

## History and Politics of Monopoly (the Game)

Bright coloured money and vying for the top hat; elusive rules and squabbling with siblings; fun and frustration. Monopoly, an American invention, is an incredibly popular board game for two or more players, in which players roll dice to make their way about the board, buying and selling property, collecting and paying rent. The goal is to render your opponents bankrupt in the process of becoming the most wealthy - to build your own monopoly.

The popular story about Monopoly's origins is that Charles Darrow miraculously came up with the board game in the 1930s - during the great depression - and as a result, embodied the typical rags to riches story - the American Dream. In fact, we can actually trace the board game's origins back to 1903 when a woman, Lizzie Magie, filed a legal claim for *The Landlord's Game*.<sup>1</sup> Magie was a proponent of Georgism - the idea that all rent gained from land ownership should belong to all members of society, introduced by Henry George.<sup>2</sup> She, somewhat ironically, was an *anti* monopolist. Her game had one set of rules in which all rent collected was shared amongst the players, and one much more like today's this was supposed to be an educational tool to show that the former was a much better way to run the game, and by extension, society.

Henry George's ideas were born out of analysis of wealth distribution. Georgism argues that since there is a finite supply of land, and simply owning land does not do anything productive for society, land rent should be distributed amongst society. One might

interpret this as Marxist, however Marx himself considered this regarding Henry George: *“Theoretically the man is utterly backward! ... His fundamental dogma is that everything would be all right if ground rent were paid to the state.”*<sup>3</sup> Georgism’s single-tax system is not in fact socialist. The land tax does not mean that the means of production would be owned by the workers. As Henry George’s own newspaper, *The Standard*, put it: *“What the socialists demand implies a total revolution of the whole system of social production; what Henry George demands leaves the present mode of social production untouched.”*<sup>4</sup>

Conflicts between socialism and Georgism aside, The Landlord’s Game highlighted the misery of monopoly for those who do not own land. After Darrow sold “his” idea to the Parker Brothers, the game took a different tone. The modern Monopoly, in contrast, makes ruthless capitalism a fun, if not sometimes frustrating, game for friends and family to pass the time. In fact, Darrow’s version exploded in popularity during the Great Depression, a time of great difficulty and unrest amongst the working class especially. The game allowed people to be in the shoes of a wealthy capitalist for an hour or so of escapism. I think this speaks to a common feeling among the American working class today. We often see ourselves as temporarily embarrassed millionaires. We fantasise about patenting million dollar ideas, winning the lottery or climbing the corporate ladder to stand above the rest.

Who does Monopoly represent? Even though it was created by a woman, it’s image now is quite different. It’s mascot, an old, rich, white man, known as Rich Uncle

Pennybags, was modeled after J.P. Morgan in 1936.<sup>5</sup> This caricature of the typical American capitalist often rings true. Both structural and social inequalities make it difficult for women, people of colour, and those born into the working class to climb the capitalist ladder. One response to this is the game *Ms. Monopoly*, produced by Hasbro. It has received widespread criticism from both the left (often for being patronising) and the right (often from a general anti-feminist perspective). While it is true that Monopoly's usual mascot is an example of gender and racial bias, I find Hasbro's attempt at correcting this to be futile, although it is amusing at least. This is because I believe that gender inequality and capitalism often goes hand in hand. Capitalism would not fare so well if women ceased their endless hours of unpaid labour that holds up society. In my view, we should not hope for more women CEOs; we should fight for *no* CEOs.

Hasbro's acquisition of Monopoly (after buying the Parker Brothers in 1991) is the conclusion of a somewhat ironic story. Hasbro itself is a monopoly. It owns the rights to selling toys for Marvel, My Little Pony, Peppa Pig, Nerf and Transformers to name a few. Hasbro produces endless cookie-cutter variations of the same Monopoly game for endless book series, TV shows and films. It is my view that capitalism, commonly lauded for its encouragement of innovation, actually stifles it. Monopolies emerge and create the same products over and over off the back of publicly funded research, cutting corners everywhere possible, introducing planned obsolescence and destroying creative thought. The story of Monopoly, whilst it was not created to promote socialism, serves as an example of how capitalism lends itself to monopoly, concentrating power and wealth in the minority of people.

Citations:

- 1 - [Monopoly's Inventor: The Progressive Who Didn't Pass 'Go' \(Published 2015\)](#)
- 2 - [Introduction to Georgist Philosophy and Activity](#)
- 3 - [Letters: Marx-Engels Correspondence 1881](#)
- 4 - [The Standard, Volume 2 August 6, 1887](#)
- 5 - [Interview: Phil Orbanes, Monopoly Expert \(Part Two\)](#)