

Emergence of active citizenry prior to petrocollapse?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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If I have my finger on the political pulse of the nation right now, my sense of things is not centered around the plummeting popularity of George W. Bush. Rather, it is more the news from the sometimes arrogant U.S. Supreme Court that has been so illuminating. The Senate can act blatantly elitist as well, and such behavior exposes not only the fatal flaws of government but some fundamental contradictions of our society.

I am convinced, partly from occasional newspaper headlines, that there must be a reaction brewing at street level and even in suburban McMansions: freedoms and decency are being stolen, while the people are expected to take it on the chin. At some point people do not wait for the next election, only to be fooled again. No, by god, they start depaving their driveways, planting gardens, riding bikes, and just saying no to corporate globalization. Or something less logical, at first?

It seems many of us are not only noticing the same things but coming to the same conclusions despite our political persuasions or affiliations. I don't refer to the usual news analysis about Republican power-grabbing, for example; a constant focus on the outrage du jour is too superficial for grasping the big picture. Is it time for a radical critique? Looking at the cultural basis of our crises does it for me.

Up and down the socioeconomic classes people are screwing up, mainly because people are already suffering hard enough times -- we really all are, when we consider the better-off folks are unfulfilled or perhaps seriously worried about the world. A failed experiment known as Modern Society is being allowed to play itself out, which will result in much harder times before we come to convergence in new cultures to embrace sustainable living; ultimately, there's no choice if there is to be a future for the human race. Polluting for profit, for example, will have to be banished to the dustbin that is history.

List of transgressions, betrayals and monkey business

With the Senate's recent vote allowing the placement of liquified natural gas (LNG) facilities regardless of local opposition, the list of outrages has gotten a little longer. But there is one question never asked in the corporate media: how much authority does the government really have when other forces -- social and geological (having to do with petroleum reserves) -- may have greater and greater weight and influence on our lives? When the government and other institutions do not address these forces -- except to deny them -- the power structure weakens, becomes less relevant and is increasingly bypassed. A crackdown is usually attempted which, even if successfully executed, ultimately fails.

Reaction against the bogusly justified Iraq War is on the rise, but "foreign policy" alone is not enough to galvanize the U.S. public unless it hits home hard. Whether that happens or not, from whatever source, there is more afoot -- and it goes to our sense of survival as Americans wishing for a decent or improving life. Perhaps high oil and gasoline prices are soon to be a spark for a leveling of the Babylon-like, increasingly unjust, dysfunctional, and out-of-touch system of government and profiteering. The question of the hour may be: Will an effective social-change movement come into play before petrocollapse while society is still intact?

The apparently stolen U.S. elections of 2000 and 2004 got the attention of almost everybody, however far back in our minds we pushed the disturbing reality. Even though I was not a fan of Al Gore, I was outraged when he somehow lost the 2000 election. This was a man whom I talked with about climate change and nuclear power in 1988, and he at least apologized for the by-product of plutonium as he defended his pro-nuclear stance. In December 2000 it was an affront to the American people for the actual winner of the presidency to lose such an election in a top-down, partisan process hijacked by the Supreme Court, whereby the poorly counted vote and fraud in Florida were swept under the rug. The people watched mostly in silence, but did not forget. Corporate owned electronic voting machines and vote registration/counting/polling irregularities in the last two U.S. presidential elections show the heavy hand of the ruling elite.

A model for sustainability

Compared to a collapsing economy or nature battling last, I don't put much hope in social movements -- about as much hope as I can have over another excellent stack of Worldwatch Institute reports. But it's unavoidable to be tempted to imagine that people won't keep being such sheep and may all of a sudden start protesting. An example of such a success is down the street from where I write: People's Park in Berkeley, California, a working symbol of people saying no to government power even when it's armed and murderous. It has endured as a wooded community garden and performance space where Food Not Bombs feeds the hungry -- and the community would never, never allow it to again be threatened by the government trying to pave it over.

There are still a fair number of activists and concerned citizens everywhere, although diffused, trying to do something for the common good, but the masses of folk refuse to wake up. They are drugged out on mass media, overwork, poor food and water, materialism, and on drugs as well. Yet, if enough people are fed up with government, the only missing element is a catalyst for change through possible upheaval. Ideally the process of fundamental change will be peaceful.

More factors in emergence

Nevertheless, a huge animal of epic proportions is going to stir to life angrily sooner or later. The Great Upending (a take-off on author Joanna Macy's "The Great Turning") could be more politically based than I now imagine. Here's one intellectual exercise along those lines that may be more real to some than it is to me:

"Is a revolution possible against government intrusion, corruption and incompetence?" If so, it may be after the horse has left the barn and the barn's falling down (peak oil and petrocollapse) -- yoo-hoo, radical activists and historians! Also overheard on the street:

With the U.S. Supreme Court deciding in June against homeowners who wish to keep their houses in the face of demolition forces of development, the public must be in a foul mood. Even those who don't own housing, and may never afford to do so, can relate to the unfairness of such a legal system that kicks people out of their homes. Previously the eminent domain clause was bad enough, that a road could deprive someone of personal property and one's family roots. Now the law has included business "parks" for commercial profit to be forced on the affected citizenry. As Steelonsteel.com's John Loeffler points out, the point of this new wrinkle in loss of freedom is for municipal government to grab more lucrative property-tax income. How this objective appeals to the Supreme Court seems to lie in government's demanding more power to make way for "progress."

