

## BOOK REVIEW

### BUT WHAT CAUSED THESE CRISES?

#### *Poverty and the Planet*

Ben Jackson

Penguin, £6.99

THIS BOOK has to be the most depressing that you could ever read. Yet it is an easy read, much like a whodunnit or horror story. You cannot put it down until the final page.

If greed, poverty and ignorance are killing not only people but also the planet, who or what is to blame? Is it deforestation, erosion, silted rivers? What about acid rain, nuclear and toxic waste, global warming, over-fishing, flooding or endangered wildlife and their habitats? Or short-sighted people and policies?

Ben Jackson, co-ordinator of the World Development Movement, looks at all these suspects and others, possessing a remarkable grasp of how problems interweave and overlap. He is known for his probing articles on the Third World including the famous one: *Biting the Bullet*. This book is about global causes of poverty and ecological degradation which blight the lives of billions of people in rich countries as well as in poor ones. Outrageously preventable situations exist in a world of plenty.

"One of the greatest obstacles to ending world poverty," he writes, "is the lack of clear understanding of its causes." Jackson has worked hard to examine the deeper causes. Unfortunately, he fails to identify the source of the problems, which is why his text is dominated by an uncontroversial description of the observable facts. Nonetheless, like Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* (1962), which shaped the movement for environmental concern in the United States and in due course awakened the world to the damage wrought to wildlife by the chemical barrage of agricultural pesticides, this work should have a profound effect on economic thinking.

Concern for the environment has become associated with affluent westerners absorbed by problems of

"over-development", pollution and preservation of the countryside, while the Third World is concerned with hunger and under-development.

Brazil, for example, is adamant that such problems can only be tackled when poor countries achieve a certain level of prosperity - as in Europe. So the vast areas of rainforest continue to be destroyed, thus aggravating problems of climate change for other countries. Global warming due to the greenhouse gases is a major problem of climate, but the lessons have yet to be learned.

Jackson illustrates time and again how mounting poverty and desperation direct the jobless poor into other areas. For example, about a million small prospectors flooded into the Amazon in a series of Klondike-like gold rushes. But the mercury the miners use to pan for gold is lethal when it gets into rivers and ecosystems, affecting animals and human life. It is the same story in Africa and in the Far East.

Jackson fills his book with stories of such chain reactions. Unfortunately, the environmental destruction cannot be prevented unless the economic and political pressures that underlie it are challenged. Political will is needed to solve the problems of international debt, unfair trade, and most importantly, the unequal distribution of land and natural resources.

Jackson appreciates that the seedbed of ecological destruction is the global division of rich and poor, but he does not offer an explanation as to how that division originated. The division serves as his starting point, rather than the question that provokes a fundamental analysis.

His analysis would benefit from a reading of the works of Henry George, for the Georgist solution could aid him through the collection of land

rent: every economy's positive feedback mechanism.

Nor does Ben Jackson refer to Adam Smith, who early put on paper how the funding of public services out of the unearned income from land would bring wealth to nations. Since then the policy of shifting taxation off the incomes of labour and capital and on to the rent of land has been recommended by economists and social reformers who span the political spectrum. They range from Tom Paine, author of *The Rights of Man*, to George Bernard Shaw, from Leo Tolstoy to Milton Friedman, and most importantly in 1910 to Winston S. Churchill.

Land rent is a fundamental requirement for economic efficiency. It is a time honoured theory. Even John Kenneth Galbraith wrote in *The Affluent Society* that if the rent of land was treated as the tax base "progress would be orderly and its fruits would be equitably shared."

Ben Jackson's solutions tend to rely on international help in one form or another to provide drinking water, agricultural development, aid for children and much else. He points out that there is a groundswell of feeling that it is no longer acceptable or rational to tolerate such unnecessary suffering and destruction. Action from one country to another must be fuelled not only by passing compassion but by recognising global injustice of which the rich world is part. Action should be directed not only to raise charitable funds but to understand, address and change the underlying causes. Meanwhile the World Development Movement, one of Britain's major pressure groups aiming to bring a better deal to the world's poor, has successfully taken the British government to court.

They have stopped £234 million from the aid budget being spent on the Pergau Dam in Malaysia. They believe the decision to fund the dam was immoral as well as illegal, and are critical of arms sales to the Third World. The WDM urge a cut in military spending to help defeat global poverty, and they want to end the burden of Third World debt and remove unfair trading barriers. These goals are worthy of support. The least we can do is purchase a copy of Ben Jackson's horror story and read it.

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