

The Hunger Plague in Rich America

How does our degenerate, privilege-ridden society treat the poverty-stricken, that large group of the population denied economic opportunities? The American Association of Social Workers, in a report issued March 21 on a detailed study of the current relief situation in forty-three representative areas in twenty-eight states, summarized its findings as follows:

"Marked increases in the number of applicants for relief in all areas swamping both public and private relief agencies. Widespread layoffs in industry and drastic payroll cuts. Evidence that the WPA program has not been able to absorb all employable needy on relief rolls. WPA wages inadequate to provide minimum subsistence to large families in many sections.

"Periodic stoppages of relief in many sections. Direct relief allowances shockingly low in many areas. Family groups which include a so-called employable member denied any relief in many sections. Little or no care available in majority of areas for non-resident transients. Malnutrition commonly reported among relief families throughout the country. Children kept from school because of lack of clothing. Aliens denied WPA placement or direct relief in many sections.

"Low-paid jobs in private industry force full-time workers to seek supplemental aid. Federal Surplus Commodities, intended as a supplement to relief, being issued in place of relief in many sections of South. Available State and local funds for direct relief exhausted in many sections. Wholesale evictions of relief families in communities where relief agencies do not pay rents.

Monthly food allowances as low as \$11.90 per month for a family of four prevail in some sections whereas the U. S. Bureau of Home Economics restricted diet for 4 persons, for temporary emergency use only, is \$26.55 per month."

Anxious to erase from the national scene the nightmare of tragic suffering which lies beneath this situation, James Ford and Catherine Morrow Ford seek to set out in their new book, "The Abolition of Poverty" (Macmillan, New York, \$2.50), an adequate program of action. Although Dr. Ford is professor of social ethics

at Harvard University, he, together with his collaborator, approaches the social problem with a minimum of academic timidity and succeeds in bringing together many of the considerations of social policy which would be implied in a frontal attack upon poverty.

The Fords belong to that wing of social reformers (radical social liberalism) which, without forswearing the libertarian tradition, insists upon the economic necessity for governmental intervention in certain areas of the economy to protect and advance the general welfare. For this reason that other wing of social reformers (radical laissez-faire liberalism), which just as emphatically insists upon the political necessity for limiting governmental intervention to much fewer areas, may find in the Fords' program more to oppose than to favor.

But in this day when humane liberalism is dominant and governmental intervention for superficial ends is the fad of politicians and of public opinion, it is refreshing to find a study like that of the Fords which goes to some of the roots of the economic problem of poverty. Holding that "the municipal government can contribute to the process of the redistribution of wealth chiefly through its policy with reference to the taxation of land and improvements," they advocate "further research" to "find ways to bring to the municipal treasury the whole of the unearned increment to land values without frightening legitimate investment in land or stampeding or mulcting recent bona fide investors."

"In so far as the municipality can actually distinguish those increments

to land values which are socially created—that is, created by the presence of population, the increase of population or by the efforts of others rather than the owners—it would wisely and justly seize them for the common treasury," they declare, arguing that the only alternative to the public appropriation of urban ground rent by taxation is "rapid municipalization of land"—annual leasing of municipally-owned land—from which, understandably, they shrink.

With other aspects of the urban social problem the Fords deal similarly. They favor public housing and various devices for slum-clearance and rehousing of the lowest income group. They emphasize modernization of building laws, sanitary laws, and zoning ordinances to eliminate unsanitary and unsafe housing. But they do not seem to realize the full significance of the prevailing system of land tenure as it conditions the structure of law and administrative policy.

In the field of national resources, they look to revision of the tax system to unburden economic enterprise, conserve resources and promote their efficient utilization, although for widening opportunities they would include minimum wage legislation and progressive income taxation along with more practical measures. They neglect the rural social problem. They ignore the implications of some larger questions of economic policy. They misinterpret the exploitation theories of both Karl Marx and Henry George. But this does not detract from the value of their book as a provocative challenge to present-day students of social problems.