

Track Down the Villain

by SIMON ZIVE

AFTER graduating college in 1927 it never entered my mind that almost 40 years later I would again be a student, and that my course of study would be one of the driest subjects of all — elementary economics. But I was due for a delightful surprise. This was a different form of economics — I will call it social economics.

What is economics? Is it an exact science, like chemistry, where one can weigh and measure things with instruments that give precise results, or a more general subject in which to draw conclusions that have to be supported by argument and reasoning rather than concrete evidence?

I think it is nearer the second than the first — therefore even the right to think about it has been snatched away from us by the theorists. Yet clear thinking about economic problems is most important. Muddled thinking about these vital problems lies at the root of most of the world's ills, depressions, wars, strikes, crime, disease, slums and pauperism.

Henry George realized this. He was no theorist, but a practical man. He had shipped before the mast, had been a roving printer and editor, storekeeper and teacher, and a prospector for gold. The social and economic inequalities he had seen around the world set him to thinking. "What was responsible for the illogical paradox of poverty in the midst of progress? Why, with wealth so greatly on the increase was poverty increasing just as greatly?"

This phenomenon had been noticed before, of course. Many writers had insisted that poverty was due solely to laziness or inefficiency — others recalled

that since poverty had always existed it was a necessary evil and nothing could be done about it.

Henry George could not accept either view. He determined to investigate our economic system to determine what made it run fast or slow and sometimes stop altogether.

During one of the California gold rushes he observed a peculiar fact which seemed to contain the germ of the disease he was trying to stamp out. Miners, settlers, farmers and other workers were flocking to a region near San Francisco. There was a boom. Henry George noticed that land was so much in demand that certain individuals would buy a plot one day for one price and sell it next day for more, having done nothing themselves to increase its value. Not merely the individual owners therefore, but the entire community should benefit. So he developed this idea in *Progress and Poverty*, persuasively and brilliantly. When the book was published it outsold popular novels of the day and appeared in translations all over Europe, going into countless editions. Today it is estimated that more than three million copies have been sold.

You can actually follow this book as you would a mystery story — meeting the leading characters: capital, labor, wages, wealth. With yourself in the role of detective, track down the villain, discover for yourself what sinister third factor exacts tribute from both capital and labor alike and (in the midst of wealth and progress) forces the crimes of poverty and misery to be committed.

This was a student talk at a recent New York graduation exercise.

ELTA (Erie Land Tax Association, Pennsylvania) is backing Al Woodel, an independent Republican candidate for City Council. He is speaking out for land value taxation.