

System failure requires visionary opposition movement

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
17 October 2005

Culture Change Letter #112

The failure of the system and of the nation's leaders means that a course-correction is too late at this time. What we can do is prepare the lifeboats and eliminate toxic cultural baggage for the voyage "home."

The U.S. government is aware of the crisis to the degree readers of this column are, as this report will show. Just as bad as "keeping a lid on it" is the absence of any realistic mitigation that can help people and the environment survive petrocollapse.

The increasing chance of our extinction due to extreme climate change is as outrageous as the social injustice that's allowed to continue without meeting resistance. But the mind of industry and even "progressives" seems to favor denial right to the end. This is why I propose a visionary opposition movement to implement lifestyle change toward a new culture.

September was the hottest September on record. There is no more time to lose being mesmerized by entrenched institutions and their distractions.

The U.S. and the industrial world are running out of gas. How this is playing out is well known from headlines on Iraq and our Gulf hurricane disasters. But the end game is near, and needs to be described and anticipated. Only then can the next phase of our history be glimpsed and influenced.

The state, the economy and energy shortage are closing in on the American people. The massively overbuilt cities are set to be abandoned and crumble. In the face of people's despair and lack of opportunity, the image that the U.S.A. tries to project is phony. The real story is one of warped values: Torture for freedom. Health care only for the rich. Growing cancer epidemic.

With all these, including avian flu, we are caught up in the government's crisis (mis)management, adding to people's sense that there is no one to care for them or prop them up in harder and harder times. With the illegal war on Iraq still raging, and the planet melting from fossil fuels and deforestation, how can there be any legitimacy due the government, felt by a downtrodden citizenry increasingly hurting from the rat race?

An awakening of diverse players

The Petrocollapse Conference in New York City on Oct. 5th offered an honest assessment of where we are, having moved beyond accepting the reality of peak oil. The large array of experts (authors, prestigious scientists, in-the-trenches activists) accepted that a new world is on the way. But what it will look like is harder to imagine, and there is much debate among us as blind visionaries waiting for either a new dawn or worsening darkness.

The trick is to marry the visionaries of petrocollapse and a new culture to the existing anti-globalization movement and other activists working for a new society. A viable opposition movement should immediately prepare for social upheaval and widespread deprivation, to minimize the pain and chaos of collapse.

Even if it involves massive die-off due to the loss of ample petroleum for the continued feeding of hundreds of millions of people, we must prepare for a transition to sustainable practices and social structures. The Washington Post covered community preparedness on Oct. 16, but did not touch on national, regional or global petroleum supply. However, the subtitle to the article ("Hurricanes Prompt Many to Be More Prepared for Disaster") was useful: "Lesson Learned: You're on Your Own".

As for New York City, it is a functioning disaster. It's not very different from the rest of civilization, although a 25-million metropolitan area is daunting to anyone knowledgeable about sustainability. New York demonstrates the limits of American consumption and despair. Observers of society should visit New York occasionally lest an erroneous notion of megacity sustainability has gotten a mental toe-hold. Die-off is denied by those trying to tow the "politically correct" line.

System belief to the death

Classical and neoliberal economists do not deserve much respect, especially when they have failed to see what is in front of their noses regarding petroleum dependence. These analysts believe in a never-ending cycle of growth, an eternal industrial way of life for a huge population.

"Demand destruction" comes from serious developments outside the so-called normal business cycle. The business cycle's recessions have been delayed and suppressed by growth schemes such as "free trade agreements" and more blatant forms for corruption and exploitation. The typical economist believes religiously that price governs supply and that a "slackening" in demand will result in another cycle of lower prices and then rising demand.

But instead, the cycle will be broken, perhaps by pent up pressure for a depression. Additionally, when collapse hits, it will

be thorough and the business cycle will end. This is because there will be production destruction as well as demand destruction. Such factors as the inability of supplies and repairs to be provided to all sectors of the economy, and an immobilized commuting labor force, will prevent the machinery (literally and figuratively) from going onward.

