

We must deal with the earth on the earth's terms

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MORE ON WORK, INCOME AND ECONOMICS

We have written two circulars on the subject of workers who cut trees in Montana and Oregon. The magazine TRUMPETER, published in British Columbia, reprinted them as one article, *Reflections on Conflicts over Forests: Work, Jobs, Income and a New Approach to Economics*. It is the kind of subject that won't go away. It comes back as a reproach to the environmentalists who have the gall to try to save the tropical forests from economic exploitation by the people who live where the forests are. Who are we, the worlds maximum sinners, in terms of earth exploitation, to be admonishing anybody about duty and morality in terms of conservation ethics, climate control and the good of the human race? And who are we to be wringing our hands over the prospect that Chinese households may become equipped with refrigerators and the consequent increase in CFCs? Does the prevention of skin cancer in the West justify the prevention of a domestic necessity to a billion people?

This kind of talk is humbling. It leaves one struggling for air and words both. But after a while the old "what I should have said" syndrome takes hold. The primary consideration is the survival of the human race in a functioning planet. There is plenty of blame for the situation we are in to be allocated and a major share of it goes to the Westerner and a major share of that to Americans of European origin. So those Americans better speak with a muted voice and willingness to undertake disproportionate sacrifice. But we have to handle this thing smart rather than dumb. If we let ourselves be shut up because we are sinners of unparalleled sinfulness it may be fatal for both human and planet.

The objective is a successful earth and a successful human. Again and again: "The destiny of the human and the destiny of the earth are inseparable. The success of the human endeavor is dependent on there being a successfully functioning earth". It is more harmful to the Brazilian than it is to the American for the rain forest to disappear. If the rest of the world is going to be as short sighted as we have been then we must accept as inevitable the failure of the human and the failure of the earth. "Maybe the human is non-viable" says Thomas. Maybe it is hopeless to try to bring an end to the ruination of the planet because there is no prophet without sin able to say "Repent, and follow me."

This is a problem whose solution depends on the application of wise economic analysis combined with some common sense. The reason the log cutters have to cut logs is because that is the way to get an income and gain access to the marketplace for the necessities of life. Loggers do not want to see the forest disappear, nor do they want to see it become dysfunctional. They want to make a living and as much as anyone else in the world they want their work to be fulfilling not earthkilling. Loggers are not less human or less worthy than environmentalists, although timber tycoons along with tycoons of other brands well may be.

The problem of the logger is the problem of the road builder and of other members of the work force. They have to do what they know how to do, and have been trained to do, and they must be reimbursed for doing it in order to be economically viable. Loggers have to cut logs. Road builders have to build roads. That is the basic problem with this economy; that is the basic problem of the "division of labor". That is what drives the demand for growth. The economy must

keep on doing what it is doing and a little bit more. More roads next year than this; more trees cut next year than this, more houses, more suburbs, more automobiles; more, more, more. What else can growth mean? When the demand for the laborer's skill ceases his livelihood is destroyed. So the society has to provide income producing work of the kind the worker knows how to do. If it does not the worker is devastated. Consider automobile workers. The workforce has been severely reduced over the last few years with social results that are shattering. The Brazilian slum dweller and the Chinese peasant are not in worse circumstances than the urban poor of Detroit and other American cities.

The fact is that there is more human labor available than there is a need for in this economy. This is an inevitable result of technology whose primary goal is the reduction of human labor input per unit of production, as well as the result of the way transnational corporations work. World population is growing and so that situation will worsen unless a new way of understanding work and income and human fulfillment takes hold.

Lester Milbrath has written a new book called ENVISIONING A SUSTAINABLE SOCIETY (SUNY Press, 1989. \$18.95 paperback, \$57.50 hardcover. To be reviewed here soon). He says early in the book "... maintaining the integrity and good functioning of its ecosystem should be the most fundamental value in the value structure of a sustainable society." This goes along with what we have said is the first law of economics: "Preserve the source." We derived it from Wendell Berry and Kenneth Boulding, two people who qualify for inclusion high on a list of wise men for our time.

This all means to me that human work must be directed toward:

- ◆ The achievement of well-being for the human population within the requirement that the integrity of the ecosystem be assured. This will not consume all the human work available by any means, so;
- ◆ Human labor not needed to provide for well-being will be devoted to the healing of the damaged ecosystems and thereafter to their enhancement. This will involve public works programs.

"Well, how do we do it? It sounds wonderful but it is pie in the sky. Where will the money come from?"

We do it through the exercise of the brains the Lord gave us and the distribution of the resources the Earth makes available. We raise the money through finding where it is and moving it to where it ought to be. There is a nine billion dollar public roads program in North Carolina. Let's take that nine billion dollars and spend it on restoring the integrity of the ecosystem. There is employment here for all the road builders and many, many more. The money is public money and it ought to be used in pursuit of benefit to both the human and the non-human life system of our place, our home and the home of a marvelous animal and plant complex, now being systematically extinguished.



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