Ancient innovations for present conventions toward extinction

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"It's roads which use the pretext of the free movement of goods and men to accelerate the orders of the empire, which strangles us to satisfy its ambition." - Vercingetorix, king of the Gauls - 52(?) BC

(from Druids, a film by Jacques Dorfmann, 2000)

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Editor's note: This exploration of our common dilemma covers the Mind-set toward extinction, followed by a section on Growth and roads, and lastly on Expressing cultural rebellion

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As people feel deeply the developments on climate and the impacts of toxic living, the main question becomes: will we soon be going extinct? This question elicits little overt agitation, although it would not be extremely unusual to overhear the question in public today. Follow-up probing can be crucial:

If we humans go extinct due to our own behavior in the next several decades, does it matter if other species can endure beyond us? The answer to that question is "No" for far too many of us today. The anthropocentric or religious "No" would mean we are completely stuck in the deepest trouble in human history, for we have not learned why we've gotten into this terminal mess. Some species went extinct since you started reading this. The web of life is being allowed to rapidly unravel.

Common assumptions and conventions need to be questioned by more than a few intellectuals and avant-garde rebels. Even if this happens, the obstacle of mass dissemination is significant in this age of corporate media consolidation. Another obstacle is via self-censorship in the environmental movement. The idea of significant die-off is taboo outside private, frank conversations.

I don't delude myself that humans as a whole will do the right thing to plan for survival and sustainability, as long as change can be put off. However, humans will exercise animal instincts and use ingenuity to try to survive. Unless the average sperm count drops too low, we will procreate and may well endure somehow. Efforts to use knowledge and wisdom could be successful enough for a viable population. For long-term survival and continued evolution, we must get our act together very soon. Reformed policies for a broken and corrupt system will get us nowhere, except where we are unfortunately headed: the equivalent of a lifeless desert. So our task is nothing less than to create a sustainable culture that reigns supreme without domination.

If our species survives long-term, it will not be because commuters dutifully made it to work. It will be because people have questioned the concept of work and production -- and much more. What is implied in working and productivity is really specialization, and that means individuals and segments of society no longer gather food, make clothes, erect shelter, care for the sick, defend the community, etc.

It is clearly unrealistic for the majority of the population of the world, which now lives in big cities, to "go back to the land." Yet, it is crucial to understand what we have lost because we are still losing it with every new and widened road, for example.

A related and even less-discussed development is humanity's loss of wildness. Being wild is rejected out of hand as outmoded and barbaric, but such an attitude turns our back on our long, successful history as a species. It can be argued that today's world-threatening crises are embedded in the average person most strongly when all vestiges of wildness, such as self-defense and an intimate relationship with nature, have been squelched.

For people to understand the high stakes presented by global warming and other forms of environmental devastation -- such as "development" and the plastic plague -- people may need a foundation of seeing in a critical light Western Civilization's negative tendencies and dubious achievements.

No one wants to throw the baby out with the bath water, but if you had to choose between surviving and not: Can you live with not knowing more about star matter via astrophysics, nor being able to play Mozart recordings? Would it be so bad if we are reduced to pondering once again what that moon up above is really made of and how it orbits our Earth? And having to put up with more primitive music? At least we'd be alive and appreciating what we can directly sense.

The dominant culture seeks its security and self-preservation, measuring success in population growth and land conquest. But a society that is founded on outmoded beliefs, and that undermines itself long-term, will fail -- while maintaining the delusion of material power as an addictive crutch, a crutch that does not allow us to give up on it and run and flee.

People might see through this, but they refuse to act if there is no solidarity or support. Nevertheless, some are morally compelled to live as if a revolution is possible (even when they doubt it is), because they see society valuing private property more than human life. That fact is no secret, but it has to be swept under the rug by those resigned to muddle on at any cost each day for a fist-full of dollars.

Revolution as we know it is much like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, if revolutionaries see the world as constructed as an acceptable place "if only wealth was shared." The coming revolution in culture is like nothing seen before. While social justice will be part of it, and is worth fighting for, it has recently become starkly clear to more and more people worrying about global warming and petrocollapse that there is no value in gaining today's world if we are fighting for anything resembling what the industrial elite built. Their buildings, roads, harbors, jets, power generating stations, weaponry, industrial agriculture, and the whole infrastructure, have been a colossal mistake. Scientists monitoring Earth's life support system are getting to realize this, but are afraid to say it. Western Civilization has been the biggest mistake humans ever made, yet we cling to business-as-usual in false hopes of reforming the disastrous creation.

