

The machine we are part of hums a death song

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The upcoming breakdown and subsequent reconvergence of human society have only certain features in common with the 1960s turmoil and enlightenment. The vaunted/feared '60s were part of the Age of Exuberance -- as William Catton described our expenditure of nonrenewable energy. I would say, as an observer of the Counterculture, that the reason the "'60s Revolution" failed was because one of its main premises was enjoying petroleum vinyl musical records -- significantly, protest music -- powered overwhelmingly by "unlimited" fossil energy!

I was so enamored with the music of my generation that I worried how it could be preserved and heard into the future if technology and resources did not forever accommodate. This occasionally concerned me as much as even the war, although the U.S. was finally getting kicked out of Indochina. All through this way of living I was not aware how mechanized the greater surrounding culture was. The hippies and various writers tried to oppose it and live differently, but today we all find ourselves part of a bigger, faster machine. It is more out of control today than decades ago, yet almost the entire segment of the intelligentsia that is aware, i.e., not anticipating a new-fangled energy panacea to perpetuate the machine, is willy-nilly waiting for collapse as the reason to live within Earth's limits.

The '60s activists and hipsters and today's concerned progressive citizens don't seem to question the technology that uses up nonrenewable resources and pollutes the fragile world. The result is that they inadvertently tried (and are trying) to save the system, in effect, by hoping it would clean up its act as global policeman and grossest polluter of the planet.

Yet, it would be vintage '60s for someone to say today, "How can you dare destroy the Earth?" But: through it all, our noisy culture and the dead artifacts we treasure, the mechanized and electrified population hums like a machine. We surely know it's not voices or human sounds when we hear the din of the petrocity.

The 20th century was fueled primarily by petroleum, the number one energy source in the U.S. today. Although there is a lot around, petroleum has long since peaked in extraction in North America. The world peaked in oil discoveries in 1965, resulting in today's mirroring of global peak extraction. If a billion barrels of oil were suddenly added to world reserves today, this would push back the time of global peak extraction by only five and a half days.

The size of today's cities is mind-boggling, with over a dozen exceeding 12 million people. Two of those are in the U.S. The U.S. is the third largest populace in the world, and the huge majority is urban, when we keep in mind that only 2% of the population lists farming as its vocation. About 90% of the food produced would not be possible without petroleum-oriented farming. Far more than 90% of the food is provided via oil fuels for transport. A majority of the average North American's food is refrigerated or frozen at some point, involving massive amounts of energy.

To most folks, whether urban or rural, the mental association with the city is positive in many respects. People's feelings are by and large more than tolerant about civilization and machines, especially refrigerators which are supposedly entirely benign. This testifies to the power of socialization, propaganda, and corruption of one's ability to think honestly and independently, when we admit that mass urbanization and energy gluttony are a disaster barely felt thus far. The amenities of the modern city are attractive, but are about as relevant to long-term survival as whether this year's fashion in skirts is short or long.

Being part of the speedy machine

The speed of modern living is still accelerating. Our pace and so-called obligations steal our time to relax and pay

attention to things that matter more to the soul than, say, paychecks from the rat race. Peace is absent from our minds and bodies the more we speed through our days. Some cope via a little meditation, although almost no modern American dares take a few days to slow down to fast with just water in order to heal and reflect. Ironically, the number one illicit drug is speed (methamphetamine), and as with the milder form of speed, coffee, the abuser is trying to function or react according to society's speedy demands.

One way to understand the reasons for our relentless speeding is to compare modern individuals to parts of a machine that we usually call The City. If we identify ourselves as such, perhaps the constant, self-destructive, immediate pressure to make the dollar can receive stronger critical attention. We can rebel, which seems unlikely now, or just wait for unprecedented force of social change triggered by strained resource limits and accelerating climate distortion.

Overpopulation is a primary cause, but growing population serves as a moving target that society is totally unwilling to act on. More machine parts, or more fuel for the machine -- more of us -- is quite desirable to the respected maniacs of growth and unlimited profits. Making more people is still encouraged even though it has been unnecessary and detrimental for hundreds of years since "exponential growth" began.

Meanwhile, the massive ignorance is staggeringly sad when it could be remedied immediately: The average North American motorist is only driving 5 MPH (five miles per hour) based on the total time required to be in, support and maintain the car. Therefore, the roughly one hundred million cars in the U.S. are simply revving the urban machine in an illusion of speed. If people abandoned this illusion and started quietly walking the 5 MPH instead, or bicycling at 20 MPH, improving their health and awareness, they would be most of the way along to realistically remaking their lives and extricating themselves from the maw of the machine.

The bicycle is not just unappreciated; it is targeted by some misguided police departments who want to get in on the growth industry of Homeland Security funding while at the same time persecuting folk who don't support the full-blown consumer economy as exemplified by car culture. New York City has cracked down on large group bike rides as if they threaten Americans like the London bombers threatened transit riders. It is important to keep in mind that the machine known as the city is a police state, a natural consequence of overcrowding.

It is said that fish don't realize they're in water. We are likewise connected to the always humming city-machine, and we are always in the environment of the machine but for momentary escapes via automobile. I would like people to understand what they are surrounded by, and that today's city be acknowledged not just as noisy, dirty and unhealthful, but also as an unfriendly entity using us up as if we are pellets of machine fuel. The city consumes land just around it like a cancer, but even greater is the "ecological footprint" of the average U.S. city: 19 times the city's own area due to distant resources appropriated by empire and corporate colonialism.

"Though we may be part of a machine system..."

