

The Prevention of Slums— a Universal Source of Psychosocial Pathology

GEOFFREY W. ESTY, M.D., F.A.A.P.

“Bureaucrats, politicians and ‘experts’ have too long been treating the *symptoms* of the ‘sick society’ with palliatives and expediencies hoping to prevent or delay the process of social disintegration and chaos.”

WHETHER central or peripheral, slums or shack towns stubbornly proliferate with the worldwide increase of population and wealth.

Public health and medicine with the assistance of other palliatives, attempt to remedy the effects of human social pollution but to date, they have not participated in efforts to *prevent* the spread and decay of slums, which continue to trap generation after generation of the poor. Disease, mental disorder, social unrest, drug addiction, delinquency, violence and crime constantly emerge as a result of a polarized community. Said the President's Crime Commission in 1967: “Crime flourishes, and has always flourished, in city slums, those neighbourhoods where overcrowding, economic deprivation, social disruption and racial discrimination are endemic.”

In the United States, at long last, physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists and allied health professionals are beginning to direct their efforts and concerns towards the problems of poverty and of survival in the slums.

Medical schools and hospitals are becoming aware that they must relate intimately and humanly with the deprived and depressed who are attempting to survive in slums. A few are adding economists and sociologists to their academic faculties. Some are establishing departments of social medicine, community health and mental centres. Others are working directly with public health on problems of lead poisoning, rats, sanitation and the prevention of fetal brain damage and mental retardation from protein and vitamin deficiencies.

In a guest editorial in the *New York Times*,¹ Lawrence O'Brien wrote: “Our greatest environmental threat may be not the contamination of our water and air and the slow poisoning of our wildlife, but the pollution of our cities by the malignancy we call the ghetto.” The reader was reminded that “The basic causes that sparked the tragic upheavals of the 1960's are still there; overcrowded inhuman living conditions, starvation, hunger and malnutrition, unemployment and underemployment, inade-

quate health care, packed and substandard schools, crime and violence, drug addiction, discrimination, hatred.”

About a billion people over the world are caught in the grip of deprivation, struggling for survival. Certainly a rational and enlightened self-interest should persuade us all to take vigorous steps to remedy such pathogenic inequities. Why don't we do so?

Plans that Fail

In the USA, government, state and local agencies have invested huge sums and made efforts to increase the well-being of the poor with respect to two major categories: personal needs and shelter.

The first category includes welfare assistance, food stamps, health insurance systems, education and job training. The second category includes low-cost housing, urban renewal, model cities, rehabilitation of slum dwellings, and the building of new cities.

City planners and architects with innovative ideas abound. An infinite number of studies and surveys exist. What then is happening with these ideas and programmes? Why do they so often fail to meet their objective? Let us look at a few of them and see what happens:

Low Cost, High Rise Facilities “For the Poor”

Under urban renewal programmes, slum buildings have been razed and families, if they are “fortunate” transferred to new high rise buildings; others are obliged to “double up” with friends or relatives in other slum buildings or shanty towns. The new high rise structures soon develop into stratified slums; their corridors littered and unsanitary; their elevators often inoperative or a source of crime.

The removal of families from their former slum buildings deprives them of lifesaving relationships with old neighbours and friends, who used to keep an eye on the children in the block. The multi-storied building often becomes a form of imprisonment, with “cells” locked for security against strangers or unknown neighbours. Subsequent vandalism and disintegration sets in as

From an address delivered to the World Federation of Mental Health, Hong Kong, November, 1971.

evidence of frustration and insecurity.

Urban Blight and Urban Death

Very few urban renewal projects have been helpful or successful. Many sound buildings have been destroyed and housing demolished which could have been rehabilitated; leaving often vast rubble-strewn acreage in



the centre of our cities, awaiting the speculative profits of real estate interests and politicians.

With the increasing population and migration of disadvantaged families into the cities and suburbs, there is subsequent acute shortage of housing and intense overcrowding. Slums are ordinarily a very profitable business, more so than the construction of decent dwelling units. However, one should be reminded that human crowding gives rise to an exponential increase in social and economic crises. These pressurized problems may well explode and make an already ungovernable society chaotic.

In times of inflation, many landlords, unable to meet the costs of maintenance, mortgage payments, and taxes, abandon their properties, which soon disintegrate from vandalism and fires. For example, conservative estimates put the number of abandoned units in New York City at more than 100,000. The malignant cancer of urban blight leads to urban death.

Repellent Taxation

Developed on relatively "cheap" land, the building of a new planned city, designed for optimum living for a diversity of incomes, is currently in favour. Reston, Virginia, and more recently Columbia, Maryland, are "successful" favourite examples.

After several years, businesses serving Reston, (this city having been the recipient of partial support from a large oil corporation), began to drift away, due to ever higher rents and taxes. The oil corporation again came to Reston's rescue by underwriting the entire project.

What was the real reason for Reston's ultimate impending failure? Was it due to faulty assessments and taxation? Why should urban renewal programmes fail to prevent continued slum formation? Why do slums over the world stubbornly persist?

In an article entitled "Psychiatry and the Survival of Man,"² Judd Marmor writes: "Further technological and

scientific advances will be of no avail unless we can develop the moral capacity to utilize them constructively for the benefit of all men There is nothing more important that psychiatry can contribute than to identify those institutional factors that are so shaping the personalities of most contemporary men and women as to render them resistant to the fundamental changes that must take place to ensure man's survival."