There are several reasons all this happened (not necessarily in this order):

Written language primarily served hierarchy, as typified by the elite that was (and is) involved in commerce for the purpose of greed and power. A careful reading of ancient history shows the rise of male domination and a subordination of tangible, natural images, in favor of the alphabet's power to manipulate with the left hemisphere of the brain [The Alphabet Versus the Goddess, Shlain].

Daniel Quinn is famous for pinpointing "totalitarian agriculture" as a major factor in the rise of Western Civilization. The domination of all other species is the hallmark of this "mother culture" that modern people have blindly accepted as the only rational story for our existence and origins. As the agricultural revolution enabled city-building and the division of labor, surpluses could be created and manipulated for the purposes of priesthoods and forging empires.

It has recently been reported that humanity's change toward agriculture and cities coincided with genetic change. By 200,000 years ago, people in Africa looked like modern humans. Since these super-ancient people's brain size hardly changed to the present, "the brain change that produced behaviorally modern humans must have been in structure." This line of research was covered by Newsweek in its March 19, 2007 issue by Sharon Begley, who went on to say that the source of such structural changes always comes from genes. Certain genes emerged just when language, art, culture and other products of "higher intelligence" did, as researchers found. The most recent out of three gene changes for modern humans is called ASPM and it too involved brain structure. It came about approximately 5,800 years ago: "That was just before people established the first cities in the Near East and is well after Homo sapiens attained their modern form. It therefore suggests that we are still evolving."

But Daniel Quinn pointed out to Culture Change, "If the 'brain change' that prompted city-building occurred 5,800 years ago, how is it that it occurred only among those who were practicing totalitarian agriculture?... If the whole of 'humanity' incurred a genetic change, then why did only the people of OUR culture 'change toward agriculture and cities'? ... There is no evidence whatever that the neolithic farmers were genetically different from modern-day hunter-gatherers."

The Middle Ages brought about two major discoveries that helped develop the modern world-view, and they became what may be permanent habits:

Linear perspective in painting and drawing, enabling people to disengage further from nature and be passive observers to see the world as if through a window, paved the way for ego-delusion of mind separateness. It also prepared us for television's long periods of sitting still to absorb others' suggestions. In Robert Romanyshyn's book Technology as Symptom and Dream, he wrote about "the technique of linear perspective drawing [that inaugurated] a change in human consciousness which separated the eye of distant vision from the matter of the world and the body." I have found Romanyshyn's full analysis to be as good as any for an understanding of how modern people can be so removed from their actions that they unconsciously destroy the world or allow others to destroy it.

To bolster the advent of perspective for two-dimensional images to support the status quo, the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in the mid 15th century further defined what passed for intelligence and leadership. What was assumed to be essential knowledge spread rapidly when made possible by Gutenberg's technology, and it contributed to the Renaissance and the Scientific Revolution. Now, the written credential (i.e., valuable papers) and the heavy reliance on language and documents, with the aid of in-animate images, are sacred pathways to becoming authority. These serve to ensure domination by the leading proponents of the culture's practices of deceit, aggression and oppression.

Cartesian thinking, and that of Locke and others, also helped bury Earth-centered, female-oriented spirituality that stood in the way of male authority for the emerging state and bourgeoisie. In "Dead on Arrival" (Culture Change magazine #20) we see how the forces of "science" suppressed "nature" in a form of religious war, as capitalism expanded and pagan village life was targeted.

Whether we are displaced from nature or we succumb to modern temptations to distract and divert ourselves, the idea of hierarchy must be dealt with if we are to find the key to survival as a species.

"Like the mind-set that places men above women, whites above blacks, and rich above poor, the mentality that places humans above nature is a dysfunctional delusion." - Petra Kelly, Green leader and author

Well, so much for history and how we turned out this way. The task we face is not understood by all, but in the end that doesn't matter. Whether we see our current point in history as proof of the need to dispense with civilization and its toxic, ecocidal baggage, or whether we merely see the need to promote society to do better at conserving, we will end up in the same place: After collapse of industrial society from climate chaos and petrocollapse, the vestiges of "progress" and the "religion" of science and technology will not be so central to common concerns and daily life.

The reluctance of the rich to make any sacrifice, such as to cut back on greenhouse gases significantly, is continually taken by liberals as a mild surprise or a temporary and acceptable impediment to political progress. This tolerance is much like the expectation of "greening" the polluting corporations, even though they will not give up profitable activity unless, in so doing, more profits can be made.

Regarding the need for a successor to the Kyoto Protocol, "Beijing's stance (is) that China should not have to sacrifice the emissions-intensive economic growth which industrialised nations went through on their path to greater prosperity." [Reuters, June 1, 2007] What is prosperity and who really has it? Is it splendor for all, without the external costs of manufactured plenty? Surely the cancer epidemic from petrochemicals and the looming climate disaster cannot be called prosperity, but it is all one package. It's hard to imagine anyone has a right to pursue it anymore, when this is not 1907 but 2007.

