

Cultural Revolution, American Style: Unpetroleum?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
02 July 2005

Culture Change Letter #103 - July 4, 2005

This could be America's last Fourth of July. Are you ready for system-breakdown and deep cultural change? It's true there's oil shock maximus ahead, with many obstacles to survival for a huge petro-addicted population. But don't forget that the upheaval and corrections are going to be in the context of a cultural revolution.

It is not so much the exploding of poison gases and spreading toxic smoke, evocative of war, which may or may not be appropriate to everyone in a post-petroleum emerging society dealing with climate change. It is rather the concept of nation and holiday from wage-slavery that may soon be passe along with employment as we know it, if petrocollapse hits in the next year.

The coming cultural revolution will feature awakening with new awareness, and part of that will be the redefining of relationships in one's more intense, immediate world. There are positive aspects to petrocollapse if it can be overcome by letting go of techno-addiction, hierarchical regimentation and destroying the ecosystem.

A cultural revolution could even mean having a good time and being your higher, sensuous self, as in the 1960s revolution. Who knows? "Back to the land" is one thing the '60s Revolution offered, and it has been practiced down to this day. Higher consciousness was another legacy from the '60s Revolution, but it was too exclusive. This time around, after petrocollapse almost all of us will be sharing a common consciousness: trying to survive in a severely limited socioeconomic and ecological environment. There will not be car culture this time around. Very little electric power, right? And civilization will be seen as breaking down for good. Hey, I'm not causing it, so don't get mad at me.

It's the SUV commuters who have brought on the Final Energy Crisis a tiny bit of time sooner, through their patriotic oil-guzzling, climate-warming, indirect oppression of Iraqis. Patriotism's fine if we need to defend our country. Except, I can relate to the eco-feminist duo Francine & Nemiah's preference for the term "matriot." Why not? As long as we're happy, eh fellows? But women will probably not continue to be called "Fellows" in stodgy institutions. Yesiree, cultural revolution.

Let's not take our petro-crisis frustrations out on hyperconsumers, when we can blame it on dental floss. That's right, that handy petroleum masterwork of convenience. Many people are addicted to dental floss. Kiss it goodbye, unless you lay in huge supplies for generations. But what if the stuff was always toxic to your body because it's plastic? Frank Zappa had it right when he sang "gonna be a dental floss tycoon" (rhymes with "Movin' to Montana soon"). What was he really saying? Maybe something akin to his band's The Mothers' song Plastic People -- wisdom from almost four decades ago. However, there's not much time to wait around if we're ever going to see a Frank Zappa postage stamp. He was supposedly running for president, but that pastime may soon be past time. We won't be having Zappa rule anyway because prostate cancer took him out several years ago. In another time in his Arab ancestry the typical Zappa was not in danger of dying from toxic chemical exposures, or bombs of Democracy either.

Today's patriots denying they are directly killing for oil is an issue that will -- along with other divisiveness and most of what now passes for "news" -- be subsumed in future concerns. Patriotism in the U.S. used to mean really loving the actual land. Rather than loving our material wealth and dubious developments such as the highest rate of incarceration in the modern world, we will again be loving the land and reawaken to the fact that it is our real and only home. Much of what we take for granted today in mainstream culture will become myth.

We will not have a lot of time for patriotism when we are worried what our own ecosystem and neighborhood can provide. The American red-white-and-blue flag may be flown nostalgically only, before too long. The new paradigm will be a matter of life and death, as always -- we've just had a few decades' cultural detour of the Supermarket Dream and Liquor Store Supreme (from The Mothers' "Mr. America Walk on By", 1966). People actually took the silly detour seriously and let the mom & pop stores die -- was that patriotic? How

about the disappearance of family farming off the U.S. Census categories? So we may find ourselves in the next few years in an a-patriotic frame of mind, especially when things go according to my prediction quoted in Congress on May 12: maintaining order from Washington DC or anyplace far away will not last.

Many of us worry about the potential for violence from desperate people come petrocollapse. People are assumed to be (1) basically good, and therefore should be treated well, especially if the dominant system degrades people and can be seen as external or past. (2) A contrary view holds that people are untrustworthy or bad. These divergent views may originate according to one's upbringing. But whether people are more bad than good, or vice versa, they are animals as we all are and are about to rediscover.

It will be a rich experience to live closer to the real Earth despite the deprivation in store prior to community convergence and tentative stabilization. Today's practices of consuming, materialism and routine are a very narrow portion of human experience. There will be less guilt felt as we will no longer be using up resources at the flick of a switch and causing pollution. We are to be forgiven perhaps for screwing up so badly, when it will be remembered that the concept of pollution is only recent. Before several thousand years ago, there was virtually no pollution. The sounds of nature were not noise pollution, and a raging river was not a disaster-flood. In "ancient" times when cities created dumps and fouled the water, this was pollution but is still very recent in the long human experience.

The concept of culture with many is that it's a quality or character trait, such as drinking chilled white wine with one's meal while listening to some great classical music. By the same token, people claim there is a lack of culture in places such as freeway-exit convenience stores and corporate eateries. However, there is plenty of culture all the way around.

