Space for Food for People

Abstract: The energy situation has made it necessary to rethink our food production systems. Furthermore, chemically polluted foodstuffs are becoming more prevalent, while conventional agricultural environments in the countryside are little better in ambient air quality, water, etc. than their urban and suburban counterparts. Solutions to unemployment and underemployment release new concepts for the division of labor and allow time for other activities.

A system of partial self-sufficiency in the production of fresh and healthy food is proposed, particularly for vegetables and fruits, near the doorstep. It is possible in Permaculture to achive a high yield with low input in work and time. This system would ideally call for a new division of land and a new concept of land ownership.

Declan Kennedy

Decisions affecting the supply and distribution of food can no longer be made in a traditional manner as fundamental changes are occuring in global resource availability and patterns of use. Current studies of worldwide energy resources predict that available non-renewable energy supplies are smaller than previously believed and are being exhausted faster than previously anticipated (1). This has been compounded by a widespread error in computation which, for instance, failed to take into account the increasing energy required to get food to the consumer. The resultant price increases - as healthy food becomes more difficult to get, the resultant increase in sickness - caused by pollution and nutritional deficits, and the resultant social costs arising out of these factors, are forcing us to rethink our physical priorities for cities as well as for the food producing hinterland.

As these changes occur, the following effects are requiring major changes in planning policies:

1. Political, economic and agricultural power is shifting from nations with large energy consumption to nations with large energy resources.

2. Social, economic and environmental instability is developing because of the dependence of industrialized nations on fossil fuels for the production and distribution of foodstuffs.

3. Ending of a temporary period of easy energy availability is causing a fundamental change in conditions necessary for the economic production of food, particularly grains and meats. Survival now requires change from a material growth outlook to an ecological orientation towards quality, stability and diversity.

4. Global levels and patterns of population, resource use and food production, formerly supported by massive use of inexpensive energy cannot be sustained any longer.

5. Food supplies to industrialized countries from partly hunger stricken developing countries, and surplus mountains of butter, milk and meat in subsidized agricultures (while good grain is used to feed livestock) exemplify how ridiculous our international policies are.

Responsible environmentalists must recognize the implications of these effects and strive for policy development which will allow us to think globally and act locally. Decentralization of production of all foodstuffs is needed with a heavy emphasis on local self-sufficiency and self-reliance. To achieve this, land reform is needed on a global scale.

The most catastrophic result of the land problem is that still today more than 500 million people are suffering from hunger. Still it is generally accepted in planning circles that it is only the economic sitiuation and the population explosion that are the causes for hunger.

In West Germany, only one out of five families have access to a plot of their own - that is, four-fifths of the population do not have the elementary right to have use of a piece of land. They have to pay large amounts of their income to the other fifth in order to be able to use land for living purposes, usually in the form of a rented apartment. We should be mindful that this situation cannot continue forever, that new ignition of social conflicts are inevitable and will increase from day to day. It may even bring about the total chaos of the total annihilation of humanity if we do not take it to task and attempt to solve it by adding the "right to land" to our internationally accepted "Bill of Rights".

The earth is home for all people who live on it. We could imagine that real equality might only be achieved if every person had the use of an equally sized piece of this earth. But the earth is not the same all over, nor are the people the same. Already in this assumption, we can see that it would be quite impossible to divide up equally the surface of this world.

It might be quite feasible to regulate land ownership on a collective basis in such a way that society, i.e., the government and the municipalities would instigate a "state" ownership and would determine the use of the land thereafter. But this also is an unhappy solution as the normal people would have little or no direct influence on the decisions about the detailed use of the land or who may use it. The "representatives" of the people - in the examples of state ownership that we know - all too often start up a new type of privilege for their own private interests. So, neither of these solutions would be impartial.

The solution is that land should not be a thing that can be owned - neither in a private (from the Latin 'privare' = to rob) or public sense. It ought to be only a thing that can be used and administered in a just and egalitarian manner - like the air. Furthermore, it must be given to those to use who are willing to take care of it - and understand how to use it without depleting it. So again, we have a problem and a contradiction:

1. The land has to be available to everyone but may not be owned by anyone in particular;
2. Its value is in relationship to how well it is used;
3. The good use and care of the land presupposes a type of private ownership or a right to use a plot which then denies others the use of that piece of land.

In the problem again is the solution: The community would administer the land in the interest of all its members and give those persons the right to use the land (who will produce from it but take care of it) for a rent or usage fee, which is then redistributed back to the members of the community.

The next problem is that in a society with such a high degree of labor division, few people will have time for self-sufficiency, to produce their own food. The division of labor has become so well rationalized that we have a growing division between employed and unemployed. In most countries the unemployment rate has risen to at least 10%, in many it is already over 20%. In many countries, there is a further 10% - 20% underemployed, to give a conservative guess. There is a great potential in these figures. With job sharing and a new division of work, new work hours per week (the 35 hour week is seriously being put forward by German trade unions), we can find an overall redistribution. This does not mean that everyone has to but that many can, go part-time, thereby, releasing part-time employment for others and releasing time for part of their own food production.

