

POVERTY IN THE THIRD WORLD

Caring West

still badly blinkered in

its perception

POVERTY is not an act of God, hunger only occasionally so.

Man has built a no-win equation into the economic system to guarantee that, despite private charity and scientific innovation, despite enlightened laws on welfare and the redistribution of resources, poverty will continue to plague human society.

Generous donations of surplus grain to drought-stricken areas like Ethiopia may alleviate some of the pain, but they won't eliminate the underlying tendencies that wilfully impoverish people, no matter how hard they may choose to work.

And yet, even though the international agencies are meticulously monitoring the rise in global poverty, the intellectual elites are failing to identify the major source of the problem.

Result: the poor have their poverty turned against them. They are made to feel guilty for their plight by the people who hold the reins of power, which is a successful technique for not adopting remedial action.

TAKE, for example, the popular myth that the world is over-populated.

Now, so successful have the Malthusians been that opposition to the claim that the world population is growing too fast is met with derision.

A closer examination of the facts can dispel this theory, which so neatly shifts the blame for poverty onto the sexual proclivities of the poor.

From where do we get the idea that the population is growing too fast? From a comparison with the rate of food production, which in many countries is below the population growth rate.

Isn't it self-evident, then, that women ought to put a brake on their reproduction, and get on with the job of producing more food?

Starving Bangladeshi women have been told that they can only receive food aid if they agree to be sterilised.¹

Which conveniently throws the burden of guilt for their plight onto their already over-burdened shoulders. But consider the following:

● About half of the world's food is

By Peter Poole

grown by women. In Africa, women do 60-80% of the farm work.

● The notion of "over-population" is a modern one. What grounds do we have for the allegation that women who, over thousands of years, have successfully related food output to the size of their families, are now incompetent to do so?

● Unlike bygone ages, women now own hardly any land: they have lost out in the global transformation of land rights which, in effect, amount to the privatisation of rental income.

Whatever the reason for poverty, it cannot be attributed to inadequate

breeding practices. The West, however, safely bunkered behind its mountains of surplus grain and butter, awash with its lakes of surplus wine and olive oil, can afford to patronise the problems of the Third World.

So blinkered are the orthodox perceptions that we refuse to accept the truth even when we hear it. Take, for example, a recent British film on Channel 4 TV.

The commentator once again trotted out the convenient explanation that couples in the Third World had large families as a hedge against old age.

Immediately after this observation, a Mexican woman who had had 11 children (six of whom had died),

Continued on Page 4 ▶

SWEAT-SHOP DREAMS

SAN DIEGO is the Southern California conduit for a flow of illegal migrant workers that highlights the problem of poverty.

Across the border, in Mexico, is the ramshackle town of Tijuana: in its slums, at any one time, about 300,000 migrants wait to cross into the United States.

These are the workers who, despite the Mexican revolution early this century, cannot find work on the land.

So they leave their villages and head for places like Tijuana, where a "coyote" guide (for a fee of up to \$300) will try and smuggle them into California.

There are about 4m illegal crossings every year, along the Mexican border, and only something like one-third are caught.

Migrant workers know that low wages in the sweat-shops of Los Angeles or on the surrounding farms are better than no

wages at all in their home villages.

Because of their state of dependence they have to accept wage rates dictated by employers, who know that illegal immigrants cannot mobilise themselves into unions.

This process has been called "the criminalisation of workers" by Dr. Jorge Bustamante of the Centre For Frontier Studies, Tijuana.

A more accurate description would be "the marginalisation of workers", for the land tenure system and tax policy is responsible for destroying their prospects of independent employment.

The migrants have one dream: to save money with which to buy land, back home. This is an aspiration that cannot be fulfilled for most Mexican workers, because rural wages have been depressed to subsistence levels and the price of land is generally sky-high.

Migrant money, then,

exacerbates the problem: American dollars help to push up prices in the land market, making it even more difficult for the peasants to find and hold a piece of land from which to coax a living.

This tragedy is being enacted throughout the world. There are about 9m migrant workers from Central America in the States.

There are about 3m migrant workers in the Middle East, 2.5m in Africa, 3m in South America and 6m in Western Europe.

Their skills are badly needed in their home countries; instead, because of malfunctioning economic systems, richer countries benefit from those skills and human energy.

This is tantamount to a subsidy paid by the poor countries (which reared and educated the migrants) to the rich countries, in the view of Dr. Bustamante in Tijuana.

Suicide tactics with nature

◀ Continued from Page Three

declared to the camera that families in her village with two or three children only were better off!²

She was evidently not acquainted with the demographic theories that enable Western analysts to avoid penetrating too deeply into the realities of poverty.

In that woman's village, the bread-winners were being forced to migrate in search of work while one-fifth of the land was owned by one person.

Time and again we find that low wages (or no wages), destitution and cultural degradation, are associated with a maldistribution of income from land.

But in the hundreds of economic textbooks published each year, you will be hard put to find a diagnosis that explained low wages (or no wages) in terms of the displacement of hard-working people from their land.

