



Facing the Crisis of Scarcity

By Leonard Silk

The economic crisis in which the United States and the other highly industrialized countries of the West now find themselves could not be more radically different from the Great Depression of the nineteen-thirties, which was a catastrophe of idle machines and men. The poet W. H. Auden warned of the waste and rot still to come:

*Power stations locked, deserted,
since they drew the boiler fires;
Pylons fallen or subsiding, trailing
dead high-tension wires;
Head-gears gaunt on grass-grown pit-
banks, seams abandoned years ago;
Drop a stone, and listen for its splash
in flood dark below.*

The Great Depression, like other earlier crises of capitalism, was the result of a failure of governments to understand the necessity of creating enough monetary demand to call forth the goods that the men and machines of society were capable of making.

But the current crisis stems not from a deficiency of demand but of supply, the most dramatic manifestations of which have been shortages of food and soaring food prices, and shortages of oil and soaring energy prices.

There are also rumors and speculations of a host of other raw-material shortages to come: bauxite, copper, lead, zinc, manganese, magnesium, and even iron ore. Arable land is short, urban land is scarce. The world is caught in an onrush of inflation, the clearest evidence of an insufficiency of supply to meet persistently growing demands.

Is the age of plenty over so soon? Have we suddenly come up against the "limits to growth," as the Club of Rome report predicted we would by the middle of the next century? Has the monster lily pad been doubling and doubling even faster than expected

and will it soon blot out the lake of life-supporting resources?

The immediate crisis does not resemble the doomsday that would result from an actual exhaustion of the world's resources.

Rather, the scarcities that have struck the industrial world and many of the developing countries as well are chiefly the result of the fierce pursuit of unenlightened self-interest by governments, businesses and individuals.

An upsurge of nationalism and resentment against the rich capitalist powers is a critical cause of the new crisis of scarcity. Colonialism has been suffering its death throes in India, Africa, Indochina, and now in the Middle East. The oil-producing nations are not only bent on acquiring wealth but on avenging old grievances.

And within the capitalist nations, it is the blind pursuit of self-interest that aggravates the crisis of scarcity. Britain starts the New Year with energy so short that all but the most essential services have been cut back to a three-day week; but the reason for the energy shortage is less the Arab oil embargo than the conflict between the Conservative Government and the British coal miners, trainmen and other workers, bitter over their low pay and smoldering with class hatred.

The energy shortage in the United States was fostered both by public demand and by hard industrial selling and lobbying. Immediately, the fuel shortage is being exacerbated by hoarding; the Government has sent out Internal Revenue Service agents to find out what "refiners, importers, wholesalers and end users" are stockpiling fuel in "excessive and unreasonable amounts."

Threats are voiced and fights break out in the long queues at filling stations. Some dealers gouge on price.

Truckers block highways, demanding more fuel, faster speed limits. But some truckers can't decide whether they are involved in a big steal or a big social reform. One trucker tells Studs Terkel, writing in *New Times*:

"During the last thirty years we were taught in this industry that the only way to get ahead was to cheat and steal and cut corners. . . . Now we're having a re-evaluation of the way we treat each other. . . . The reforms we may see in our union may at the same time take place in the Government and in our social world. I think maybe the whole nation is beginning to see that the sharp operator isn't the one to look up to."

Could this crisis be a stroke of luck? Could it restore our sanity and sense of mutual interdependence—in the society and in the world—before it is too late? This crisis of scarcity isn't yet one of physical exhaustion of resources, though that could come, but of how we live and how we use what we have. It is confronting us with the necessity of rediscovering the nonmaterial aspects of life: thinking more, feeling more, knowing each other better, expressing our concerns for one another.

The crisis of the nineteen-seventies, radically different from the crisis of the nineteen-thirties, requires an even more basic change of social direction:

*If we really want to live, we'd better
start at once to try;
If we don't, it doesn't matter, but
we'd better start to die.*

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