It is within our power – even the Unknown Consumer's!

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Culture Change Letter #113

This essay continues addressing U.S. system failure by examining power of the individual that can be combined in community. After unveiling The Unknown Consumer, this essay's analysis contains the quetion, "Is it possible to salvage the U.S. experiment, given its advance into decline and chaos?" (After you finish this Culture Change Letter, click on our Forum section to post a comment.)
I feel much sorrow for the Unknown Consumer, the poor schlump (blue collar or affluent) whom I see making any kind of purchase – what else is anybody
doing in public, besides driving?

Odds are overwhelmingly that the average
U.S. citizen - rightly called a consumer, if the shoe fits – is doing
nothing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions or the use of that deadly, strategic, dwindling commodity: oil.

Nevertheless, there is a sleeping force of change biding its time among today's unconscious and oppressed folk.

I see working people as well as disabled or unemployed people trying to manage
as low-income consumers. They constantly do things such as drink from plastic soda bottles and thus
poison themselves, thereby cheating their bodies out of clean water and honest
food. I'm sorry for these folk, but I'm getting more angry at their plight and
the greedy few who keep them in their condition and class. It is no consolation that the greedy rich are poisoning themselves too and weakening the gene pool.

Also sad is the fact that an oppressed member of society is likely to desire the usual "opportunities" that lead nowhere.

There are better approaches to dealing with "The System," even when leaders don't lead.

It used to make me almost visibly frustrated to see anyone buying junk for the landfill. But
now I just feel sadness and compassion – especially because people have no
idea of what petrochemicals are about. The people mainly trust their
government and the retail establishments selling brand names that are like
friends in many people's minds. It is left to small organizations such as Algalita Marine Research Foundation and Culture Change to enlighten the public regarding the true threat of the plastic plague.

The average U.S. citizen is a wage slave with no hope of gaining
widespread respect or amazing, exotic experience to enrich his or her life. So, in
anonymity – with corporations and the government knowing about any particular citizen
all too intrusively – the Unknown Consumer lowers his or her head and even
manages to smile.

The main thing that characterizes consumers, especially the unknown variety, is that they don't do anything but obey. One reason they eat up action movies or any kind of story is that in make-believe and in all literature and myth, characters are doing something.

The Unknown Consumer is for the most part an ignorant victim who has been brainwashed to believe that personal car ownership is essential to modern life. The average speed of the U.S. motorist is at most five (5) miles per hour, when accounting for so much time required to earn money to buy the car, pay for repairs, fuel, insurance, etc. Does this mean we are talking about a nation of fools? For three decades the 5 MPH statistic has been known to anyone who cares to learn beyond society's required knowledge.

In three decades the Earth’s climate has apparently been irretrievably altered for the worst. That is a moderate statement regarding a condition of runaway global warming. Not only has the car contributed greatly to destroying the climate, it has helped drive countless species extinct. In the U.S. alone there are one million animals slaughtered each day on the roads, and this translates to many billions of animal lives in three decades. Three million people during the same period of time were killed in the U.S. in car crashes and by diseases from exhaust fumes. The best farmland was paved over for car-based urbanism. None of this has stopped, partly because the funded environmental movement is largely a sell-out. Instead of embracing a moratorium on new road building, it embraces "clean cars" and other weak reforms of The System.

The hopeless attitude of the Unknown Consumer is paradoxical when so much empowerment is within his or her reach. But the empowerment in question is not the limited or bogus variety served up by The System. People don't see their own power, due to their unsuspected training for regimentation and believing in a U.S. democracy that is not quite what's sold or represented. This contributes to an illusion of static stability and longevity of a "growing nation."

This column has focused many times on what steps an individual or household or movement can attempt and accomplish. For decades, possibly millions of people in the U.S. have pursued elements of self-reliance. Yet, the mainstream news media and public schools do too thorough a job of misleading and deceiving. A vast illusion has been erected that consists of artificial, toxic stuff and false values.

One main principle kept from the public is that growth clearly cannot be infinite. So, no thought is given to how growth may stop (e.g., from petrocollapse) or why growth should be stopped now. What happens when growth stops? This is not even a subject of serious widespread discussion, except among the small portion of the intelligentsia familiar with ecology and the peaking of global oil extraction.

The populace does not know about entropy. The Second Law of Thermodynamics says that any transfer of energy results in some disorder and waste. The Law is known to physicists, but how many trained physicists try to decrease the entropy they cause (pollution)? A big reason entropy is not taught to the public must be that it's bad for business.

The U.S. has become known worldwide as a killing machine. This is entropy at its worst. Gone is the innocence of decades ago when there were different directions for a truly growing nation to take.

