

BASHING THE POOR

Ed. Note: The Spring/Summer issue of The Illinois Georgist is hot off the press. It includes several items of interest including an oral history interview with Audrey Little by Adam Monroe, Jr., the Chicago School 1990-91 schedule, and a major opinion piece, "Bashing the Poor", by Chicago HGS President Sam Venturella, excerpted below. Contact Chicago HGS for a copy.

There's a new game around. It's called "bashing the poor." It's played in the public policy research think tanks. The players have never felt the pinch of poverty. One of the qualifications to be a player is superficiality. You see if you're not superficial you might look beyond appearances. That would be an error; for then you might begin to ask real world questions. It helps if you are muddleheaded.

One variation of the game is "Here is how I would live if I were poor." "A cardinal rule of the game is to ignore the logic of language. You must ignore the fact the words rich and poor are comparatives -- that they have meaning only in relation to each other. That way you can imagine (step one) a time and place where population is sparse, and technology is limited to human-powered machines. These are conditions which do not permit much production of wealth; nor much variety. Then you can call these people "poor" if you compare them to an Illinois farmer or a LaSalle Street stockbroker.

Step two, in this instance, is to imagine you are forced by some mysterious circumstance to live in such a community. Again ignoring logic, you begin... by bringing capital, knowledge and skills from your own time and circumstances. The capital would enable you to buy some land to work. You see, without land of your own to work you would have to


work for one of your new neighbors at wages he would be willing to pay. Then you say, "see, being poor isn't so bad."

In an area where all must work to live, there is no great disparity of wealth. Some may have a little more and others a little less than the average; but there are no rich and no poor. So long as all have access to land, and trade is not prohibited by custom or law, there can be no poor. It is whether one is prevented from laboring, or from keeping all that one produces, that determines if one is poor or not.

Poverty is relative. It can't be defined by a government clerk. The dollar income which purportedly defines poverty is meaningless. Ten thousand (1990) dollars cash income to a family who own a house, a few acres of fertile soil and some chickens is gravy compared to a family who have no land and must rent a few rooms.

To compare the poverty of an unemployed or lowpaid laborer in a high-tech society to a standard of living in a society where primitive technology is prevalent, is to compare apples and oranges. The lack of amenities [in a low-tech society] does not mean the people are poor. A hard life? Yes. But not poverty, not near starvation in the midst of plenty.

Then, there is "Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps." Here it is important to think of symptoms as being causes of poverty. The point of this game is to demonstrate that unemployment or low income is due to personal failure, not the economy or the market or politics.

With disconcerting frequency, the business sections of our daily newspapers carry reports of sudden loss of employment. Mergers, business failures, market changes, or a downturn in the economy means unemployment for any number of workers. Not all are lucky enough to have a 'golden parachute' to tide them over until the next job. Poverty is the fault of the poor. We all know that, don't we? 

Not long ago Congress voted, with much patriotic rhetoric, for the imposition of severe penalties upon anyone presuming to burn the flag of the United States. Yet, the very Congressmen who passed this law are responsible, by acts of commission or omission, for burning, polluting, and plundering the territory that the flag is supposed to represent. Therein, they exemplified the peculiar and perhaps fatal fallacy of civilization: the confusion of symbol with reality.

--Alan Watts

Wealth versus Money (1968)

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reality; as the "free market" triumphs on the frontiers of Eastern Europe while it rots in the urban and rural heartland of America... we can become the goddess of liberty who lifts her lamp again to lead the world toward a new vision: A transformed and sustainable world political economy that "liberates production from taxation, the earth from monopoly, and humanity from poverty" -- a "Geocracy" that offers justice to humanity, compassion to our mother earth and all her offspring, and freedom to create not only material abundance, but... a new way of thinking about "self" that is not defined or imagined as at the expense of the "other."

--Mark A. Sullivan

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA: THE MERCURY RISES AGAIN

The Newsletter of the Northern California HGS, *The Mercury*, has been just sent out to its associates. This issue, simply dated 1990, features an article and photo of Cathe Smeland on the front page. Ms. Smeland was recently elected as President of the School's Board of Directors (as reported in our April issue).

Other features in this *Mercury* include an article by Paul Johnson on "LVT for a Greener Future." Mr. Johnson, a Board member of the San Francisco School and a Green activist, took his case for better land use via the land value tax to a Green conference in Eugene, Oregon.

The Mercury also reports on how HGS-SF is working with CALNET (California Network of Economics Teachers) to develop a new curriculum which stresses an ethical approach to economics. Workshops were held in October, December and March by an ad hoc group of teachers concerned about the lack of ethics in their high school programs. HGS-SF Executive Director, Bob Scrofani, moderated the sessions.

The workshops were convened, *The Mercury* reports, after a report on the California Economic Centers revealed that a majority of teachers found the teaching of economic history, distribution of wealth, and roles of labor, agriculture and government either "unimportant" and/or "uncomfortable" to teach.

An outline of the curriculum proposed by the group is now being revised and will be reviewed by educators and economics professors. Land tenure and ownership are discussed as controversial issues in the materials. For further information and/or an outline of the curriculum, send a self-addressed envelope and \$2 to *Ethics and Economics* c/o the Henry George School in San Francisco.

"George's Compassionate Economics" is another major article in this issue, featuring a detailed outline of a seven-point program from Matthew Fox's book on Compassion. Rev. Fox is a Dominican priest who has recently been silenced by the church hierarchy in Rome for teaching "Creation-Centered Spirituality," which

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