
The Beginning of the End of Capitalism, 2008

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Barack Obama is saying, "Rally around me, we can grow again -- let's just borrow some more and spend anew with less greed." It won't work. He knows no other way, ostensibly. But what's that White House food garden about? Not a help to the GDP, which is such a flawed measurement of what should count.

Until the new local self-sufficiency paradigm takes hold, we seem hell bent on allowing remaining wealth and resources from the old paradigm to be squandered and handed to the super rich. Speaking of which, the "Defense" budget is still sacrosanct. Obama can't change that, but he wants to spread around the money more nicely and be "greener" as the system crashes.

If we can see the pointlessness of propping up an inequitable system that depends on exploitation, devastation, overconsumption and endless growth, we can fondly look forward to the end of capitalism. It seems like it could be on its last legs right now, as never before. 2008 was peak money, peak cars, peak petroleum cost, and peak unaccountability.

Ending capitalism has to come from serious feelings that go beyond daydreaming of a sweeter world. One feeling can be anger over being told your choice is to either work meaninglessly your whole life or to starve. Or tasting the advantages of cooperative living and seeing, in stark contrast, a greedy manipulator trying to exploit others. Or sensing that our ecological fate, common to all of us, is of no concern to materialistic fools who act like they're not from this planet.

How can capitalism be questioned so easily today? Obviously, the fat cats fucked up. This total mess is where things were heading for many years, but we were too kowtowed to question the national and global system.

The biggest feeling of all will be from hunger in the belly. When people feel the urgent motivation to take care of their stomachs and to assure the survival of their families, when patience and faith run out, that's when defense in the form of an insurgency takes place. However, such a revolution -- even if successful -- may not address the problem of opportunism by a new elite that may or may not be capitalist.

Although some of us are most interested in culture change for meaningful change toward sustainability, it is today's astronomical debt and wealth of capitalism -- and the capitalist governments' budgets -- that are at issue in the public's mind. To try to figure out just how huge the bubble is that's now popping is to play a numbers game. It's easier to do that than to act like a revolutionary and start living without capitalism. For now, it's still necessary to show people that the system is out of control and crashing. President Obama is a great change from Bush and the over two hundred years of white men occupying the White House. But the phenomenon is a distraction from the greater story of collapse.

Numerically we can see that there's not enough real money to rescue the inflated financial sector. The fact that the debt that's out there, connected to toxic assets, is several times larger than the amount of capital available is ignored in the hope that future growth will remove the red ink and deficit.

Before that can happen and economic growth could resume, there would have to be a number of impossibilities. Cheap and abundant energy, particularly liquid fuels, would have to be found as never before in order to create and distribute the endless amount of goods for consumption. Easy credit would have to return, meaning that the risk of lending would have to be deemed low once again. The stimulus budget would have to work wonders, but the kind of economic activity it would have to create is more of the same: expansion of the infrastructure for more urban sprawl, and turnover of endless manufactured gadgets and appliances (by green consumers, it is hoped).

Today's system of capitalism running completely amok, typified by trillions of dollars never going to the workers supporting the whole house of cards, is failing fast. As the attempt to put band-aids on a metastasized cancer finally shows itself to be an illusion created by those trying to desperately prop up and then pull out their wealth, that's when the final, accelerated collapse will be completed. Due to interdependence of markets, other nations' economies will be brought down along with their regimes. The grand Ponzi scheme ends -- wherever growth schemes were perpetrated. The U.S. government will attempt to retain order at home via martial law and suspension of rights and environmental protection. Overseas military adventures will be unaffordable.

This is the real Plan B when the sham of the growth stimulus becomes obvious. This Depression will make the 1930s Great Depression seem like a walk in the park. At the end of the tunnel, however, will not be the growth of the post-war economy but rather, when the chaotic desperation dies down, the getting back to basics that the back-to-the-landers and city collectivists have been practicing since the 1960s' counterculture.

Plan B is when the bottom really drops out and the population freaks out in a national Katrina fiasco – despite the kinder, gentler Obama flavor. For more people than ever will have begun to suffer from hunger due to job loss and lack of access to good land and fisheries.

And especially in the event of massive droughts or petrocollapse they will march on the rich and try to take whatever they can. When order cannot be restored within a few days, police and military personnel will head for their own homes to protect their families and meager food supplies.

Meanwhile, some people will have already started organizing local systems for food production and distribution, as well as other services and roles to replace the global supermarket that has by then utterly failed and disappeared.

The suffering and confusion will be so great that in the aftermath of reorganizing there will be strong resistance to any attempts to repeat the discredited ways that brought so much pain. As the dust settles and die-off plays out, stability will return, albeit in a new world. Climate destruction and loss of cheap, abundant energy will mean that almost everyone will be lucky to have a subsistence lifestyle.

However, there will come an almost unprecedented level of equality and sharing in order to maximize efficiency. Kropotkin made clear over one hundred years ago conclusively that mutual aid is more productive, easy, and natural compared to competition.

So the days of being lucky to have a job, to work for someone else's gain -- when that someone else is not even visible or accountable -- is on the way out. President Obama is still defending the old system. He probably knows better. But those who have the greatest stake in the existing set-up are his whole team of advisers, if not his bosses or hidden masters.

Regardless, Obama's "job one" is to avoid mass panic and thereby steer the masses toward constructive patience via confidence building. That's working to some degree now, but the momentum of job loss and factory production cuts are too powerful a force to turn around with smoke and mirrors – resource depletion and overpopulation are everything, and not just topics for debate like abortion or stem-cell research are.

Obama was just what the establishment needed at the right time. He makes us believe change is possible. But his own hope as presently defined is too narrow to fit the times or the challenge.

Where we are headed is a question that the flag-waving blow-hards don't have a clue on. Obama should convene a series of public Alternative Futures discussions such as on the town-hall level. Unfortunately, the many unimaginative citizens of U.S. entitlement and exceptionalism will continue to dominate the debate, and this plays into the hands of the corporate media. Yet, ideas will come out, if only for a resumption of Victory Gardens that the White House is, indeed, reviving at a meaningful time.

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This essay is Culture Change Letter #244

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