

Counter argument for "Stimulus," growth and employment

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
02 March 2009

"Our culture and Western Civilization are so threatened from within -- the system's own contradictions and failures -- that collapse prevents us from imagining in much detail what kind of new (or traditional, close-to-nature) culture or society can be around the corner. Likewise, technology worship and clinging to material things hold us back."

Culture Change Letter #239

It is not clear where we are headed in terms of a society impacted by ecological destruction and the end of globalized consumption. I for one am not sure I want to see the result. However, as things are not so bad now compared to where they seem to be heading -- with too many mouths to feed and no social safety net or ecological capacity up to the challenge for avoiding big pain -- I continue to soldier on, so to speak. I try to serve the greater good while I worry about my own survival and that of my loved ones. I also have a good time when I can, but things are getting weirder for me as they seem to be for most of us.

I keep in mind my former career-training as an oil-industry analyst and my generalist knowledge gained, in order to try to make sense of our changing, swirling world. It's what I learned after leaving the industry and government that ultimately allowed me, I believe, to find out more or less fully what is going on, and thus feel I can offer ideas on what needs to be done. That is not to say I know everything or am prepared for any direction the human experience may take. But some things I know for sure from experience and meditating on the forces of both history and the universe.

Predictions

In the 1980s I was making widely reported gasoline price and supply predictions. After leaving industry I made more interesting predictions. In 1991 I wrote in the Spring 1992 edition of *Population and Environment: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, that the U.S. socioeconomic failure would be worse than the Soviet Union's collapse, because we were so petroleum-dependent compared to the Russians who on the household level were growing their own potatoes. Through the 1990s I predicted collapse of the U.S. economy due to the coming global peak of oil extraction, in our *Auto-Free Times* magazine which became *Culture Change*. I have also predicted an eventual Ecotopian outcome, even in the U.S. that I've jokingly called the United Paved Precincts of Amerika.

I have learned that the kind of economy and social structure we have been living under is lacking in any sound foundation for long-term continuity. In fact, our survival is threatened by our present system. The political solutions that have been allowed to circulate are really economic band-aids that do not threaten the power structure. This is a prime reason it is so hard to predict where we are

going to end up as a people. Our culture and Western Civilization are so threatened from within -- the system's own contradictions and failures -- that collapse prevents us from imagining in much detail what kind of new (or traditional, close-to-nature) culture or society can be around the corner. Likewise, technology worship and clinging to material things hold us back.

For my whole adult life I have yearned for and worked for -- except when I was mostly serving corporations -- a better world that left war, greed and pollution behind. The paradox is that when one wants fundamental change enough to take action and look deeply at the obstacles, the positive vision is tempered by unpleasant realism and truth that others may call negative or doom-and-gloom. But the sum of positive alternatives -- to ecocide, war and unequal treatment -- is in one's heart and not suppressed everywhere at all times. Here I leave the style of first-person writing and lay out the rest of my argument.

People are currently their own worst enemy. Some are removed from caring about themselves or others, and they are motivated to hold the power to enforce the status quo. They manage to keep the majority of people, who are not aggressive or creative, under control by various means. One way is to convince people that being able to buy things means freedom, although for 99% of our evolution as a species we lived in a natural way so as to use freely what was at hand for survival and for the good of the tribe and "relations" (other species). Another way to control people is through divide-and-conquer tactics with a large measure of fear generated. Hence, we have a fairly obedient population that allows astronomical disparity in wealth. The frogs in the pot are starting to boil to death, but now we at last have a black frog who croaks really well and means well, but he represents change-lite.

The "Obama Stimulus" is not all bad, just as there are some good government programs. However, it is time to question the feasibility of really reforming a doomed system built on lies, exploitation and separation from nature.

Workers as the key to the problem

Workers are enablers of the system that exploits them and kills them. Workers "earning" their paycheck and material wealth that serves to destroy the ecosystem are dutiful dupes of authoritarian, ruthless rulers who control not only wealth but institutions and public information. Workers are not all of one mind, and many are reluctant workers who would rather be relaxing or doing something to directly benefit themselves and their family. But enough workers have bought into the ideas that jobs are necessary and that it is acceptable or inevitable to work for others -- in order to get nowhere but the eventual grave after a stunted life deprived of fulfillment.