We're on borrowed time, considering that the hurricanes hit the economy hard along with the petroleum infrastructure. High energy prices from peak oil and high demand will continue to eat into the economy. Overall, the loss of blood will cause the patient to faint and probably bleed to death.

We're living in a time of mass insanity, when people buy a "nice new car" despite knowing about global warming and diminishing oil supplies. Consuming plastic is insane as well, as we let petrochemicals into our bodies for the sake of convenience. People have an innate understanding or suspicion that consuming crazy amounts of petroleum -- even just plastic -- is wrong ecologically and morally. Although they don't see petroleum going up in flames before their own eyes, they are building their own coffins and calling it employment. People have deadened their spirits and must pretend life is still alright, at least compared to the lot of Iraqis and Afghans. (Fortunately, telling a waiter or shopkeeper that we are allergic to plastic works every time when one is trying to avoid the toxic petroleum. We are actually all allergic to plastic and other petrochemical toxins, but if you just want your coffee in a non-dioxin or non-styrofoam cup, it's better to refrain from constantly educating.)

System Collapse x 2: birth of a new age

There has been a lot of overbreeding going on, especially when land has only been getting scarcer. Although die-off upon petrocollapse is not a pretty vision, there will be plenty of land to go around for the future culture of sustainability.

Fortunately, peak-oil nay-sayers and confusionists are going out of style even more rapidly than the global-warming nay-sayers and confusionists dwindled to a few resolute, fossil-industry paid talking heads. The pace of change only accelerates.

However, despite progress in our collective understanding and recognizing the need for action, we are at the end of the necessary time period for restructuring the nation's infrastructure.

"We simply must balance our demand for energy with our rapidly shrinking resources. By acting now, we can control our future instead of letting the future control us." - President Jimmy Carter, 1977

Robert Hirsch, whose study for the U.S. Dept. of Energy was mentioned but unidentified in USA Today's top story of Oct. 17, 2005 on peak oil, pointed out that waiting for peak to hit and then try to take traditional government/industry action will be not only a failure but will result in severe hardship for the whole petroleum-dependent nation and world. Hirsch's study is strong on examining petroleum industry trends, and analyzes the effects of car dependence (25% of U.S. oil use in terms of fuels). But the report does not raise an alarm about food production and distribution. Welcome to petrocollapse, my friends.

Some in the U.S. government do understand the bigger picture on petroleum and the threats to continuing business as usual. Congressman Roscoe Bartlett has started to gain valuable adherents in the House of Representatives. Congressman Bartlett, imagining the world's opinion of the U.S.'s gluttony of petroleum, told me this nation must surely appear to the rest of the world as a big pig that the world would not mind seeing suddenly deflate and fall.

Much more of these honest, open assessments of peak oil and our common plight need to be made and shared. Or we can glue our eyes to televised World Series baseball and watch car ads. We can wish to believe that terrorism happens because our (dwindling) freedom is hated. Actually, some of us home-grown Americans are getting to hate our "freedom to shop."

The unraveling of Earth's delicately balanced climate is underway. Concurrently, the socioeconomic system is under considerable strain on its way to collapse. In the absence of government planning for a world unable to grow nearly as much food as is required, due to dwindling petroleum and global warming -- while population continues to mushroom -- we can sit back and wait for double, total collapse. Or we can hasten change toward a future by getting through collapse sooner, by living as if the post-petroleum future were already here. Withdrawing our daily support of the growth economy can have serious and beneficial effects.

Where is the outrage, the militant opposition to this deadly system? In the 1960s sacrifices were made for social change. Black Power activists not only demonstrated their right to bear arms, but did it to call attention to suffering under racism in hopeless communities. So, a contemporary activist today could reject poisoning by plastic and fight the encroachment of cars upon the common land. Even if one was put off by the Black Panthers and their rhetoric and rifles, most of us now can agree that taking some kind of serious, peaceful action for the climate and to deal with petrocollapse is essential. This is a new crisis across the board, and it's not about leftism or rightism.

