Post-Peak Oil Reality Trumps Right Wing Trend

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
01 April 2010

The direction of the U.S. has been questioned, analyzed, feared and condemned with increasing intensity since the 1960s. Things got a little quiet and complacent in the 1980s, as cheaper oil and no major war enabled the U.S. to get on with the business of making money at the expense of the poor and Mother Nature. Income disparity and official cruelty were not outrageous enough for open revolt. Cheerleaders exercised their right to support the status quo or press for more corporate supremacy. But all the while, critical observers have anticipated or foreseen the rise of U.S. police-state totalitarianism,
invasion of privacy, further erosion of freedoms, the growth of the Pentagon, and globalism.

Many of these critical observers also realized that the environment, and later the climate, was deteriorating at an accelerated rate. But only some of them were looking at specific resources' limits, such as oil's completely giving out one day in our lifetimes. Now the post-peak oil age is staring us in the face, with the Great Recession signaling the end of bubble prosperity. There is no consensus on how things will play out -- whether a Depression, total collapse or prosperous green technotopia -- or when.

However, many of us know that the end of cheap, abundant oil means a new chapter of history is opening up now or very soon. More and more authorities are acknowledging an imminent peak in oil extraction or a major oil-supply crunch. The "optimistic" and contrary view out of Exxon is becoming marginalized. Since "peak oilists" understand that the new chapter has begun, and we can visualize energy scarcity causing radical change in lifestyle and social structure, isn't it time to place the traditional left-right view of politics and conventional economic theory aside? Today's political conflict is dominated by those who see a constant or growing pie to fight over or redistribute. Their worldview will be swept aside when everyone from neo-Nazis to peaceniks have their cars permanently idled, without fuel, and have to dig up lawns and depave driveways to desperately grow food.

EnergyBulletin.net is a peak oil website with a lot of new articles daily on related matters such as gardening, farming, climate change, and psychological aspects of economic collapse. Occasionally there are articles on politics, but they have something to do with energy or U.S. consumerism. A recent article the website posted didn't seem to have anything to do with energy: "Is America ‘Yearning for Fascism’?" by Chris Hedges (writing originally in truthdig.com). That it was on a peak oil website says a lot about the power of the article, and says something about many peak oilists' views of the future.

The Shallow Focus on Federal Politics

Hedges is a strong critic of U.S. policies. How much he knows about peak oil and overpopulation isn't known to me, but his latest article ignores entirely the possibility of petrocollapse or a new, very different future due to the end of abundant oil and energy. Like most commentators, Hedges focuses on politics and political trends. He happens to be passionate about ending war and for protecting "democracy" (an idealized notion or myth). It also happens that many people concerned with peak oil are quite concerned about his issues as well -- so much so that ideas or fears on politics and social (in)justice sometimes color peak oilists' energy outlooks.

As is the case with most citizens, Hedges does not see much change soon in our daily way of life as consumers, if at all. His big concern is change for the worse politically: in terms of fascist thugs breaking down your door. Or, almost as horrible to liberals and progressives, another Republican President gets in. After all, this might mean war on Middle Eastern countries, expanded offshore drilling, reviving nuclear power -- oh, wait, Obama and the Democrats are doing all that now, with no intention of changing direction. The Democrats might think this buys them some points with the Right, but it doesn't -- revealing that today's raging political differences are mostly about power. After all, the main gripes against the new health care law seemed to be stretched or manufactured.

The unemployed, the uninsured and the oppressed minorities are probably only going to rise up in hunger, when collapse really hits, rather than at the urgings of political demagogues. After all, there's no mass revolutionary fervor when the entrenched idea of working one's life away for others, to buy more personal stuff, is the modern form of freedom.

Oil reality trumps political trends

Hedges quotes the independent minded ex-Democrat of Congress Cynthia McKinney who blames "the people who put us in this predicament" and laments "Our problem is a problem of governance." She refers to the nation's political challenges and right-wing trends, and not the looming utter loss of abundant, cheap energy. If she and Hedges believe that strife between left and right is going to be a big deal up ahead -- and this may well be true -- just wait until the trucks don't pull in to the supermarkets because of a massive oil shortage. It will be triggered perhaps by a revolution in Saudi Arabia, an Israeli attack on Iran, or other geopolitical event. But the biggest pressure on the whole situation is the fact that global oil supply has peaked. Peak oil (along with the related crisis of climate distortion) is bigger than fascism or any other social movement. What about wars, for example over water?

It is often pointed out that dwindling fresh, clean water will be the biggest resource crisis, causing more fighting than oil will. Events may appear to play out that way, but the water crisis is inseparable from the issue of petroleum because of (1) how water is pumped (often with petroleum energy) and (2) how water is consumed in relation to petroleum applications. And (3) the extra mouths drinking water today were fed and brought about by fast-growing petroleum-centered agriculture and food distribution.

The amount of crude oil estimated to remain in the ground, "reserves," is commonly assumed to be available for the market, as if nothing can disrupt it; rising cost and diminished net energy return are thought to be the only constraints. Collapse as a governing factor is ignored, ironically and optimistically, by many peak oilists. The quantity of remaining diminished reserves is thought to entirely determine the timing of post-peak decline and resultant socioeconomic impacts. This view is bolstered by what peak oilists see as no alternative forms of energy coming to the rescue. This is a reasonable position, but what most peak oilists and renewable energy advocates don't seem to grasp is that the oil market's extreme reaction to an inevitable, sudden shortage of 10% or more will be the whole driver of collapse. The unprecedented, destructive socioeconomic spasm -- 1970s oil crises on steroids -- will allow no recovery, notably a hoped-for intact oil-industry capability to bring less and less product to the market -- following the famous Hubbert bell curve in such a way to allow the perpetuation of industrial nationalist power.

Fears of fascism have some validity but seem to omit the understanding that the U.S. -- like any corporate state now or in Europe in the 1930s and '40s -- is already a fascist society, when it fits the definition by Mussolini: "corporatism." The U.S. citizenry has been treated to a domestic version for many decades: "friendly fascism," whereby our pluralism and tolerance (not great, but real) have allowed us to say we are not like those brutal Axis nations of World War II. The several million civilians killed around the world by U.S. militarism since World War II might disagree, but U.S. citizens aren't much aware of other people's problems "over there."

As we cannot control collapse that must stem largely from the loss of cheap, abundant energy -- a process already begun -- it is time to put our "political" energy into building local economies and forming our family-neighborhood tribes for the tough future and eventual sustainable culture ahead. This will help prepare everyone for the post-peak oil dissolution of the U.S. as we know it -- no matter who next holds the White House or is kissing the ass of today's Wall Street elite.

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Is America ‘Yearning for Fascism’? (scroll to second article)