The fastest way to put the brakes on global heating (it's not George Monbiot's)

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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The fastest way to put the brakes on global heating is to embrace the peaking of world oil extraction and the implications of petrocollapse. As long as we deny there's a terminal outcome for our petroleum-based infrastructure -- and therefore society as we know it -- we will keep dancing around the crisis of climate change. Precious time is being lost while feedback loops strengthen greenhouse gas output. Embracing collapse sounds crazy and, as we all would prefer, hopefully unnecessary. But what if that's your only ticket out of the burning theater and the rafters are about to come down?

Let's get our priorities straight. Is the economy a sacred cow? Is maintaining it along with its institutions of government and corporations the only way greenhouse gases will be slashed, and quickly enough to stave off climate hell? Writer George Monbiot is so certain that the answer is "yes" that he may have forgotten that direct action steps on certain toes.

I think the answer to those questions is emphatically "No!" Trusting the continuation of the economy and its self-serving components of Earth's destruction includes their assuring first their own self-preservation -- as if they were divine creations of Mother Nature to be loaded onto a Noah's Ark to save the world. No, thank you. There's another way, but many of us of a conventional bent are loathe to make the leap -- even if it would be off a burning precipice to safety within reach. When will we do it, when our neck of the woods becomes uncomfortable?

A "leftist" "green" activist response to climate change has buzzed into the online world that fits into the "economic growth mongering" apologism that my Culture Change column identified on Aug. 22. George Monbiot is a UK commentator who can really dish out the criticism when it comes to government policies such as biofuels, bicycling, and the like. Here's what he wrote on Aug. 22, in his column titled "Identity Politics in Climate Change Hell", wherein he accuses a climate activist named Ewa of playing politics when she wrote a Guardian newspaper column titled "Time for a revolution". He does not see himself as the one playing politics:

"Runaway climate change is bearing down on us fast. We require a massive political and economic response to prevent it. Governments and corporations, whether we like it or not, currently control both money and power. Unless we manage to mobilise them, we stand a snowball’s chance in climate hell of stopping the collapse of the biosphere."

Debunking corporate government role

If Monbiot's right about the possibility of mobilizing government and corporations, then massive effort should be directed to that end. But what makes him think they will fall into line as compassionate and sensible actors on the fragile stage of our greenhouse world? They haven't yet, although we've heard some responsible-sounding if empty noises.

If governments and corporations are indeed joined to humanity at the hip and there's no way to function without them to save the climate, well, okay, let's get started. Now what is the official plan to take us down to 90% reduction in emissions overnight? Oh, it doesn't exist yet? We have to be patient until 2030, because governments and corporations can't change overnight (into something unrecognizable)? Pardon me for doubting honest cooperation from them to save our planet from our commercial plunder and accommodation of consumerism.

Putting collapse on the table

What if government and corporations and the global warming threat are one and the same thing? What if the inevitable collapse of government and corporations could bring about the desperately needed curtailment of greenhouse gas emissions? If that seems like an impossible dream scheme, we supposedly have the option of building our way out of climate hell through the popular green-techno "solution": Monbiot says, "build the installations required to turn the energy economy around - wind farms, wave machines, solar thermal plants in the Sahara, new grid connections and public transport systems".

If we are now in sudden peril, isn’t it a lot easier and quicker to cut off the gangrene of commercialism and consumerism than to reform it some day? Maybe I'm naive about cutting it off, but if it isn't done now to get rid of a "mere" foot, and face the pain with grim determination, then soon we will be faced with losing the leg and then the whole organism.