Effective activism today challenges the culture of greed and waste, no matter who indulges in it. There are plenty of us trying not to play the game of consumerism and marching meekly off to slaughter (i.e., being trampled in a food riot when the trucks don't roll in to the supermarkets). What happened to our animal spirit that ordinarily would resist threats to our freedom and survival? We also point the way to cooperative solutions rather than competition. Modern humans need to re-form into tribes or establish a culture with tribal values, and also enforce peace.

We appear to be a tremendously weak generation, but exceptional individuals and groups persist. However, we are

surrounded by idiots who think success means being able to consume a fancy coffee drink in a "nice car," polluting on their way to the corporate job. Granted, it's hard to live apart from the dominant system, but why participate to the hilt? Turn off the lights and pull the plugs already!

If survival in an anti-nature society is doubtful -- it is increasingly obvious -- doesn't it make sense to move toward a natural way of living and to defend nature? This must not be ignored by peak oil experts and renewable energy advocates. One can say that it's difficult or even unrealistic. But rejecting it means annihilation. Historically speaking, this is a culture of poison -- of our bodies and nature -- and overpopulation: This will be more of a legacy than "The Gipper's" Hollywood smile or whether same-sex marriage is ever allowed in the military.

These are the last of the old days

If we keep listening to the narrow-interest "leaders" who represent the short-term profiteers and exploiters, the oppression continues until all is lost.

The mask of legitimacy and of fairness has been slipping from the Bush regime and the whole government, as continuing greed and "order" become the clear purpose of the dominators and their system. It is not merely a matter of bad policies, but rather the *raison d'être* that we must question regarding the system of economics and government. The Democrats are just as much a part of the beast as the Republicans, as the "left hand" is encased in a velvet glove of the "good cop."

The police state is bankrupt on many levels and ought to be abandoned before petrocollapse gives the state another purpose for attempted, botched governance -- it is too late for anything constructive by the government except perhaps to allow sustainability measures that are now illegal under zoning laws.

The destruction of good soil and drainage through paving and antiquated industrial agriculture are ridiculous features of the short-term fossil-fueled affair humans are engaged in. Our abusive relationship with Earth is starting to yield the equivalent of the greatest backlash that any criminal rapist could ever imagine. Meanwhile, to undo the over-pavement and free the land is illegal, oftentimes even when it is "your" land.

Peak oil and petrocollapse demand reforms verging on fundamental redesign of human habitat. To understand peak oil, to accept petrocollapse and visualize a post-petroleum sustainable culture, we must appreciate how horribly destructive is the present society. To understand how unjust and wasteful is the dominant social system is to advocate its soonest replacement by its opposite: a nature-oriented, egalitarian and tribal society organized along local economics. This vision was clearly offered by various speakers at the Petrocollapse NYC conference Oct. 5th.

The failure of the dominant system is understandable when people are hopelessly attached to the global economy, willingly or without question, and cannot deal with the reality of petroleum's failure to endlessly accommodate economic growth. They have a religious conviction that there will be a technological fix even though the climate collapses. This notion was dispensed with by the speakers at Petrocollapse NYC.

The inability of the system's ardent practitioners to change course is shown by their tolerance for killing-machines -- cars -- to be allowed to run around everywhere. Such tolerance of nature's subjugation and risk of fatal crashes and animal slaughter suggests this must be a culture of hate. At least, a complete lack of taste. The antecedents of dominator-culture (centered around Mesopotamia) assured that a greedy, materialistic culture would come along to enslave the whole Earth. Now, to fuel needless driving, the leading force in Western Civilization (the U.S.) is like a serpent biting its tail: Iraq, the origin of the civilization, subject to its deadly invader.

Economic/financial meltdown

As petrocollapse looms, the economy is already extremely vulnerable. Riding on endless growth and escaping the business-cycle trough -- thanks to smoke and mirrors and being the biggest dealer on the block -- the U.S. is a gigantic pimple on the head of the global economy ready to burst. Yet, mild economic reports from the government and the Federal Reserve are designed to keep everyone calm.

