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RESOURCES FOR AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

CHARLES J. HITCH, Ed.

Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

Pp. 105. \$7.50

How can we guarantee adequate supplies of energy and resources for the future without sacrificing the quality of the environment? The question is one of national urgency; and this book—a compilation of forum papers “marking the 25th anniversary of Resources for the Future”—attempts to address that question.

The book is useful in bringing together the perspectives of seven authors. Especially noteworthy are Harrison Brown’s reflections on resource needs for the next 25 years and Charles Schultze’s position that private incentives can achieve desired environmental goals more readily than the government’s command-and-control approach.

Edward Mason concludes that in spite of the projections of the Club of Rome, America does not face scarcities of industrial materials. He points to the impressive technological developments that took place in Germany during the war years when plentiful metals were substituted for scarce ones. Between early 1942 and mid 1943, for example, the amount of copper used in a railway locomotive dropped from 2.3 metric tons to 237 kilograms, about a ten-fold decrease. Lewis Branscomb finds that the “so-called energy crisis” is basically a crisis of confidence and will. In his discussion of what he terms “the myth of finite resources” he insists that physical resources must be viewed in light of human resources. Taken together, they appear to be open-ended: “Energy can be traded off against not only materials, but even intangibles like information. Information is the ultimate renewable resource.” (p. 72).

Harrison Brown argues that nuclear energy will have to be used on a substantial scale if we are to achieve “reasonable” (undefined) levels of self-sufficiency in the near term. He is far more confident than I that the dangers of nuclear power (catastrophic accidents, diversion of explosive-grade nuclear materials, waste disposal) can be contained. But even apart from such optimism, his judgment is called into question by Zimmermann and Pohl’s recent assessment of the potential contribution of nuclear power to total U.S. energy requirements.¹ Brown also claims that, “given adequate supplies of energy, we need never suffer from lack of nonfuel minerals.” (pp. 39-43). This also is debatable. Yale University geomorphologist Brian Skinner claims that after we use up the rich ore deposits of the

1. Zimmermann & Pohl, “The Potential Contribution of Nuclear Energy to U.S. Energy Requirements,” 12 ENERGY 465-71 (1977).

geochemically rarer metals such as tin, copper, lead, silver, and molybdenum—perhaps within the next 100 years—it will require somewhere between 100 and 1000 times more energy to recover these metals from the host silicate materials in which they are found in extremely low concentrations. Skinner concludes that “it seems unlikely that we will choose to jump the mineralogical barrier” this new situation will force upon us but rather, we will have to rely increasingly on iron and aluminum and adjust to the reduced efficiency in machines this will entail.²

A major weakness of the book—and it is a very serious weakness indeed—is that the authors largely ignore a substantial literature that looks at energy and resource questions in a more radical and imaginative way. Not even mentioned is Amory Lovins’ key article, “Energy Strategy: The Road Not Taken?,”³ published approximately a year before the time of this forum, or E. J. Schumacher’s important insights on “intermediate technology,”⁴ or Herman Daly’s reflections on a “steady-state economy.”⁵ It may be too early to know whether Schumacher, Lovins, Daly, and others are on the right track, but to ignore them altogether is to fail to deal responsibly with the issues at hand.

A second weakness is that most of these essays simply assume a high growth rate in the demand for electricity. Such growth may indeed take place, but it is not inevitable. Rather than uncritically making the growth assumption, which in part becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, what is needed is a close examination of the social costs and benefits involved as well as the alternatives.

The conventional tone of the book is reflected in Robert Fri’s statement that “energy is . . . more of an imperative than is our environment” and that it is “not greed that causes our liquid fuels problem but respectable economic growth.” He concludes that we should not push conservation “so fiercely as to slow economic growth markedly.” (p. 52). When William McNeill argues that in the past human beings have faced and survived environmental crises and that, therefore, our situation today is not unique, I find his logic faulty. It presupposes precisely the point at issue, namely whether our situation is unique. Some of us think it is and that to ignore this uniqueness is to court disaster.

2. Skinner, *A Second Iron Age Ahead?* 64 *AMERICAN SCIENTIST* 258-69 (1976).

3. Lovins, *Energy Strategy: The Road Not Taken?*, 54 *FOREIGN AFFAIRS* 65-96 (1976).

4. Schumacher, *Intermediate Technology*, 8 *THE CENTER MAGAZINE*, 43-49 (1975).

5. H. Daly, *STEADY-STATE ECONOMICS: THE ECONOMICS OF BIOPHYSICAL EQUILIBRIUM AND MORAL GROWTH* (1977).

Perhaps the main shortcoming of this book is also the central problem of economics as a discipline; the scope is too narrow, too severely technical, too lacking in a broader reading of human motives, values, and affairs. It is the incompleteness of the discussion, as much as its narrow establishment orientation, that makes this a less useful book than it might have been. Problems of energy and the environment will remain inscrutable until we learn more about human insecurity, pretentiousness and greed, and cease focusing primarily on technical considerations. Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man*⁶ and Solzhenitsyn's Harvard commencement address, "The Exhausted West,"⁷ may be more relevant to the issues dealt with in this little volume than are most of the government statistics and forecasts cited by the various contributors.

The authors avoid the moral aspects of the problems considered; little serious attempt is made to deal with the effects of resource decisions on minorities and the poor, to spell out what obligations we today have to future generations, or to wrestle with the responsibilities of the affluent Western nations to the Third World. This short-sightedness is not only morally regrettable but perhaps unwise from the purely pragmatic consideration of our long-term success as a nation.

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6. R. NIEBUHR, *THE NATURE AND DESTINY OF MAN*, (1941).

7. Solzhenitsyn, *The Exhausted West*, 80 *HARVARD MAGAZINE* No. 6, 21-26 (1978).