

The Ubiquity of Poverty

by SYDNEY MAYERS

"IN aggregate wealth and individual opportunity, no nation in history can match the U. S. . . . Its fields generate a super-abundance of food, its factories a surfeit of goods and gadgets . . . The accouterments of affluence are everywhere . . . Yet in the midst of this unparalleled abundance, another nation dwells in grinding deprivation. It comprises the 27,700,000 Americans who are denied access to the wealth that surrounds them." So begins a lengthy, in-depth Time magazine report, detailing the widespread poverty prevailing in this country.

The Time quotation is rather reminiscent, poignantly recalling the problem posed by Henry George: "Why, in spite of increase in productive power, do wages tend to a minimum which will give but a bare living?" Almost ninety years after George asked the question, it seems nothing has been accomplished save to re-phrase it. Nine decades have passed, and all we can do is fatuously repeat "the more it changes, the more it remains the same." Thus we permit the *status quo* of penury to continue.

However, one advance has actually been made. There is a current willingness to acknowledge that poverty *does* exist, that people *are* hungry, that the wealth of a fabulously productive community *is* ill-distributed. Formerly, the fact of poverty, if not blandly "swept under the rug," was rationalized as an inevitable act of God. After all, it was alleged, He created the poor, who the Bible assures us will always be with us. Those who did not blame God, blamed the poor themselves, branding them ignorant and indolent. It was a comforting "solution," but the chaos

of recent years has compelled a forthright recognition that poverty is undeniably present and cries for a remedy.

Unfortunately, the true remedy has been consistently by-passed by well-meaning government officials in search of a magic panacea. They have devised a New Deal, a Fair Deal, a New Frontier, a Great Society, and similar schemes—all superficial, all ineffectual, all staggeringly costly to the nation's economy. None of these massive efforts has sought the root of the problem, the *cause* of poverty. Somehow this is like physicians trying to cure a disease without endeavoring to pinpoint its origin.

Time's account is a frightening exposé of the plight of "a Nation within a Nation," revealing gnawing hunger, abnormally high death rates, ugly slums and abject human degradation. It is not a pretty picture, but it is not new—nor even different. The wretched of our time are no less miserable than those of a thousand, a hundred, or twenty years ago. Would it profit Jean Valjean to change places with a denizen of today's Appalachia or Harlem? Economically, not a bit!

If God created the poor, He also created the earth, with all its bounty. But it was not He who set up the barriers which restrain eager hands from grasping nature's gifts; this was the work of man. It is Man who denies his fellow-men access to the earth, or mulcts them of most of what they reap and produce. And this will go on until the principles of Henry George are applied, for he did more than pose a problem—he presented a logical, an effective, an irrefutable, remedy. When *that* remedy is used, the problem of poverty will end.

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"Justice is truth in action," said Benjamin Disraeli.