

# Fools, food and fuel

Colin's work increasingly examines global food security, climate and other forms of global environmental change and economic policy. These are some of the questions Colin and his colleagues are asking:

*What happens to the capacity of people in Africa to fight off HIV/AIDS when drought won't allow them to raise traditional crops for needed nutrients? Has the time come for wealthy populations to reduce their red meat consumption? Are genetically modified crops a boon or the latest scam? How do we thread our way to eternal vigilance through the quagmire of profit-driven corporate behaviour? What are the ramifications of global food insecurity for global security?*

## Fools

Even Alan Greenspan (economic guru to several recent U.S. administrations) acknowledges that we are now in a global economic crisis. Some commentators have dared to mutter the D word. D for depression. The bubble of greed that fuelled the great housing loan swindle has burst, splattering froth in the face of a thousand predatory bankers, corrupted rating agencies and toothless regulators. The leaders of the G7 and the heads of all the world's rich countries are frantically trying to restore confidence to the global monetary system. Confidence is essential, because much of the global economy relies on faith. Some, however, relies on fraud perpetrated against nature and the poor.

Longevity of any stock market recovery is unlikely if large-scale collective greed and poor judgement are permitted to resurface. The collapse of Enron and WorldCom in the U.S., and the imprisonment of Australian ex-billionaire entrepreneur Alan Bond had little lasting reformative effect. The scale of the current collapse is larger; any transformation should be more durable.

Many commentators and governments now affect surprise, but many analysts have long predicted that the 'Masters of the Universe' — the wizards and wolves of Wall Street — would be brought to Earth by a global financial collapse. On the positive side, the award of the 2008 Nobel Prize in Economics to Professor Paul Krugman (a strong advocate for reduced inequality) is very encouraging; he supports increased regulation and the return of norms which limit extravagance.

Greed and hubris have forms even more sinister than the fleecing of naive, hopeful but foolish investors. The poverty of economic theory has two main dimensions. The first is the immense undervaluing of natural resources. The scale of human technology increasingly allows the harming of nature, such as fish stocks, clean air and a stable climate. Conventional economics sets almost no penalty for this abuse. Consequently, consumers pay no short-term price. Instead, the poor pay. In future both poor and rich will pay.

However, as long as political leaders, oil sheikhs, coal barons and financial 'experts' have sufficient personal access to food and clean air and provided they retain sufficient confidence in the ability of their security

forces to protect them from the consequences of rising seas and displaced peoples, then their servants — the tamed, complacent and (generally) insulated economic caste — will also be able to ignore environmental concerns.

In contrast, the dissident ecological economist Partha Dasgupta has shown that the net per-person wealth of many countries has long been in decline, once income is adjusted for population growth and falling natural capital.\* A recent European Union funded enquiry reported that the global economy loses more value through the clearance of forests than the current banking crisis, at between \$2 and \$5 trillion per annum. In other words, despite our illusion of affluence, the global population is every day becoming poorer. Such warnings continue to be ignored. The scale of nature still seems vast, especially for those policy makers and theorists who are disconnected from its damage. So we continue to destroy it.

The second fundamental manifestation of economic hubris is the justification and dismissal of the suffering of billions of human beings past, present and future. 'Market forces' have long been used to claim as 'fair' the simultaneous stratospheric pay for executives and the microscopic pay of ordinary workers, such as those who live in or come from developing countries and tend the families and skyscrapers of booming petro-cities such as Dubai.

Alternative and fairer economic systems are possible; the challenge is how this can evolve other than via a pathway through the ashes of a global collapse, which could easily become a terrifying dark age.

## Food

In recent months food prices have spiked globally, leading to an increase in the already staggering number of hungry people in the world. The height,

stamina and intelligence of more than 800 million people have already been harmed by the chronic under-consumption of food energy. The food crisis has now attracted headlines because previously well-fed people are also at risk of energy under-nutrition. Some estimates are that a billion people lack macronutrients. There is speculation that this increase in the price of food has been driven by the diversion of a substantial fraction of the U.S. corn crop for bio-fuels. This is undoubtedly a factor, but other causes exist, such as the steep rise in the price of oil, weather problems (some of which are manifestations of climate change, and thus likely to get worse) and commodity speculation. About twenty times the volume of grain now used for fuel is diverted to feed animals, almost all of which are then killed for human consumption.

