

Collapse: Walmart and Waiting for the Shoe to Drop

Contributed by Alice Friedemann
20 January 2008

As I screwed in yet another fluorescent light bulb that didn't work, I thought about what else I could do to put my finger in the dike of the "Limits to Growth." I can almost hear ecosystems groan as they nearly burst from the weight of heavy metals, pavement, and drought.

Jared Diamond, in "Collapse," believes ecology plays a major role in the breakdown of civilizations.

But Jonathan Friedman, at Lund University in Sweden (1), counters that Diamond has it backwards. The social logic of civilization makes limits opaque to its citizens, who can't even see there are limits imposed by natural resources, so they don't plan ahead. A good example is not preparing for peak oil thirty years ahead of time, as Robert Hirsch points out ought to be done, in the study he headed for the U.S. Dept. of Energy, "Peaking of World Oil Production." (2)

This blindness is evident in the Presidential campaign as well, where none of the candidates is running on a platform of the need to reform industrial agriculture, drastically reduce our consumption of goods and energy, or slow down development and population growth.

Friedman says this disconnect with reality is most powerfully expressed by Kafka, where the characters are trapped in ways of seeing the world they can't see beyond. At a time when most of the world's problems are due to the depletion and destruction of the ecosystems that keep us alive, politicians and people in general continue to see the world through political and economic filters.

Even those of us awake to the world being one big cockroach about to get smashed by energy limits, are trapped like ants in the amber of the system.

What's ridiculous is that we, personally, are supposed to save the world, not collective action. We're on our own, without government and corporate help. PG&E, the northern California utility that serves five million customers, is encouraging us to buy long-lasting fluorescent light bulbs. It sounds like a bad joke -- how many Californians does it take to screw in a light bulb to prevent The Collapse of Civilization As We Know It?

Andrew Szasz, in his new book "Shopping Our Way to Safety," says that our government and regulatory agencies have been so weakened, we've lost hope in collective action. Szasz finds that chilling -- we can't shop our way out of our problems, no matter how many green goods we buy, and thinking that we can gives us less urgency to fight for meaningful reform.

Buying organic is only possible for people who can afford to pay extra, and doesn't do much to change the way food is grown. Agriculture should be at the top of the reform list, because it does the most damage. The way we grow food destroys topsoil, depletes aquifers and fossil fuels, eutrophies water, and poisons land and water with petrochemicals.

As we all know, shopping is what got us into this fix to begin with. Yet we continue to throw hungry devices that suck ever more electric power into the System, like primitives sacrificing goats to the Gods, unable to stop because the financial structure depends on endless

growth. The Beast must not only be fed, but mended as it ages and falls apart, its sagging bridges, pitted roads, rusting fresh water pipelines, and aging dams perpetually patched.

Walmart executives must have realized they had to cut back on energy to make profits, and they're trying to turn this to their advantage by Greening their image, hoping to win back the millions of affluent customers who've been boycotting them for years.

On the one hand, it's great that WalMart has decided to green up their image. We need corporations and governments to take the lead in making a transition, since they're the institutions using most of the energy and natural resources.

But as many have pointed out, how can Walmart even be slightly green? They're the main corporation that turned China into a cesspool of coal fumes, sewage, and chemicals to produce throwaway goods, whipping the gyre of consumption into the global tornado that's devoured the flesh of the earth and poured our trees, fish, clean water, topsoil, oil, and metal into cheap goods. They're at the center of the vortex, keeping it spinning, the essence of the delusion we live in. How on earth can they become Green?

Those helping with the WalMart makeover point out that since Walmart is such a large part of the problem, Greening WalMart will have more impact than changing light bulbs. They want to do something, even if in the end, it doesn't do much to avert collapse.

As I see the giant foot overhead drawing nearer, and knowing that my own feeble attempts to hold it at bay are pointless, I can't disagree. We all do what we can, what we think will help, if only to forget we're cockroaches for a while.

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Alice Friedemann, January 20, 2008

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(1) Robert Costanza, et. al. 2007. "Sustainability or Collapse? An Integrated History and Future of People on Earth". MIT Press.

(2)
Peaking of World Oil Production: Impacts, Mitigation and Risk Management, Robert L. Hirsch, SAIC:

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