Agriculture and Human Values (2020) 37:527–528
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10460-020-10069-x

RAPID RESPONSE OPINION

What can people think of doing when they have little money?

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Accepted: 9 April 2020 / Published online: 3 June 2020

COVID-19 already has sparked thoughts of long-term economic hardship, with a recession unavoidable and a depression possible. Only a few weeks into the pandemic, countless citizens are struggling to make ends meet. And this acute crisis doesn't change the need to reduce our use of fossil fuels if we are to head-off the more serious ecological and health consequences of greenhouse gas accumulations. If we are to meet a zero-fossil carbon target by 2050, economic hardship will be part of the equation.

Many of us are studying the exits, looking for ways out of this dilemma. This story about a Russian welder and his family in Siberia in 1997, from an Associated Press article by Sarah Mae Brown, points toward possibilities:

> Each day, Nikolai and Galya arise in the dark and go about the business of making a living. They milk their cows, feed their pig, gather eggs from their chickens, tend their garden. They live off what they grow, and sell the rest for a few rubles here and there. From milk alone, they earn perhaps $100 a month. And when the sun rises, Nikolai heads off from his simple wooden house to his long-time job as a welder in a state-run auto repair factory. For this, he earns nothing.

The article continues, "People survive on their gardens and their wits, and the official economy primarily is a distraction." After some mention of an impending trade union strike and President Yeltsin's reaction, Brown writes:

> Across Russia, especially in smaller towns and villages, millions of workers have gone months without wages. Both the government and private employers have been unable—or unwilling—to pay them. Even retirees have gone without their pensions. Outsiders tend to ask how this is possible: How can a nation survive when its people are unpaid? Why would a worker show up for a job that offers no wages? Like many Russians, Nikolai—who hasn't been paid in three months—doesn't ask these questions. Why wouldn't he show up for work? "Where would I go?" he said. "There aren't any other jobs in this town. I'm too old to look for work in Moscow. This is a one-factory town; we have no other choices. And besides, what if the day I decide not to show up the managers start handing out wages?"

Across Russia, in small towns and villages, millions of people lived in an economy which had plunged. Of course, the vast majority of people in human history had no access to the fossil energy which made the scale of the Industrial Revolution possible. But the post-Soviet economic collapse in Russia provides an example of how citizens of an industrial society could cope in the midst of widespread economic upheaval. The 1990s were a harsh time in Russia, with lowered life expectancies and widespread deprivation, but many people survived without support of the industrial economy by relying on Nature's economy in combination with traditional culture. It is ironic that the welder's household had enough slack to subsidize the stumbling industrial economy.

We have the most extensive good soils on Earth in the United States. The question is, how do we get back our cultural capacity to live on that rich land without warming the atmosphere?

Our association is with The Land Institute, located in rural Saline County, Kansas, near Salina, the largest city with about 47,000 people. The county total is about 54,000. Five of the county's small towns still have a post office. Eight do not. With the industrialization of agriculture, those towns have declined in the past several decades. A sufficiency of people was replaced by a sufficiency of capital made possible by the imperative of highly dense carbon. The rising industrial economy that exploited it forced the depopulation.

This article is part of the Topical Collection: Agriculture, Food & Covid-19.

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But those towns could come back. Numerous low-priced houses, in varying need of repair, stand ready to receive people. There's still ecological capacity—plenty of good soil and water. And there's still some cultural capacity—traditions of neighborliness and frugality. There are also sticky problems—land ownership is an obvious one, but just as crucial is the loss of knowledge about low-energy farming in recent decades and dulling of skills that were common in pre-fossil fuel farm country. But there's potential in "flyover country." Repopulating the countryside is not an exercise in nostalgia or naïve "back to the land" dreams. It's a practical necessity.

The Russian welder and his family are among millions who provide a good example. As we wean ourselves from the domination of the industrial mind and feature a more creaturely worldview life can be better and healthier.

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