Dissolve the U.S.: an Option for Proactive Change before Collapse

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Will Obama be a Greater Gorbachev?

Culture Change Letter #221 -
Housing starts in the U.S. are down 47% as of 13 months ago. Prices of commodities, not just oil, are falling because of job losses unseen since 1947. Oil is still very costly when subsidies are included. The prior recoveries from recessions were from bubbles: dot com and housing speculation -- when oil extraction was still rising. Now peak money has come and gone. Climate disasters have barely begun. So to deny we're slipping on a downward slope is getting harder, and more of us are wondering about the uncertain outcome.

Another bubble is highly unlikely, so we're having to face the music. With nothing to reverse the trends, and with mounting effects of ecological degradation and overpopulation, we see things are headed in a terrible direction. Still, people don't want to explore collapse, or they place a comforting limit on what it means and what might happen. "No one knows" passes for wisdom and even action.

Whether we have been hit mainly by crippling energy costs as part of peak oil and petrocollapse, or clobbered more by Wall Street greed, the state of the global corporate economy is sick and maybe terminal. It's reasonable to expect -- or get caught up in -- food riots on a broader scale than ever. Same for the fall of governments. Fortunately, there's something we can do to avoid the worst of the fallout if we act proactively.

Meanwhile, we are looking at the near certainty that the depression -- "the Final Depression" or "Grand Collapse" or "Darkness before the Dawn" -- will intensify. And, since we have to consider there's no longer "unlimited" cheap energy to rebuild the infrastructure for rail, it is time to (1) anticipate what can happen to the nation in the throes of petrocollapse and the bursting of peak money, and (2) steer our megaship away from the iceberg in hopes of a glancing blow and launching all possible bioregional lifeboats.

The real danger is in clinging to the status quo. For example, we should not try to build ever-more cars to run on deteriorating roads built with and for oil. To do so is to throw good money after bad, to reward or bail out fat cats taking the whole ship down as we sit by. Given the late hour for cheap energy and rebuilding, we have to think bicycles more than trains to be produced from car-dinosaur factories.

Even the most visionary, radical thinkers seem to saying little more than, "Look, there's a big problem out there!" Yes, we see it. Some of us see more than others. But we need to see what's next, while visualizing the positive future we need.

The positive future that we'd like is basic security, more love, connection to community and healthy nature, and liberation from foolish work. What would you like? How can we get there? First we have to look at where our problems are pushing us. Then we can see how any handles we have on inescapable trends may be seized upon for improved results. Otherwise, it will be just maximum chaos and a doubtful rebuilding from utter collapse.

Risking chaos without any attempt to restructure for improvement is the prevailing tendency. Reforming a system of waste, while refusing to slash greenhouse gases and stop unproductive work, offers no hope except for green opportunism. As the recent International Arctic Change conference warned, "The roof of our house is on fire while the leaders of our family sit comfortably in the living room below preoccupied with "political realities" -- the message from 1,000 scientists from around the world along with northern indigenous leaders.

What's a real plan today

Beware of sellouts who trick people into thinking their plan is doable and realistic: is it a fantasy in any way, ignoring peak oil's full effects or climate-change devastation? Is their plan a ruse to keep up the hopeless attempt to reform the dominant system into some green entity it has only resisted and rejected?

The denial of reality is about as strong as the trend to recognize it, which means things are getting more intense as the natural world collides with civilization for what's stacking up to be a final showdown.

We may soon see how correct I was when I claimed in 1992, in the quarterly journal Population and Environment, that the Russian people were better off in their imperial collapse than people of the U.S. will be because of petroleum dependence. With the common practice of one out of five Russians growing their own potatoes, unlike U.S. folk who only drive to the supermarket, survival from the short term to long term looked not so bad comparatively. But one reason there was no major die-off, as I predict in the U.S. and elsewhere, is that Russia was in an economic world still “growing.”

For more guidance from history, we can look to the work of Dmitry Orlov who decided to compare the Soviet Union's collapse to what he saw starting to happen in the U.S. His "five stages of collapse" seem to have begun. I don't believe he sees a good outcome from potential U.S. efforts to turn negatives into a positive future. Perhaps it is the dreamer in me that makes me an activist that says we can imagine, as John Lennon did in his song Imagine, that we can be "sharing all the world."

"What?" you exclaim, "isn't the U.S. needed as a world leader as times get even tougher!"? Well, the U.S. has been worse than a lumbering giant of idiocy where it matters: standing in the way of climate protection, guzzling oil, and creating terror around the world through militarism and "intelligence" operations. There has been no nation worse, although let us be fair by defending the United States as having many wonderful people and some incomparable scenery.

"What about defense against the evil doers?!" With collapse there will be little of today's overblown "defense", and little possibility of full scale oil-driven invasion of the former USA. Today the biggest oil consumer in the world is the U.S. Defense Fuel Supply Center. The future bioregional nations will have their own defense, but probably basic and not gold-plated, high-tech or dominated by corporate mercenaries.
If one dreams that the U.S., as presently structured, will become a paragon of good sense -- somehow thwarting the selfish kleptocracy that calls the shots -- this is the height of naivete. So we must get on with proactively dismantling the U.S. before the tsunami of change hits -- much like dispersing before a wave crashes. If all are tied together, all drown. If we separate into bioregional local economies, we might survive and even help each other across divides. Manufacturing and crafts have all but disappeared in the U.S., as other countries in Asia usually send us whatever we think we need. So our future will include recreating capabilities to make and repair things, but probably not frivolous toys that use energy.

