

Keeping a lid on the twin unravelings

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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The political system -- and the things it carries out that we hate, such as war, pollution and virtual enslavement of most of the people -- is a logical outgrowth of a huge population being managed. Making our political rulers' job easier of late, we happen to have increasingly restrictive IVs stuck in our veins to supply us with oil every day. This helps us act as if other issues are far more important: "Gimme more channels of teevee and frozen dessert to enjoy in my fossil-fueled McMansion."

A huge number of animals trying to maximize their self-interest are of course going to invade other countries and try to get ever richer -- even admitting that "we need the oil." It's almost easy to laugh about and take philosophically; easy when you're not being pummeled by a U.S. soldier for the crime of being a poor Iraqi, for example (the victim du decade of Yankee imperialism).

But the outrage of the American progressive citizen can be a bit misplaced and unproductive: If the idea is to achieve social justice and demand a bigger piece of the pie, (1) this won't work, and (2) what if it's an arsenic pie? The whole pie (the System) needs to be thrown out, and anyway it is completely unsustainable. It may not be possible or advisable to accelerate system collapse, but we need to start redefining success, as Congressman Roscoe Bartlett says.

Alas, a more attractive model of modern society, such as the Parisian with a nicer transportation system and tasteful buildings, is no longer in the realm of possibility for the gluttonous, oblivious U.S. For the U.S. to become twice as energy-efficient -- Europe's per capita energy use -- this is not going to suffice because the plentiful energy is about to disappear, I predict before the decade is out. Even though a Toyota driver often feels like a better conserver of the planet than an SUV driver, it can be like the pot calling the kettle black. Car-free is the answer, ultimately. The question is not so much whether one owns a car, but whether one is dependent on it.

The idea of education in order to understand the evils of the system is often another misplaced priority. What's needed is to keep in mind that the news media, the government and all the large institutions are mainly intent on KEEPING A LID ON IT. When the so-called leaders of this nation seem to be in denial, or are mistakenly pursuing war to secure the nation's "SUV fuel," it's not that people in power don't understand: their denial is part of the act of KEEPING A LID ON IT. The whole game is so corrupt and greed-oriented -- as human animals will be when they operate in a dominant culture of materialism -- that the powers-that-be must do all they can to keep people mesmerized by any distraction available. In addition, people are purposely divided and given bogeymen to fear. The system isn't working for most of us and its days are numbered, but the cynical idiots steering the Titanic figure they can at least make some more big bucks and let God and the Devil sort everything out later.

To step back and put things in perspective, if we can forget about attaining the McMansion (or buying a second McMansion), and realize that "too many rats in the cage" are fouling the water dish -- we will never be a zillion peaceful Buddhas -- we can identify two huge unravelings. The economy and everything related to it is unraveling. It is only a matter of time when the smoke-and-mirrors of maximizing growth are totally ineffectual, and the global corporate economy implodes. Along with this collapse will probably be government vanishing as we know it. The die-off from energy/food/water deprivation on a massive scale will result in a much smaller population left more to its own devices, such as growing food locally.

While it's becoming widely suspected that Western Civilization has been a great mistake, as we'll see when it hits the wall in our lifetimes, and while it's true this dominant culture does not necessarily equate to "human nature," one's hopes should not be relied upon for a better culture to prevail in future without some dues to pay: too many people are here on Earth today, and it's too late for them all to become more efficient and kind in order to stay. The success of a sustainable culture will rely on a much lowered population. About a billion could be sustained if industry had not trashed the ecosystem. We'll find out what today's Earth's carrying capacity really is.

This brings us to the other unraveling (2) that's much worse, especially in the long term: climate distortion. Global warming is probably out of control. As natural systems unravel and spiraling greenhouse gas generation feeds on itself, this could mean most life forms go extinct. It has happened before, but we are barely beginning to see the effects of the greenhouse we are constructing. There will be no escape, so why do we tolerate what the global warmers (you and me, too) are doing, as I write this and you read this?

