Who Is Injured by Poverty?  

By PHIL GRANT

As long as poverty remains possible we shall never be sure that it will not overtake ourselves.

—G. B. SHAW

IT WOULD be stupidly shortsighted to believe, upon having all of our teeth yanked out, that not we, but our mouths, were suffering. True, our mouths would be destitute so far as teeth were concerned, but they wouldn’t suffer the unhappiness that our stomachs would when we tried to digestunchewed meals . . .

Similarly, it isn’t the poor who are made unhappy by their poverty, but the so-called middle class and rich. If we should visit the dirtiest of big- and small-city slums, the poorest areas of the South, or the Ozarks, we would find humans as poor as any that can be found on earth, actually smiling and singing gaily—unworried.

These poor souls, as Gershwin’s Porgy sang, “have plenty of nuthin’, and nuthin’ s plenty for” them. Margaret Bourke White’s photographs, taken during the last depression to show us the horrible condition of the southern poor, illustrated clearly how ragged, dirty and debased humans can become without seeming aware of their miserable plight. Her photographs showed the bent, ragged, underfed and rickety paupers contentedly smiling broad toothless smiles, in spite of their broken-down rotting shacks, their dark, drab and ugly rooms.

The photographs illustrated clearly that poverty doesn’t make the poor unhappy; it simply robs them of the dignity and nobility that are man’s birthright.

Paradoxically, it is the rich and hope-to-be-rich middle class who are made unhappy by poverty. It is they who are rarely worried or content. It is the independent manufacturer and business men who have the nervous breakdowns and ulcers, who, when the periodic depressions roll around to spread poverty among the lower classes, find their profits disappearing, the return on the capital they invested falling to almost nothing, the businesses which they spent their lives and savings to build collapsing for want of customers who have money with which to buy the goods they must sell if they are to escape bankruptcy.

It is the professional men, the doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, scientists, barbers and entertainers, and not the unemployed and low-wage working men, who really suffer when the folks-on-the-wrong-side-of-the-tracks are desti-

tute. For they can’t sell their services and talents to humans who cannot afford to buy them; nor can they sell them to the middle class to the same extent they did in “good times.” Since those in the middle-income group can buy services only after they’ve provided their families with food, clothing and shelter; after they’ve put aside enough to pay for their children’s educations and their own funerals. That is why, during depressions, the professionals in our society are unhappiest.

But what is even more important, it isn’t the poor alone who suffer from the crime and disease that blossom in their poverty-striken areas. For it is those who have something to steal who must be robbed, and murdered, if they resist. It is those who have something to tax who must pay the costs of policemen, courts and the prisons that are filled by criminals bred in the slum areas. It is the upper classes as well as the paupers who are subject to the venereal diseases and epidemics that pour out of the shanties to spread like poison gas into the private residences and mansions.

And, of course, the cost of fighting disease must be paid by those who have incomes large enough to tax.

But even those in very high places, the multi-millionaires, suffer more from poverty than do the paupers. For it is the poverty of the masses that gives life to communism or socialism. The very rich and mighty may pretend to themselves that all they need do is to wipe out communism and socialism is to have the FBI track down and punish spies and screwballs who allow themselves to be used as Soviet cats’ paws. The rich know, or should know, that communism or socialism is not a foreign political movement; but a resentful feeling among the middle class—not the poor born out of fear of the poverty into which they see themselves sliding. The very rich certainly know that when middle-class fear and resentment reach a certain level there will be riots, revolution, anarchy and mass murder in spite of the FBI, the army, the navy and the atom bomb. As Aristotle remarked, “Poverty is the parent of revolution and crime.”

The opulent should have learned from history that when mad riot breaks loose, it is the very rich, the aristocracy of the land, who are swung from lamp posts, flung out of windows and off balconies, butchered in their beds and subjected to the lowest indignities. Having most, the millionaires have most to lose. But that is not to say that the poor during revolutions will not suffer at all. When riot breaks out, it is their bodies that are machine-gunned to form huge tangled barricades of lifeless bleeding flesh. They, as well as the middle-class workers and professional people, during revolu-

—From The Wonderful Wealth Machine, by Phil Grant of the Henry George School faculty. This book will be published soon by Devin Adair Company, New York, and will be a modern version of Progress and Poverty.