

The Georgist Journal

Number 43

Spring 1984

COMMENT THE NEW YEAR - NEITHER ORWELLIAN NOR REAGANITE

As the year 1984 came upon us, there was widespread awareness that this year was the title and subject of George Orwell's novel written in 1948. In that book Orwell forecast a grim world of repression and dictatorship. As this year opened, there was scarcely a newspaper or magazine that did not try its hand at assessing the Orwellian vision. Most agreed that the forecast was too grim, but that we had better be wary as some of the elements are already in place.

Now that we are well into the year, things have settled down and 1984 appears to be a year like other years with its turmoils and problems "as usual", and with the focus in the U.S. on the quadrennial presidential race.

We are supposed to be on the road to economic recovery, with inflation reduced, a tapering off of unemployment and production improving. But there are dark shadows in the economy that we had better not forget. Many businesses are failing and smaller companies are being swallowed up by larger ones. The same trend is happening to our farms. The homeless - especially in large cities - are on the increase as rents go up and up. Poverty has actually increased during our "recovery."

Let us also not forget that "1984" has been true for many years of those parts of the world that are under dictatorships, whether of the left or the right - and these have increased since 1948.

In the advanced economies which still have more democracy, one of the conspicuous developments - high technology with computerization - has posed problems as well as promises. With national data banks there is less and less privacy - a significant ingredient for an Orwellian scenario. And economically, there is the problem of jobs, feared by many. There is a demand for specialized skilled labor but not much future for unskilled labor. As the rush to obtain these skills produces more skilled labor, demand will not keep up with supply.

Maybe 1984 isn't as bad as the Orwellian nightmare, but neither is it as good as the Reaganite prognostication. If you close one eye you can see just the good, and if you close the other eye you can see just the bad. With both eyes open it looks very much like a tale of progress and poverty - more than coincidentally the title of Henry George's book of more than a century ago. The problems we have today are pretty much the same as the ones he pointed out. He showed the basic cause to be the monopolization of land that restricted economic opportunities, and he showed the solution to be the taxation of land values that would release land for use - an analysis that is more relevant today than ever.

R.C.