SharonAstyk.com said on Dec. 15 "2009 will be the year we say that things 'collapsed'...a la the Great Depression." Is anticipating collapse the best we can do? What about an intelligent restructuring? The word for restructuring in Russian is famous around the world: perestroika. In 1990 I published in the Earth Island Journal my article "Ecostroika." (Actually, Sharon Astyk has great ideas along such lines.)

Mikhail Gorbachev and then Boris Yeltsin presided over the dissolution of the USSR, but had to go with what was already happening: collapse was inevitable, but it did not pose the threat that today's higher house of cards represents globally.

Because the U.S. government is incompetent and cannot be trusted to handle the engineering job of the millennium -- mitigating petrocollapse, overpopulation, peak money, and climate collapse -- as we saw post-Katrina, local communities need to formulate their own plans with President Obama's encouragement. He can thus be a greater Gorbachev for posterity. But let us not delude ourselves to imagine he can start telling the citizenry that we must stop population growth and start reducing our numbers. He is, after all, central to the one-party system for haphazard economic growth: the Democrats-and-Republicans.

Culturally the U.S. population is hooked on technology that makes them passive. A recent poll published in the Portland Oregonian states that 70% of the nation's residents' "favorite way to relax is watching a holiday movie." Personally I find movies to be one of the greatest justifications for civilization -- the new artistic documentary Blind Spot, on peak oil, comes to mind. But without the convenient power and gadgets we've enjoyed and been slaves to, we'll have to become much more convivial, in ways described by Ivan Illich: be more social and interactive.

Nuts and Bolts/Nitty Gritty of Dissolution

Responsibility for the nuclear waste, weapons, superfund sites, and brownfields must be taken seriously -- whereas today the byword is growth, growth, growth (i.e., profits, profits, profits for the few). Where has growth gotten the average person? Lower real wages and more working hours. Honest assessments of our predicament can be more easily made if we recognize our false system of values. We need to flush down our propaganda and national delusions brought to us by television and gossip magazines. Or, just wait for some plum job so we can get back to consuming like the global hogs and zombies we have been.

Dissolving the United States consciously is an actual proposal for a workable future, more clear than the "relocalization" that dissolution would automatically cause. Most analysis and speculation about the effects of peak oil and climate chaos are exercises in hand-wringing and waiting around for a vaguely anticipated involuntary dissolution of the nation and global economy.

Much like a failed marriage is better dissolved earlier rather than later, dissolution of the U.S. empire (domestic especially) will minimize pain and chaos that can take over completely -- as anyone knows who went through a tough divorce long after the love and respect went splitsville.

Vermont has had a serious, although tiny, secession movement. Great things have come from that state, I mean nation, and will continue. Whereas there once were Committees of Correspondence for the American Revolution, revisited by the Green Party in the 1990s, there needs to be Committees for Dissolution in every state and local community too.

The idea of dissolution is not in any way meant as disrespect to God-fearing, my-country-right-or-wrong, anti-abortion, pro-war ways of living in our unraveling society of haves and have nots. Indeed, diversity is healthy, and no doubt there will be after dissolution strongholds of homophobic, patriarchal, gun-loving bible-toting whites, just as there will be nations or tribes of feministic, pagan vegans. Or, to bypass the ridiculous stereotyping and labeling, people everywhere will be adopting local survival strategies to suit their surroundings.

There may be acorns in abundance here, wild rice there, seaweed here, rats there, permaculture gardens everywhere -- connected not through fossil fuels and steel/asphalt infrastructure 'a crumbling, but through sail boats, bicycles, horses, and other means. The important feature for future economics and trade will be local resources that are renewable. By definition, with the passing of the Petroleum Age underway already, we will not have long-distance trade through jets and trucks and rail as we know it.

Let us not be bested by the Russians: steer our collapse as proactively as possible, applying available petroleum energy and society's still-intact services to cushion the fall of our petroleum civilization.

For example, create millions of Victory Gardens for local food production. Make community barter networks, and call neighbors together for Citizen Petroleum Councils and Transition Town programs. Bicycle and bike-trailer facilities. Depaving. Ecological restoration for clean water and fish habitat.

If done later by hand and animal power, when petroleum power may be down forever, little would be accomplished, as little energy will be available and applied to the above measures -- such that the enormous rubble that falls will stay there and hinder the survivors who will lack means. If these measures were undertaken before the U.S. and the global economy falls flat, available energy will make the tasks to a large extent doable, and we could see a transition to Balkanization or Ecotopiazation.

Conclusion

Dissolution is our future, so let's get started proactively. Raise the issue with someone you know and watch the tension rise -- touching a nerve means you're close to the truth.

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Further reading:

"End time for USA upon oil collapse: A scenario for a sustainable future", by Jan Lundberg, 2005, in the newsletter of Association for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas (ASPO) and

culturechange.org

"The Five Stages of Collapse" by Dmitry Orlov, are
- Financial Collapse
- Commercial Collapse
- Political Collapse
- Social Collapse
- Cultural Collapse

as appeared on Nov. 11 2008 in the online Energy Bulletin:

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Arctic conference - "Climate Change: Chasm Widens Between Science and Policy" by Stephen Leahy, Dec. 15, 2008, Inter Press Service:

ipsnews.net