

[The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

A way to eliminate unemployment and provide a productive role for seniors

Posted by [Gail the Actuary](#) on April 18, 2010 - 10:57am in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

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The is a guest post by John Michael Greer, excerpted from a longer [post](#) he wrote. I have also included a short excerpt from Sharon Astyk's [response](#) to JMG's post, and a few Campfire questions.

John Michael Greer's comments:

What would you say, dear reader, if I told you that I've come up with a way to eliminate unemployment in the United States – yes, even in the face of the current economic mess? What if I explained that it would also improve the effective standard of living of many American families and decrease their income tax burdens? And that it would also increase our economic resilience and sustainability, and simultaneously cause a significant decrease in the amount of automobile traffic on America's streets and highways? Would you be all for it?

No, dear reader, you wouldn't. Permit me to explain why.

Right now, many two-income families with children in the United States are caught in a very curious economic bind. I haven't been able to find statistics, but I personally know quite a few families for whom the cost of paid child care and one partner's costs for commuting, business clothes, and all the other expenses of employment, approaches or even exceeds the take-home pay of one partner. Factor in the benefits of shifting to a lower tax bracket, and for a great many of these families, becoming a single-income family with one partner staying out of the paid work force would actually result in an increase in disposable income each month.

This is even before factoring in the financial elephant in the living room of the old one-income family: the economic benefits of the household economy. It's only in the last half dozen decades that the home has become nothing more than a center of consumption; before then, it was a place where real wealth was produced. It costs a great deal less to buy the raw materials for meals than to pick up something from the supermarket deli on the way home from work, as so many people do these days, or to fill the pantry and the fridge with prepackaged processed food; it costs a great deal less to buy yarn than to purchase socks and afghans of anything like the quality a good knitter can make; it costs a great deal less to grow a good fraction of a family's vegetables in a backyard garden than to buy them fresh at the grocery, if you can get them at all.

The difference in each case – and examples like this could be multiplied manifold – is

made by the household economy. Economists like to dismiss the household economy as inefficient, but it's worth remembering that "efficiency" in current economic jargon is defined as labor efficiency – that is an economic process is considered more efficient if it uses less human labor, no matter how wildly inefficient it is in any other sense. Economists also like to dismiss the household economy because it lacks economies of scale, and here they're on firmer ground. Still, there's another factor that more than counterbalances this; much of the value of an employee's labor – as much, as Marxists like to remind us, as the employer can get away with taking – goes to support his employer, while all of the value produced by labor in the household market remains with the family and is used directly, without being mediated through the money economy.

This is why, until quite recently, at least half the adult members of most families, aside from the urban poor, worked in the household economy instead of the money economy. It's also why a grandparent or two or an unmarried aunt so often found a place in the family setting. This had very little to do with charity; an extra pair of hands that could be employed in the household economy was a significant economic asset to most families. One of the advantages of this, of course, is that elderly people continued to have a valued and productive role in their families and communities, instead of being paid to go away and do nothing until they die, as so many of them are today.

None of these things are any less possible today than they were in the 1920s, or for that matter the 1820s. As a former househusband, I can say this on the basis of personal experience; my wife and I found that we had a better standard of living on her bookkeeper's salary alone, with a thriving full time household economy, than we had earlier on two salaries with only the scraps of a household economy the two of us could manage after work and commuting. I came in for a certain amount of derision for making that choice, of course, though it's only fair to say that I got off very lightly in comparison to the abuse leveled, mostly by women, at those women I knew who made a similar decision.

Now of course that touches on one of the most volatile issues touching on the household economy, the politics of gender. For complex cultural reasons, a great many feminists in the 1960s and 1970s came to believe that working for one's family in the household economy was a form of slavery, while working for an employer in the money economy – often under conditions that were even more exploitative – was a form of liberation. Now it's certainly true that assigning people to participation in the household economy by gender was unfair, but it's equally true that assigning them to participation in the money economy on the same basis was no better; for every woman whose talents were wasted in a housewife's role, there was arguably a man whose life would have been much happier and more productive had he had the option of working full time in the household economy.

Feminism might usefully have challenged the relative social status assigned to the household and money economies, and pressed for a revaluation of work and gender that could have thrown open a much broader field of possibilities to people of both genders; and in fact some thoughtful steps were taken in this direction by a few perceptive thinkers in the movement. In general, though, that turned out to be the road not taken. Instead, the great majority of women simply accepted the social value given to participation in the money economy, demanded access to it for themselves, and got it. In the process, for most Americans, the household economy collapsed, or survived only as a

dowdy sort of hobby practiced by the insufficiently fashionable.

Let's grant at the outset, therefore, that there's no particular reason why people of one gender ought to be more active in the household economy than people of the other; let's assume that a great many men will make the choice I did, and work full time in the household economy while the women in their lives work full time for a paycheck. On that basis, is there a point to two-income families shifting gears and becoming families that combine one cash income with a productive household economy? Of course there is, and now more than ever.

