The Zombie Shopping Empire Maintains "It Can't Happen Here"

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Listening to Thunderclap Newman, a revolutionary rock band of 1969-1971, it's clear that then, as now, we didn't know where we were going. Their number-one song in the UK, "Something In The Air," proclaimed "the revolution's here." In those heady days there was far more optimism for the revolution, defined variously in Marxist terms or what came to be lumped into "New Age" consciousness. The Movement and its revolution did not succeed in changing society's course, as The Movement soon fragmented into submovements which survive today (feminist, environmental, peace, gay rights, etc.).

The answer to the question "Why not now" (for a revolution) has to do with (a) the worsening state of the Earth, saddening and depressing many, and (b) the power of what we can call the monumental greed machine and its police state. The U.S.'s and mega corporations' long suppression of people's movements is well-known, and is ongoing. Turn on any electronic media, and you get frivolity rather than revolutionary content (e.g., "Something in the Air"). Unfortunately, youth seem to believe that techno-toys are liberating -- until they can really have it all with a nice new car.

Some young adults and oldsters believe a revolution is in store more than ever today, but conditions have changed since the old-style 20th century social-justice and political revolutions. Did those revolutions really succeed, or were they only a changing of the guard? Is redistributing the economic pie outmoded, when it is a toxic pie?

Revolution can come, but it may accompany much more chaos than ever seen before, such as epic food riots with no relief. The population size in the U.S. since 1970 has jumped by over 50% from 203 million to over 310 million today. Demographically, far fewer people have direct access to land and water. Moreover, their skills to subsist are steadily poorer, despite the hippies' Back to the Land movement and the present efforts of the Transition Town movement. Globally in 1970 there were 3.7 billion people, and now we are hitting 7 billion. The strain on the ecosystem may mean it's too late to get our political house in order while Gaia waits. For she does not wait, as she seems to be sloughing off a fever or infestation by non-self-disciplined humans.

Also in the U.S., compared to 1970, the average person's slavery for the corporatocracy is more intense; people involuntarily work more hours for less money. Most significant for our declining wealth, per capita energy consumption has been declining for decades, as oil reached its peak extraction in the U.S. by 1971. Crude oil prices jumped several times in the 1970s. Oil products are far more expensive today than in the 1970s when there was still enough abundant cheap energy to allow economies and populations to grow fast and irresponsibly. Oil prices today seem very high but are actually much higher, by tens of dollars per barrel, when numerous subsidies -- hidden and direct -- are accounted for.

The U.S. has in the past witnessed no end of other nations' catastrophes, and has unleashed a few as well. For the most part we have so far been spared. Truly massive loss of life (besides roughly five million killed in U.S. car crashes and exhaust-related diseases since 1970) has always occurred "over there" except for during the U.S. Civil War. But now we see climate disruption hitting home faster, as some of us knew it would since global warming became more clear about a decade ago. Fires, floods, droughts are busting out, and these will multiply until one day a large region's food or water supply gets severely disrupted and affects the U.S. as a whole. We may then find ourselves too crippled to absorb a major event, as we managed to do after the Katrina and Rita hurricanes. Just as Japan may never recover from the Fukushima triple disaster of earthquake, tsunami and (especially) the nuke station meltdowns, a crippling event can hit the U.S., even before petrocollapse.

For the U.S., "It can't happen here" is a fantasy perhaps first questioned by Sinclair Lewis in 1935, whose novel of that name explored American fascism. Then Frank Zappa and The Mothers in 1966 satirically suggested "freak out in Kansas... Minnesota..." to hint that suburbia may not endure.

The world has recently seen revolutions sprout up like weeds. The Wisconsin protesters' occupation of the state capitol this year was barely a foretaste of what CAN happen here. One could interpret the Madison occupation as a healthy pro-labor/Democrat rebellion, but it is more: the unhealthy growth economy is faltering in a system that has always enshrined greed, so that the middle class erodes first and fastest.

