

The Power of Ideas and Images

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In a modern society, a citizen participates in two realms: the private realm of the market, which involves economic exchange, and the public realm of governance, which involves the establishment of universal rules for conduct. Although there is considerable interaction between the two spheres, their patterns of operation are distinctive.

Power in both realms is heavily influenced by the distribution of property. Analysis of the way in which concentrated ownership of land affects private markets has been the strength of the Georgist movement. The movement has been less attentive to the methods by which landowners are able to dominate the public sphere of governance.

In addition to neglecting the role of economic power in the public realm, the Georgist movement has also overlooked another source of power in both the private and public realms. That second means of influencing outcomes is information, either in disembodied form as a linguistic convention or an idea or in embodied form as technology or a structured pattern of behavior. Among Georgists, there has been at least some discussion of the power conferred on those who control information monopolies in the private sector via patents and copyrights. There has been far less discussion of how the control of language and information gives some people a chance to domi-

nate others in the realm of governance. Since Common Ground seeks to fight unjust power structures, it is important to consider how words, images, and ideas support them.

Information as Power in the Public Sector

An open system of government (whether called democratic or republican is not crucial here) depends on the free flow of information. Citizens cannot make intelligent judgments about public issues without relevant knowledge. The capacity to control access to crucial information is thus as great an impediment to democracy as concentrated ownership of land.

Georgists are all familiar with this problem. Official statistics and academic ideology conspire to prevent the public from recognizing the true importance of land in the economy. The national income accounts make land appear to be a trivial part of economic production. Property assessments understate the true value of land. Standard economic models subsume land under capital, so students never have a chance to reflect on the possible importance of land. Information about land value and ownership is kept so hidden that its absence is not even noticed by journalists, politicians, or social reformers. By undermining open debate in that way, there is no need for those with power to exercise it in a more blatant manner to maintain the status quo.

There are many other issues that are kept out of the public dialogue by similar methods. Each instance, by itself, seems relatively trivial. In combination, however, they form an impenetrable wall that effectively silences democratic processes.

The Dying of the Trees, a recent book by Charles E. Little, mentions in passing a number of cases in which the declining health of the forests due to acid rain has been the subject of an ongoing disinformation campaign. For example, sugar maple growers of Vermont and Quebec have become alarmed by the effects of acid rain on the nutrient balance in the soils of the region and resulting declines in growth and sap production. Yet, after performing an aerial survey of the visual condition of maples throughout New England, the U.S. Forest Service declared them to be in good health. Government scientists have been under tremendous pressure not to find evidence of damage caused by acid rain. The problem, as one maple grower told Little, is that "a great deal of forest research is funded by the federal government, by chemical companies, and forest industry companies— and it's very difficult for people who depend on that funding to stick their necks out." He added that many scientists who publicly deny a connection between air pollution and forest decline will privately admit that a relationship exists.

The point here is not primarily that environmen-

tal conditions in the United States may be much worse than official statements suggest. The larger issue is that it is impossible for citizens to make informed choices about complex policy issues unless they are aware of the biased political climate in which research is conducted. It is important for Georgists to recognize that land issues are not alone in being subject to disinformation.

Language as Power

In world full of violence and overt domination, it is easy to overlook the significance of ideas and images. Although brute force is the most visible form of power, language and other symbolic forms of communication are more effective vehicles of influence in the long run. Information management, which includes control over publicly recognized symbols and the definition of words, plays an important role in keeping privilege invisible and relatively free from attack.

In his book Power and Powerlessness, John Gaventa describes succinctly the relevance of language to power. He begins with a simple question: Why are oppressed people so often quiescent (accepting of their lot in life)? He discusses three explanations for their nonresistance. The liberal or pluralist explanation is that they are satisfied (because otherwise they would speak up and organize). The radical explanation is that

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those in power can prevent (through intimidation) the oppressed from voicing grievances. The third explanation, based on communications theory, is the most psychologically sophisticated. It suggests that power can function without any observable trace and with no resistance if the oppressed can be psychologically defeated.

The resistance of the powerless is stifled most effectively not by threatening violence, but by inculcating the oppressed with the language, symbols, values, and attitudes of the oppressors. The oppressed then accept their condition because it appears natural, ordained by God, or simply inevitable. On that basis, the oppressed are convinced that they deserve their ill treatment. An extreme form of this is the Stockholm Syndrome, whereby captives or battered wives come to identify with their tormentors. Less extreme forms include the ancient belief in the divine right of kings and modern beliefs about private property.

