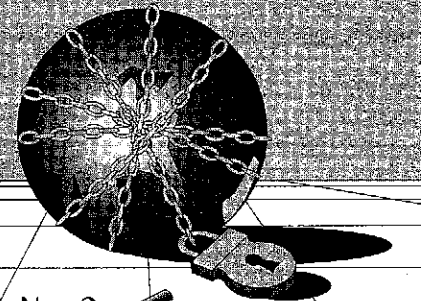


# GROUND SWELL

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## HENRY GEORGE SEMINAR AT SCRANTON UNIVERSITY

Ed O'Donnell, guest speaker, in Scranton, PA on April 18, 2016

By Bill Batt, Albany, NY

Twice yearly the University of Scranton holds an event in honor of Henry George, a seminar in the spring and a major lecture each fall. They are jointly hosted by the Departments of Economics and Finance in the Kania Business School. Monday, April 18, 2016, was the 25th anniversary of the program's inauguration. The guest of honor was Edward T. O'Donnell, Associate Professor of History at the College of Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts. Dr. O'Donnell published his fourth book recently, to considerable acclaim, *Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality*. With economic inequality in the US now reaching proportions comparable to the late 19th Century and the time of Henry George, this book appears at an opportune moment: the present era has often now been called the "2nd Gilded Age."

The spring and fall events at Scranton originated with an endowment from the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation. Shortly after George's life, classical economic thought was largely jettisoned and replaced by the neoclassical paradigm, arguably under the pressure of powerful economic forces. But the University has been playing a role in the resurgent interest in Georgist thought. Its strategic invitation to noted economists, nine of whom later have gone on to receive the Nobel prize in Economics, attempts to engender focus on the importance of George's economic philosophy. Past speakers have included Robert Solow, Paul Krugman, Robert Lucas, Amartya Sen, George Akerlof, Joseph Stiglitz, Robert Shiller, Peter Diamond, Thomas Sargent, and Angus Deaton. Others, while not Nobel laureates, have been of comparable stature. The guests seldom appreciate the central concerns of Henry George's message, but this year the school's selection guaranteed it.

Professor O'Donnell has had a longstanding interest in George and the historical context of which he was a part. Not only has he specialized in the American *fin de siècle*, he has also written books on Irish-American history, on American immigration more generally, and on an epic 1904 Steamboat disaster in New York City. At the Scranton presentation, before an audience of students whose attendance was compulsory, he proved to be a captivating speaker nonetheless.

O'Donnell's book offers new information and context to George's life and history, whereas several past treatments of note have been about the man, and/or about his philosophy. George Geiger's *Philosophy of Henry George* (1933), Anna George deMille, Henry George's daughter's, *Henry George* (1950), Charles Albro Barker's *Henry George* (1955), Steven Cord's *Henry George: Dreamer or Realist* (1965), Edward

Rose's *Henry George* (1968), Rhoda Hellman's *Henry George Reconsidered* (1987), have many complements in journal articles and other sketches. But no other book has so adequate a treatment of the historical period in which George was so much a part. The source documentation alone runs to over 40 pages of eight-point type.

It is important to note what Professor O'Donnell's talk, as well as his book, does not address. There is no discussion as such of economic theory, or any empirical analysis. One will look in vain for an explication of elasticity, of deadweight loss, or of tax incidence. Nor is there any discussion of the later impact and aftermath of George's work. Fortunately, there is work in progress that will address this later period, and we can look to our young historian Alexandra Wagner Lough for works to come. Just as important is the availability of online access to other Georgist material from sources worldwide, as well as news articles, more recent economic analyses and empirical studies. The rise of computer power and available data now makes possible the application of Georgist claims that were only plausible theory when he was alive. A century ago, and indeed until recently, the persuasive power of the Georgist paradigm was based less on empirical evidence than on reason and logic.

It can therefore be said that this contemporary and more wide-ranging treatment provides an important contribution to understanding George, even though it has little discussion of underlying economic or legal theory. For most Georgists today, and particularly for the Schalkenbach Foundation, there is less concern about the life of the man that compels our interest than the significance of his thought. And the dimensions of his work currently available in a five-volume collection and in a prolific assortment of other articles and speeches have yet to be fully plumbed. Nonetheless, one cannot begin to explore the depth of the economics and philosophy without knowing something of the man. For this reason, Professor O'Donnell's book will now stand as the most helpful biography of Henry George, and this work by an established and accomplished historian deserves a place in the collection of all of us professing to be Georgists. We are also fortunate in having his recorded talks on C-Span as well as perhaps other sources.

The spring seminar is also the occasion for the induction of Kania School students into the Omicron Delta Epsilon honor society, which this (continued on page 11)

**H. G. SEMINAR AT SCRANTON (from page 1)**

year had over twenty members of the junior and senior classes. The respect and concern -- indeed the love -- that this Jesuit institution accords its students is particularly noticeable to an outside observer. The introduction of students, including a personal profile, reflects the concern and the bond the University has with them beyond the classroom. Perhaps some of these students, imbued with the sense of social justice that Scranton instills, will find Professor O'Donnell's talk also has lasting impact.

(Dr. H. William Batt may be emailed at [albany-geoist@gmail.com](mailto:albany-geoist@gmail.com)) <<

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