1649, a small group of Diggers claimed common rights to a once-common piece of land called St. George's Hill, outside London, set up a colony there and began to cultivate the land. By the end of April, their number had risen to fifty and the Diggers

continued on p. 8

continued from p.7

planned to eventually have five-thousand people in that one colony alone. Plans were already being developed to have additional farming colonies in Oatland Park, Windsor Park and other places that were once commonly held land.

At the beginning of this land confiscation, Winstanley issued a manifesto which included these words: "The Earth (which was made to be a Common Treasure of relief for all) has been hedged in to Enclosures by the teachers and rulers, and others have been made Servants and Slaves: And that Earth that is within this Creation, made a Common Storehouse for all, is bought and sold, and kept in the hands of a few..." The Diggers' mission is a restoration of common rights to the land: "That every one that is born in the Land, may be fed by the Earth his Mother that brought him forth."

The choice of St. George's Hill was symbolic as well as strategic. It has been said by historians that had the Diggers founded their commune in some out of the way, rural area, they would have most likely gone unnoticed. But they chose a plot of land close to the heart of the Empire whose very name had connotations of "dragon slaying," of throwing off the yoke of old bondage. Indeed, Winstanley's manifesto rises at times to visionary, even apocalyptic heights: "Bondage shall be removed, Tears wiped away and all poor People by their righteous Labours shall be relieved and freed from Poverty and Straits." Along with the language of redemption, Winstanley sees the reclamation of the the land as the founding of a new Jerusalem: "All the Prophecies, Visions and Revelations of Scripture concerning the restoration of Israel, and of making the People the Inheritors of the whole Earth, doth seat [itself] in this work." Indeed, what the Diggers thought they could ultimately reclaim was an original covenant with the Earth, proclaimed, as they saw it, by the Deity in the Old Testament and ratified by his Prophets.

Continuing his allegorical polemic, Winstanley compared landowners with "Pharoh, who is their type" and the clergy to "Scribes and Pharisees" because they served the interests of the ruling class of landowners. He blamed the church of his day for helping to maintain private land ownership. He further urged landowners to "give up the Pharonic

bondage of the people and "disown this oppressing Murder, Oppression and Thievery of Buying and Selling of Land."

The Diggers had been occupying St. George's Hill for less than a month when the British Council of State,

the Justice Department of its day, received an alarming letter charging that certain individuals had begun planting vegetables on the Hill and that they had "invited all peoples to come and help them." With due haste, the Council dispatched a report to Lord Fairfax, then the lord general of the British Army, stating that "a disorderly and tumultuous sort of people" had gathered on the Hill, were planting vegetables and "that conflux of people may be a beginning whence things of a greater and more dangerous consequence may grow." The Council further ordered Fairfax to disperse the group by any means necessary.

When confronted by the army, Winstanley defended the group saying they did not intend to knock down enclosures or violate anyone's property but to simply till the Earth until all men joined them. The Diggers had pledged themselves to what today we would call non-violent civil disobedience.

The group was ordered to disperse, but Lord Fairfax did not have his heart in it. Indeed, his chief officer wrote to the Council: "this business is not worth the writing nor yet taking notice of." But the Council and local landowners perisited and began to harrass the settlers over the next few months. The group found itself under siege. At one point, two lo-

"Though a man be brought up in the Land, yet he must not work for himself but for him that bought the Land; He that has no Land must work for small wages for those who call the Land theirs."

Gerrard Winstanley

cal landowners gathered together a small group of men, some dressed as women, and physically assaulted the settlers. At other times, the Diggers' tools and carts were broken apart and there were further beatings. At one point Winstanley and several others were arrested for trespassing. Despite harrassment and arrest they stood their ground

Finally, in early 1650 the local Lord of the Manor, Parson Platt, had had enough and he assembled a small group of vigilantes who stormed St. George's Hill, attacking the group, burning all their belongings and driving them off the land. Platt hired several guards to stand watch over the Hill and threatened the Diggers with death should they return. This effectively ended the movement, though there were a few attempts to start up again by settling other parcels of land nearby.

While the events surrounding the Digger movement might seem to be of little historical significance or consequence, historians and scholars have continued to publish books and papers about the movement and Winstanley's writings defending it. In fact, the rate of publication of Digger studies has increased over the last twenty years. There was even a movie called *Winstanley*, made in the 70s, about the movement. This may suggest there is a strong message, even inspiration, in the appeal for the common use of land and a call for an orginal, social covenant with the Earth.

Henry George School of Social Science
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