The strategy of hiding from the reality of social and ecological upheaval works in the short term at best. The dutiful consumer who keeps his or her head down, working at a meaningless job just to pay bills, can try to feel immune and separate from the hapless homeless folk. But material success can become history quite fast, because "It CAN happen here" and will. For several decades the U.S. has been living high off the hog at other nations' expense, and at the expense of Mother Earth. Cheap oil's affluence has been attributed to good ol' 'merican ingenuity or the "work ethic." Another imagined factor in American exceptionalism is the racist notion of white superiority, as the more bracing climate of North America begets productivity compared to southern climes (where people happen to enjoy closer family cohesion and more fiestas).

Where does material success get someone, if he or she is not as healthy as the simple-living low-carbon footprint citizen? The advantages of material success may mean extra comforts and less worry, but this illusory state of mind relies on false security. A top topic among those conscious of both the trap of materialism and the dilemma of working to pay bills instead of preparing for community-centered simple living, is "How can I do more for the future?" It is often unanswered. And the positive impulse is often dampened by the more fearful and fatalistic "What difference will it make if I try or do not, when disaster and collapse are coming anyway?" For the pessimists, it's all just a matter of time.

The Grand Idiocy: the American Exception

The Grand Idiocy of U.S. society is multifaceted. It has for decades propped up the sham of an economy that "must" pave over the best farmland, "must" be financially inequitable, "must tolerate" toxic poison, and "must" live with nuclear power because "we need" the energy. But as collapse approaches, the Grand Idiocy is increasingly about denying "it can't happen here" regarding social unrest. The seemingly oblivious masses, calm for now, may celebrate the Fourth of July, but holidays have become more of a respite from overwork and are rare instances of minimal convivial social interaction. The throngs of humanity on beaches on summer weekends, where people are generally getting along, is deceptive. No one seems to be conscious to the folly of "it can't happen here" pandemonium.

Land use in the U.S. is dictated by speculation, profit, corruption, the notion of endless space, and privatizing the shrinking commons. This idiotic inefficiency may be second only to the insanity of importing more and more of our goods and food from thousands of miles away by burning polluting, dwindling oil. Looking at a typical neighborhood of relatively affluent consumers, the expanse of asphalted pavement devoted to cars on any street jumps out at a bicyclist as deadening. Such a waste of space not only adds to global warming; it is a killing field for car-related roadkill and running over children or the elderly. Is it not crazy that hardly any of the residents have anything to do with growing their own food when the space is there? When I've just forked over a lot my hard earned cash for a bag of food, and I ride my bike past fruit trees laden with plums and oranges, I shake my head in wonder, disgust and sadness over what might be if we behaved consciously. In the same neighborhood a public school is now tearing up a huge grass playing field to replace it with plastic, toxic astroturf. This is a trend in California. So children learn that adults are hard-hearted, anti-nature bosses, when the kids could be learning to grow food they may well need soon -- if not playing on real, oxygen-giving grass.

The Grand Idiocy may be an apt name for the late American Experiment. I playfully christened it in the 1990s as the United Paved Precincts of America. In my less tolerant moods I have spelled America "Amerikkka" when I think, for example, of the racist reaction to the presidency of Barack Obama.

The Shopping Zombies for Empire might be a fair label for U.S. citizens oblivious to oil wars of aggression. It is pitiable that hundreds of thousands of desperate young people join the military ostensibly for employment or education, when defense of their country is not really at issue. They don't seem to stop and think that illegal wars using illegal means amount to crimes that anyone connected is accountable for, as the Nuremburg trials determined. "It -- Nuremburg-like trials -- CAN happen here." Wait, a price is being paid already for invading countries in the Middle East: an epidemic of suicide and illnesses related to depleted uranium and forced vaccinations.

"Go shopping..." - George W. Bush's presidential and healing wisdom after Sept. 11, 2001

Can we graduate from or escape The Grand Idiocy? It's unlikely without collapse, because we are conditioned each day to be a good imperial citizen. Go to work, go shopping, don't ask questions. Vote every once in a while. If voting made a real difference it would be illegal.

