



Dateline With Doomsday ?

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ECOLOGY, the study of the relationship between man, his environment and the delicate balances of the natural world, has gained tremendous popularity in U.S. colleges and universities in recent years. There can be no doubt that this concern to obtain a better understanding of what man is doing to the world, of the other creatures which inhabit and help support it, and the trends in conservation of natural resources, have been fostered by a growing realisation that man's husbandry of the earth in its widest sense has been conditioned more by the desire to satisfy material desires than by wisdom and prudent self-discipline. In short, many young people today are deeply aware that there are very finite natural limitations to what man can do to his own habitat without sparking off a series of harmful ecological and biological consequences.

Indeed, the record of man's thoughtless actions in the past is witnessed today by some of the problems that he must now fight to overcome if future generations are to survive at all. According to some eminent scientists, the major question now facing mankind is no longer concerned with whether man can continue to follow the path of industrial materialism without endangering his own survival; it is reduced to a matter of calculating the point in time when catastrophic breakdown of organised societies is going to take place. Population increase, consumption of natural resources, pollution proliferation and extinction of life-sustaining natural species, are now furiously and most seriously being calculated and recalculated. And even the most optimistic forecasts bearing the authoritative signatures of some of the world's leading brains leave little room for complacency.

Although opinions on the tolerance threshold of the various factors outlined above vary considerably from expert to expert, almost all of them are agreed that what is important but not really understood is the inter-relationship of the diverse doomsday paths. While some people choose to emphasize the implications of the world population doubling in about thirty years, others stress the inadequacy of the social and politico-economic institutions to even begin to deal with the related problems that population growth will add to those which are already facing us. There are many people who reject the Malthusian theory of

population outrunning subsistence. Indeed, history itself supports this rejection. Professor Colin Clarke and others have illustrated how population growth in the past has been the spur to economic innovation and has resulted in increased wealth and higher living standards. But what is worrying many people now is that natural resources (including clean air and water) are finite resources and that man shows every indication of a propensity to consume them at a faster rate with little effort to conserve them.

Whether as individuals or political representatives we choose to heed the numerous warnings which the scientists are sounding daily is a matter of personal choice and in some cases even a question of faith. Taking the philosophical way out, we can always assert with self-righteous indignation that it does not really matter as no doubt the world will get whatever it deserves. However, these survival issues are very relevant to advocacy of free trade and land reform. In the past, those of us who subscribe to the views that the foundations for a more equitable distribution of wealth must be laid in changing the prevailing majority concepts about land ownership, competition and freedom to trade and travel, have often invoked the argument that these things in themselves would not only help rectify inequalities in wealth *per se* but would also establish an economic environment conducive to freely maximising productive effort, thus increasing at greater speed the total of wealth produced. But what some scientists seem to be saying (although there does not seem to be much hope of the view being taken seriously by politicians) is that the goal of more industrialisation and material progress as accepted today as being desirable, may be a most dangerous one to pursue. If this view were to be popularly held, would it help or hinder the advocacy of free trade and the collection of economic rent in the name of the community?

First, it must be admitted that it seems rather unlikely that the industrial nations could ever succeed in convincing the developing ones that they do not really need cars, television sets, electrical appliances and homes which adequately insulate them from the extremes of temperature. Secondly, it seems even more remote that the production of these things in the industrialised countries themselves could ever

be curtailed, having regard to the status that they have attained as being most desirable, and knowing that some entire economies at present depend on these very items for survival! But the fact remains that in some circles at least, there is sincere doubt about the economic path we are presently treading. Perhaps it might help to clarify our own views by stating what we believe to hold true about the world as we find it.

If we have carefully examined the laws of the production and distribution of wealth, we rightly conclude that a major impediment on the distribution side has been the monopoly rights over natural resources enjoyed by those who have been able to claim title to them over those who have not been so fortunate. We also conclude that the pattern of voluntary co-operation between individuals in mutual exchange (intra and international trade) has been affected adversely by protectionism and harmful taxation in the form of duties, levies, quotas etc. We further know that the financing of trade both within and between nations has been distorted from time to time by the influence of deliberate monetary inflation and by adherence to fixed rates of exchange. Taking the total influence of these three things together - land monopoly, trade restrictions and inflation - it is reasonable to further conclude that that which has happened during the last 150 years or so - modern industrialised production with its unfortunate by-products - has not really been a function of natural economic law but rather a function of economic enslavement of the many by the fortunate but influential few. This was clearly seen by Henry George in his day and the situation has worsened considerably since then, just as he foretold that it would do. With the economic exploitation that was recognised by Leo Tolstoy, we find exploitation of the natural environment in a most unnatural way.

We can only speculate as to whether the *same type* of industrialised development (and its scarring consequences) would have taken place *if* land rent had been collected by the community and *if* free trade had prevailed. Would it all have happened very much quicker? Personally, I doubt it. I even doubt whether some of it would have happened at all. The collection of land rent by the community can be demonstrated to have two very desirable consequences in ecological terms. It would encourage a judicious use of resources and conservation of them. More important still, although it would encourage a greater use of resources, (i.e. fewer would be withheld from use), it would not imply necessarily a more intensive use in every location. In fact, locational intensity has often been promoted by the restrictions on the use of alternative adjacent resources. Even more important

are the socio-economic by-products of the collection of the land rent surplus. More people would be able to become more self-sufficient more easily. And once basic needs are satisfied, once hunger and the need for shelter have been satisfied, then there is more inclination to develop fellowship with one's neighbours, extend charitable inclinations, give time in voluntary service and develop an appreciation for the finer things in life.

If we hold these things to be true, perhaps we can then take a courageous step into the unknown and claim that if the causes of the maldistribution of wealth were tackled correctly at their source - if land rent was collected by the community in lieu of other taxes, if all restrictions on trade were lifted, if governments were precluded from inflating the currencies - then we could expect such an economic transformation that given a relatively short space of time, particularly in the developing countries, a whole new form of society would emerge.