Behavioural scientists, including the social psychiatrists and the psychologists are sensitive to *causes* of illness as well as its symptoms which torture the body politic. In contrast, economists, politicians and planners responsible for the formulation of laws, are too often unmindful of the psychology of human behaviour. As a result, it has become clear that our present forms of taxation tend to be arbitrary and penalizing, depending upon the tax assessor, evoking non-compliance and evasion with disrespect for the law, and setting a double standard of values.

In contrast, a positive incentive tax system would motivate a positive response and compliance. It would permit the solution of economic problems including the prevention of slums. Furthermore, such a tax reform would safeguard basic human justice and equality.

Tax that promotes every Unsound Policy Imaginable

The time-honoured two-faced property tax has contributed to the spreading citizen tax strikes, community violence, polarity of life styles and social disintegration, although it possesses within it a latent potential for equality and social justice.

Dr. Robert Hutchins³, former Chancellor of the University of Chicago, and President of the Centre for the Study of Democratic Institutions in Santa Barbara, California declares:

"The real property tax, which is the main support of local governments, reflects and promotes every unsound policy imaginable. It encourages urban blight, suburban sprawl and land speculation. It thwarts urban rehabilitation, construction investment in building and improving homes. And it prevents orderly development and planning."

He urges the gradual removing of the tax on improvements with a correspondingly increasing tax on land values.

The property tax as usually defined, is not *one* tax, but *two*—a tax on buildings and a latent, often hidden but nominal tax on the land itself, which bears little relation to its true value.

This encourages speculation and financial "windfalls" to land owners who hoard, under-use, or misuse their holdings. Conversely, it penalizes, by higher taxation, those who conserve and improve their properties. Currently, individuals and large real estate companies, banks and railroad corporations are buying up huge acreages of federal as well as privately-owned land for speculation as a hedge against inflation and for investment tax write-offs. Ironically, such speculation is itself a major factor

in living costs, as it serves to remove land from use and to send land costs even higher.

Economists give too little thought to the potentialities of a positive incentive tax system, which would be in tune with instinctual human behaviour.

The taxation of site values is just such a system. It would promote rather than retard the economy. It would make slums unprofitable, and encourage rehabilitation or new relocated housing. It would tend also to force unused or poorly used land toward its optimum use and conservation and cease to penalize development and improvement. Site-value taxation constitutes a natural source of government revenue, for the values of sites are created and maintained by the activities of the community. It is thus not only sound, but equitable and just.

Bureaucrats, politicians and many "experts" have too long been treating the *symptoms* of the "sick society" with palliatives and expediencies, hoping to prevent or delay the process of social disintegration and chaos. They do not appear to be able to determine the *causes* of societal ill health with respect to the power that positive motivations and incentives play in the human psyche. Consequently current tax practices become more of a weapon to destroy than a means to save society.

I fear that society is afflicted with "iatrogenic disease." In this context, the term is used with respect to a common world-wide societal disease, the name of which has been borrowed from medicine. It is defined as:

"A physician-induced condition which arises when an

inappropriate treatment, given perhaps for a mis-diagnosed illness, is continued and even stubbornly escalated. When such treatment gives rise to symptoms of its own, it is called 'iatrogenic disease.' Unless the error is appreciated, the treatment stopped, and therapeutic direction shifted, the patient ultimately dies."

It is urged that behavioural scientists, social psychologists and psychiatrists and others familiar with the



important parts that incentives and motivations play in human affairs, begin to counsel with the leadership of governments concerning the psycho-economics of taxation, as it affects human dignity, health and survival.

¹ Lawrence F. O'Brien, "The Ecology of the Slums," *New York Times*, August 21, 1971.

² Judd Marmor, M.D., "Psychiatry and the Survival of Man," *Saturday Review*, May 22, 1971.

³ Dr. Robert Hutchins: Statement given in the film *One Way to Better Cities*; The Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, Inc., N.Y., N.Y. 10021; distributed by Stowe C. Phelps Productions Inc., 5 East 57th St., New York, N.Y. 10022.

Is Henry George Becoming Fashionable?

ROY DOUGLAS



INTELLECTUALS as a race tend rather to despise fashion, and certainly do not believe that anything so crude could possibly affect the functioning of their own fine minds. Unfortunately, fashion plays at least as large a part in the world of ideas as it does in any other field of human activity. Take dear old Henry George. Writers of the generation which has just passed were willing to acknowledge that George's ideas were of great importance, even if they didn't happen to agree with him themselves. Sir Robert Ensor and G. D. H. Cole, for example, were Fabians; but they realised that no-one could write properly about the history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries without considering George's impact on human ideas—not least, his impact on the ideas of socialists.

On the other hand, Professor Lyons's long and scholarly study of Irish history since 1846 has recently contrived 800-odd pages without one single reference to George—in spite of the fact that George had a very marked influence on Patrick Ford (who found a very large slice of the Irish Party's money), and on the immensely important Michael Davitt. One wonders to what extent history mirrors the past, and to what extent it mirrors the historian.

Thus one is pleased when scholars begin to notice that there once existed a man called Henry George, and that quite a lot of people during and after George's lifetime happened to be interested in what he said. Four articles on this subject have appeared comparatively recently in scholarly journals. Two of them are

by Bernard Newton, and discuss the impact of George on British economists.¹ These are rather specialist in character; they are concerned rather with the reception of George by more or less contemporary economists than with his wider effect on opinion, or his effect on men of a later age. The series is not yet complete, and it is to be hoped that the concluding article or articles will tell us something of his long-range effect on economic thought, and whether the effect was what George intended. One would also like to know whether there was any "logical" reason for George's ideas appearing and making their impact just when they did. To what extent was the agricultural depression of the late 1870's an essential prerequisite for men to be receptive of radical ideas about land?