We in the U.S. need to remember that in Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan people are regularly deprived of homes and even their lives -- for the crime of living in countries where U.S. or U.S.-paid oppressors have designs for "democracy" and "freedom."

At least when it happens in the U.S. there is compensation to the victim's losing a home that he or she owns. If one is not an owner in the U.S., there's as little security every single day as in many countries that the corporate media and the U.S. government paint as disasters. At least in those traditional societies the family as an institution is ever-strong. In the U.S. the "American Dream" is becoming more unattainable, with homelessness on the rise. Still, secure consuming through ownership is supposedly the ticket -- until the game is called on account of weather (climate change or "oil storm").

The new U.S. law on eminent domain raises questions about whether freedom and security really exist anymore, if they ever really did for anyone without property. Yet it is the outraged house-owning patriot who often becomes most incensed. The only consolation to those resigned to "the System" may be that states can still have their laws on eminent domain, as long as they don't contradict federal law.

Back to LNG: The Los Angeles Times reported on June 22, 2005 that "The Senate voted on Wednesday to give federal regulators authority over the location of liquefied natural gas terminals, despite objections from governors that states should be have an equal say in deciding where such projects are built." If this does not tip people against the whole system of U.S. government or any government, then it's because people blindly want LNG terminals in their back yards for the energy -- even though it will not be cheap.

What's absurd is that the necessary number of terminals will not be built in time to make a significant difference in energy supplies. So we see, from the top-down decision making regarding highly dangerous LNG and hugely expensive terminals and pipelines, that the growth mongers at the control of "the System" are a little more desperate all the time. Today it may be war on the Iraqis, tomorrow it may be war on U.S. Americans -- if only on the pocketbook, for the whole country will not be able to rally around the LNG threat. It's worth noting that "divide and conquer" is still in use.

The list of freedoms being deleted by the federal government is long. It need not seem so mysterious, given population pressures and dwindling resources. But knowing this, and despite the need for understanding, it does not calm the dispossessed and so many cornered slave-like members of society who wonder more and more what the nation is coming to. They see they were hoodwinked into another war and know they lost or gave up some freedoms through a Patriot Act. Almost half of all New Yorkers believe the U.S. government was behind the World Trade Center attacks [source: Zogby polls]; I happen to disagree that the actual perpetrators, whoever the one-lone-nut or rogues gallery was involved, is so central: we are simply witnessing a madness called Western Civilization.

Convergence

But now it's time for people to move onward and deal with food and water come the petrocollapse around the corner. The collapse of the Twin Towers was a mild foretaste of the petro-powered colossus's sputtering end. (See "End-time for U.S.A. upon oil collapse - A scenario for a sustainable future" - Culture Change Letter #100)

Another diminution of government credibility, among a large subculture at least, is when the U.S. Supreme Court decided this spring that medical use of marijuana is not legitimate. Does "interstate commerce" really apply? Don't traditions of states' rights and individual freedom remain to the citizenry as prime, and when contradicted, is there not further erosion of respect for law? Does this court-ruling change people's minds that they are having harmless behavior or herbal-cure health care regulated and punished? Or are people chalking up the tightening of the social noose to a religious denial of tolerance? If the latte, a severe violation between the separation of church and state must be felt.

Much more serious is war as an example of state-sanctioned murder. After George W. Bush's justification of "staying the course" in Iraq, delivered to a military audience this week, the corporate media and politicians are still ignoring the parallel of the Vietnam debacle and genocide. It may escape the president, but it is widely known that the Iraq invasion and occupation is an uncanny similarity to the Soviet invasion and occupation of Afghanistan that drained the Soviet nation and its middle class, bringing the USSR down. Instead, to wear the mantle of patriotism, the New York Times continues to preach "competence" in better war-making, such as with more soldiers. The U.S. military-industrial complex has no right to be in Iraq or to shed blood anywhere else on a preemptive basis. The simple, clear slogan "Out Now" is available mainly to people in the streets. The dark side of America, however, is not just personified by Bush. Anyone clinging to a dying way of life that exploits the Earth and other people is also part of the problem.

As the U.S. government increasingly makes a joke of itself, laws will be ignored or opposed with greater frequency and

confidence. However, this won't mean much compared to the greater forces of ecology and the economy soon to seize all our attention. That will be rather soon, for events such as petrocollapse are like a tsunami we can see in the distance rumbling toward us but we don't take precautions because we've never personally experienced it before. Worse, people are in denial as most addicts are.

The possibility of people getting fed up enough in a political sense to get really active and mobilize for a regime shift -- almost like the American War of Independence -- are things one can hear from scattered everyday people, but only time will tell and very soon.

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A syndicated radio interview of Jan Lundberg was conducted June 29, 2005 by Steel On Steel, hosted by John Loeffler. It will be online this weekend, and here is the user-name and password: lundberg (all lower case) for each prompt. Visit

http://steelonsteel.com/broadcast_date.php?year_month_num=2005-06
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Jan Lundberg's Culture Change Letter #100:

End-time for U.S.A. upon oil collapse - A scenario for a sustainable future

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