

The Energy Crisis

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ON TOP of all the other crises this battered world is suffering there now comes the "energy crisis". America, still reeling under the impact of crime, Watergate, strikes, inflation and environment problems, now has still another problem.

More specifically, it is an oil crisis — a shortage brought on principally by the unwillingness of Arab countries to export petroleum to countries sympathetic to Israel. Thus it is more a political crisis than a resource crisis. As usual, it is man's misbehaviour that has brought us to this pass rather than any defection of nature.

If there is any natural shortage, it signalled itself long in advance. It was long known that fossil fuels took millions of years to evolve and that we are using them up at a rapid rate. Experts have been warning us for at least half a century. The wonder is that we are still discovering immense reserves of oil undreamed of a few years ago (the north slope of Alaska, the North sea and other locations). And there are other sources of energy — some debatable but many holding untold possibilities. No wonder there is a widespread feeling that the present crisis is being manipulated by powerful interests (and not just Arabs) behind the scenes.

The giant oil monopolies have exercised great influence on the government of the U.S. and other countries. The powerful oil lobby have succeeded in getting legislation they want in controlling markets and prices, exports and imports, and favoured tax treatment, especially the oil-depletion allowance. They have also succeeded in discouraging the development of other sources of energy.

Not much use has been made of hydraulic power, sea-thermal energy, wind power and the earth itself (geothermal energy), all pronounced by scientists to be feasible of development as alternative sources of power. Atomic energy is more controversial but the main bottleneck is the technical one of finding a satisfactory cooling system that would minimize the risks. There are a few successful atomic energy plants in existence, and if as much research and skill went into further development as goes into atomic bombs, new vistas could surely be opened up.

Another source — solar energy — has scarcely been tapped. It is a limitless source of power and it has been demonstrated that it can be harnessed for specific purposes. Magnetohydrodynamics and syn-

thetic gas are other possibilities that have remained almost untouched.

One would suppose that we could get on with it without grinding to a halt. Is it possible that these other sources are more difficult to monopolize than petroleum and thus investors are not as interested?

One thing to be said for crises is that they force us to take stock and do something (though unfortunately not always the right thing) since we can no longer bumble along in the same old way. We are beginning to be conscious of the enormous waste we have made. Though I do not think this is the crucial issue, it does not hurt to take account of the wasteful way in which energy has been consumed. Buildings use more than half the electrical energy in the USA. And they are poorly and inefficiently planned for this purpose. Automobiles are all-devouring monsters and suburban families find that even two cars are not enough. We spew forth our energy wastes with little thought of conservation of energy.

But the real problem is still the one foreseen by John Stuart Mill — the equitable allocation of the world's resources. We have not yet tackled it on a national scale when an international resource problem is dumped into our laps. We are not only unprepared to deal with the crisis thrust upon us by the Arabs, but with the entire question of world resources, including the ocean which is beginning to churn up as an international problem.

The existence of rich petroleum resources in Arab countries points to an anomaly: because of an accident of nature, a people having little use for the resource they happen to be living over can hold the rest of the world at bay until it comes to their terms. We are unwilling to meet this problem in a firm and just way because it would challenge tradition and practice in our own backyard.

While we are improvising ways and means of dealing with the "energy crisis" — including much ill-advised governmental regulations — let us also see in it an opportunity to bring nations closer to a realization that the land question is the most basic of economic questions and that it will continue to dog us until we face it and solve it equitably.

If we could make a start on a national scale to establish more equal opportunities for all to the bounty of nature, the world problem, including the energy crisis would become much easier of solution.