

Zimbabwezation

Contributed by Albert Bates
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"[E]xisting levels of production... are now threatened by the environmental fragility of the natural resource base and the unsustainability of existing farming practices." - The International Monetary Fund, to Zimbabwe, ten years ago

We recall a visit to Zimbabwe in the late 1990s, when that country had become one of the world's bright microeconomic lights illuminating the way for a future Africa of enterprise and empowerment. The Zimbabwe miracle was exciting everyone, and we purchased a pullover and pants from a company called Zimbabaloola that were emblazoned with colorful art in the style of ancient pictographs crossed with rude rock reggae. Zimbabwe had some of the most productive farms in the world and they were going organic. Permaculture and ecovillage design courses were fully subscribed. The arts scene was in blossom and world beat radio stations carried Zimbabwe's music around the globe. And then it abruptly unraveled.

Backing up a step, Zimbabwe was never at peace for very long. It had as troubled a colonial history as Bolivia, Nigeria or anywhere else rich in resources and poor in defensive foresight. In the 13th Century it was known as Mwene Mutapa, a port of call on the gold and copper trade routes of Arab dhows and Chinese junks. In the early 17th century it was conquered by Portugal and utterly plundered. In the 19th century refugees from the Zulu wars erected the state of Matabeleland there but then were ravaged by the Shona Empire, leaving the region open to invasion by Cecil Rhodes's British South Africa Company in the 1880s. The fertile watershed became known as Southern Rhodesia for nearly a century, as its deeper mineral resources were systematically excavated and removed to Europe.

In 1978, the white government, supported by apartheid South Africa, was under siege by black liberation opponents and as its last alternative to collapse opened negotiations with the leaders of the Patriotic Fronts — the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU), led by Robert Mugabe, and the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU), led by Joshua Nkomo. Mugabe had spent 11 years in Salisbury prison, during which he earned three degrees, including a law degree from London and a bachelor of administration from the University of South Africa, by correspondence courses. He had friends in high places, including anti-colonial leaders throughout Africa. After a raucous transition to independence mediated in part by Henry Kissinger, tainted elections were held in 1980 that brought Mugabe to the center of a ruling coalition. Using mass-murder of his opponents, rigged ballots and intimidation, Mugabe was re-elected three more times. Mugabe was no Mandela.

Initially, the coalition did quite well for itself and the people of Zimbabwe. Mugabe saw a prosperous economy as his ticket to personal wealth and Swiss bank accounts, and encouraged local enterprise. That was the golden period of the 1980s and 90s, when infant mortality and malnutrition were halved, life expectancy rose to 64, and literacy jumped to an all-time high, nearly 90 percent. The labor market was unable to absorb all these young, educated Zimbabweans, however, and by the late 1990s, the World Bank and IMF were brought in to address a growing economic crisis. The IMF observed that for the poor farmers working communal lands, "existing levels of production in these areas are now threatened by the environmental fragility of the natural resource base and the unsustainability of existing farming practices" and recommended greater environmental regulation.

In 2000, Mugabe offered a constitutional amendment that would allow government to confiscate white-owned land for redistribution to black farmers without compensation. It was defeated by the voters, but he instituted the practice anyway. Self-styled "war veterans" roamed the country, invading white-owned farms and those who did not leave voluntarily were tortured or killed. Political opponents were rounded up and interred in prison camps where wives and children were sexually abused by AIDS-infected prisoners and "war veterans" and then released to live in cardboard shantytowns that were periodically bulldozed. These atrocities were well documented by eyewitness accounts published in the daily papers of South Africa when we attended the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg 2002, so one can only assume that the hundred or more Heads of State and thousands of NGOs and UN agencies also attending were abundantly aware. Millions of Zimbabweans have since perished, average life expectancy has fallen to 34, AIDS is rampant and unchecked, and inflation, last measured in June 2008, was running at 11,250,000 percent.

Mugabe has extended his presidency beyond the expiration of his elected term, and blames the trouble in Zimbabwe on homosexuals and Great Britain, especially Tony Blair. We can't help wonder whether Henry Kissinger, Milton Friedman and the IMF might have also had something to do with it.

The Mugabe model of pillaging and laying ruin to a prosperous economy was used by the cabal that took down the US economy in the first decade of this century, and the world economy trembled and fell in the wake of that. What might we now expect? Inflation at 11,250,000 percent, average life expectancy of 34, and endemic disease all seem plausible.

Let us be clear. We are not comparing Mr. Obama to Mr. Mugabe. We could compare Mr. Mugabe to Mr. Bush, except that Mr. Mugabe is still president, apparently for life. What we might say by way of making this discussion relevant is that Mr. Obama is no economist, and that is probably a good thing.

But, because of that, he did what anyone might have. He bought an insurance policy from Tim Geithner.

Mr. Geithner took a meeting with him ["Obama's Choice"] and promised he could get the USA out of this ungodly mess. He had managed a successful bailout once before, in South Korea in 1997. He'd worked in three administrations, served Kissinger Associates for three years, was New York Fed president in 2003, chairman of the G-10's Committee on Payment and Settlement Systems of the Bank for International Settlements, and a member of the Group of Thirty. He knew where the skeletons were. He seemed to know what he was talking about. Obama bit.

Geithner's job, reinflate the bubble. You know, that rapidly deflating one with the big flapping hole in its side. So with duct tape and spit, he has closed the hole, a little, and now is puffing furiously.

Can Geithner rescue the world economy by reinflating the bubble? No more than Zimbabwe can recover with Mugabe still in the presidential palace.

Ultimately it goes back to the IMF's prescient observation that "existing levels of production in these areas are now threatened by the environmental fragility of the natural resource base and the unsustainability of existing farming practices." It's just that the areas of unsustainable practices we are talking about are now the whole world.

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His Financial Collapse Survival Guide (2009) is now available in Kindle format from Amazon.com. He will be teaching a permaculture design course in southern Belize from March 20 to April 1 for anyone who'd like to experience his full repertoire.

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