Considering collapse with eyes wide open

Now to flesh out instant collapse. I don't really want to do so or see it occur in my lifetime. But I feel compelled to refute the game players' faith in keeping up the status quo for the sake of our survival amidst climate extinction. Some of them are truly without a clue as to natural living and decentralized forms of economics for whatever smaller human communities are manageable and sustainable. Others have gotten a whiff of the poorer, funkier lifestyle of those who have nothing to lose materially, and they say to themselves, "No way, I'm not gonna live in a f___ing yurt." Out loud they continue to warn us of the climate crisis and command attention of everyone who isn't an SUV die-hard, and point to the Promised Land of benign technology and smooth transitioning. Ah, thank you oh savior -- but meanwhile I see your lifestyle is not a' changin'.

I'm all for benign technology and smooth transitioning. However, for a whole overpopulated planet, where is it besides in theory? Yes, it's vital to use some energy and to use technology for needs not normally associated with energy. There are ingenious ways of using less energy to do a lot of important tasks and to enjoy a full life of comfort. Yet, maintaining comfort for billions of people is not realistic, and only a few hundred million are actually living in comfort today. As we are seeing with food prices rising and pollution unabated, the vaunted social benefits of governments and corporations are failing us. George Monbiot warns us that we must not reject "all state and corporate solutions," as he claims rejecting them is the main goal of some climate activists. Some "solutions" would be wonderful to see and actually come to pass. But will the state and the corporations ever promote such climate protection as needed by the biosphere so as to eliminate their own power?
Peak oil reality: Earth to Monbiot, hello…

And there's no way around that failure of the system. The Hirsch Report to the U.S. Dept. of Energy in 2005 made it clear, as have other studies, that it is impossible to escape severe economic repercussions from the passing of cheap, abundant oil. The Hirsch Report also warned that we cannot prepare for peak once it is upon us. Therefore, since peak is here or very near, there's no technological solution available in time. But this doesn’t stop the technofixers from yacking away on the deck of the Titanic as the ship’s about to hit the iceberg.

It appears that Monbiot does not have a real understanding of peak oil, despite his being a long-time Culture Change email subscriber. (I asked him to meet me when I spoke at The Institute of Petroleum in London in 2003, but he didn't respond.) He is welcome and urged to study other sources of insight on the petroleum industry and our prospects for the perpetuation of the oil and gas infrastructure. After all, the economy's major players that he sees as permanent and helpful fixtures depend on petroleum more than anything else. If he did learn about peak oil's realities, would he continue with his assumptions about the economy and the dominant players he resignedly respects?

What would a post-petrocollapse economy look like?

Let us now focus on the positive after having stated some negativities of the problem: What would a non-petroleum economy or a post-petrocollapse economy look like? What would the alternative to the "burning theater" look like? Let's say we somehow abandon our dependence on government and corporations, and we slash our own energy use. If that means quitting your job now, let's imagine it anyway. Let's imagine the trucks not pulling into the supermarkets, and the grid going down. Not even emergency services as we know them are working. (I don't want to see this, but what if they are about to happen?)

Our daily life at first would be in a panic -- where to obtain food? What about water, and does the pump not work “'cause the vandals took the handles”? In some parts of the world, the less petroleum-dependent parts, the panic will be minimal. In others it will be full bore, where we presently drive down the street for our needs and we order no end of services for our homes through utilities and overnight couriers (who use greenhouse-gas emitting trucks and airplanes). Let's say you're in a modern city and petrocollapse hits before total climate breakdown causes something worse. Can we call up the government and corporations and ask them if they are still reconciling their priorities? Those priorities include protecting the wealth of the few and guaranteeing consumer splendor for those willing to work their butts off while not questioning authority.

It is hard to project a sustainable population size for a suddenly oil-deprived city. But we can picture the survivors looking at available ground for growing food and rigging rooftops and plastic tarps to gather rain water. Depaving will have to be by hand because we neglected to do it when we had the petroleum-energy. Will green technology be available off the shelf to do all we need in the post-petroleum world? Somewhat, but let's keep in mind that no one was stocking any shelves lately.