Is Beijing's attitude -- or the Iraq occupation, to take a similar example of intransigence for the sake of economic gain -- something to merely oppose with words? When will people be willing to risk arrest from Gandhian civil disobedience? Perhaps they would if they understood how prosperity has become a false game and a perverted, deadly, outmoded measurement of social values. And people would take bold action to save themselves if they realized there is no way out of the maze but to scale the wall or break it down.

Protestors in Germany for the Group of 8 meeting literally tried to break the wall down. China and the principal mega-corporations who rate as nations are encouraged by the Bush Administration's position at the Group of 8 meeting, as the White House said it would hold firm against concrete
long-term targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Then the Bushies promised to consider reductions. More effective than promises and treaties to break down the wall would be for large numbers of consumers to hold back on purchasing new items such as cars and anything shipped great distance, such as from China.

My original point is that these questions, while burning, may not be relevant when humanity is in the heat of action, as disharmony increases. Fortunately, out of the chaos and flames may come a wiser, smaller, nature-oriented alternative to global corporatism. A major question for an alternative culture to ever flower is whether carbon dioxide levels will rise much above 400 parts per million. We are already in the midst of a monumental extinction period in the history of life on Earth, due to human "progress." To count on hopes for climate salvation may be like hoping one's executioner will have a change of heart even though he still has his hood on.

The challenge we face is that we all need to act in our own collective interests to defend life immediately. If people sit by while others joust on climate policy for energy use, etc., then the short-term economic powers will push us over the brink. They already may have done so, according to many scientists studying tipping points of today's ecological reality.

Of the following innovations that became conventions, would you agree they helped move us toward extinction, and how many can you imagine doing away with?

- Non-tribal living, resulting in minimal community cohesion.

- Work -- primitive societies have no word for "work" -- usually for the gain of the rich.

- Specialization, which meant losing basic skills to survive, formerly found all in one family.

- Language as writing (as discussed in the first section above). It does not have a bad reputation, as true with most conventions, and -- like a computer in the service of good -- written language sure is handy.

- Sky-god monotheism, taking spirituality out of everyone's direct experience, propping up a patriarchy. Some would say that the only problem is people's failure to live up to prophets' messages of peace. But why do we need to follow special persons and some written moral code?

- Medical cult (later the medical industry) which replaced individual/folk healing. Treatments by others substituted for self healing. Anatomy and wonderful discoveries are saving lives, but still we face extinction, some say due to technology.

- Women's greater fertility from staying settled. Male domination, and the need for more workers and farm-hands, all helping to fuel the population boom still booming.

- Cities and Crowding, resulting in disease and the end of wild humanity. Primitive societies have no world for "free."

- Mental illness. Most modern people are disassociated from reality: through the artificial environment, people are removed from nature. Madness and disconnection became normal in their minds from their environment and the surrounding denial of the herd. Despite the herd's huge size, lack of community is rife in modern lifestyles.

- Public schools that teach compliant behavior to conform and not ask inconvenient questions. It becomes more clear that society's goal is more to control a budding work force when the arts are cut back and prisons are maximized.

- Addiction to substances, shopping, technology, and to spectator sports.

- "Progress" and "growth" as automatically good and as the real way of our species.

Note: Spectator sports and church-going have benefits, but are still institutions that are not about individual freedom and creativity. They came about only after cities and crowded conditions came along, and pass for community while in some respects undermining it. A case can be made that nature is what really needs to be worshipped, instead of a sky-god, the afterlife, and "sports gods." Other activities can be much more convivial and cohesive, and honor the wild in us as well.

The acceptance and impact of technological and sociological changes in recent decades have been covered in previous Culture Change articles; one development not dealt with is the recent convention of letting in almost anything, even the unknown, into one's body. A major change in the way people relate to the world has been brought about by unnatural, industrialized foods that are not grown in the community. This is related to the spread of toxins and radiation in and around us, as if these are acceptable costs of "progress,"

Growth and roads

Growth was never a paradigm until after the Middle Ages. Today we are attached strongly to it, just like the cancer cell is.

Every person should rightly be an economist. That is, understanding his or her householding, and by extension the whole dimension of one's area of operation in one's territory. The community's input, output and balance of resources are essential to know and live by. That's the way it always was before "economists" came on the scene.

