Overpopulation, vegans eating plastic, and the housing bubble

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13 December 2005

Culture Change Letter #117

Overpopulation and depopulation are like almost no other "unmentionable" subjects because they evoke major speculation, fears and strong opinions. As we are constantly using "ten Earth's" worth of the planet's useable photosynthetic energy in the industrial age, by drawing upon the ancient solar deposits known as fossil fuels, this could indicate we are ten times overpopulated as ecological carrying capacity would allow.

But "too many people" sounds antisocial and harsh. Some folk like having so many "companions" (strangers around). Cities are commonly thought to be the greatest thing on Earth, despite such grave drawbacks as there being little public space anymore that isn't fenced or paved.

No one wants to lessen the collective burden by being the one to "check out." Even so, some of us are looking at massive, involuntary die-off as a consequence of fast-dwindling petroleum for growing and distributing food. The bursting of the housing bubble could actually result from depopulation: fewer people in the cities as a result of starvation or an exodus to the rural areas.

In the collapse of the Soviet Union, one way the urban populations coped with food shortage was to take day trips to the countryside to plant and harvest. One stimulus for this strategy was seeing the food trucks pulling into town only to stop at the outskirts: they could stop and let people buy everything the truck had then and there. There was no need to drive the trucks further into the city, and this saved fuel too. Houses nearer the center of town were obviously less valuable under austere conditions.

What the particular food is all about can make a difference. For example, there is great concern that the increased meat eating in China puts a strain on world food supplies because animal farming uses so much grain and petroleum. This and other considerations point to vegetarianism and veganism as the only reasonable course.

On Amtrak coming back to the West Coast during my peak-oil speaking tour last month, I went to the dining car somewhere in Riverside County. The stark, arid beauty of the outdoors was rapidly giving way to tasteless urban sprawl. I just wanted breakfast and to enjoy real dishes and utensils. But because I tried to order just coffee and biscuits as well as any vegetarian food, and not bacon and eggs, I was denied service and was advised to go to the Snack Car. When I said I was vegetarian, I was asked if I would eat eggs. I said no, and was told I was a vegan and thus was banished to the Junk Food Car.

There everything is heavily packaged, nothing is organic, and plastics are microwaved around the food they cling to. A vegan would to better to eat the regular animal-based fare in the dining car from both the health and waste standpoints. A gourmet might as well eat in either car, if taste is all that matters. Of greatest concern is that Amtrak no longer recycles anything, unless we can trust them to sort through all the garbage and refuse that's thrown together in thousands of huge plastic garbage bags each day.

Vegans eat no animal products of any kind, and many of them go further by refusing any leather clothing or accessories. It is most laudable to protect animals and to avoid eating factory-farm and high-cholesterol foods. Many vegans believe that there is no human overpopulation problem; to many a vegan it's simply a matter of diet and changing agricultural policy.

However, a vegan may not be getting ahead in the health sweepstakes if he or she allows no end of plastic chemical exposure from plastic wrapping, disposable utensils, bottled water in plastic, using PVC pipes, and eats from canned foods containing plastic lining in caps and cans that have estrogen imitators. It is the latter that is also in popular Nalgene water bottles. And few people know that food wrap is PVC and therefore highly toxic.

A vegan who engages in the above practices and relies on petroleum for polyester clothing, or drives a car, or buys "organic" products shipped from great distances (increasingly in plastic packaging) is not only harming him/herself but harms the world. Some of this behavior is often based on ignorance. After all, society has kept the lid on the plastic plague.

It has been sold as technological progress and essential convenience in a fast-paced world.

Making studies on toxic chemicals are unpopular with funders and institutions, but more reports are just starting to appear in printed media about plastics pollution of the oceans and our bodies. These reports never attack plastics in general nor petroleum. The interests of polluting industries and the technofix industries to come are always represented. People often just want to know, "what plastics are safer and when will plant plastics take over the market?" These questions are dead ends, as previous Culture Change reports have explained.

Without dwelling on academia's shortcomings or censorship in corporate media, we can heighten our general awareness and take action. However, we must start addressing a dilemma such as plastic veganism as a case of yet another social movement of a narrow focus that does not fully address petroleum. In this age of war for oil, peaking global extraction of oil, and climate distortion from petroleum, many worthy causes such as rights for minorities are unfortunately becoming subsumed in the tsunami of petrocollapse.

Not to pick on vegans, let us imagine an ethical vegan is also active in composting, recycling, growing food in the community, protesting war, and conserving energy in electricity and transportation. This is beautiful, and who can criticize -- except those threatened by behavior that makes them feel guilty?

Vegans are always up for an interesting debate. Just point out to them that our species evolved eating meat as omnivores, and that animals such as the salmon and caribou are sacred and staple foods to many tribes. Such meat eating went on for untold millennia and provided excellent, concentrated nutrition. Ah, but the hunters and gatherers who lived as they did are not the ones killing and consuming most animals today, of course. Yet, there can be some meat consumption by the average American that is not factory-farm and is local and organic. All parts of the animal should be used, and the animal thanked or acknowledged as it is killed as humanely as possible, as traditional tribes did.

John Robbins wrote the ground-breaking Diet for a New America. His statistics on how many, many more times the energy and water are required for meat production as opposed to grain and bean production – for the same amount of protein – blew minds and started a movement. Even before the Alliance for a Paving Moratorium focused on the atrocious road-kill from cars, Robbins joined our Alliance and knew that society needed to focus on petroleum that is not just related to modern conventional crop production.

Supermarket Katrina