

# Poverty on the Amazon

by ALAN ST. DENIS

**E**ARLY in the Twentieth Century, it was the fashion to deny (or at least to ignore) the existence of poverty. Then the outlook changed; poverty was rediscovered, and governmental machinery began to move in an endeavor to eliminate this unhappy circumstance. Today the War on Poverty proceeds apace, though unfortunately efforts to reveal its cause are overshadowed by attempts to find a panacea for it.

In a way, it is understandable that in the United States poverty should have been discounted, and all but dismissed. Our vast resources and enormous industrial capacity normally provided a fair share of prosperity for the great majority of those who dwell here. The few who could not make ends meet were somewhat obscure and (until recent days) comparatively unheard.

But there are places in the world where poverty has been dreadfully ubiquitous for so long that (to quote Blackstone) "the memory of man runneth not to the contrary." One such area is the outlying northeast section of Brazil. In his recently published book, *Death in the Northeast*, Josué de Castro vividly describes the abject poverty that prevails there. Moreover, to his great credit, he sharply outlines the reasons for the misery, and insists that poverty in his country is not an act of God or the result of natural causes.

Drought and famine have played their part in the suffering of Northeast Brazil, but Dr. de Castro shows

that such calamities merely increase the chronic hunger and misery, which he ascribes to "the inadequate agrarian structure of the region, the undesirable land tenure system, the existence of great estates side by side with tiny holdings that we find all over Northeastern Brazil." He reports that fifty per cent of the land is owned by three per cent of the local landlords; that only twenty per cent of the local residents own any land, and that eighty per cent are tenants, sharecroppers or squatters.

Based on his findings, Dr. de Castro contends that the degradation of Brazil's rural inhabitants stems directly from the feudal land system that has existed since the time of Portuguese colonizers, which supports human exploitation through large-scale private monopolization of land. He finds no hope in the Alliance for Progress or similar international aid movements, which he believes simply bolster the *status quo*. Such plans, he declares, are "irremediably doomed to fail unless accompanied by basic domestic reforms, the first of which must be to abolish the feudal agrarian system."

Dr. de Castro's painstaking analysis of the cause of poverty, and his logical presentation of the obvious remedy, are at once a powerful indictment and an encouraging recommendation. It seems incumbent on the advocates of Henry George to redouble their efforts to educate the people of South America (and elsewhere) in his economic and social philosophy.

An extension of the Henry George School has been formed in Hong Kong by Dr. Wong Po-Chang and his colleagues. The first classes will begin in January, 1967. An opening ceremony is being planned to take place during the Christmas holidays, and Dr. Wong invites well wishers from the U.S. to send a few words of encouragement. Send airmail greetings promptly to Dr. Wong Po-Chang, Mascot House, 746 Nathan Road, Kowloon, Hong Kong.