Fall of the technological world

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
05 October 2008

Culture Change Letter #204 --
The technological world is going to fall and disintegrate, much like the financial house of cards appears to be doing. We need to embrace this reality and start living in a reasonable, responsible fashion, because we cannot escape it even if we can try to prepare. Hoping that the government will solve the problem of greed is like hoping the fox no longer hungers for fresh raw chicken. Similarly, hoping for a graceful exit from the entropic inferno of techno tyranny is to imagine we can be teleported to a better planet. So we must draw upon the do-it-yourself principle, as rebels and free people have always done in all aspects of human existence.

This essay examines the why and how of technology's fall, and also the post-technological future. My own biases aside -- I have a love-hate relationship with technology -- I believe we can think outside the box (and abandon the box), and gain perspective even in our world of addiction to material, manufactured and disposable things. Why is this important? The reasons are ecological -- we cannot avoid the scientific facts -- and there are moral reasons as well.

Mother Nature does not give second chances. "We are not exempt from extinction", says paleoanthropologist Richard Leakey. Extinction is part of evolution of all life, so we must face that humans are nothing special. In fact, their cleverness in manipulating the environment was helpful only up to a certain point in our "pre-history"; it has resulted today in our going over the ecological precipice. As we continue today's mass extinction we are pretending it's not important, perhaps so we can cling to our convenient and alluring technology, and put off rebelling until the floor is caving in.

Weighing all I know and feel, I believe we are looking at the technological world starting to crash to the ground. We will experience it falling around us and upon us. We have not seen much of this yet. For those who are not sure, let's consider what happened when humanity left behind the simplicity of relying almost solely on hunter-gathering and burning downed logs for fire for cooking, light and warmth.

- We began soil-depleting cultivation agriculture, whose high food production allowed population growth.

- We engaged in coal-burning -- a result of clearing Western Europe's forests for more agriculture -- with the various machines and processes for maximizing the use of this polluting, non-renewable "resource."

- We developed nuclear power which is inseparable from nuclear weapons technology.

- We became dependent on petroleum in all its forms and the net-energy bonus that allowed for exponential population growth.

- We developed plastics from petroleum which are wonderfully convenient and apparently cheap, but are killing much life in the oceans and are taking an invisible but deadly toll on us as well. Some of the problems: endocrine disrupters, poisons from manufacturing, from burning, etc.

The post-technological world

If technology and the cultivation-agriculture that made it possible is perhaps our worst mistake, and is going to be mostly phased out as "growth" implodes, what will our future without massive technology look like?

I'm not the only one wondering. I'm also not the only one willing to see the historic crash sooner rather than later, because we see it as inevitable and made worse by buying a little time for more climatic destruction via unfettered industrial and agricultural activity. No one in his or her right mind looks forward to a violent collapse. It would be a mistake to label an "anti-technologist" as lacking compassion for dependent populations, when the anti-technologist or "Luddite" may believe in a better possible future through simpler, equitable living.

Because the reasons for petrocollapse and world-wide famine have been well explored in Culture Change and elsewhere, suffice to say that the end of abundant petroleum will trigger collapse. It is already happening, no matter what name is put on it (e.g., meltdown). The economic/industrial/agricultural infrastructure is entirely based on petroleum, and now that it has clearly begun its final dwindling through depletion we find there are no substitutes for petroleum -- neither in sufficient scale nor point of readiness.

So we are on the cusp of our entire system's collapsing and eating itself alive. The process will be quick, as the "run on the energy bank" is set to happen momentarily, according to this petroleum-industry analyst as well as Matt Simmons, energy investment banker. In his presentation at the annual Association for The Study of Peak Oil and Gas (USA chapter) last month, he referred to food-supply disappearance within one week of our fuel tanks topped off due to oil

market concerns. The 400 attendees gave Simmons a standing ovation, even though most of them entertain less extreme scenarios for peak oil's impact.

Therefore, within days, modern society finds itself with a staggering number of technological products whose days are numbered. They always were numbered, as the landfill was the ultimate destination. But without cheap energy for modern populations, we will start to see (1) an immediate cessation of much activity we take for granted today, whether it be transportation or operating the disgusting number of questionable, redundant appliances in our homes, and (2) the final usage of items that require power from batteries, for example. We will soon run out of "good" batteries, as the trucks will at some point soon fail to bring more. As soon as this historic process starts (call it peak oil), people will scramble for survival based on what they have hoarded (food, water, materials such as batteries, etc.) and can seize in desperation.

This column has already explored why and how petrocollapse's bloody and however long or short phase of deprivation and die-off will take place. How will the survivors live? Some of you readers cannot bear to think about petrocollapse, and some deny it's possible, so the aftermath is pretty much unexplored today. But let us stipulate that in some parts of the world some communities survive petrocollapse with no disaster or discontinuity.

Humans are the technology species, and always will be. But life and history go in cycles, such that the agricultural and industrial revolutions will pass. They are being quickly ushered out by the plug being pulled on petroleum supply. The consequence of petro-gluttony and individualistic consuming will result in a crash of all petro-fed populations. The technology that remains will fit into a non-petroleum lifestyle. Much petroleum will remain in the ground, but will no longer be accessible when the oil industry is crippled by collapse. Humpty Dumpty will not be reassembled. So our technology will be low-tech almost exclusively, or at least decentralized completely.