Perhaps we'll hear quirky songs with exhortations such as
"Monkeywrench the truck and car

By not spending su dolar”
(I wrote and recorded it and I perform it; the last two words are Spanish)

In smaller communities there will be coordination of available resources and immediate conversion of, say, pasture land to growing grain and vegetables. Where are the seeds for this? Let's say we have them. What about tractors and

fertilizers, etc.? The answer is human power. Biofuels are not and will not be in sufficient supply to maintain anything like our present practices (such as everyone eating food). Richard Heinberg of Post Carbon Institute said that we would need "50 million farmers in the US, one out of six people." Animal power will be much appreciated, as in Cuba after its petrocollapse in the early '90s. But have you seen any oxen lately in the U.S.? Pedal power systems exist already and will become extremely popular.

At the end of a hard day of physical work, petrocollapse survivors will not be turning on the telly and zoning out, only to take orders the next day from their former masters in government and corporations. Instead, there will be community meetings after work, and the next day there will be more physical work. But ingenuity and skills will be just as important. People will organize themselves for tasks cooperatively, as we did for uncounted millennia. Except, this time, gathering firewood for the meals to cook may include taking furniture out of abandoned homes and buildings. This is foreseeable as an easy option when die-off has happened -- from our losing the petroleum for food production and distribution that we have been taking for granted for almost a century. Or we can foresee die-off from climate extinction.

Articles including short stories have been published in this column on the subject of post-oil society, so details won't be restated here. The point is that we will soon be using a lot less energy, to a thankful degree for our cherished climate, and deforestation will also be crimped by our losing the fuel for the chainsaws and bulldozers. Petrocollapse saves the climate. So far we've talked about the involuntary collapse.

Voluntary collapse?

But wait. Some don’t talk about collapse, voluntary or otherwise, as they let their actions speak instead. They buy only local goods and services. They keep their income and spending to a minimum. Quality of life is far more important than quantity of wealth and material things. After all, we can only eat one meal at a time and wear only one pair of shoes at a time. Speaking of time, it should be our own, for our families and visible, familiar community, and not for the boss or the Tax Man. Furthermore, the most efficient conservation activity is accomplished by children who are not born; constrained fertility is the strongest action possible. All of this behavior contributes to collapse of the consumer economy and the authority of government.

Talking about a voluntary collapse prior to petrocollapse to save the climate is getting almost no public discussion. It implies an unpopular and hated -- and many would say completely unrealistic and antisocial -- course of action. And no one would participate. Well, some would as soon as they see there's nothing to lose. It would be tragic if this undesirable and painful course became popular and chaotic. There could be ugly scenes and dislocation, were it somehow to succeed. But it could possibly be for the most part quite nonviolent. If the idea were circulated and followed that we must slash petroleum use now, and not buy any corporate products, and suspend having children, this would bring down the global warming industrial system very soon. It would take only a certain amount of this non-cooperation, as Gandhi called it, for success. Once the corporations fold and government power ebbs, as people take to the streets and meet their neighbors to work with them, our main challenge only begins. But the greenhouse gases will have at least been slashed.

If governments and corporations did not get enough continued slavish patience to give us a green society, we'll say "You had your chance." How long do we wait to say this -- when they've allowed carbon dioxide to reach the fatal 450 parts per million in the atmosphere? The choice is still yours for now.

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The "Hirsch Report":

netl.doe.gov

(The report was removed for unknown reasons from the Project Censored website, which used to be the only place to find it, and Culture Change has asked that it be restored.)

"Identity Politics in Climate Change Hell: Do you want to save the biosphere or boost your own brand of politics? You can’t do both" in The Guardian UK's Comment is Free, by George Monbiot:

guardian.co.uk

"Time for a revolution" in The Guardian UK's Comment is Free, by Ewa Jasiewicz, Aug. 21, 2008:

guardian.co.uk

Climate Camp, that Ewa and George attended:

climatecamp.org

Richard Heinberg's excellent books include The Party's Over, Powerdown, and Peak Everything and are available from New Society Publishers. Much of his online material can be seen at
postcarbon.org

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