The latest global crime against truth is from the White House -- no surprise. The New York Times reported on June 8, 2005 that Philip Cooney, chief of staff for the White House Council on Environmental Quality, "removed or adjusted descriptions of climate research that government scientists and their supervisors, including some senior Bush administration officials, had already approved. In many cases, the changes appeared in the final reports." Before going to the White House in 2001, Cooney was the 'climate team leader' and a lobbyist at the American Petroleum Institute. I could call them whores, but I myself was in the service of the API as well, when my company's data and reputation occasionally served the agendas of industry, government agencies and utilities in the 1970s and '80s.

The race is on between the unraveling economy and the unraveling biosphere. Which one devastates first is merely academic. They are both inescapable threats and ought to be dealt with as best we can. Author James Howard Kunstler (The Long Emergency, 2005) is rightly outraged as he rails against the nation's leaders for not taking the threat of oil collapse seriously, by, for example, rebuilding rail transport. But is it too late for that, if the task is too monumental and the energy will not be available? He is right in terms of political analysis: he recently said to me that the current state of the U.S. can be described as "Nascar Nation Meets the Weimar Republic."

"The Land of Plenty" by Tammy deGruchy for the National Coalition for the Homeless
courtesy Street Spirit magazine

Meanwhile, alternative social systems and just plain people are pursuing survival strategies that are commendable for the sharing and common sense applied. It is important that we realize there is not going to be a greener version of the same "Babylon system" we see around us today. Europe and its less ostentatious consumption levels and huge population is not sustainable either. The good old days are still here for the dominant culture. They will soon be a memory, although there is plenty wrong with today.

The smaller the institution, the better it will work. Food Not Bombs is an example of a working, efficient institution with no bureaucracy. People are fed because resources are shared, and it's not about money. Even the lack of land in the hands of the majority of the people is transcended. One of the "secrets" to success for Food Not Bombs is that no one owns it. It is freely "franchised" to be anywhere and everywhere. Solidarity and full stomachs are wonderfully effective. There is enough food wasted to go around much better, but this approach is not not enough of a solution for a whole society on fast-dwindling petroleum.

The larger an institution is, the more it supports the status quo and the more it needs to be boycotted and encouraged to cease. Small groups that work together within themselves and using networking are the future. Everyone will be a hands-on survivor and will have to help with the tasks at hand for the sake of the community.

The Nascar-Walmart-wave-the-flag American is of course not inclined to support Food Not Bombs activism, and probably would want such riff raff – serving vegan food to "bums" – run out of town. Yes, the rednecks and conservatives voted for Bush, both Bushes. But it's crucial to understand that we are all at risk on two "eco" levels: economically and ecologically. As long as we think we need refrigerators in every home, and we eat most of our food from many miles away, we are all digging our own graves.

In addition to Food Not Bombs, there are related initiatives amidst hipster-culture that look forward to no more artificial wealth. Grassroots activists outside the mainstream wage a suppressed cultural revolution that is not well coordinated, and they have no territory. But they do lie in wait as the raggle-taggle opposition to the status quo. They anticipate a better life involving sharing, loving, doing more physical work, and rejoining Mother Nature in her bosom of support. The babes that tore at her nipples with their teeth, and cut off or inflated her breasts for profit, will be cast out.

Unfortunately, a lot of innocent people are going to be casualties as well. But, as happened after the Black Death plague in Europe in the 14th century, population crash made it better thereafter for everyone socially, economically and politically: there was more land to go around. Land must be in balance with the number of people using it. The "ecological footprint" of a town cannot be many times its size if the town and its culture are to be sustainable. And the bootprint on Mother Nature's face is more than apparent already, if we face it.

The Long Emergency by James Howard Kunstler, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005, New York, NY. www.groveatlantic.com

New York Times' Andrew Revkin reports on climate change manipulation by White House:
<http://nytimes.com>

Ecological footprint:
Global Footprint Network: <http://www.footprintnetwork.org>
Redefining Progress: <http://redefiningprogress.org>

Street Spirit www.thestreetspirit.org/index.htm. June issue is online and offered on the streets of East Bay, California, sold by homeless people.

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