System replacement

It is reasonable to ask: is it possible to salvage the U.S. experiment, given its advance into decline and chaos? Inherent contradictions and hypocrisies have been sure to exact a price too high to bear. It appears equally questionable whether it is possible to salvage the course of our civilization, based -- as the U.S. is -- on endless resource extraction and ruthless exploitation of nature and of humanity.

Whereas this nation and other industrial societies are headed for certain collapse and possible rebirth, despite today’s maximum entropy, we may find success in making adjustments to survive. Without the abundant petroleum for modern living on which we have come to depend, and because we have isolated ourselves from nature, we will be forced to utilize our local resources sustainably. It will be somewhat easier than it would be, due to a huge population’s substantial die-off upon petrocollapse.

But it is within our power to correct the course of our culture. We can do so in one of two ways:

(1) we are forced to suddenly depart from today’s common practices of industrial society and authoritarian government, or

(2) we walk away from a failed experiment to join in a better model. (Thank you, Daniel Quinn for publishing the excellent idea.)

Whereas the majority of the mostly clueless population – guzzling gasoline and wasting money on consumer junk – seems programmed to embark on the first option (the hard way), which will result in many more casualties, a growing minority desires to live closer to nature and already tries to recycle, reuse, refuse and restore. Moreover, a subset of that minority knows from experience that solidarity gets the goods.

The aware minority would be much more effective and active if minimal economic considerations did not dictate many practices that mean playing along and selling out. It is hard when actual choices regarding any lifestyle without material ownership are scant. It is at our peril within the dominant paradigm whenever we don’t strive to be part of the Haves elite. With the reduction of the middle class, the Have-Nots are rising in number and have less and less ability to meet their own basic, human needs.

However, with a little more participation from the do-nothing segment of the population blindly acquiescing to consumerism and following questionable rules/laws/conventions, we can visualize a cultural revolution to hasten the end of destructive social behavior. It will be difficult because ecological awareness in the U.S. is in its infancy.

A case in point is the tiny area of urban land devoted to nature. Near a creek in a park in overdeveloped Fairfax County, Virginia, is a patch of land off limits to mowing. A sign announces that the plants, if allowed to grow, will improve the health of the creek and drainage. This should not have to be explained. Perhaps 99% percent of the county's land is paved or built upon, fragmented by deadly roads of pollution and by fences bad for animals and their movements. Fairfax County has the fastest "growth" in the nation, in part due to ballooning federal government-related employment.

It will be interesting to see the fate of the ignorant citizenry when fuel is no longer available for driving -- including fuel for food trucks bringing petroleum-grown produce from afar. Sudden, desperate attempts will be made to procure food and even depave parking lots for crop production. Such attempts could start happening any day now. Another example is with electrical energy use: the vaunted California conservation of 11% in 2001 that was voluntary was soon given up, and it's nothing compared to what's ahead. Everyone by now knows of global warming and that it is not a good thing. Yet, hundreds of millions of energy-sucking gadgets and appliances are being used wastefully, instead of sharing them or replacing them with non-polluting substitutes.

Substitutes for video games or watching DVDs include reading books or playing acoustic musical instruments. With a movement to educate and involve people in energy-saving and convivial practices, enough masses of people could begin immediately to take their future into their own hands. With high gasoline prices, people can start to share cars or use a bicycle, buses, trains, and actually walk. In expensive full-page ads, the American petroleum Institute has issued several conservation points for public consideration. These suggestions make hardly any difference, but the appearance of promoting responsibility and passing the buck are clear. The real story is that when enough people do not buy new cars, the economy will come tumbling down. This can only be good if it's as a result of people switching to more sustainable practices.

People could wake up to the idiocy of mass car ownership: the waste of money, the illnesses from sitting while driving, polluting the planet, risking one’s life in crashes, and the urban sprawl that results from car dependence. Yet, people are brainwashed to participate in consumerism instead of demanding walkable, clean communities.

There is nothing more pleasurable and social than a promenade whereby a town’s population walks along its harbor every pleasant evening. An example is what's done in the Azores principle city, Ponta Delgado. (I hold the smiling faces of the healthy, friendly townspeople in my memory.) It is not possible to meet people if driving in separate cars, but it is possible to thus deprive non-drivers of space, safety and clean air.

Transform the existing groups

The anti-war movement is really not a peace movement, when it agitates only for a cessation of war and imperialism. What A.N.S.W.E.R., a prominent group, does not allow is the element of sustainable living to be presented as a viable alternative to petroleum dependence/war for oil. A.N.S.W.E.R can put on a big demonstration, but the organization refuses to include in its message the idea of discouraging citizens from driving cars. The reason the so-called coalition’s hierarchy refuses to do this is that “a potential protester might want to drive to a protest rally,” as they made clear to Culture Change in 2004.

