

(2023 January 29) Reading Henry George on the injustice of land ownership

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ownership comes down to one thing: "I took it; now it's mine," with all the power and dominance and entitlement that ownership entails. Extend that attitude to water, seeds, labor itself, data, air, attention, historical narrative, . . . all the things of the commons that comprise not just human life but all life, all of it can be enclosed and commodified. Not because it's a law of nature, but because it was taken, and the taking was then justified."

- Antonia Malchik

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Henry George was in vogue off and on for a century after the 1879 publication of his *Progress and Poverty*, and is again (or still is) in some circles, as Antonia Malchik reminds us in the attached piece.

The perennial issues of land commodification and ownership she and George examine are particularly noticeable during times of major social change, as they were during the Great Depressions of the 1890s and 1930s and the post-WW II era of the 1960s-80s.

Her Substack essay caught my attention especially because for the past few days here at my humble in the high desert I've been engaged with a slew of infrastructure repairs — water, heat, power — not untypical for offgrid home owners but seldom hitting so all at the same time.

Among the Diggers and other back-to-the-landers in the 60s and 70s, the notion of landownership being an injustice had a lot of resonance. Not only that the whole country was ripped off from Native Americans (under the age-old method of acquisition Malchik calls 'I took it; now it's mine') but because, as George made very clear, in the modern world (from, say, the 15thC), the ownership of land has always meant a takeover by the money powers of the commons, our shared natural world, a spiraling up of economic goods adding to the increasing wealth and power of those who already have it.

Over a century ago, George (like his predecessor Prud'hon and near contemporary Kropotkin) pretty much predicted the obscene wealth of today's one percent (*obscene*, from the Latin *obscēnus*, *obscāenus* ("inauspicious; ominous; disgusting, filthy; offensive, repulsive; indecent, lewd, obscene")) compared to the rest of us. That obvious upwards spiral to unprecedented heights (can we call it a screw-up?) in an acquisition-based society and the related cultural-ecological-medical-political-military mess the world is in are more than enough to make George seem worth looking at again.

One noticeable result of that mess and its distended economic structure, maybe especially here in the less densely populated, low-rent Southwest, is increasing emigration not only of refugees

from climatic and political crises in the global south, but from North American metropoli: an exurban diaspora that spreads late 20thC urban sprawl into further reaches of the no longer so wild — though maybe still a little woolly — west. In effect, making back-to-the-landers of my generation look like some kind of pioneers, pathfinders and harbingers of today's more massive digitally-tooled migrations.

And all this, to bring it back to George, calls into question the notions of property rights as well as property in general, especially in relation to the commons of land, water and air.

Of course, we all have our sense of ownership, our setting of boundaries from up-close personal space to more inclusive home and homestead. We all recognize and conform in some ways to ancient extended-family circles of community (clan, tribe, nation, etc.). And to some extent, regardless of our ethnic and national heritages, we all share some version of the Us-Them distinction so embedded in Indo-European linguistic and social history, the distinction between those within and those without those circles. We all decide in some way, this is mine (or ours), this is not yours.

The past two days have brought that dialectic home to me in a very unusual way. Yesterday morning, I found two Barn Owls inside the 30x60 passive solar greenhouse attached to the south-facing side of my abode. After letting them out an open door and not finding any sign of nest, eggs or nestlings in the spot they seemed to be drawn to (it's right on the cusp of spring breeding season here), I found and covered up a hole in the polycarbonate roof that evidently had been torn off in last week's windstorm, which seemed likely to be where they got in.

Telling them that though they were welcome to the mice, they were not welcome to move in, not even to roost during the day, the house rules, my rules, I explained, were 'No snakes, and no other critters larger than a mouse or songbird.'

In the midst of my mulling over the Georgist idea (is that a word? Georgian is too ambiguous) that our interest here is not proprietary but in stewardship; and the newcomer (settler/colonist) inclination to say, 'I'm here, now close the gate'; that investment of cash (or even, as George emphasizes, blood, sweat and tears) does not justify a claim to possession; and the whole boondoggle about who got here first; the owls (magnificent birds I've always felt kind of blessed to have living in the barn), who clearly have ancestral priors, brought to mind some memories from events that took place fifteen years before I moved here.

I suspect it was not a coincidence that I moved to Alhambra, an eastern suburb in the sprawling suburbia known as Los Angeles, only a few days before the Watts uprising broke out on the other side of the LA basin. We could smell the smoke when the wind blew in off the Pacific.

One of the stories in the news for several days (a story made familiar later in other urban blow-ups) was about small businesses with Jewish owners — pawnshops in particular — being looted and/or burned out. Prominent among reported rationales of the looters was that the shopowners didn't live there, were aliens or carpetbaggers of a sort, and the money they made there didn't go back into Watts but was spent somewhere else. Raw ethnic-racial prejudice, for

sure, but something else too, something to consider along with our definitions of community, ownership and property rights, human rights and the rights of nature, civil rights in relation to civility, and the rest.

Postscript:

At least one of the owls was in the greenhouse again after dark tonight and convinced again to go out the opened door. Tomorrow maybe I'll find how it got in, and if it's still inside tell it again the house rules as I shoo it out.

