

Books

INSIDE SOUTH AMERICA, by John Gunther. Harper & Row, New York, 1967. 610 pp. \$7.95.

Reviewed by
Sydney Mayers

John Gunther has achieved fame and fortune as the author of his widely-known "Inside" books, this being the eighth and the latest. Like its predecessors, *Inside South America* is immensely readable, thanks to its racy journalistic style, its topical interest, and the barrelful of *minutiae* it contains. As always, Gunther presents the reader with a mishmash of geography, history, politics, linguistics, folk lore, local color and customs. The result is a somewhat superficial book, which tends to intrigue rather than inform, to amaze rather than impress, and to amuse rather than edify.

Nonetheless, if *Inside South America* is neither great literature nor profound philosophy, it is splendid reporting. One who cannot himself journey through the enormous area covered will learn a great deal as he vicariously travels with Gunther; and will thoroughly enjoy the experience. Moreover, the volume holds special interest for the student of political economy, since it graphically portrays the economic background of each of the ten countries concerned. Gunther is highly observant and vigorously descriptive. His accounts of the ugly slums, the near starvation, the infant mortality, the general death-rate, the degradation, the human erosion, and other concomitants of the abysmal poverty so prevalent south of the Panama Canal, are astonishingly revealing—at once incredible and frightening.

William Buckley, editor of *National Review*, interviewed on New York's educational television station on November 3rd, gave a brief explanation of Henry George's ideas, and said he "had the most sublime intuition about land."

He discerningly equates the widespread poverty of the continent primarily with the unconscionable system of land exploitation found there. "South America today," Gunther points out, "has two-thirds as many serfs as did Russia . . . In country after country the disproportion in land ownership is almost too gross to be believed. In Colombia 3 percent of the population owns 60 percent of the arable land; in Venezuela 1.7 percent owns 74.5 percent. Figures for Peru and Ecuador are even more lopsided. Or consider Chile, where 2.2 percent of owners control three-quarters of the cultivated area." In Bolivia, as late as 1952, "the big landowners could sell their peons like livestock as part of their property." In Brazil (where one owner has a holding of five thousand square miles, an area the size of Connecticut), "*one-half of all agricultural land in the nation is in the hands of 1.6 percent of the population*" (the italics are Mr. Gunther's). In Uruguay, "about 1 percent of the population still owns roughly 33.5 percent of the land."

The above constitutes a sketchy sampling of the many similar statistics the book sets forth, all of which, incidentally, are supported by reference to specific sources. And let it be noted that Gunther gathered his material in 1966 and 1967. It is almost as up-to-date as today's newspaper, and what he writes about is not history, but current events. Gunther mentions, of course, various land reform programs which are gradually being put into effect, but unfortunately they all follow the shibboleth of "break up the big estates," and do not attack the root of the evil. Perhaps more books like John Gunther's excellent work will ultimately lead to the adoption of the only land reform program that would be efficacious: the proposals of Henry George.