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Was Henry George a Libertarian?

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"George would probably have considered himself a libertarian had the term been current in his day" (C. Lowell Harriss, in Critics of Henry George, 1979, p. 367, edited by Robert Andelson).

Henry George was a free market economist who advocated making use of market mechanisms whenever possible. In the

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tradition of John Stuart Mill and Adam Smith, Henry George was very much a classical liberal economist, when the term "liberal" still referred to "liberty". Today, classical liberals are usually called "libertarians" (another word derived from the word "liberty").

In an interview in the North American Review in July 1885, Henry George suggested that, if the government is found to be too corrupt to handle all of the revenue from a land value tax, then the revenue should instead be distributed as a citizen dividend. In the same interview, he said if there were any better alternative to having the government run natural monopolies such as railroads or electric power, then he would support that alternative.

Land value taxation would be more than sufficient to pay for the few basic government services that modern libertarians advocate: defense, courts, infrastructure, and perhaps a safety net. Libertarians would remove all subsidies to special interests (as would Henry George), and would also replace all government services that can be performed better by the non-governmental sector (as Henry George would, too).

Henry George was also in agreement with libertarians' desire for civil liberties and personal liberty. In Social Problems,

he stated that it is not the business of government to dictate morality or religion (see his chapter on "The Functions of Government").

Many prominent libertarians have had views very compatible with those of Henry George. For example, the Nobel Prize libertarian economist, Milton Friedman, has stated that "the least bad tax is the property tax on the unimproved value of land, the Henry George argument of many, many years ago" (quoted in Human Events, Nov. 18, 1978, pg. 14). Another familiar libertarian economist, Adam Smith, also endorsed a land value tax as being a very appropriate form of taxation.

The famous libertarian, Thomas Jefferson, advocated use of a land value tax to fund the national government (letter to Fitzhugh, 1797). Thomas Paine endorsed a land value tax very similar to that of Henry George ("Agrarian Justice", 1797). Another well-known libertarian, John Stuart Mill, also promoted land value taxation (Principles of Political Economy, 1848, bk. 5, ch. 2, sec. 5). Libertarian historians have cited the writings of Albert Jay Nock and Frank Chodorov. Both men agreed with Henry George's policies on land.

It is worthwhile for supporters of Henry George's views to reach out to their libertarian cousins, who haven't yet seen that Henry George's version of libertarianism is the most consistent one.