After economics took over as a specialty to justify the rape of the planet and the enslavement of people as workers, a new specialization had to come along: Activism. Today, if activism is physically aimed against what we can call the Global Warming Economy, such activists are legally considered terrorists. Some of these alleged saboteurs were sentenced a few days ago to prison in federal court in Eugene, Oregon, These "terra-ists" got more much severe punishment for arson (that hurt no person or animal) than non-terrorists do who burn down buildings to get the insurance money.

If you don't take personally the anti-nature, money-driven affronts that occur daily we can see through open eyes, you may not be full of hate. But to feel something and care is human and essential when survival and other species'

suffering are on the line, and when justice and self-respect are of true concern.

"US economic growth slowed to 0.6 per cent last quarter in the worst performance for the economy in four years, according to the latest government estimates. The anemic performance was worse than economists expected but is likely to be viewed by the Federal Reserve as a prelude to a broad-based recovery." (Peak Oil Review, June 4) The value judgment of "worse" reflects cultural approval for unsustainable and catastrophic resource extraction.

This is no longer only a Western crime. In China,

"Every road throughout the nation is being refinished with concrete. From highways to one-lane roads that were formerly dirt, nearly every road in every province is being upgraded to allow movement of goods and people at a faster pace. This would account for China's usage of 45% of the world's cement year upon year. This is expected to grow at an average annual rate of 8.5% (or 90 million metric tons) during the 2006-2007 period... Traveling by rail through Sichuan Province and everywhere else, parallel rail lines beside existing lines are being built for rapid transit and high speed delivery of goods and people. From now to 2010 the Chinese government plans to complete an additional 19,800 kilometers of new tracks and up grade 15,000 kilometers of existing routes." (ibid) Rail is not great news in itself, particulary when it expands the global economy. But one advantage that railroads have over road building with concrete is that the making of cement is a major greenhouse gas source, and roads of asphalt mean more oil consumption.

Growth is what China wants, to beat the capitalist West at its own game and to enlarge the new Chinese elite's wealth.

Around the world, turning people into economic units, or the equivalent of machines, is so opposite to our vast preponderance of human evolution, that it is unthinkable for primitive people and our wild selves to relate to. Modern society may someday be known as yesterday's misfortune to experience.

The traditional, spiritual idea of being one, all of us and everything as one, has been systematically rejected by the innovators of capitalism and colonialism. This attitude serves their unethical and greedy agendas. A key tool to bring about acceptance of their behavior was to generate or exaggerate fear. When psychological-ops did not work, divide-and-conquer through violence and corruption did the trick. When one person sells out and can claim respectability, everyone not in the elite's game suffers immeasurably.

Expressing cultural rebellion

Fortunately, some writers and performers are asking great questions and exposing raw truth. Using performing arts to question commonplace assumptions can engage people to undermine the dominant paradigm even more than a bunch of great cartoons or paintings. For example:

Dancing in public has been suppressed by control-freak societies beginning with the ancient Romans, followed by organized religions' cracking down, continuing to this day. In her article "Dance, Dance, Revolution," Barbara Ehrenreich eloquently exposed the authorities in New York City and elsewhere who wish to suppress subversive dance [New York Times]. The fact that dancing is a threat, in any country at any time, means there is hope for healthy rebellion and a resurgence of human feeling. When Emma Goldman (1869-1940) said "If I can't dance I don't want to be in your revolution," she wasn't joking. Ehrenreich did not use this famous reference, perhaps out of the Times' intolerance for dancing around, figuratively, with an icon of anarchism.

"We learn language so we can apply for jobs, not so we can express ourselves." - Dutch singer Stef Bos [Ode, May/June 2000]

There are informative messages more poetic than essays and books that advise us of the folly of modern ways, whether from plays, films or songs. From Druids, a film by Jacques Dorfmann, 2000:

60 BC: "Just don't abandon the path of knowledge when you take the road of action."

- Archdruid (Max von Sydow), pointing to the Romans' road:
"The Romans act without true knowledge - See what they do: A sword of stone right through the living heart of land!"

"Roads: The free movement of goods and men." - Julius Caesar (Klaus Maria Brandauer)

"It's roads which use the pretext of the free movement of goods and men to accelerate the orders of the empire, which strangles us to satisfy its ambition."
Vercingetorix, king of the Gauls (from the film Druids, starring Christopher Lambert) - 52(?) BC

A song can also say it from the heart in the few words, with the additional impact of melody, harmony, beat and rhyme:

How Many Roads

How many roads

How many roads

When the first road had been built

Then our spirits could be kil't

Half the forests soon were gone

Climate change had soon begun

How many roads

How many roads

When am I gonna get

My SUV

When are we gettin' wet

From the risin' sea

No more species do evolve

Round the sun we still revolve

Solar panels, videos

Watchin' nature just indoors

How many roads

How many roads

2002, Depaver Jan

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