To begin with, as already mentioned, a significant number of families with children would gain an immediate boost in their disposable income each month by taking the kids home from daycare, giving up the second commute (and in some cases, the second car as well), dropping the other expenses that come with paid employment, and taking a wild downhill ride through the income tax brackets. A great many more would find that when these benefits are combined with the real wealth produced by the household economy, they came out well ahead. Even those who simply broke even would be likely to find that differences in quality, though hard to measure in strictly economic terms, would make the change more than worthwhile.

Now take a moment to think of the effects on community and society. Take a significant amount of the workforce out of paid employment, and two things happen: first, unemployment rates go down, and second, competition among employers for the remaining workers tends to drive wages up. Some sectors of the economy would be negatively affected, to be sure; sales of convenience foods would decrease, and so would employment in the day care industry, among others; still, these industries would be affected by the contraction in workforce numbers along with all the others, and those employees who needed to find a job elsewhere would be entering a job market where their chances would be much better than they are at present. There would need to be some adjustments, especially to retirement arrangements, but those are going to have to happen fairly soon anyway.

Finally, factor in the impact of such a change on the resilience and sustainability of society. A nation in which a very large fraction of the workforce is insulated from the money economy, and produces a diverse array of goods and services at home for local consumption using relatively simple tools, is a nation that's much better prepared to face the economic turmoil of the end of the age of cheap oil than a nation where nearly everyone depends for their income, as well as for the goods and services they use every day, on the global economy. A nation in which, let's say, 30% fewer people have to drive to work than they do today is much better prepared to face the price spikes and shortages that will almost inevitably affect gasoline and other petroleum products in the years to come. A nation in which doing things for yourself again has a recognized social value is much better prepared for a future in which we will have to do much more for ourselves than most people can imagine just now.

So when can we expect the return of the single-income family to become an element of constructive plans for the post-peak future? When will Transition Town programs, let's say, match up the experienced elderly with novice househusbands and housewives who want to learn how to cook, sew, can, garden, and knit? When will high-profile liberal couples start throwing parties to announce that one member of the pair is quitting paid

employment, so that the poor have an easier job market and a better chance at upward mobility? When will people aggressively lobby their congressflacks to get a sizable income tax deduction and special Social Security arrangements for families with one income?

Let's just say I'm not going to hold my breath. In fact, dear reader, I'm quite confident that even if you belong to that large group of married couples with children who could increase your disposable income by giving up that second job, you won't do it; in fact, you won't even run the numbers to see whether it would work for you – and the reason you won't is that you're so mesmerized by that monthly check of \$2000 a month take-home, or whatever it happens to be, that you can't imagine giving it up even if you have to spend \$2200 a month to get it. That is to say, dear reader, that if you don't think in terms of whole systems, the fact that the system costs of that second job might just outweigh the benefits will be as incomprehensible to you as a computer would have been to a medieval peasant.

The extraordinary blindness to whole systems that pervades our collective consciousness these days is a fairly recent thing – as recently as the 1970s, talk about system costs got far fewer blank stares and non sequiturs than it does today – and I doubt it will last long in historical terms, if only because the hard edge of Darwinian selection separates adaptive cultural forms from maladaptive ones with the same ruthlessness it applies to genetics. While it remains in place, it will likely cause a great deal of damage, but that in itself will tend to accelerate its replacement with some less dysfunctional habit of thought. Ironically, the Theodore Roethke poem with which I started this post offers a cogent reminder of that. It begins:

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

We will all, I think, learn a great deal by going where we have to go during the lean and challenging years to come. The hope that we might manage to learn a thing or two in advance of that journey is understandable enough, and the thing has happened now and then in history; still, for reasons already discussed, that hope seems very frail to me just now.

Sharon Astyk [writes](#) in response (from a longer post):

One of the things that I've argued a number of times is that along with vast influxes of energy and resources, we've never had long periods of economic growth in the modern era without shifting huge portions of the population out of the informal economy and into the formal one. in my essay "Peeling the Onion" I track the history of these moves - from the 1930s into the 1970s, the massive elimination of American and European farmers and the shift of farm and subsistence workers into the formal economy represents the first major wave. The second one, beginning in the 1960s (actually, it began in the 1940s - despite 50s mythos, women working outside the home never did decline to pre-war levels or anything like it) was the large scale move towards two

income households. And since the 1980s, there has been the massive shift of workers in the Global South into factories and cities.

In all these cases, these shift simultaneously create new workers and new consumers - and I think it is important to remember this because there are strains of the energy resource movement that view energy as the primary economic driver. In fact, the very fact that in order to use more energy we have to have more industrial consumers is significant - because we are running bang against the material limits worldwide of more than just oil and gas and coal - we're hitting the end of vast new worker populations to feed that growth.

Also:

. . .the women's movement has yet to fully come to terms with the degree to which modern feminism's view of the world, goals and objectives has been shaped by a cheap energy, deeply corporatized society.

A Few Questions

1. Does it make sense to start expanding the household economy, now, even before many would feel that it is needed?
2. Are there tasks that the household economy can take on?
3. In our society, can men feel comfortable if their work is part of the household economy?
4. In your own situation, can you see a place where combining generations (or other relatives) into the same household would be helpful? What obstacles prevent this?



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