

Vinyl 2010 Essay Competition Submission

ID number: 307

Summary:

A food and energy crisis represents both a danger and an opportunity to society. Whilst the danger lies in the relative hardship and threat to survival that the shortage engenders with its consonant rises in crime and social disorder generally, the political will of the body politic for deep and radical change to address fundamental imbalances that cause poverty to begin with is a chance that times of plenty do not typically provide. In order to address severe polarization of wealth and ecological dangers, the moment for political mobilisation presented by a food and energy crisis must be seized.

Essay:

Within every opportunity lies danger, and within every danger lies opportunity. The relative lack of food and energy compared with times past provokes an instinctive dread within humanity fearing for its own survival. The increasingly rapid consumption and exploitation of energy sources in Nature, especially since the Industrial Revolution, poses a fundamental threat to the sustainability of the sources themselves. Moreover, by-products of the consumptive process such as pollution, degradation and erosion cause severe damage to the interconnected complex of global ecosystems. Faced with overpopulation of a single species and its immense taxation of combustible energy, the natural processes of the Earth instigate corrective processes designed to fend off the assault on its existence and to restore the delicate balance of life. These processes – disease, starvation, natural disasters and drought – are generally perceived by humanity to be events wholly antagonistic to its interests. However, in reality they represent an invaluable opportunity for mankind to change its behaviour as a series of progressively dramatic warnings of hazards that the harmful consequences of human industry pose to humanity's own survival. In order to utilise the opportunities thus presented, it is imperative that mankind understand them as such, not only as calamities.

Political action requires mobilisation of one of the basic incentives of man, namely, the desire for gain and the fear of loss¹ or one of his elevated incentives to achieve beauty, good and industry as ends unto themselves. Whilst the more noble feelings should be promoted as more worthy than the vulgar, nevertheless the superior power of the more primitive instincts for self-gain must be recognised and harnessed in order to convince all of society of the necessity – as well as the morality – of instituting radical and far-reaching measures designed to address not merely the symptoms of the food and energy shortage but rather the root causes of them. Those are the injustice of mankind in organising a society of extreme inequalities of distribution of material wealth as well as his reckless profligacy in constantly pursuing population growth and ever-more rapid and dramatic means of exploiting combustible energy resources in order to feed the demand for luxury amidst consumerist society. In order to convince those whose appetites create demand for the harmful activities that are causing dangerous

¹ *An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation / Jeremy Bentham ; an authoritative edition by J.H. Burns and H.L.A. Hart ; with a new introduction by F. Rosen and an interpretive essay by H.L.A. Hart. (1996), Ch.1, p.1.*

phenomena such as loss of biodiversity,² soil erosion, and industrial pollution³ it is necessary to demonstrate that changes in economic policy in order to prioritise population and resource consumption sustainability (which may even require short or medium-term economic contraction in some cases) is a matter not merely of high-minded love for Nature for itself but also a matter of human self-interest.

The worsening food and energy supply situation has provided a prime opportunity to conservationists to argue for deep-seated changes to economic policy. In times of want, the threats to humankind tend to make radical changes more acceptable to the members of the general population who in times of plenty seek only to preserve the current situation and their own wealth. Nevertheless, even in times of recession the basic misunderstanding of the case for a conservationist economic agenda through the juxtaposition of 'the economy' and 'the environment' as mutually hostile interests poses a considerable challenge to arguments for deep-seated economic reform along ecologically sustainable lines.⁴ This requires all parties who comprehend that economic and environmental interests are in reality two fingers from the same hand to put the case in such terms to the wider population in the course of the political battles for changes to economic policy in order to address the humanitarian threats posed by food and energy shortages. The debate must not be allowed to be one of 'man versus environment' because that would attempt to set the vulgar and noble instincts of man in opposition, which past history has shown almost invariably results in a victory for the fastest and least immediately painful solution as the one perceived to be the most commodious.

Such solutions are typically the worst possible amidst a range of reactions, ignoring or postponing the problem whilst addressing its symptoms. The reaction is akin to placing a plaster on an open wound whilst continuing to engage in the same dangerous activity that caused the injury in the hope that the mere dressing will prevent future catastrophes. The paradox lies in the fact that arguments against change in traditional consumption-oriented understanding of economic performance: when economic performance according to traditional measurement is good then changes will reduce it; when it is bad, changes will threaten its recovery. Thus, the problem lies not with food or energy supply but rather in how they are perceived and utilised by society itself. Competition for energy remains the *modus operandi* of the vast majority of the societies of the world, both within each society and between them. The competitive ethos of the dominant capitalist system is justified by reference to the growth that it stimulates by appealing directly to the vulgar instincts of greed as laudable for wealth it produces. The superior efficiency of energy consumption and the speed with which wealth can be generated is used to justify the extreme polarisation of wealth in the capitalist class system with grossly inequitable distribution of food and energy as well as the supposed prioritisation of short-term human welfare over ecological welfare. Challenges to these rationales and victory in the debate concerning the economy and the environment represent the great opportunity that the hardship of constrained food and energy supply overshadows. The opportunity must be seized with both hands before economic recovery chills ardour for change.

² Gabriel, Sigmar 'Biodiversity 'fundamental' to economics' – <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/6432217.stm>.

³ 'World only cares about pirates' – <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/7740417.stm>.

⁴ 'No deal amid EU climate deadlock' – <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7768758.stm>.