The initial flame which is needed to win over human energy and intelligence to this concept has already been lit by Bill Millison and David Holmgren in their conviction that self-reliance is indeed possible for everyone through the approach they call Permaculture.

Permaculture, or PERMAnent agriCULTURE describes exactly from where this concept came, but is not sufficient as a definition. Permaculture includes the integration of man, animals, plants and architecture with nature and a healthy life. A permanent agriculture on a small scale needs more than just an integrated, self-developing system of perennial and self-propagating productive plant and animal species which, brought together, establish a self-contained ecosystem within human settlements. It is important that new ideas can be included and expanded, so that now global and detailed solutions can be proposed for almost all geographical, climatic and social conditions - both for smaller and larger pieces of land.

An important principle in the Permaculture concept is that each element serves many functions and that each function is supported by many elements. Hereby, it is not only that the greatest possible amount of flexibility and stability can be achieved but the sum of all yields is increased. The reason for this is that one animal or plant species can never absorb all the available energies and nutrients within a system. If we look at the first examples of permaculture in Australia, whether in the city or the country, it becomes clear that it is not the singular technique that is important but the strategy, the timing, the location and the energy-input.

One of the most endangered industries through increasing centralization and large scale mechanized monoculture procuction is the agricultural system. Already we have lost 50% of our arable land globally which has become a complete desert and on the remaining land overall productivity had dropped drastically. Conservative estimates show that traditional farming methods produced 300 units of energy output for 100 units of energy input. "Modern" methods hardly reach 10 units of output for the same input (5). In addition to that figure, 95% of the energy used to bring food to out tables is used in storage, transport and packaging. A large percentage of our rainforests today are cut down to be turned into the packaging material which serves to keep our food in an edible state.

More important than exact figures here, is the fact that systems which use up more energy than they produce are headed into a state of chaos.

One argument against a more sensible use of resources through self-producing, ecological menthods is that people do not want to change. A second is that good ecology is associated with a return to a subsistance standard of living. Both arguments are wrong.

According to a study done by the Norwegian Institute of Nutrition in 1975, 76% of all Norwegians think that their standard of living is too high and that they would rather live a simple life with what they need, accepting limited income and career possibilities (6).

In France a study of SOFRES for the journal *Elle* in 1974 showed that:
-53% of the population would accept a reduced level of consumption if it would mean an new and more qualitative way of life; 68% would prefer classical hard-wearing clothing to fashion clothes; 75% look at one-way packaging as a stupid waste (6).

In West Germany, the same trend has brought about a steady gain in the elections for the ecological alternatives parties [particularly the Green Party].

In order to counteract the second point, I would like to refer to Andre Gorz and his book Ecology and Freedom (6). His thesis is that goods which last are simple to repair and consume little or no energy (once they are produced) and that their production will result in a higher standard of living and fewer hours of work. Instead of producing clothes dryers which depend on electricity and use up practically all the energy produced by atomic power plants in the U.S.A., we should use the renewable energy of sun and wind. Nobody who has seen the moon vehicles run with solar energy can say we have not got the technology.

The building site, as we know it presently, is a place to learn that there is a specialist for everything. This was useful up to a point. It is not unreasonable to propose, however, that specialization has reached its limits and that we need to learn how to integrate and recognize the interdependencies of the systems on which our survival depends - natural as well as social. In other words, we have to make a place where we can learn and grow ecologically, giving back where we have taken, producing where we want to eat, learning to live in harmony with nature and each other.

References

(1) John D. Hamaker & Donald A. Weaver, The Survival of Civilization Hamaker-Weaver Publishers, Michigan & California, 1982.
(2) Joseph Collins, David Kinsley & Frances More Lappe, Aid As Obstacle: twenty questions about our foreign aid and the hungry; Institute of Food and Development Policy, SanFrancisco, 1980.
(3) Yoshita Otani, Der Bodenfrage und Ihre Losung, Book 3, Series: AUSWEG, ARROW VERLAG, ULM. 1978.
(4) Bill Mollison & David Holmgren, Permaculture One, A Perennial Agriculture for Human Settlements, Transworld Publishers, Australia, 1978; in German: pala-verlag, Schaafheim, 1983; in Portugese, Ground Editoria, Sao Paulo, 1983; in French, Edition Debard, Paris, 1984; and Bill Mollison, Permaculture Two, Practical Design for Town And Country in Permanent Agriculture, Tagari Books. Stanley, Tasmamnia, 1979; in German, pala-verlag, Schaafheim, 1983; to be published in Portugese and French in 1984/85.

continued, pg. 15, col. 3...