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# Letters To Individual Liberty

## Libertarians and the Land Problem

The article on 'zoning and land' use (IL — May 82), though written with enthusiasm and conviction, betrays the same lack of understanding of the land question that afflicts too many libertarians. The term 'State' is derived from 'Estate' and the replacement of the feudal fief by State power changed little for most people — except perhaps giving them the pretense of some control of their lives. A return to a libertarian-style fiefdom would not provide an attractive alternative to the present State.

Some libertarians assert that feudalism would not accompany the removal of the 'State'. They enjoy a pretty picture of a free society populated by hardy entrepreneurs working their private plots as they stoutly refuse to loot, or to sacrifice for others.

Unfortunately, this is as much a dream as the socialist utopias. The lessons of history are starkly evident to the unimpassioned observer. Landholding *always* becomes concentrated, the large landholders *always* become the 'State,' the majority of the population *always* becomes a rackrented appendage of the Estate. Libertarians want so much to believe that landholding would become widespread in their free economy, yet reality belies this notion.

It is difficult to understand how libertarians can refuse to see the obvious. From Cuba to Viet-Nam, from El Salvadore to the Falklands, landholding is the issue. There are never 'communist revolutions'. Always the revolt pits peasants against rackrenting landlords. That opportunistic communists may choose to take leadership does not alter the nature of the revolt.

Thoughtful libertarians should consider their 'sales pitch' to a pre-communist Mekong peasant who must unhappily pass 90% of his net production to a Saigon landlord. Should he be told he must accept the 'market determined' Rent? Would the same argument that 'the market will decide' be acceptable to a pre-land reform Taiwanese peasant who must yield to his landlord two-thirds off the top of his production?

Vietnam is now pursuing the road of socialist land reform with its inevitable dreary failures. Taiwan trod a different path. The aging Chinese generals followed the 'Land to the Tiller' philosophy of Sun-Yat-Sen. Sun had been influenced strongly by Henry George, so Taiwanese land reform was Georgist and free market. The result was that the island, though

carrying a population density of more than 1,200 to the square mile, attained a net export of food. As a Georgist purist, there is much I dislike about the program, but the facts are not at issue. The Viets treated their land problem with socialism, while Taiwan used Georgist free enterprise. This philosophical conflict will occur again, for it is at the heart of the libertarian/collectivist struggle. The advocates of liberty had better ready themselves for the right, or they will lose all.

One might ponder the result if India, with half the population density of Taiwan, were to abandon its desultory socialist land reforms, and initiate instead a Georgist free market reform. Perhaps, we would see this sickly subcontinent become the granary of South-East Asia and, incidentally, a hotbed of libertarianism. For a widespread and just dispersal of private property is the basis of an enduring free society. Nothing provides a just dispersal better than the impersonal forces of a free market place.

George's ideas in practice have always worked to advance liberty. It should be no surprise that adoption by Denmark of Georgist community Rent collection (The Danes call it 'ground-debt') has led to an impressive farm ownership exceeding 96%. The US is not even close. These 'socialist' farmers trade across the world through an efficient private trading network. One may contrast their competitive marketing practices with the State intervention so constantly demanded by their 'capitalistic' American cousins.

Next time you visit California's San Joaquin Valley, compare the thousands of small farms in Stanislaus County with their neighboring corporate latifundia. At the turn of the century, a Special District financed by Georgist Rent collection was established in Stanislaus. The Rent charged pushed land into the market and thousands of family farms replaced the 80 semi-arid, played-out, virtually unused, wheat farms of the large landholders. To provide irrigation, the Stanislaus sodbusters built the highest dam in the world by themselves, without state or federal help. Their story could be a fictional treat from Ayn Rand. Instead, it was a factual application of Georgist economics.

Meanwhile, to the south of Stanislaus the peons, with their paternal acquiescence of their union, are

*continued on page 8*

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## Letters to Individual Liberty

*continued from page 6*

trucked to the factories in the fields, just as if the San Joaquin were one of the banana republics even further to the south.

The San Joaquin Valley illumines the narrow choice confronting libertarians. They may opt for a Geor-gist free market in land, or travel the road toward the private and corporate latifundia. They should recall that North America owed its incredible advances not to the special talents of its immigrants, nor to the mounting accumulation of capital goods, but to the unbeatable combination of cheap (or free) land and unrestricted trade. Now, the land is anything but cheap; landholdings are ever more concentrated; land speculation has replaced production and service as the occupation of the able; and State meddling with the market is the norm.

The argument is persuasive that the coercive activity of the State is always a direct, or indirect, response to the land problem. Particular interventions, such as zoning, land-use planning, urban redevelopment and 'enterprise zones', are no more than specific examples of a pervasive intrusion.

Strider's energetic haymakers miss their proper target, which is the special behavior of land in the marketplace. Land does not respond to the price mechanism process as do other things. The peculiar propensity of land to act like a collectible is the right place to begin analysis.

George isolated the problem and provided an ethical solution. Until a better mechanism appears, his community Rent collection method offers the best opportunity to achieve a completely free market and a genuinely libertarian world.

— Harry Pollard —

8/Individual Liberty

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The Henry George Schools of California



**The Alumni Group International**

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The Alumni Group International is a non-organization of people who are committed to the principles of 'Liberty and Justice' as so eloquently described by Henry George. George pointed out that these twin concepts cannot exist independently. There cannot be justice without liberty, nor can there be liberty without justice.

**Purpose of the AGI** is to support and expand the InterStudent Program. This Program is designed to provide high school and college students with an understanding of classical political economy, including a particular emphasis on the mechanism and operation of the genuinely free market.

**Philosophical Objective of the AGI** is to achieve, in George's words, "Association in Equality". This is the condition of voluntary cooperation with the same rules for everybody; a free society with no privilege.

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