

AN ALTERNATIVE OUTLOOK

By Everett W. Gross

When I was in training to become a teacher, it was stressed that if anything I say is not understood, I would do well to assume that a good bit of the fault is my own. My friend, Charles Novak (April 30) calls my attention to one of my failings. As I read his letter, I think he means to compliment some books including one which I recommend as a beginning book -- not a final book -- in economics. As I understand him, the compliment he means to be paying is to place my book in a class with others on the basis that they "propound the concept of one solution for all problems."

I have to beg Mr. Novak to retract his compliment because Henry George's PROGRESS AND POVERTY does not deserve that one. As a matter of fact, I do not even recommend it as a first book if you happen to have time to read Adam Smith's WEALTH OF NATIONS and some other great classics first.

I have occasionally heard that Henry George tried to offer one solution for all problems, and the statement is usually made as an indictment and not as a compliment. I would feel indicted if the statement were made about me (and maybe it is.) But in George's case, the facts are almost exactly opposite from that.

I have read nearly everything Henry George ever wrote, and I am not aware that he ever touched upon as many as two problems. It would be more accurate to say of his book not that it is about one solution for all problems, but that it is about all solutions for one problem.

That one problem is poverty and he discusses all of the solutions of which I have ever heard. Some examples are labor unions, licenses, cooperatives, import tariffs, alms and doles, subsidies, destruction of produce and manipulating the money supply. He discusses the conditions under which those solutions will work and under which they will not work.

The modern popular tendency to look at different faces of poverty as separate problems is the same as it was when George wrote 107 years ago. And so are those faces the same as then. Problems with our national budget, our state budgets, our school budgets, our road building and repair budgets, our school budgets, our personal budgets are all just one problem: POVERTY.

And the modern proposed solutions are not new. All of them were discussed by George. He shows why the ones which simply consist of pushing the poverty onto someone else who is equally bad off are doomed to failure. The single contribution which George made to solve that single problem was really, in a sense, not a solution at all. It was simply to point out how all of those so-called solutions act upon the price structure to cancel themselves out -- as long as we continue to tax backwards so as to keep the total economy so nearly ruined.

I suppose I need to apologize for allowing anyone to think I am suggesting one solution for many problems. The many manifestations of poverty are not separate problems. They are just poverty.

Yes, there are problems other than poverty among us. But until I have time and the ability to study them in depth, you will not find them mentioned in my writings.