Just as the current global economic crisis was a foreseeable manifestation of fundamentally unsound theories, the possibility — indeed probability — of a future social crisis at a global scale remains high, due to deeply flawed economic and ecological thinking. This is not because ecologists are wrong, but because dominant economic policies ignore ecological realities and limits.

My aim is neither to frighten nor depress you. The obvious nature of the very severe economic crisis confronting us is leading to fundamental reflection and hopefully reform of economic principles. The entrenchment of new cultural norms could foster a culture of restraint leading to a reduction in global inequality and a society in which status and kudos are given to people who exhibit the ancient virtues of modesty, financial prudence and transparency. If that could be combined with an acceptance of limits, and with the diversion of funds from the military towards realising the Millennium Development Goals, then population growth could be substantially slowed. This paragraph has a lot of 'if's', I know, but the alternative is appalling.

As Sam Cooke sang, *A change is gonna come*. Let us work hard and work together to ensure that good things come from that change.

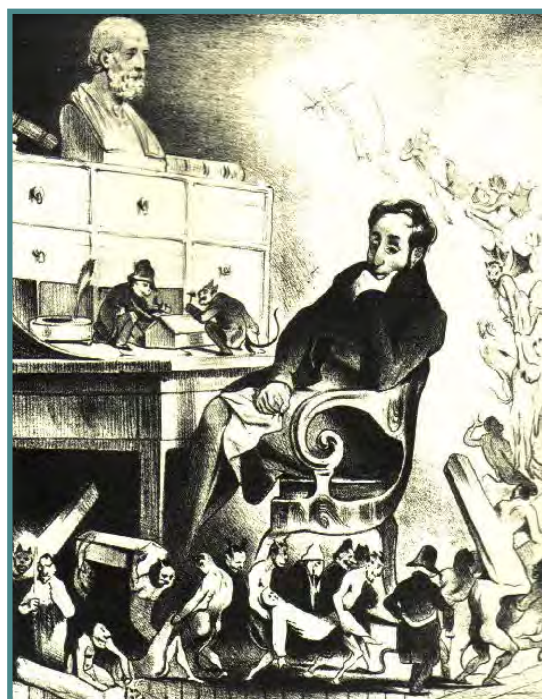
## Fuel for thought: 2 recent papers

Butler, CD, 'Sustainable health for all by the year 2100?' (editorial), *International Journal of Public Health*:

How far have we actually come since the World Health Organisation (WHO) issued its once famous slogan, 'Health for all by the year 2000' in 1978? Do reasons for optimism still exist despite 'peak oil', global climate change and the persistence of so much poverty?

This paper argues that 'business as usual' will lead to impoverishment, declines in human well-being even in currently rich countries and the possibility of a new global Dark Age. Fortunately, many elements that could deliver a tolerable future already exist. For example, ecological economics offers a way to redefine the meaning and measurement of economic growth in ways which will reward sustainability rather than promote global collapse.

Our chief obstacles are complacency, despair and the illusion that the problems we face are



Honoré Daumier, *Le Médecin* (The doctor), 1833

neither our own nor of our own making. Public health can and should be at the forefront of this new revolution.

Butler CD, 'Do we face a third revolution in human history? If so, how will public health respond?' (commentary), *Journal of Public Health*:

Energy security, 'peak oil' and climate change: what are desirable public health responses to the confluence of these topics? One is denial. If that anaesthesia wears off, we can try 'Fortress World,' in which enclaves of comparatively privileged citizens band together to nurture their assets and fend off outsiders.

However, while moats may be attractive in the short run, no plausible technology exists to keep out unwanted greenhouse gases.

A third response by the public health movement is to work for massive reforms such as new theories and forms of organisation, new forms of tolerance and far-sighted leadership, intelligent use of data and strategy and alliances with many disciplines beyond public health, including marketing, political science and ecological economics.

Is humanity willing to grasp the nettle of paying more cash for cleaner energy? Will we insist on substituting other forms of fossil fuel (such as coal, coal gas and methane hydrates) for oil, with accelerating consequences for greenhouse gas accumulation and thus for climate change?

As we began, so we close with more questions. We're interested in what you think.

\* Ecological economics is a mature and rigorous discipline. It is dissident in the sense that mainstream economists — who should by now be properly discredited — have long denied the validity of an ecological approach to economics. They prefer, instead, to imagine the world as effectively limitless.