AT THE heart of the global problem is an easy-to-trace sequence of events that can leave no doubt about why people are suffering from poverty and starvation, or what needs to be done about it.

This has been the process, at different times, and in different places, the cumulative effect of which is to place control over the earth's natural resources in the hands of a small minority of people:

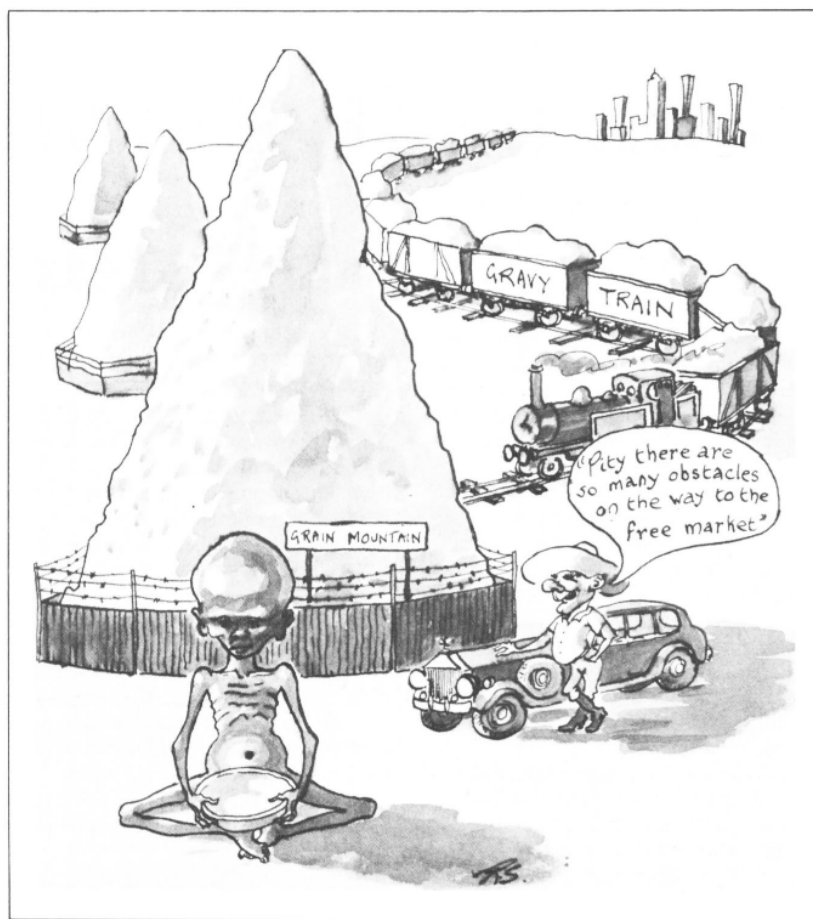
- Displacement from the land creates a large pool of landless workers, who depress wages in the urban sector to levels below subsistence.

- Millions of people are "marginalised" onto the fringes of society – sometimes being forced literally to eke out a living on the edge of a desert, in other cases to snatch a living from the left-overs of society (750,000 people live permanently on the rubbish dumps of Mexico City).

- About 25m people are currently displaced from their communities, forced to become migrant workers – a process that splits families, and creates a rootless class of men for whom crime and other forms of anti-social behaviour become attractive alternatives to low wages and social degradation.

- Landlessness creates a labour market in which the worker is not able to bargain fairly for a decent wage, because he is trapped: he cannot threaten to return to work as an independent labourer on the farm that is no longer his.

A defective land tenure system,



then, creates a degrading set of conditions, ranging from the slums of Karachi to the 100,000 people who submissively accept slavery in the West African country of Mauritania.

Compounding the social and economic consequences are the environmental effects of the modern land tenure system.

As people's living standards are reduced, and as they become increasingly desperate, dangerous practices are adopted.

For example, people in the Himalayas have resorted to cutting down forests for the firewood that they need: this disturbs the water tables and results in soil erosion. So soil fertility diminishes, thereby accelerating the process of impoverishment.

For scores of generations the nomadic and pastoral tribes of Africa and Asia have lived in harmony with their ecological environments, employ-

ing food-nurturing practices that ensured inter-generational survival.

Only in recent decades have many of them adopted suicide tactics with nature, and yet Western theoreticians continue to fail to ask the fundamental question: why?

WE NEED to review land tenure policies so that a few practical strategies can be implemented to meet some complex challenges.

Man needs to conserve resources: how can we create compact communities and employ intensive cultivation? How do we show our respect for nature, so that she can continue to feed generations into infinity?

Working relationships need to be devised to ensure a fair reward for labour. How can we eliminate those obstacles that today penalise people who want to work and invest?

Professor Peirce (see page six), in a thoughtful essay, demonstrates that a new approach can be devised if we will only start to think clearly and without prejudice.

REFERENCES:

1. Andrew Veitch, 'Scandal Of Women Sterilised For Food', *The Guardian* (London) Sept. 12, 1985.
2. *The People Trade*, London: Channel 4, is based on the TV series.