To define future culture, there will have to be modifications on the above concepts. Such as, no more chilled wine or any refrigeration. The people of Baghdad have little refrigeration. I have lived without refrigeration for years on end, although I had the pleasure of going to a huge cooperative supermarket nearly every day. (Using a bike cart was rarely necessary, and a car even less necessary.) Future interludes with chilled wine and classical music can likely involve walking to a clearing for drinking and playing quartets outdoors, in winter for that chill on the wine. In that case, we may as well drink red which is better at room temperature, back in the cosy communal long house perhaps.

The cultural revolution is not something anyone can lead. Maybe even Abbie Hoffman's participation in the '60s Revolution was mainly a part someone had to play, and many did. The coming cultural revolution is not going to be about personalities, and it won't be about what people want or don't want. It will be about what happens to animals upon overbreeding and the veneer of civilization is gone.

The coming cultural revolution may be like the book "Ecotopia" in some parts, after the die-off has pacified the industrialized countries including any petroleum-dependent "island fortresses" such as the U.S. In the U.S. a person oblivious consumes today several times more petroleum than people in the rest of the world, and this historical anomaly has everything to do with the dominant U.S. culture's value-system. We each need to perform an exercise of minusing out of us the useless values we are currently saddled with, while keeping the good. We can do this either by creating in our minds a new breed or hybrid person or culture, or draw upon traditional societies that knew sustainable ways; we will then be much closer to a more courteous start.

I will explore further in follow-up essays the cultural values and features of a sustainable society that will have endured petrocollapse and seen the dust having settled. We're talking about America, a unique and troubled place with some beautiful aspects and extraordinary people. Some people will go back to calling the continent Turtle Island, most assuredly.

It could be that a cultural revolution of sorts will also occur in the "developing countries" and they will have time to make a U-turn. When I visited the progressive state of Kerala it was feared that Western Culture was ruining the youth and

families with manufactured material things unnecessary to traditional life. That was in 1996, and we all know that India has since zoomed in oil consumption and population growth. Families in India, however, are more resourceful and have more cohesion than the average U.S. family.

Getting your kicks -- in first

Back in the U.S. of A we're talkin' about a revo-evolution, whatever that is, and let's hope it's fun. I'm not an apostle of the god of Have a Good Time, whoever that is. But I like to get my kicks. Don't you? It's just that you may have to get your kicks struggling for food, water and fending off desperate blood suckers like the people from the next neighborhood, if your neighborhood is not secure at some critical juncture. Let's hope it doesn't play out like that. But it has happened before. Better things have happened too, so there's hope.

It's going to be a rough time when overpopulation crashes. Sorry, that's not something some of us want to hear -- and that even includes people knowledgeable about peak oil. And in that rough time we will find out who's left standing. "Time will tell, who has fell, and who's been left behind, when you go your way and I go mine" (Bob Dylan, Blonde on Blonde). I would like to imagine that the positive intentions of fighting violence with acts of sharing (food, etc.) will solve much conflict. However, if there are too many mouths to feed, will people voluntarily starve as a service to the community or the nation? It almost doesn't matter what the government's intentions in all this are, if government too will be out of gas. Okay, they have huge stockpiles, but not infinite.

The cultural environment will determine economics as they redevelop in keeping with the ecosystem. This is under my "Scenario for a Sustainable Future," Culture Change Letter #100. However, if we are talking about a different scenario, such as a twenty-year depression to follow the first crash of petrocollapse, then the culture would reflect much more an intact national or even global economy. "Like a twenty year depression" is author Richard Heinberg's description of collapse, as discussed at the East Bay Post Carbon Solutions Group's beyond oil evening at a church in Oakland, California in June. I personally don't foresee the long-depression scenario.

"Please help me"

I have gotten many an email lately, more than ever before, about the effects of peak oil ahead. Some of these Culture Change readers write passionately and compassionately, and some are in some denial (but not many). People are sharing their techniques, strategies, predictions, fears, and hopes. I don't hear anyone saying "What a great time to have kids" although people are still set on creating new humans as opposed to adopting.

There is a genre of books and films on future societies based on having run out of major resources, if science fiction is broken down by subtypes. What people want to visualize is partly what is going to happen, although the capability of influencing one's own universe does have its limits, notwithstanding pop-physics as in the idealized documentary "What the [bleep] do we know."

The cultural revolution will not be a top down experience as happened in China in the 1960s and '70s. Rather, the revolution will be a grassroots culture change from inside ourselves as much as from outside -- without petroleum and everything that is associated with it. Surely you know the worth of petroleum in its versatility, never mind its deadliness and curse. Is that what it is, a curse? Some day after Petrocollapse there will be plays and campfire stories about the Cursed Petroleum spirit that blinded men and made them see fabulous gold in their reach. Are the few who succeeded heroes? They do make nice husbands, eh ladies with a yen for Yen? The petroleum-laden lady with her unnatural make-up, brain-poisoning perfume and other stuff from petroleum should know the following; it is increasingly known such that a popular investment commentator has a strong message on petroleum today:

Petroleum basics

"Energy is essential to industrial economies. It takes energy to extract raw materials from the earth. It then takes energy to manufacture the things we use and consume. It also takes energy to transport the goods we produce. Even the energy we consume takes energy to produce whether it is oil, natural gas, or electricity. Petroleum products contribute about 40% of the energy we use in the United States each year to other products that we never think about.

