



THE ECONOMIC PAMPHLETEER
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Running out of land for food

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The challenge of preserving enough farmland for food production will be a defining challenge for the 21st century. Lester Brown, icon of the Worldwatch Institute, identifies food scarcity as “the weak link” of modern society (Brown, 2012). He points to the growing global demand for food and fuel, eroding soils, declining aquifers, and

global climate change as major challenges to the future of human civilization. All of these challenges could be met, but not without a fundamental transformation in current ways of thinking about both land and food. A market economy will neither provide food for the hungry of current generations nor preserve enough farmland to provide food for

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Why did I name my column “The Economic Pamphleteer”? Pamphlets historically were short, thoughtfully written opinion pieces and were at the center of every revolution in western history. Current ways of economic thinking aren’t working and aren’t going to work in the future. Nowhere are the negative consequences more apparent than in foods, farms, and communities. I know where today’s economists are coming from; I have been there. I spent the first half of my 30-year academic career as a very conventional free-market, bottom-line agricultural economist. I eventually became convinced that the economics I had been taught and was teaching wasn’t good for farmers, wasn’t good for rural communities, and didn’t even produce food that was good for people. I have spent the 25 years since learning and teaching the principles of a new economics of sustainability. Hopefully my “pamphlets” will help spark a revolution in economic thinking.

generations of the future. Any society that allows markets to determine how much and what kind of land is used for food is not sustainable. This could be *the* defining challenge of the 21st century.

In his classic book *The Great Transformation*, economist Karl Polanyi details the historical consequence of “commodifying” land and labor in futile efforts of capitalists to create a self-regulating, free-market global economy (Polanyi, 1944/1957). Prior to the “enclosure movement,” land was held in common, rather than owned by individuals. Land was freely available to everyone to use to meet their basic needs of survival and sustenance. The process of enclosing, or privatizing, the commons began during the 16th century. However, “the years between 1760 and 1820 are the years of wholesale enclosure in which, in village after village, common rights are lost” (Thompson, 1991, p. 217). The industrial revolution and rise of capitalism occurred during this time.

Land had to be privatized and commodified or priced before land use could be determined by market competition rather than community consensus. Only then could the global economy become self-correcting or self-regulating. Labor likewise had to be commodified. The commodification of land essentially forced the commodification of labor, as those without access to land for food were forced to sell their labor to employers in order to survive. However, it seemed that nothing short of the threat of starvation could force people who once had access to land to produce their own food to work for money to buy food. The English Poor Laws were nationalized and expanded in 1834 to cover the entire working class, not just the young, old, and disabled. Various other attempts were made to protect the working class from the social upheaval triggered by removal of land from the commons. Nothing seemed to work.

The right to enough land to grow one’s own food was long considered to be a fundamental right under “natural law.” In 1690, John Locke

proclaimed that land could be ethically removed from the commons only if “...there is enough, and as good, left in common for others” (Locke, 1690, chap. 5, sect. 27). In comparing privatization of land to taking a drink from a flowing stream, he wrote, “And in the case of land and water, where there is enough of both” (Lockean Proviso, n.d., para. 2). Eventually, there was not enough good land left in the commons for those who needed it most.

By 1795, Thomas Paine concluded, “the landed monopoly...has produced the greatest evil. It has dispossessed more than half the inhabitants

of every nation of their natural inheritance... and has thereby created a species of poverty and wretchedness that did not exist before” (Paine, 1795, para. 20). Paine was not advocating a return to hunting and gathering. He recognized that agriculture was necessary to support the global population of even his time. He was reaffirming that if land belongs to anyone, it belongs to the people in common, and even if managed privately, it must still be used for the common good.

Paine proposed a universal, lifelong indemnity to compensate the people for their loss of access to the commons. A variety of social welfare and food assistance programs have been tried over the years, culminating in the U.S. with the New Deal and Great Society programs of the 1930s and 1960s, respectively. Nothing has adequately addressed the twin perils of poverty and hunger associated with privatization of land and labor. Experiments with socialism and communism have been frustrated by the same challenges as early social welfare programs. People only seem inclined to work when they have a personal incentive to do so. Since the resurgence of free-market fundamentalism in the 1980s, social welfare and food assistance programs have been under persistent attack. “Poverty and wretchedness” seem destined to continue unabated.

The current global food system is not provid-

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ing adequate food for much of the world's population today, and it most certainly is not leaving future generations with enough land to meet their needs for food. It is not sustainable. Speculative farmland prices, relentless farmland consolidation, and global "land-grabbing" are all symptoms of a soulless global economy running out of land for food. Rising global food prices have triggered new waves of hunger and starvation. Many families who can afford enough calories are suffering from a variety of diet-related health problems caused by not getting adequate nutrition. Market economies will not provide enough good food for all, and all previous attempts to ameliorate this inherent deficiency have failed. It's time for a fundamental change in thinking about issues of land and food.

For example, specific parcels of land could be identified and zoned for use in food production, without depriving individuals of their right to benefit from land improvement. This is not socialism. It is no different in concept from current zoning laws. However, enough land would need to be zoned "permanently" for food production to meet the basic food needs of both current and future generations. This means that the area of land zoned for food would need to be sufficient in both quantity and quality to allow for *sustainable* farming in order to avoid further exploitation.

Admittedly, the "development value" of land currently zoned for agriculture would be lost. Such value, however, is purely speculative, and society has no responsibility to ensure the success of land speculation. Owners of land currently zoned for higher-valued uses could be compensated for down-zoning to agriculture by taxing away speculative gains in other land that is up-zoned to higher-valued uses. Profits from up-zoning are essential a

grant from society, as owners of such land have done nothing to increase its value. Taxing away such profits would also remove economic pressure to up-zone land from agriculture to other uses.

Farming of land that is zoned for food and farmed sustainably could be treated as a public utility, as proposed by Willard Cochrane, secretary of agriculture during the Kennedy administration (Levins, 2000). Sustainable farmers could become independent contractors. Admittedly, this would not solve the hunger problem because hunger is too closely linked with poverty. But, it would ensure there is enough good land left for food when society eventually addresses the problems of poverty caused by the commodification of labor. The more urgent priority is to preserve enough good farmland to provide good food for all, both now and in the future.

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