

DOWN AND OUT

The end of the world as we know it. Or a dim light shining through otherwise wintry and overcast skies. Filtered as well from recent headlines are strenuous notions of an end to an age of unfettered economic behaviors, schemes and scams replete with an absence of socially rewarding accompaniments and, in stark contrast, the eventual onset of a new and welcome era of limitations and the reconstruction of trust.(1)

Nordic countries appear to have avoided the global meltdown. However, their recessionary footprints are only slightly behind the rest of the world's given a relative dependence on exports, a steep downturn in overseas consumer demand, and the growth of unemployment tied even to the fate of productive corporations whose decline seems to defy logic or common sense.(2).While world leaders plan interventions and new regulatory structures, many on a global basis, individuals are adopting retrenchment strategies as once prosperous middle-income families face a rising sense of insecurity about financial outcomes they feel are no longer under their control. Because of existent governmental supports, a mood of Depression era precariousness may be widely avoided, as may the marginalization of central or dense populations. For those already closer to the countryside, a shift to self-sufficiency provides a portal into an admittedly extreme attempt at a localized response.

One author is known to have spent the 1980's in traditional vacation pursuits, bicycling in his free time away from the university along more southerly European pathways where he contemplated the effects of development and change on then pristine environments. Much in the manner of a growing number of environmental activists, his interests evolved to include a later devotion to ecological study during which time he reached the conclusion that the material comforts widely enjoyed throughout the prosperous 1990's did not lead to outlooks that would provide a critical level of environmental conservation for his own sake and for that of future generations. (3)

A personal answer to the challenges of a globalizing landscape was to set up rural housekeeping with his young family. Today, the family continues to live today off the land, grows its own organic crops, spends a meager amount on energy resources, and gathers firewood from neighborhood forests for the colder months. It is also engaged in the spinning of yarn for clothing and woolens, and in the harvesting of flax for fish traps. In addition to organically grown foods, the writer and his family now subsist largely on fish from local lakes, as well as berries, wild fruits, and mushrooms.

The frugality that both urban and suburban, middle-income families are today being called on to practice has long been a custom in this northerly scene of forests and lakes, so much so that the Holidays and the New Year brought scant regret at a lack of exchange of customary gifts or guilt at a financial inability necessary to equate the presence of abundant material comforts with the spiritual considerations of the season.

A copious degree of self-sufficiency stands out as extreme in contemporary times. However, it brings its own rewards, including a freedom from the vagaries of monetary economies and, above all, a strong sense of place, both in a stable home and what appears to be a small-scale society firmly anchored to its roots. Nevertheless, this rural family recognizes that such a solution is unlikely to please everyone. Few can be expected to decline the fruits of large-scale, mechanized commercial agriculture for those of a restrained, rigorously tended backyard garden. A diet aligned with the demands of self-sufficiency, with few grains and luxuries that rely infrequently on the production of local farms, is not only unfamiliar to the great majority, but would also in the author's words, " drive others out of the house." in order to speedily adopt an alternative lifestyle of their choice.

Some analysts underscore the fact that market liberalizations have provoked this very freedom of choice in our economic and social associations. There is also a suggestion that an accompaniment has been an increasing search for an organizational average between isolating localisms and the development of an agreed upon norm in a globalizing age that to many appears to have often confused speculative cross-border shareholding with the long-term institutional loyalties of citizenship.

The activation of affinities of belief or ethnicity have emerged as part of this search for a common middle-ground. And they have provided many with a needed sense of belonging as well as with a more than ambivalent economic return for those who were once considered outsiders. (4) Still other commentators point to the irony of a global financial meltdown that is intimately linked to an original desire to craft for the consistently marginalized a sense of a permanent place in society through the security of home ownership.

At present, the search for social organizational solutions to cascading losses in monetary economies and the labor market still seem distant. So, too, does a receding view from the mid-20th century. This was an era of decline, change, and realignment, during which more than one prominent observer was known to have highlighted the nation itself as an integral part of shared understandings as well as a reliable political fact.

(1) Lewis, Michael and David Einhorn. " The End Of The Financial World As We Know It" New York Times online, 1/4/2009, (2) "Smoking Ruins Behind, Thick Mists Ahead As The Economy Enters a New Year." Helsingen Sanomat online, 1/10, 2009. (3) Siukonen, Timo. " Self-Sufficient Family Enjoys Simplicity During Christmas." Helsingen Sanomat online, 12/12/2008. (4) Prometheus Foundation Website.

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