We do not have to deny our nature-selves and write off living close to the land as some forgotten primitive dream. We will continue experiencing the city-machine hum until we again have silence we have not known for many decades. The skies were quiet over the U.S. after the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. Picture the same thing applying to ground transportation as well, day after day, indefinitely, all over the world. Could this presage the universal and possibly permanent return to nature, as despoiled as it is?

The city actually hums in a dull and smoggy roar similar to distant surf. Some of the frequencies are off the human charts but affect us nonetheless, whether they be industrial or secret/government generated. But the fact that the city hums -- this deserves the duck test: Does it walk like a duck, talk like a duck... It must be a (machine).

We have established that the city is a machine, and plugged-in human city residents are machine parts or machine fodder. But this does not mean we are literally machines, yet: some corporate institutions and their scientists are working on it. If we don't want to be a part of such a mechanized, technological culture without a future, we must actually unplug our noisy, costly refrigerators (oh my gosh, the barbarity!) and live as the world has always lived prior to recent industrialization. Where futurists disagree is whether we have a choice in ending up in or escaping a diabolical nanotech world of domination.

Our having become little machines also means that with machinery, many things are accomplished much quicker than without machinery, and machine (technological) dependency has led to an addiction to faster living and the creation of tremendous stress. The stress is in part due to the never-ceasing hum of the machine and society's inhumane demand to have the citizen perform as a machine instead of as a tender being in need of love, hospitality and understanding.

Although "The Machine" is going to sputter and die, there is rebirth as part of the inevitable passing of an inanimate, cold entity that took up space, time and energy.

Awareness of our machine existence seems to be absent among people who see little problem with the rapid paving of the Earth, the roads and cars, the airplanes, the proliferation of monstrosously large buildings, the massive wiring and cellularizing, the hum of the city machine, etc. Or, if people are aware, they don't care -- as long as they can get their gasoline and food, not to mention other more tantalizing goodies.

Some of us are aware of the system we have erected as a machine needing to be dismantled or changed into a living organism -- for the sake of our common survival and the health of the biosphere -- but we are all part of the system. A general is more part of it than a fruit-stand entrepreneur, but we are all mixed in or plugged in.

An illustration of that idea that's closer to home: I have been invited to give a speech at Congressman Roscoe Bartlett's energy conference this fall. What we are all starting to learn is that it doesn't matter if someone is more tied to the system than someone else when we have to come together to deal with an unprecedented crisis. We have to start redefining success and change the culture, as Congressman Bartlett says.

The positive, don't forget!

Just knowing we have built a machine that's humming along, one that is opposed to nature and our own needs as sensitive beings, is a start toward dismantling negative structures. Humans are clever and diverse, and a small number are speedily working on a non-machine approach to daily living. As they are outside the machine to a significant degree, their ways are not entirely workable according to the rules of the machine and those who serve it.

However, as an investment in the future, sustainable living and social tools for survival are to be valued as better than gold. Our next essay is on just this question: how do we behave and change our ways in order to achieve sustainability, simplicity and slower living? Please write in your suggestions for a fun concept: What would you like to see practiced on a "Petrocollapse Rehearsal Day"? I have selected Sept 21, the fall equinox, as the Beginning of (the) Fall. Obvious ideas include using no cars, electricity, running water or plastic. Perhaps such a day will even be observed, and the public will create notes and share the experience.

Being at one with the Earth has gone out of style according to modern society, as if manufactured contraptions and accelerated entropy are fair trade offs. However, there are some hard-core nature lovers who live close to nature, and their articulate expressions for their preferences and ethics may become all the rage -- at least in the hopes of this columnist. This is yet another area of inquiry that can use input from the Culture Change readership. Your comments are welcome. Look forward to another Culture Change report on returning to our hunter-gatherer roots despite the impending wreckage of petroleum civilization that has given us consumer convenience such as the cancer epidemic.

If the machine is humming its death song, we should recognize it and not just cover our ears. "Destroy what destroys you" is the response of anarchists promoting their own bravado, and it is unfeasible as well as uncompassionate. So, what to do? Gandhi's principles of noncooperation and nonparticipation, with village crafts for self-sufficiency, may still be the best strategy -- updated, of course, to our era of maximum pavement and machine domination. Monkey-wrenching the machine can be as simple as not buying a new car, if enough people participate consciously, or will come to pass soon enough: Financial meltdown of the economy and/or petroleum supply failure will hoist corporate globalism on its own petard. The machine paradigm will be its own undoing.

Links:

William Catton, author of the book Overshoot, writing in The Social Contract magazine in Spring 2001:

<http://thesocialcontract.com/cgi-bin/showarticle.pl?articleID=963&terms=youngquist>

"Spending our great inheritance" in hard copy version of The Social Contract magazine: geologist-author Walter Youngquist issue, Spring 2005:

<http://thesocialcontract.com/>

"Crackpot Crackdown" by Aaron Naparstek, New York Press, July 27, 2005:

<http://www.nypress.com/18/30/news&columns/aaronnaparstek.cfm>

Ecological footprint, courtesy Redefining Progress: <http://www.myfootprint.org/>

Albert A. Bartlett's Sustainability Papers, Culture Change webpages on Overpopulation. Dr. Bartlett calculated the above-mentioned 5.5 days of extending the peak oil date.

http://www.culturechange.org/overpopulation_bartlett.html

Jan Lundberg's "Ten Oil Supply Basics", The Social Contract, Spring 2005:

<http://thesocialcontract.com/cgi-bin/showarticle.pl?articleID=1302&terms=lundberg>

7th Annual Sustainable Communities Symposium, in beautiful Crested Butte, Colorado, Sept. 28, 2005 (Jan Lundberg, keynote speaker):

<http://hccaonline.org/page.cfm?pageid=2655>

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>

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