The ultimate form of power goes one step further by obliterating the possibility of imagining resistance. If a person feels oppressed and blames himself or herself, that still presupposes that he or she is aware that something is wrong, that something is out of order. But if people are robbed of the language by which to identify and name their oppression, they can be completely oblivious to it. Then there is no possible escape. An impoverished language that can admit of no possibilities beyond immediate experience is the most profound sort of prison. Liberation is unthinkable because the forms of oppression lie literally outside of thought. Depriving people of a language adequate to their experience is the most suffocating form of oppression. (This, by the way, is why battles over identity politics are so intense. They are ultimately battles over the most intimate forms of power: the language and other symbolic gestures by which people de-

fine their experience and give it meaning.)

This sort of analysis helps to explain why the Georgist movement has remained marginalized for much of this century. Middle class Americans have absorbed an ideology that confuses comfort with the capacity for self-governance and consumption with the development of character. The impoverishment of language is so pervasive that our ability to imagine alternative worlds is stunted. With a diminished sense of history, with religion relegated to sentimentality, with art debased to entertainment, and with an educational system designed to anesthetize rather than excite the imagination, we Americans have been trained to be oblivious to what we are missing. Under those circumstances, the unequal distribution of land and power does not seem remarkable. It has come to seem natural that experts and elites should run our lives, that we should be grateful for their beneficence, and that passivity is the normal condition of human existence.

The Next Stage of the Movement

The battle for justice or liberation is not confined to the economic arena. The politics of meaning is on a par with the politics of land. In fact, the two are related. Landed elites have historically controlled the most prestigious and influential institutions of education, worship, and propaganda, and the latter have dutifully provided the language and symbols that have given legitimacy to elites.

An essential task for the Georgist movement is to divorce the power of language and image from the power of property. In part that must be done through the laborious process of collecting facts and presenting arguments that challenge established modes of thought and behavior. It also means that some of the political campaigns waged by Common Ground should per-

haps be over the misuse of language and the burying of information, not just the use of land and government-granted privilege. Equal access to information should be as central to our platform as the public collection of rent. As pioneers in that arena, we should be able to attract allies of many political persuasions.

A New Drama

To win the battle over information, however, the movement must offer more than sound arguments and evidence that citizens have been lied to. New facts will help, but they are not sufficient to change minds. Only a new mythology (an engaging story that offers insight into the human condition) can break people's allegiance to the myths of property rights that protect entrenched power. Paraphrasing the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, it is more important that our story have emotional resonance than that it be literally true. The Georgist message can reach a large audience only by being framed as a drama, not merely a collection of ideas and facts about justice.

The Georgist drama has generally been either a noble soliloquy on tax policy and land reform or an obscure melodrama depicting a struggle between workers and landowners. The first approach has fit well with the liberal drama of incrementalist reform: the system is healthy and just needs minor adjustment. The second approach is parallel to the Marxist melodrama of class conflict, except that "capitalists" are more identifiable to the public as villains than landlords. Moreover, Marxism has always had the advantage of being apocalyptic—its story is explicitly about the fulfillment of human destiny.

Neither the liberal nor the Marxist dramatic form has been especially successful for Georgists. A new one is

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needed. In addition to the theme of justice, it must also address the confusion people feel about personal and collective identity.

(Pictured below are Cliff Cobb, author of above article, and Gerry Shaw (see page 8) together at the C.G.O. conference in Ottawa, Ontario, Oct. 1996.)



For example, in the notes for a class on Liberation Theology and Land Reform, Lindy Davies makes a poignant observation: if Henry George's dream were to come true and more consumer items were to flow through the market, would people be happier? Would not more consumerism simply accelerate the alienation that comes from specialization and the process of valuing things as commodities? How does the Georgist paradigm help people cope with the sense that their lives are rootless and out of control—and that status anxiety is an incurable disease?

Without a response to the existential anxieties of our age, we will remain a small, sectarian group on the fringe of serious public debate. With a set of appealing answers, by contrast, the movement could move beyond its one-or two-dimensional image and claim center stage. We could offer people not only a house to live in, but a place to call home. We could promise not only more jobs, but a sense that work has meaning. Finally, we could make it clear that the value of life, not the value of land, is our ultimate reason for joining together to make a new world.