

EARTH DAY 1982

In the last piece before his death last month Rene Dubos, the scientist-humanist, wrote of his hopes for humanity by using "the five E's--ecology, economics, energetics, esthetics and ethics...to create the 'humanized' environments that are stable, profitable, pleasurable, and favorable to the health of the earth and the growth of civilization." (quoted in New York Times, March 6, 1982)

Although Henry George denied such utopian claims for his own remedy a century earlier, those who profess concern for the "five E's," such as those of us who celebrate Earth Day this year when the cause is less than the height of fashion, could well apply his solution to each of these interrelated issues.

Ecology, the balance of forces in the environment that sustain life and growth, is the first definition of natural law. For man to respect earth he must first understand the natural laws that govern his own behavior. Men and women must be free to meet their needs and pursue their wellbeing. Human labor is not just another commodity to be bought and sold. It is the creator of wealth, not its product. But there will be no freedom for many as long as access to the land and its resources is controlled by the privileged few.

Economics will remain a dismal science as long as its practitioners fail to distinguish the earth and all its natural treasures from the works of man, be they products of labor or capital, or as most often today, a complex intertwining of both. Sound economics dictate that the rewards of labor and capital go only to those who expend those efforts and investments. The bounty of the earth must be shared by all.

Energy is the classic product of the application of human labor and capital to natural resources. There would be little concern for either shortages or gluts if we paid the true costs of drilling, digging, harnessing and transporting energy in fuel and other forms. What we should not pay is the price exacted by those sovereigns or corporations, individuals or families, who claim to own those deserts, seas, mountains, forests and fields, where these natural resources abound. Is it possible that opposition to solar energy is based on the truth that no one, not even governments, can lay claim to ownership of the sun? The beginnings of a solution are visible in the sale of offshore drilling rights and land leases. Improving and globally broadening this rudimentary collection of economic rent could permanently solve our energy problems.

Esthetics, despite the tastemakers who dictate fashion, are no mere temporal preference. The relation of form to content, the balance of size, shape, sound, color and all the variables to which the senses and mind are alive create beauty beyond the eye of the particular beholder. The appropriate development of land--not necessarily the highest and best use of the real estate man--makes for a beautiful community and unspoiled countryside. City slums, roadside

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sprawl and rural decay all result from poor land use, encouraged by low land taxes, high building taxes, or both, as is too often the case in metropolitan America. If we rewarded appropriate use with lower, or no taxes on desirable development and penalized speculation with taxes on real land values, the environment would soon be more esthetically pleasing. And if we agree that no building is suitable in some places--the wilderness, the shoreline, good farmland--we can remove both the threat of development and higher taxation at the same time.

Taxing the unearned increment in land values and untaxing the earned rewards of labor and capital would restore an equity in public policy based on ethical consideration. Imagine a social compact in which the common good is supported by the freely collected, socially derived value while individuals keep all that is rightfully theirs by dint of their own efforts. Imagine too the potential for reducing greed and the crimes it engenders, when one cannot own that which is not made by man and every privileged position, on earth, in space, is returned in compensatory value to the whole world, starting with one's own community.

More than ever we need the Georgist legacy for a sixth "E"--to make the five "E's" effective!