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Strawman Alert

Kevin Carson

April 28, 2005

Tim Worstall comes out ahead in a dustup with George Monbiot over wind farms. Of course, it helps if you can put words in your opponent's mouth. Monbiot, in this article, writes:

In other words, there is no sustainable way of meeting current projections for energy demand. The only strategy in any way compatible with environmentalism is one led by a vast reduction in total use.

Worstall comments:

Yup, George wants us all to go back to being medieval peasants. Good one.

Of course—it's that simple! Current levels of energy consumption are absolutely necessary to maintain the present standard of living. It couldn't be possible that subsidies to transportation and energy consumption make large factories thousands of miles away artificially competitive against small ones where we live, or that such subsidies combined with zoning laws and FHA redlining reduce the market incentive

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Retrieved on 4th September 2021 from mutualist.blogspot.com

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to live where you work and shop. When it comes to technological determinism, nobody comes close to a state socialist or a technocratic liberal for sheer, crude materialism—except a corporate capitalist, that is! Worstall sounds like Friedrich Engels, Art Schlesinger, or J.K. Galbraith at their worst.

Here’s another Monbiot quote, to put the one above in context:

Wind farms, while necessary, are a classic example of what environmentalists call an “end-of-the-pipe solution”. Instead of tackling the problem — our massive demand for energy — at source, they provide less damaging means of accommodating it. Or part of it. The Whinash project, by replacing energy generation from power stations burning fossil fuel, will reduce carbon dioxide emission by 178,000 tonnes a year. This is impressive, until you discover that a single jumbo jet, flying from London to Miami and back every day, releases the climate-change equivalent of 520,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide a year. One daily connection between Britain and Florida costs three giant wind farms.

If anything is a prime candidate for free-market problem solving, it’s the fuel-guzzling jumbo jets Monbiot complains of. The civil aviation system in the U.S., jumbo jets and all, is almost entirely a creature of the state. The airport infrastructure of the 20th century was built mostly with government funds, with heavy use of eminent domain. No attempt was made until the 1970s to run airports on aviation fuel tax revenue—and even then, the operating cost didn’t figure in amortization of previous government loot. Had the system been built from the first entirely with voluntary user fees, and voluntary sales of land, we’d have a civil aviation system several orders of magnitude smaller—and “air freight” would probably mean shipping

by zeppelin. Even today, if the system had to forego eminent domain and operate entirely on user fees, it would be frozen at its present scale. For example, see “On Airports and Individual Rights,” by Tibor Machan:

Some people will say that stringent protection of rights would lead to small airports, at best, and many constraints on construction. Of course—but what’s so wrong with that?

As for those jumbo jets themselves, they are a spinoff of Cold War military production. The aircraft industry was spiralling into red ink with the postwar demobilization, and did not regain solvency until the uptick in military spending of the late ‘40s. [Frank Kofsky, *Harry S. Truman and the War Scare of 1948*] What’s more, the machine tools for producing large airplanes were so complex and expensive that the production runs for civilian airliners alone wouldn’t pay for them—which is where heavy bomber production came into the picture. [David Noble, *America by Design: Science, Technology and the Rise of Corporate Capitalism*]

If it weren’t for the state’s role in subsidizing those airports and freeways, we’d be consuming most of our stuff from factories a lot closer to home, and shipping most of the rest by rail. We don’t need the government to knock this crap down; we just need it to stop propping it up.

Granted, Monbiot probably isn’t thinking primarily of market forces or cost internalization as a way to produce present levels of consumption goods with less energy input. But nothing in the phrase “vast reduction in total use” is inconsistent with that. In fact, I sent Mr. Monbiot the following email a while back, and got a pretty favorable response:

I believe the solution to the crisis is already built in. There’s no need for government-imposed austerity measures. The price of oil itself will lead to the

austerity measures. Such a scenario was depicted over twenty years ago by Warren Johnson in *Muddling Toward Frugality*: rising fuel prices make transportation-intensive forms of production less and less competitive, and force a radical decentralization of the economy.

As it is, the corporate economy exists at the present level of concentration only because of state capitalist intervention in the free market. The government absorbs (or rather transfers to the taxpayers) all the inefficiency costs of large-scale production, so that big business can operate at many times the peak economy of scale. But the more fuel prices rise, the less feasible subsidies to transportation and fuel consumption become. Eventually the breaking point will be reached at which the state can no longer absorb the costs of subsidizing inefficiency.

Such subsidies lead to fundamental irrationality by distorting the function of the market price system as a feedback mechanism: when allowed to operate without interference, it coordinates supply to demand by telling the consumer the real cost of providing a resource, and enabling him to make a rational decision about how much to consume. Interference with price-feedback produces the same results as a distortion of the hormonal feedback mechanism in the human body: gigantism and collapse. In the case of transportation, we have demands on highways and airports increasing many times faster than new capacity can be built, and existing structures decaying faster than money can be appropriated to replace them.

When we have a genuine free market, and big business has to internalize all its operating costs, we will also have an end to corporate capitalism.