The Coming Chaos

Contributed by Peter Goodchild
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It now seems to me that the systemic collapse of modern civilization will have two distinct phases. The first will be merely economic hardship, and the second will be chaos. In the first phase, the major issues will be inflation, unemployment, and the stock market. In the second phase, there will be the disappearance of government, law, and money.

I am reminded of Robert D. Kaplan's Ends of the Earth. We might imagine the USA, for example, as one of the collapsed countries he describes, where official borders are meaningless, and where police, armies, and bandit hordes are indistinguishable from one another.
In the second phase, everything we worried about in the first phase will seem laughable.

I was struck by the difference between the two phases when I was going over some of my notes on post-oil survival. They seemed to contain a danger, not only of anachronisms, but of multi-layered ones. I had been describing the etiquette of dealing with lawyers and real-estate agents and escaping any troubles by moving to the green highlands of a wealthy country.

At the moment, however, I am experiencing the mildest foretaste of an utterly different dimension, living in a goat-infested and garbage-strewn desert. Here I am trying to deal, for example, with people who refuse to believe me when I say I have a medical problem, because the general belief is that anyone who is not dead cannot, by definition, have a medical problem.

I am also trying to find ways to get college students to be something other than totally dispirited and demoralized, although they are living in a world where survival means being motionless and invisible. To be moving and visible would mean, at best, that you would be regarded as a model for others, i.e. all the work would be given to you. At worst, it would mean that you would be hated for making others look bad, and would soon be fired as a troublemaker. The iron gates of the mind were long ago slammed shut here and are now well rusted in place.

Oh, well, things could be worse. In Thailand crippled beggars lie in the streets, but the king is worshiped as a god, although his principal accomplishments are those of a saxophonist. Worse, not for the demographic figures being passed over, but for the cool and remarkably symbolic indifference being portrayed. When I asked my Thai girlfriend if His Majesty had ever addressed any of the more serious issues, the question barely registered in her consciousness.

When I speak of these two phases of systemic collapse, what I mean is that we concern ourselves over whether the waitress will bring the food promptly enough, but we omit to ask if there is any food to be brought. All these things require a revolution in our thinking, but the revolution is never great enough. If there is a culture shock in traveling from one country to another, what kind of shock will it be to move in time rather than space? If chaos is just a nothingness, why does it require such an encyclopedic mind in order to perceive even its more prominent features, ignoring for the moment its faint but elaborate shadows?

I am the least finicky eater I ever met, but here I must often throw out food that I have brought back to my apartment: fruit goes from unripe to rotten in one day, and ground meat is so full of lumps of gristle that it hurts my teeth. In my childhood I never dreamed that I would be facing food that was literally not good enough to give to a dog. As with the problem of the saxophone-playing king, what is impressed on the mind is not the more glaring economic or political data, but the ambience of a rather subtle horror movie, in which the characters range from the merely dysfunctional to the possibly vampirish. It is those nuances that kill.

At the same time, this dismal fragmentation is counterbalanced by worlds quite the opposite. I remember driving once across a part of southern Ontario, through lush meadows with tidy fences, past maple trees filled with birds, and for hour

after hour of that journey I saw not a single human being. There was great abundance in the landscape, not the barrenness and pollution I have seen in other countries. There was so much bountiful land to spare that it was as if the entire population had been swept up into the sky by the alien forces beloved of science fiction, carried away, no doubt in the midst of their knitting and their bingo games, quite unaware of the dispassionate minds that were collecting the information. The world is always stranger than we can imagine.

How is it possible that I can be living in a country where even the flies are of such poor quality, and yet there are still places that would grace an intergalactic calendar of happy planets? Am I lost in some silly Edwardian fantasy if I concern myself about the appropriate roles of lawyers and real-estate agents? Should I remember that even in New York City there are street gangs of twelve-year-old children who make the route impassible? After the collapse of the present civilization, are we going to be trapped in a bitter and overcrowded world to which the human nervous system was never adapted, or will we live in a peaceable kingdom of green trees and blue skies?

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