

Homage to Henry George

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I have launched a new initiative for economic justice on www.sharetherents.org This is based on the audit of my performance. I came to realise that there was never a chance of succeeding with the language and strategies that I inherited when I first walked into the London headquarters of the British Georgist movement back in the 1960s. So I celebrate my departure from the past with a homage to the activist who, in the 1880s, successfully launched the first global reform movement.

It was towards the end of a decade-long campaign to help the people of Russia that I realised why we had failed. I identified two reasons. First, the rent-seeking culture had become so deeply embedded that it would never allow fiscal reform anywhere in the world. Second, our tools undermined our ambitions. I share my reflections in case they are of value to others. I have road-tested them in China (last month) and the United States earlier this month). I was left encouraged.

(1) The assumption that ours is a rational society. If I and my colleagues strained hard to explain the integrity of land value taxation to policymakers and the media, reason would ultimately prevail. On the basis of deep historical research, I now understand that under no circumstances can the Georgist paradigm be *negotiated* into existence. I describe what I call the statecraft of greed in *The Traumatized Society* and in *Ten Theses* being serialised on www.sharetherents.org The agents of power have to be bypassed.

(2) The concept of "land value taxation" obstructs progress. I no longer use it. Here's why:

(i) *land*: emphasis on this word distracted me from *the other half* of what people were excluded from when land was enclosed. Rent is the value of the services of both nature *and society*. People were excluded from society when they were deprived of their rights of access to the commons. By failing to demand the restoration of the right to create an authentic democratic culture, the void was left for other ideologies to fill.

(ii) *land value*: this term concedes the right to privately own the capitalised value of rent. This strengthened people's determination to avoid public claims on "their" asset values.

(iii) *taxation*: "tax" shuts down people's minds. Denial is the default position. I was embarked on Mission Impossible. And: by threatening a tax on "their" land, I implicitly conceded that government would only recover a part of the rent (a 100% charge would be resisted as confiscation, as a "taking"). I allowed myself to be co-opted by the rent-seeking agenda!

(3) Language By talking about "increases in the value of their land", I misrepresented economic reality. The value of *their* land did *not* increase. It was the value of public services that were further enhanced by tax-funded investments. Derelict governments allowed land owners to capture enhanced rents. I reinforced rent-seeking by endorsing the myth that "their" land increased in value.

(4) Objectivity My books presented an objective account of land value taxation without the passion that is required to reconstruct communities on the basis of freedom and justice. I ought to have offered visions of the future that might flow from the recovery of the community's rents. Restoration of an authentic democratic culture would lead to ways of living significantly different

from those bequeathed by the predators. My objectivity lacked the inspiration needed to overcome the despair and denial which, I now recognise, helps people to cope with the perverse laws of the land. Over the course of four generations, the Georgist paradigm was dumbed down.

(5) *The Shift* We need a *culture* shift (facilitated by a tax shift) to control the geopolitical trends that pose an existential threat to humanity. I am exploring ways to mobilise people beyond the methods employed by most NGOs (which seek to ameliorate painful symptoms rather than alter the foundations of a corrupted social system).

Georgists from around the world pitched in to our Russian campaign. It was a wonderful exercise in collaboration. I do not want that effort to have been wasted. Failure to save the people of Russia will not have been in vain if the lessons are learnt. Today, in China, the World Bank is once again pushing to privatise land and rent. Reasoned discourse with the international financial institutions and sovereign governments will not yield change: *their mandate is to protect the rent-seeking culture*.

We need to foster what Mason Gaffney calls a Great Awakening: a renewal of humanity's moral/spiritual heritage, the kind that preceded great reforms of the past. The way to achieve this is to excise the mind-bending language bequeathed to us by the culture that was incubated by the predators of the past. Their vitriolic values have all but erased the last traces of decency in our communities.

I am optimistic, for this reason. The next generation of activists will be unique in the history of our species. So far, humans have lived according to the rules of territoriality. This was a necessary evolutionary strategy. Territoriality, however, has been rendered obsolete. Time and space are overcome by clicks on keyboards. Cell phones mobilised tens of thousands of people into the squares of Arab cities, and their sheer numbers was sufficient to overthrow those who exercised monopoly power. But they were not equipped with the knowledge of what it would take to lay the foundations for a better future: hence the re-assertion of rent-seeking in Egypt by the military, the owners of one of the country's largest landed estates.

Back in the 19th century, Henry George provided a clear exposition which empowered the people of the street. He even animated some policy-makers (who, at the turn into the 20th century, realised that they were faced with the opportunity to change the course of history). We now need a narrative that resonates with the realities of the 21st century. Those realities cannot be adequately articulated in the idioms that pass for economic and political discourse today. My effort to scope out new concepts is but one contribution to what I hope will be a fresh start to redeem the selfless sacrifices of four generations of activists.

If you view this initiative with sympathy, please check out the Cheating Index plan and register your support: <http://sharetherents.org/the-cheating-index/>

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