As I daydream while pedaling or falling asleep, I tick off finger by finger maybe a dozen non-idiotic things I'd like to see happen on a grand scale:

• Gardening

• Sharing the gleanings of fruit trees

• Bartering

• Depaving and food-not-lawns

• Bike and bike-cart/trailer assembly

• Skill sharing

• Street parties and meeting neighbors

• Community organizing

• Land trust purchases for low-income housing

• Cooperative living, such as for child care and elder care

• Removing deposits from banks and instead using credit unions

• Going car-free or not buying a new car

--- the list goes on easily!

Inklings of awakening and resistance slip through the media minders. For example, the Food Not Bombs group is always ready to say "no" to cold-hearted authorities in any city it operates in:

Citing Homeless Law, Hackers Turn Sights on Orlando

The hacker group Anonymous disabled several Web sites as
punishment for the city's arrests of people who help feed
the homeless. - New York Times, July 1, 2011

It would be extremely helpful if more Americans could permanently tune out the corporate-media illusion, and instead identify and banish their delusions. Shopping less, and doing more for oneself and one's family on the consciously local level, is not a hard path. The question is how much can be accomplished by a social movement that is barely off the ground, before "It IS happening here."

Lest you believe state violence might be overthrown by popular violence, consider that the military and law enforcement have increasingly become one super-armed force in the U.S. -- toward citizens primarily. It can easily be adapted from present heavy-handed carrying out of search warrants for drugs, to more overtly political ends. A militant rebellion, romanticized by writers such as Ted Rall, Derrick Jensen and Micah White, would be easily crushed unless the militant revolutionaries were suddenly so numerous and organized that millions of people would convene to disarm and contain

the militarized police and home-based troops. But consider the firepower and size of the growing SWAT (Special Weapons Attack Team) capabilities, by reading
Why Do the Police Have Tanks? The Strange and Dangerous Militarization of the US Police Force. "The federal government has supplied local police departments with military uniforms, weaponry, vehicles, and training." (AlterNet, by Rania Khalek, July 5, 2011)

The race between our social evolution and overshooting our environment with (unacknowledged) overcrowding is not looking very favorable for turning around today's alarming species extinction. If species extinction is something for "only other species to worry about," let's remember that we are a species too. Homo Exterminatore (destroyer) has built, extracted and destroyed our way far beyond ecological carrying capacity. Can we become Homo Benignus (benign)? While we can cheer on a revolution, in what context are we doing so? Maybe we are not seeing the whole picture when we rail against plutocrats and dogmatic oppressors who are merely reflections of our dominant culture.

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Further reading:

Nonviolence is key for truly lasting social change toward a sustainable world: read recent Culture Change reports Greeting the Fall of the Empire: a Message of Peace (headlined alternately as "Vision: Why the Fall of American Empire Can Be a Good (and Peaceful) Thing" in AlterNet, and Minimize violence: Prepare for collapse and "new" culture, both by Jan Lundberg.

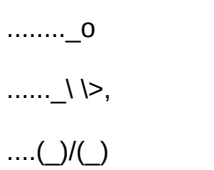
Food Not Bombs and "Anonymous" in Orlando:
nytimes.com

U.S. and world
population data and insights

Joining the ranks of Ted Rall who called for violent revolution in his 2010 book Anti-American Manifesto, Micah White of Adbusters magazine wrote "Revolution in America" (although the magazine is Canadian, but North American) at micahmwhite.com.

"Something in the Air" by Thunderclap Newman on YouTube.

"It Can't Happen Here" by The Mothers on YouTube.

Military and law enforcement policy has become one approach:
Why Do the Police Have Tanks? The Strange and Dangerous Militarization of the US Police Force, AlterNet.org, by Rania Khalek, July 5, 2011.

Zbigniew Brzezinski thinks it WILL happen here: Middle Class Unrest To Hit U.S.