Crude oil and natural gas imports can account for about one-third of the U.S. trade deficit. The deficit has already cost millions of US jobs in manufacturing and other sectors and depressed wages of US workers. As energy prices rise, and energy costs continue to be hidden in all goods and services, the breaking point must finally arrive for the householder -- who may soon be unable to get fuel for transportation and heating -- and for the economy that finally stalls when the tank gauge reads empty (no matter how much oil is under the ground). This economic/financial meltdown can both precede and precipitate the final energy crisis.

Our economic extinction is not something to contemplate as we shop and adjust the thermostat, but to step away from as we slash energy use and embark upon community/tribal living. The choice is ours, just as the ravaged land, air and water is everyone's including all species'.

[editor's note: the companion piece to the above essay is Culture Change Letter #113, "It is within our power - even the Unknown Consumer's!" by Jan Lundberg at

http://culturechange.org/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=30&Itemid=2

* * * * *

Links and further reading:

Petrocollapse Conference speeches from October 5, Manhattan: text and pictures of presentation, and complete audio files! See home page of <http://www.petrocollapse.org>

Robert L. Hirsch's SAIC peak oil 2005 report for the U.S. Department of Energy:

"If mitigation were to be too little, too late, world supply/demand balance will be achieved through massive demand destruction (shortages), which would translate to significant economic hardship..." - page 59.

"If peaking is imminent, failure to initiate timely mitigation could be extremely damaging." - page 6.

See http://www.netl.doe.gov/otiic/World_Oil_Issues/Oil_Peaking_NETL.pdf

Top Story in USA Today, Oct. 17th: Peak Oil Debate

http://www.usatoday.com/money/industries/energy/2005-10-16-oil-1a-cover-usat_x.htm

Virtual territory for an opposition movement: <http://www.culturechange.org/e-letter-territory.html>

Press Release from the office of Congressman Roscoe Bartlett:

Washington, D.C. – October 17, 2005 's SAIC peak oil 2005 report for the U.S. Department of Energy:"If mitigation were to be too little, too late, world supply/demand balance will be achieved through massive demand destruction (shortages), which would translate to significant economic hardship..." - page 59. "If peaking is imminent, failure to initiate timely mitigation could be extremely damaging." - page 6. See Top Story in for an opposition movement: Press Release from the office of Congressman :Washington, D.C. – October 17, 2005's SAIC peak oil 2005 report for the U.S. Department of Energy:"If mitigation were to be too little, too late, world supply/demand balance will be achieved through massive demand destruction (shortages), which would translate to significant economic hardship..." - page 59. "If peaking is imminent, failure to initiate timely mitigation could be extremely damaging." - page 6. See Top Story in for an opposition movement: Press Release from the office of Congressman :Washington, D.C. – October 17, 2005Six Republican House Members Urge Immediate U.S. Response to a Looming Energy Crisis: Global Peak Oil"We are on a collision course with disaster and we have to do something very meaningful about it." - Congressman Sherwood Boehlert, Chairman, Committee on Science

“…we will take the next logical step in cultural evolution... Oil is not going to last forever.” – Congressman Wayne Gilchrest

Congressman Roscoe Bartlett led a group of six Republican colleagues, including the Chairmen of the Intelligence and Science Committees in a one-hour Special Order speech before the U.S. House of Representatives discussing the urgency of the U.S. government responding to the threats to the U.S. economy and national security posed by global peak oil. Congressman Bartlett was joined by Congressmen Gil Gutknecht, Wayne Gilchrest, Peter Hoekstra, Sherwood Boehlert, and Vernon Ehlers. Contact: Lisa Lyons Wright at 202-225-2417 or 202-225-9554 or lisa.wright@mail.house.gov

Support Culture Change online by making a donation. Help us do more to raise awareness, such following up our NYC Petrocollapse Conference: <http://www.culturechange.org/funding.htm>

Grow food extremely local with Food Not Lawns:

<http://www.foodnotlawns.com/>

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

and from City Farmer: Canada's Office of Urban Agriculture, learn about Cuba's organic-growing revolution:

<http://www.cityfarmer.org/cubacastro.html>