



Deja Vu All Over Again

“Whereas the debate for the last few years has been about work programs, what we’re seeing now is that work isn’t enough to keep people out of the shelter system. The \$5.15 per hour minimum wage is not enough to cover rents greater than \$700 or \$800 a month.” That was the statement of Steven Banks,

Counsel to the Homeless Rights Project of the Legal Aid Society, quoted in the *New York Times* on February 8th. The *Times* article chronicles the precipitous increase in the homeless-shelter population in New York — reflecting a national trend — and notes that the current increase is almost completely made up of women and children. The number of single males in shelters — that population of skid-row derelicts that everyone likes to envision as “the homeless” — has remained constant for a decade. (This has something to do with the fact that although some rudimentary social services are still in place to aid poor women and their families, single men on the street are almost completely ignored.)

This should not come as a surprise to anyone, although the *Times* had little to say about what might have caused this problem. It did mention that the city’s commissioner of homeless services, Martin Oesterrich, cited the following reasons: “sharply rising housing costs in an economic boom, a subway advertisement campaign that encourages victims of domestic violence to seek help, more court orders for eviction, and declines in subsidized housing.” Bingo. We are also told that homelessness has reached levels that have not been seen since the late 1980s: the height, one may remember, of the last big real-estate bubble, right before the last recession.

There are those who deride us here at the HGI for teaching out of a textbook first published in 1879, declaring that nothing that old could ever be relevant to today’s conditions. It is ironic that they criticize us for promulgating what they characterize as the same old tired theory, and yet turn around and report the same old tired news about poverty and the boom/bust cycle. From the standpoint of the basic principles of political economy (that’s what we teach here!), there are no surprises in the economic news — or in the “new economy”.

It seems odd, for example, that here our economy has been expanding for the last eight years; assets are up tremendously, unemployment is down, and yet here come the old demons of poverty and homelessness, just like the time before: it’s an old story of *Progress and Poverty*.

We have been globalizing, of course, and President Clinton rode tall on the digital frontier, presiding over the longest peacetime economic expansion since the last time, but “globalization” is (*continued on page 34*)

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by no means new. The “free trade vs. protection” debate was a huge public issue in Henry George’s day. Nowadays we call it WTO, NAFTA, or “the Battle in Seattle”. And although the specifics get numbingly complex (the NAFTA “free trade” agreement was over 300 pages long), the overall question remains the same: who benefits from the tremendous gains made possible by international trade — and who loses? Henry George said this:

It is useless to tell working-men that increase in the general wealth means improvement in their condition. They know by experience that this is not true. The working classes of the United States have seen the general wealth enormously increased, and they have also seen that, as wealth has increased, the fortunes of the rich have grown larger, without its becoming a whit easier to get a living by labor. — Protection or Free Trade (1886)

There is much fretting about the persistence of the “urban underclass”, that burgeoning group of embittered, unemployable people pent up in rotting, unmaintained, over-priced slums (or turning up to desperately compete for the few beds left in homeless shelters), but we were already fretting about them in 1879:

Whence shall come the new barbarians? Go through the squalid quarters of great cities, and you may see, even now, their gathering hordes! How shall learning perish? Men will cease to read, and books will kindle fires and be turned into cartridges! (Progress and Poverty)

But, of course, if George’s only contribution were this sort of eloquent indignation, he would scarcely be worth our time today. We have plenty of indignation in our public dialogue today — but precious little analysis of the fundamental causes of our seemingly intractable social problems. But that is what we need, and that is precisely what we have not gotten from our “leaders”, whether political or academic. For evidence of the utter bankruptcy of economic policy in our time, we need look no further than the depressing familiarity of stories such as this one.

And what of economic analysis in our time? The academic writers who are published in today’s economic journals, who provide the standard pool of talking heads for TV commentary, would have us believe that this is a matter of great and rarefied subtlety, an exploration of realms far beyond the ken of the average working stiff. Henry George said otherwise:

If political economy be the science that can not safely be left to specialists, the one science of which it is needful of all to know something, it is also the science which the ordinary man may most easily study. It requires no tools, no apparatus, no special learning. The phenomena which it investigates need not be sought for in laboratories or libraries; they lie about us, and are constantly thrust upon us. The principles on which it builds are

truths of which we all are conscious. . . and on which in everyday matters we constantly base our reasoning and our actions. And its processes, which consist mainly in analysis, require only care in distinguishing what is essential from what is merely accidental. — *The Science of Political Economy* (1897)

Kids in New York City have been missing school, the article went on to report, because they and their families, some 700 strong on recent nights, had spent the night in the hallway of the Bronx office responsible for the city-wide assignment of shelter beds to homeless families. Things like this are a tragedy in our “new economy” — but they are not a mystery.

Remembering Neva Bianco

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opportunity, to interest church members in George’s ideas, to no avail. It was a constant source of both frustration and bewilderment to her.

During that confusing time when we were sorting out the HGI’s day-to-day functions, Neva started grabbing dozens of new correspondence students. I may never know how many students she actually taught that year, but it was a lot (our database, which was begun in ’95, lists 82 students for Neva — but, of course, she had been teaching for many years before that). Her students nearly always continued past the first course, and universally praised her work.

This was also when Neva, in her inimitable “no big deal” style, contributed a sizeable mutual fund to the Henry George Institute. “It was my sister’s,” she said, “and I knew that was what she’d want me to do with it.”

Although she supported all endeavors to broaden the influence of the georgist remedy, Neva’s personal philosophy had an expansiveness of vision — in which Association in Equality, made real by georgist reform, could transform human society. She was an enthusiastic teacher of the HGI’s course in *Liberation Theology and Land Reform*, and was passionate about the spirituality and faith expressed in Henry George’s works.

Neva never married, and aside from her fondly-remembered sister, Roma, I know nothing of Neva’s family. I know how she felt about little children, though. One of my fondest memories is of Neva at the 1997 CGO conference in New Jersey. During the talk of one of the luncheon speakers, she asked to hold our son Eli, who was then five months old. She took Eli, and proceeded to become so rapt with burbling love for the child that she became transported. I went up, sheepishly, and tapped her on the shoulder, bringing her back to “reality”.

Neva was one of the most sensible people I have ever known. She never allowed ego to get in her way. Although she was competent at everything she did, and sure enough of herself on her own ground, I don’t doubt that she would be very surprised to know what a great many lives she touched.

The *Journal* would gratefully accept other remembrances of her. **GI**