No one dares call today's worker a glorified beast of burden, for we have "progressed" and overcome the bad old past where things were more cut-and-dried. This mistake or inescapable conclusion in logic (and conclusion of one's life) means that the adherents of more jobs are the

actual problem with humanity and the ecosystem today, whether the adherents are workers or capitalists. Another way to put it is that our enemy is merely lack of imagination and of love for one another.

The social policy course of employment, which is the apparent easy way out of recently added stress, versus the course of rejecting the system (and living under the radar, ethically or no), is dominant, and correlative with the deteriorating state the species finds itself in. At a time when the failure of mega-finance and debt is so clear that no one has a certainty of future well-being, it should also be clear enough to generate doubt in the entire system that is so clearly ailing and teetering. The approach of more of the same, to prop up the existing system instead of create a better one that's a major departure from the present one, is insanely dangerous.

The Stimulus assumes the system will respond to it and go back to growing. When we look at the weakness of the system and see what the permanent loss of cheap energy and pristine nature have to offer, it should be obvious there's no return to growth.

The idea of growth is diametrically opposed to stability. So stability has been redefined as growth, which is physically impossible over time on a closed system called Earth. Because growth cannot go on forever, those advocating it are really the forces of short-term gain for greed. To claim that growth helps people goes with attempts to stave off problems relating to overcrowding in relation to resource limits.

It is only when people (1) finally question the existing system's ability to care for everyone (which it never could) in the long term, and (2) when people reject the ridiculousness of endless growth, and (3) they take control of their own affairs to assure their local environment meets basic needs (instead of working for a corporate entity to buy things from strangers), will the true economic problems and ecological crisis be dealt with.

So it must be with different eyes that we see developments now signaling the end of growth. For example, the cutting of 16,000 jobs at Sony, and 4,000 jobs at Microsoft, need to be seen as good news. (What should be much more troubling is the estimated 95,000 agricultural jobs to be lost in California during 2009, due mainly to drought.) Although the workers are displaced, they have stopped producing machines and gizmos that warm the globe through electric use that then become toxic junk for the landfills due to questionable recycling. The idled workers, largely ignorant of ecology and energy, may be waiting for more work of the same kind while unwilling (or at a loss) to work for themselves as full members of their own communities.

The world is faced with global unemployment rising this year by more than 50m from baseline 2007 levels, according to the International Labour Organization, a UN agency. The agency also spoke of an additional 200 million people going into lower-paid poverty. (These calculations are based on the stronger corporate economy of over a month ago.) There is probably no solution for this in terms of new jobs opening up in the traditional sense. However, if these people can somehow obtain food, they can shift to the kind of work that benefits themselves and their own communities while safeguarding their ecosystems. And it is not "them" at risk; we are all going to be affected in the accelerating depression

and petrocollapse.

The economic crisis is overdue, as the WTO and various capitalistic bubbles delayed the once normal business cycle of recession. Now the system is going down fast. The workers and non-workers of today will figure out a way, although with huge casualties due to lack of preparation for the real world.

Rather than argue over the present system's ability to come back and allow its proponents to offer more of the same -- using the veiled claim that it's good for families to be dependent and helpless -- it is time to imagine that a better world is possible. Local food production and caring for a region's water supplies are just two features of what needs to happen now, and ultimately will happen. The doubt one may have over the timing, and how weak we may be to start over as a saner society, confuses the issues as much as the ongoing suppression of better ways of organizing ourselves. Cooperative arrangements and sharing are anathema to those suffering most from material insecurity: those who must own unlimited wealth. As long as these sociopaths can continue to hold or control positions of leadership and manipulate the masses through media and other institutions -- as well as through fear and divide-and-conquer -- then the weirder will be our daily lives as the pressure and uncertainty build. Recognizing this can help get us on task.

* * * * *

References

"America Needs Restructuring," by Jan Lundberg

"Fossil fuels policy action: A special section for correspondence and controversy", Population & Environment, Springer Netherlands (who took over), ISSN 0199-0039 (Print) 1573-7810 (Online), Issue Volume 13, Number 3 / March, 1992

Population & Environment

"Global crisis 'could cost 50m jobs'" by Frances Williams, Financial Times, Jan. 28 2009:

ft.com

"California in drought emergency: Arnold Schwarzenegger has declared a state of emergency", BBC, Feb. 28, 2009:

news.bbc.co.uk