When the anti-war movement becomes a peace movement by embracing radical energy conservation such as discouraging both car use and the purchasing of new cars, it will become the social justice movement it wants to be as well as an

environmental movement. Without a comprehensive approach, we are consigned to empty reforms and a political system of expediency and continued war on the planet for consumerism, even if somehow the voracious and rapacious corporations and their government held off from more wars and "police actions.".

If today’s funded environmental movement and the anti-war movement would abandon car dependence and also push for local economics by boycotting corporate products, there could soon be an overall movement in opposition to business-as-usual headed by the cabal in the White House. But it is vital to understand that the problem is not the White House or Tony Blair or the avaricious Chinese or our home-grown inner cities' lazy/violent students, or any other convenient object of blame. Deserving of real blame is the cynical compromiser that does not lift a finger to reduce consumption. Deserving of real blame is the parent or educator that does not encourage a child to curtail energy use, minimize packaging, use local products, etc.

The average householder who is not composting – instead tossing table scraps and spoiled food into the plastic garbage bag to end up in the landfill – can be called an enemy of the planet. Granted, in dense urban areas there is not much place for compost to end up, nor are collection programs going door to door in many cities. Granted, the educational system and the lack of government leadership on such issues do create much of the problem and keep people from solving problems. However, what of those of us who know better and just keep doing nothing? Recycling one’s drink bottles does not do much good if the better option would be to just drink water or make one’s own tea and juice.

Nonprofit groups wishing to reform the system – never solving problems while being paid comfortable salaries – normally have a constituency they care about. However, redistributing the crumbs of wealth on the banquet tables of the Titanic does not address the flaws of mainstream culture, so reformers and wannabe leaders are often worse than useless. This is because valuable time is being wasted when people could be coming together to save seeds, plant urban gardens, learn bicycle repair, revive sewing, and constructing grey water systems and construct composting toilets. Additionally, people need to actively oppose poor practices such as more road construction and more paving, instead of just reading by chance about a rare protest in the back pages of a newspaper.

Trash the system

The above approach trashes the dominant system of waste, and brings about citizen action tending toward solidarity and opposition to today’s powers that be. However, the goal of any active, aware citizen concerned about the health of the ecosphere and our common economic future should be system replacement. The new system must be nature itself. If we do not actively reject the present artificial, wasteful system now, it will go out the door with a disastrous explosion (collapse) and suddenly deprive most people of food, water and heat. We are getting the warnings now, such as with hurricanes and their consequences, and the warnings are ignored by the incompetent political leaders as well as the Unknown Consumer.

If instead we prepare for petrocollapse and begin to get to know our

neighbors, and start taking responsibility for our own lives, we will rapidly gain a measure of control in our own ecosystems. We will help one another and start to save the Earth from complete depletion of resources and maximum entropy. The answers have never been found in the major newspapers, the evening TV news, or even in the liberal bastions of propaganda such as NPR or Sierra Club magazine. (The car ads should be all the tip-off we need.). Some answers are out there on the internet, but there is no substitute for action in the streets and in the living rooms.

There is no freedom gained from playing the game by the rules of the dominators. Elections do nothing to fundamentally change things, even if they are honest elections. Rather, it is the act of getting arrested or risking it, in great numbers, that has really changed societies in the past.

We have to know where we want to get to. Switching the President or passing some better laws will not change how we live. To really change our energy habits and start to run our own lives in actual communities, such as in tribes, is to see the passing of the most destructive civilization ever known. A fraudulent “democracy” has failed to provide for the common good and to protect the land, air and water.

It is time to use the power within us to choose sustainable living and create our real homes: in the bosom of our village, sharing the land and protecting nature from greedballs so rife in today’s “advanced” societies. In so doing, we will eventually spare the world from imperialist ventures tearing up whole populations such as in Iraq today and Vietnam, Iran, Korea and other lands in the past. A new world is ours for the making and sharing with all life.

[editor's note: the companion piece to the above essay is Culture Change Letter #112, "System failure requires visionary opposition movement" by Jan Lundberg at

http://culturechange.org/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=27&Itemid=2]

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Links and further reading:

The Pledge for Climate Protection just happens to be applicable to peak oil and petrocollapse:
http://www.culturechange.org/global_warming_pledge.html

Energy and Equity, a small book by Ivan Illich published in the mid-1970s
Support Culture Change online by making a donation. Help us do more to raise awareness, such as following up our NYC Petrocollapse Conference:
http://www.culturechange.org/funding.htm