

Peak oil odyssey: the revolution will not be televised, nor will television be revolutionized

Contributed by John Siman
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I've always loved to teach and have, over the years, internalized much of the good old Socratic methodology -- teaching not by indoctrination, not by forcing the student's agreement, but by helping her to discover a clarity of thought which she already had inside of her. Socrates himself referred to this gentle way as intellectual midwifery. So whenever I consider a difficult question, I automatically think to myself, Could a bright and motivated teenager figure this out -- conceive of its implications clearly -- with only a little external guidance from me?

Right now I'm thinking that there is probably not a single bright and motivated teenager in the entire U.S.A. who could figure out the implications of Global Peak Oil without being indoctrinated in some forceful and demanding manner.

For imagine what would happen if we, in the gentle Socratic tradition, tried to guide her, for example, by assigning her an introduction to Global Peak Oil as a term paper project. She would find out fairly quickly that essentially all of the mainstream sources -- the official sources, that is -- from the United States Geological Survey to the International Energy Agency to Daniel Yergin's Cambridge Energy Research Associates -- speak as with one voice about the abounding abundance of oil.

She would also, of course, quickly come across the name of Matthew Simmons and his book about the sudden sodden twilight of cheap oil and the imminent end of all modern economic growth. This is true. Simmons has not yet been excluded from our NationalMediaChatroom. But our bright and motivated student would most likely encounter Simmons in the context of, say, a National Public Radio interview, on which his voice would be expertly edited to sound rather shrill and panicked, as if emanating from the wilderness.

And justifiably so, at least from the point of view of those who run our NationalMediaChatroom. For Simmons' voice does, even for all of his insider and establishment and big-money credentials, evoke a certain ascetic, southwestern-desert prophetic tradition (and, moreover, one suspects that his breath might be faintly redolent of locusts and honey - indeed at a conference sponsored by the Pentagon back in June, he did say, and rather out of the blue as I've been told, that it was time for us Americans to go back to the soil).

So then. Our bright and motivated teenager could only infer that Simmons, this Houston-based clear-thinking super-successful Harvard-educated Republican C.E.O. represents a minority viewpoint. And she would be right.

And she would therefore say to herself, Mention Simmons in a footnote or something like that to let Teacher know that I've been thorough in my research. But leave it at that.

And since she actually is thorough in her research, she would also quickly come across the names of James Howard Kunstler and Richard Heinberg, who, unlike Simmons, are decidedly not interviewed on National Public Radio (to say nothing of FoxNews, though I personally am willing to argue that there are no longer any salient differences between the two).

So she'd link to Kunstler's ClusterfuckNation, and she'd say to herself, Clusterfuck, no way am I even putting this in a footnote. And she'd link to Heinberg's MuseLetter, and she'd see that he's contributing to a book by Project Censored titled The Case for Impeachment of Bush and Cheney, and she'd say to herself, All I need now is to be added to HomeLand Security's database just as I am filling out my college applications.

So much for assigning Global Peak Oil as a term paper project to help a bright and motivated teenager conceive of her own clear thoughts on the matter.

And so as a Socratic teacher, an intellectual midwife, I'd be at a loss. And I would have to take a few steps back and reconsider how I myself learned about Global Peak Oil in the first place. And here is how it happened. In real time. In real life.

Back in June of 2003 I was at an intellectual dead-end. I knew in my gut that there was something fundamentally wrong about how America, about how my country, was turning out, but I couldn't for the life of me put a finger on it.

So what could I do?

What I could do was dial 1-555-long-distance-information and phone Jim Kunstler at his home somewhere in Shangri-la, New York and ask, in a polite and engaging fashion, Dude, what the f--k is going on?

-- Peak Oil is what the f--k is going on, he replied.

-- And what the f--k is Peak Oil?

-- Start by reading Heinberg. Call me back when you think you understand it.

And so I did. And so here I am.

I was indoctrinated, told what to think, told what the reality was – not gently midwifed through some personal conceiving of a not-as-yet evident truth already nascent within the matrix which I call my soul.

And so what if I had not phoned Jim Kunstler on that day in June of 2003? What if I had not been told – by a prominent writer whom I already read and respected -- to shut up, pay attention, and learn about all of the technical jargon, all of the arcane number-crunching, all of the ineluctable implications of the Second Law of Thermodynamics?

I wouldn't have taken Global Peak Oil seriously as an imminent global catastrophe.

So why should anyone else?

For the experience of Global Peak Oil means Peak everything made by oil, and that means Peak more of just about anything than we ever ever ever had before. In terms of total energy, in terms of getting and spending, in terms of the total get-off which we call consumerism, we've never had it so good. In all of human history. And even with three dollars a gallon at the pump and a permanent apocalypse in the Mideast and global climate bakeoff, the total get-off still seems only to be getting better. The party's not over. Not quite yet.

That's what we Americans are experiencing right now, and that's what we have been experiencing (with the occasional holocaust) since our grandparents were born.

It's not too much of a generalization to say that all of our experience indicates eternal material progress. And all of our common-sense and practical knowledge tells us that there will always be more. Even the few remaining hippies, for all of their Buddhist and ecological and Third World sympathies, believe this.

There is therefore no way to persuade any American who has not already (for whatever deep-felt and seemingly spiritual reasons) rejected eternal material progress to believe that the future is going to be about less.

Our message can therefore, until after we pass Peak, never go mainstream. It can never be televised.

Nor can television ever be broadcast outside of the mainstream.

"The revolution will not be televised," nor will television be revolutionized.

For the mainstream which makes television, which makes the Internet and the Interstates, which makes all of our techn-goodies possible, consists of flows of trillions of barrels of oil (seasoned, of course, with fantastic amounts of coal, natural gas, and nukes).

Until we pass Peak, until the Party actually is over, we can warn other Americans not in great numbers but only a few at a time, and not with gentle Socratic teaching but only with urgent indoctrination: You have to listen to me now, we will say, You have to know this.

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Further reading/References:

NPR: Experts Ponder Peak of Global Oil Production

Listen to this story - click on the headline to the story using a RealAudio or WindowsMedia player.

www.npr.org

Simmons & Company International:

www.simmonsco-intl.com

"The maturation of Matt Simmons, energy-industry investment banker and peak oil guru" written by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #134 - June 24, 2006:
culturechange.org/cms

James Howard Kunstler's website:

www.kunstler.com

Richard Heinberg's website including his Museletter:

www.richardheinberg.com/