

Transforming Economic Life

James Robertson

Green Books for the Schumacher Society, £5.00

Review by IAN BARON

THIS IS a remarkable short survey of issues and policies for activists who are concerned with the way in which modern crises link social and environmental problems. We could view it as the first draft of a new manifesto for the 21st century.

James Robertson is one of the leading thinkers in what the ecology lobby calls the new economics. But he challenges that lobby to systematise their thinking by embracing one policy which they seriously neglect. The author demonstrates in his latest work, which is published as a briefing paper by the Devon-based Schumacher Society, that the treatment of rent as public revenue is central to the solution of the following policies:

- Farming and food
- Travel and transport
- Energy
- Work and livelihood
- Social cohesion
- Local development, including housing
- Business
- Health
- Law and order

Mr. Robertson even gently chides the shortfall in the "small is beautiful" thesis of E.F. Schumacher by noting that technology was not "the base" from which to solve certain problems. But James Robertson says that humane technologies, while vital, "will break through on a significant scale only as part of a larger transformation, including changes in taxes and laws".

The rent as public revenue thesis is presented by Mr. Robertson as one of a trio of policies which would drive change in the desired direction. The other two are eco-taxes and Citizen's Income. In so far as eco-taxes are intended to fall on the rental value of any natural resource, they fall within the ambit of what Henry George advocated in *Progress and Poverty* (1879).

What about the proposal for a reformed benefits system based on Citizen's Income? Mr. Robertson is now tying this proposal into each person's natural right to a share of the income of nature. Indeed, Henry George is on record as having said that surplus government revenue from a land tax could be shared equally among all citizens as a dividend.

So, in his formulation, we have the makings of a manifesto which is driven by logic and ethics in the direction of an open acknowledgement of the centrality of the Georgist philosophy. As the author works his way through the problems he finds himself returning to the significance of tax reform. And he provides a clear

exposition of the consequences of failing to apply this policy:

"Failure to tax site values raises land prices, thus making land unaffordable for people like potential small farmers and tradespeople who might otherwise work productively on it. It encourages landowners to hold land out of economic use in the hope of speculative capital gains as land values rise".

The weakest themes relate to money and finance, and the global economy. The author acknowledges the need for further research and reflection, and to this end he ought to be more actively supported by others. In any event, this briefing is an important contribution to the working papers for those who wish to develop a blueprint for a society fit for people in which nature is treated as a bounty that needs to be respectfully nurtured. **LSL**

● Green Books Limited, Foxhole, Dartington, Totnes, Devon TQ9 6EB.

Factor Four:

Doubling Wealth-Halving Resource Use

Ernst von Weizsacker, Amory b. Lovins and L. Hunter Lovins
Earthscan, £15.99

Review by PAUL KNIGHT

HOW DO YOU double wealth while halving the use of resource inputs? What is billed as The New Report of the Club of Rome offers technological solutions which would enable us to conserve resources even while maintaining existing levels of output. In fact the authors offer 50 examples of how to quadruple resource productivity.

Terminating the waste of our human and natural wealth is a good slogan, and progress has been built on the back of technological innovation. But what makes the authors think that the social system will readily adapt to their proposals for improving productivity? They share the need for urgency, but their solution falls short of providing a mechanism for driving change in the desired direction. The market becomes an easy villain, which they say is not a

substitute for ethics, religion and civilisation. But rhetoric is no substitute for a market mechanism which provides positive incentives to improve productivity, and which penalises wasteful practices. The fact that certain policies which governments preserve

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