"Transportation accounts for an estimated 67% of all petroleum use in this country. The rest is accounted for by nonfuel products and petrochemicals and feedstocks. The list below from the Energy Information Administration is not exhaustive, but is illustrative of the many uses of petroleum.

"Nonfuel use of petroleum is small compared with fuel use, but petroleum products account for about 89 percent of the Nation's total energy consumption for nonfuel uses. There are many nonfuel uses for petroleum, including various specialized products for use in the textile, metallurgical, electrical, and other industries. A partial list of nonfuel uses for petroleum includes:

- o Solvents such as those used in paints, lacquers, and printing inks
- o Lubricating oils and greases for automobile engines and other machinery
- o Petroleum (or paraffin) wax used in candy making, packaging, candles, matches, and polishes
- o Petrolatum (petroleum jelly) sometimes blended with paraffin wax in medical products and toiletries
- o Asphalt used to pave roads and airfields, to surface canals and reservoirs, and to make roofing materials and floor coverings
- o Petroleum coke used as a raw material for many carbon and graphite products, including furnace electrodes and liners, and the anodes used in the production of aluminum.
- o Petroleum Feedstocks used as chemical feedstock derived from petroleum principally for the manufacture of chemicals, synthetic rubber, and a variety of plastics.

[The above "bullet" graphics are appropriate as zeroes]

"Petroleum feedstocks have been used in the commercial production of petrochemicals since the 1920's. Petrochemical feedstocks are converted to basic chemical building blocks and intermediates used to produce plastics, synthetic rubber, synthetic fibers, drugs, and detergents. Naphtha, one of the basic feedstocks, is a liquid obtained from the refining of crude oil.

"Petrochemical feedstocks also include products recovered from natural gas, and refinery gases (ethane, propane, and butane). Still other feedstocks include ethylene, propylene, normal- and iso-butlenes, butadiene, and aromatics such as benzene, toluene, and xylene. These feedstocks are produced by processing products such as ethane (separated from natural gas), distillates, naphthas, and heavier oils.

"Industry data show that the chemical industry uses nearly 1.5 million barrels per day of natural gas liquids and liquefied refinery gases as petrochemical feedstocks and plant fuel. Demand for textiles, explosives, elastomers, plastics, drugs, and synthetic rubber during World War II increased the petrochemical use of refinery gases. Gas byproducts from the production of gasoline are an important source of many feedstocks."

"As shown above from the government's own energy information sheets, the use of petroleum is critical to our modern industrial way of life... Think of what life may become without energy. We may soon find out, if peak oil is really here. With the price of energy at \$60 a barrel..." - Jim Puplava of Financialsense.com's "The Core Rate / Storm Watch Update."

Nonpetroleum culture and money

If we have been a petroleum culture (let's face it!), we will make up for it by being willy-nilly a nonpetroleum culture. I believe this will extend to what I anticipate as a noncommercial culture as well. Not only will trade be really down thanks to fuel issues alone, but the focus on money is to become really doubtful. Bartering and alternative local currencies will come to the fore, as in Argentina when the international banking system collapsed there. If the national economy hangs on a while, look for it to compete with a black market. Take a hint from this nugget of wisdom from the From the Wilderness website's comparison of the USSR's collapse to current U.S. conditions and outlook:

"There is a lesson here: when faced with a collapsing economy, one should stop thinking of wealth in terms of money. Access to actual physical resources and assets, as well as intangibles such as connections and relationships, quickly becomes much more valuable than mere cash." - from 'Post-Soviet Lessons for a Post-American Century' (Part One of Three) by Dmitry Orlov.

* * * * *

Dr. Colin Campbell's incisive petrodollar-analysis introduction to Jan Lundberg's End-Time for USA Upon Oil Collapse, in the July 2005 newsletter of the Association for the Study of Peak Oil & Gas, Ireland
<http://www.peakoil.ie/newsletters/587>

Jim Puplava's Financial Sense:

<http://financialsense.com/stormwatch/2005/0624.html>

Petrocollapse: Can you live without indoor running water? - on From the Wilderness:
http://fromthewilderness.com/free/ww3/070105_world_stories.shtml#2">

Interconnectedness of all in the universe: Doom and gloom? Your perception calls the tune (Culture Change e-Letter #74)

<http://www.culturechange.org/e-letter-doomgloom.html>

Peak Oil and Community Solutions - second annual conference, Sept. 23, 2005, Jan Lundberg and Richard Heinberg among speakers. Yellow Springs, Ohio
<http://www.communitysolution.org/05conf1.html>

To donate to Culture Change, please visit
<http://www.culturechange.org/funding.htm>
(secure on-line donating)

Previous Culture Change Letters:<http://www.culturechange.org/e-letter-archive.html>

To recommend Culturechange mailing list to a friend, send him or her this link:

<http://lists.mutualaid.org/mailman/listinfo/culturechange>