When we think of technology nowadays we typically think of the fancy laptop computer I'm reluctantly typing on. But there's a whole range of technological products and systems that fall into the category of short term, and into the category of sustainable. Short term would include the continental electrical grid, with its reliance on extreme computerization and financial-sector vulnerability. Any small systems running on battery power may fail unless there is pedal-power generating, solar photovoltaic cells, wind generation, or the like. But these means, and the products running on them, are subject to breakage and non-replacement of parts.

Therefore, the long-term or sustainable technologies are what can be created and maintained from local resources. They must be renewable, such as wood, leather, stone, bone, and cosmic magic. (We'll have to see about the last one; I was joking.) Scrap metal and plastic will probably be maximized for as long as possible. But they will suddenly no longer be applicable on a massive scale with constant resupply via trucks using "unlimited" petroleum. As for biofuels and other "solutions" that aren't scalable for anything resembling today's economy, they will be on a limited basis and constrained by the first priority of producing food.

From Culture Change Letter #201's list of sustainable systems and organizing principles:
Ecovillages, intentional communities, anarchist collectives, Community Supported Agriculture, bicycle culture, animal husbandry, natural building techniques, biochar, sail transport network, and the path of the peaceful spiritual warrior. And more...

Moral argument for abandoning complex and destructive technology

When a house is rotten and falling down, it is past time to leave and create something better. "Better" should mean the new shelter will be more sustainable and therefore simple -- less technological.

Techno-dependence may be inseparably tied to acquisitiveness and greed. So the tendency to get more technological products to help build one's little castle or empire has to do with taking from others: the Earth and its myriad species, and peoples whose lands are devastated by extractive industries. Then there's the running of endless machines and gadgets that depend on the grid and other support materials. This implies greenhouse-gas emissions, that on a large scale spell pain and death for others -- and ultimately the self. So the life-style of techno-dependency and trashing the useless or semi-recyclable waste is selfish and short sighted.

In fact, generating dollars from reliance on technology and the sweat of others' labor is just our old fashioned Babylon civilization's extension to date. Somehow the "march of history" and the thousands of years of wars, invention, "progress," and art serve to excuse or redefine the old Babylon syndrome, so as to let it continue -- and see what tomorrow's television news and other diversions might bring.

Passively witnessing techno-destruction can be argued to be as unacceptable as watching a heinous crime against a defenseless old lady and doing nothing, or perhaps running one's SUV a couple of blocks to buy some unnecessary, self-gratifying, processed goodie.

Techno fears, frustrations, and the ethical dilemma

On Oct. 4th I took a bus to Arcata to catch a ride going to an Earth First! reunion of activists celebrating the departure of Maxxam Corp. from Humboldt County. The company, owned by Charles Hurwitz, a Texas-based corporate raider, had liquidated most of the last ancient redwood trees in private hands in two decades. The Oct. 4 event was billed as Hurwitz Out of Humboldt. I was to pass the word and come play some songs and lend my presence. But after waiting two hours for a ride at the designated spot with three other carless activists, I changed my mind when a car materialized. I decided to stay local and not be in a car hurtling down the highway, two hours each way, with off and on rain, in order to get my jollies and see friends.

In retrospect, missing out on seeing Dana Lyons, Julia Butterfly, Darryl Cherney, and many other friends and characters, I regret not going. I also should have honored the work of many unsung heroes and heroines who over the years braved cops, loggers, bad weather in forest conditions with minimum supplies and equipment, fierce animals, tree-sit dangers, and more. I could only tell myself I didn't want to get into some car and subject myself to the long ride and come all the way back that evening. Car-pooling was apparently not arranged, and I would have liked a more accessible venue. In waiting around I began to feel the event might not be worth my while. The next day when I heard about the big party and the music, and that a girl had yelled out for one of my songs, I realized I had made an error: if I'm a serious musician, I have to travel to gigs, and I was expected (although not really needed). Upon further reflection -- considering this article's focus on technological dominance crashing to the ground -- I'm left with my realization that I let my fear and hatred of techno-dependence and dangerous roads make my decision. As a career activist (against cars and roads mostly) I may have erred, and I blew it socially and musically. But I have long thought there's no real lasting community when people are driving great distances -- especially in our imminent future without plentiful liquid fuels with which to burn up the planet (no matter if for a good cause).

Conclusion

Can we modern humans graduate, from accepting we have financial collapse, to contemplating energy collapse and worse, in time to salvage a little of our dwindling capability to steer the ecological ship? Such questions are weeded out from public media with a vengeance, even as the ship hits the iceberg of societal and ecological collapse. Therefore we must as do-it-yourselfers raise the real issues of the day primarily by word of mouth. Our task is to reach out to all sectors for all who might be finally open to a radical critique and getting off our butts: to walk away from a failed experiment, on to a sustainable future that relies on community and nature's health. - JL

* * * * *

Further reading:

Richard Leakey, interviewed by Matt Graham in Willamette Week, Oct. 1, 2008:

wweek.com

Matt Simmons, petroleum-industry investment banker and author:

simmonsco-intl.com

"Collapse of Wall Street precedes complete disintegration of system. About those 'green jobs'..." by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #201:

culturechange.org

"Maine study weighs impact of more wood heating", by Francis K. Quinn, Associated Press, Sept. 27, 2008:

ap.google.com

The Russian permafrost timebomb:

climatecodered.net

A short list of useful post-collapse sites:

Albert Bates (of the Ecovillage Training Center) and his book and blog site:

thegreatchange.com

Dmitry Orlov (author of Reinventing Collapse):

ClubOrlov

Post Carbon Institute:

PostCarbon.org
Ecocity Builders:

Ecocity Builders

Life After The Oil Crash:

LifeAfterTheOilCrash.net