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The most recent Threadable reading\* for Land Ownership was a selection from Henry George's 1879 book *Progress & Poverty*, Part VII: Justice of the Remedy, Chapter I: The Injustice of Private Property in Land (in my copy this is pages 333-346.)

\*(<https://threadablenative.page.link/Rxp8yegeZ1vXy4u19> if you want to try the Threadable app and need the link! Only works on iOS/Apple devices for now.

For anyone new to On the Commons an overview of this project is here. These Substack posts are for anyone who doesn't have iOS or doesn't want to use Threadable but still wants to know about the readings; the subtitles are marked with "Threadable-adjacent reading discussion on land ownership." Please feel free to comment or email me with any questions.)

*Progress & Poverty* is in the public domain (released from private enclosure!), and there are many different places online where you can read the text. On this archive.org link, the selection we are reading starts on page 333 and ends on page 346, the end of the chapter.

I put off writing this post because when I start talking about Henry George, I find myself unable to stop, and I don't want to inflict all the passages I underlined in the entire book on everybody, no matter how compelling I think they are. It just gets hard for me to curtail a tendency to quote from his book because when it comes to land ownership, George says almost everything.

I first read George's *Progress & Poverty* a couple of years ago, and was immediately taken with his ability to go straight to the heart of land ownership and its injustice. The section we read on Threadable prompted a lot of discussion about land, ownership, and, unexpectedly, the Puritan ideal of productivity and what it says about who has a right to live and participate in society. This was an important point because part of George's argument takes off from John Locke's philosophy that ownership is given by mixing land with labor. I think he's partly using that philosophy to bolster his arguments rather than relying on Locke entirely, but would have to go back into earlier parts of the book more carefully.

Fundamentally, George maintains that land ownership is unjust, inexcusable, and the root of most of the wealth inequality he observed in his time. That inequality shocked him—the title of

his book reflects his initial question regarding how land and people could have so much wealth and “progress,” and at the same time such immense poverty.

The quoted line below, from the beginning of the reading selection, states his perspective directly: “When it is proposed to abolish private property in land . . .”

That is George’s desire, to abolish private property in land, and he makes a strong case for it. The “justice” he speaks of is the vested interest that landowners already have in the land they have title to. But as I’ve quoted somewhere else in this newsletter previously, part of his case is that, the further back in time ownership goes—his example is closely tied to big landed estates and nobility in England—the more compounded the injustice of that ownership is and the more harm it has caused and will continue to cause in the future.

This came up briefly in the comments on the last On the Commons post, that once land is owned, it is much easier to control other aspects of people’s lives because you control their access to survival, something that George repeatedly addressed when it came to labor and ownership. I disagree with Locke’s idea that labor grants ownership, but George’s point was that when land is privately owned, many more people are prevented from laboring on it or for it at all, except at the behest or whim of the owner.

Even if you’re, as one reader said it seems that George was, a productivist and lean on the idea of labor and productivity to back up ownership, that doesn’t in fact give an answer as to the genesis or the morality of ownership itself. Thomas Paine wrote about this himself in his own theory of property rights:

“There could be no such thing as landed property originally. Man did not make the earth, and, though he had a natural right to occupy it, he had no right to locate as his property in perpetuity any part of it; neither did the Creator of the earth open a land-office, from whence the first title-deeds should issue.”

George, unlike other writes on land ownership, doesn’t shy away from the question at the base of it. There is no real answer given to the question of where ownership comes from. There are centuries of legal opinions and philosophical arguments, but go back far enough—or not even that far—and ownership comes down to one thing: “I took it; now it’s mine,” with all the power and dominance and entitlement that ownership entails. Extend that attitude to water, seeds, labor itself, data, air, attention, historical narrative, . . . all the things of the commons that comprise not just human life but all life, all of it can be enclosed and commodified. Not because it’s a law of nature, but because it was taken, and the taking was then justified.

Within Threadable, we had a discussion about how land ownership was until very recently—not even 150 years ago—bound up with a right to vote, even for white men, and what that says about

how people think of having “skin in the game.” As one reader put it when I mentioned homelessness and affordable housing objections, we are still living with a legacy of property ownership somehow implying “skin in the game” while skin itself—being alive, fed, housed; the right to exist—doesn’t. When I hear current objections to affordable housing and renters and who has a “stake” in the community they live in, it differs very little from the kind of vicious language directed at people kicked out of their homes and villages during enclosures of the commons in England hundreds of years ago.

There is much more here and I could keep going, but if I do I probably won’t stop! George’s book is within the public domain, but there are also many Georgist economists quietly at work around the world. And there is a Substack devoted to George, Progress & Poverty, and how some of his ideas could be put into practice today.

It’s all wrapped up in the injustice of land ownership. As George points out toward the end of his book, those injustices have an effect on what are classified as more abstract human rights as well: equality, happiness, the freedom to speak, to be heard, to vote, to have a say in one’s society.

“These rights are denied when the equal right to land—on which and by which men alone can live—is denied.”

The next reading is from William Blackstone’s 1750s writing on property ownership. (Spoiler alert: he can’t find good grounds for land ownership, either, and ends up leaning on Genesis from the Christian Bible and dominionism.) After that it’s John Locke and his idea that labor creates property (Blackstone disagrees), followed by Nick Hayes’s *The Book of Trespass* and finally Mary Cristina Wood’s *Nature’s Trust* as the final reading