

Poverty Rediscovered

by SYDNEY MAYERS

IN the year of our Lord 1964, in the United States of America, the richest and most productive country on earth, it has been found expedient to declare a "war against poverty." By doing so, the national administration frankly concedes that, notwithstanding the tremendous industrial, scientific and social advances of the past century, the monstrous economic maldistribution that has plagued mankind for millennia still prevails. It thus becomes poignantly apparent that what Henry George called "the great enigma of our time" remains an unsolved puzzle — except to the all too few who understand and sympathize with his economic principles.

The continuing prevalence of poverty is a distressing reality, yet there is something refreshing in the current willingness to acknowledge its existence. This is a distinct change of attitude, for until recently the tendency was to dismiss the very word "poverty" as an archaic expression, having no place in today's vocabulary. The Georgist who spoke of poverty was repeatedly greeted with the insistent assertion that "there no longer is such a thing—certainly not in this country!" Supporting this reaction was the common inclination to equate poverty with jobless vagrants, threadbare beggars, underfed children and the like.

In the context of political economy, being a comparative concept, poverty can occur even in the absence of abject human misery. The general trend of wages to a subsistence level necessarily creates the condition. Now, however, it is clear that there is poverty not

only in the abstract economic sense, but in terms of physical want and suffering as well. "Depressed areas" abound, unemployment and welfare payments have skyrocketed, and in America's second largest city lines of demonstrators carry picket-signs reading "We want food." Under such circumstances, even the most ostrich-like evader of facts must admit the existence of what is.

It is not pleasant to review this situation. It is heart-rending to acknowledge that there is hunger in the land; that one need not go to India or China to find it. And the problem will never be solved with doles, no matter what euphemistic names we may give these handouts. (George calls personal charity a noble impulse, but public charity a degrading practice.) In any case, it is impossible to close one's eyes and pretend poverty is not there—it simply cannot be swept under a convenient carpet of complacency.

If this nation is forthright enough to grant the existence of poverty, and sincere in its desire to "war" upon it, perhaps it is not too much to hope that more ears will hearken to the voice of Henry George. Now that poverty has been rediscovered, perhaps one may delicately point out that Henry George "discovered" poverty over eighty-five years ago. Moreover, he faced it as an economic problem, and proceeded to evolve a logical solution, which he freely gave to all the world. Surely the time has come to hear his message, and to be guided by it.

