

## On Henry George and Barn Owls, Response to Antonia Malchik (31 January 2023)

Antonia: Thanks for the Henry George post.

<https://antonia.substack.com/p/reading-progress-and-poverty-by-henry>

I sent this to my mail list yesterday:

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*, *obscaenus* (“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 wooly — 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.