Sex and Fertility in the Post-Petroleum Age

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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I don't know how I started thinking about this subject, but I decided it's thought-worthy and bound to stimulate interest. I look forward to people's comments at the bottom of this webpage, or at the next bar I hop to.

When the market economy really collapses, there will be a paucity of goods for everyone, including condoms and birth control pills – whether they are made out of petroleum or not.
As Tuna Cole, author of Ragnarok: A Plausible Future, about post-collapse Oregon, says, "No more KY jell!" Condoms are made out of the rubber tree's latex, but shipping it via sailboat for a huge population in future is unlikely. Rubbers are also made out of lamb's intestine, but again this is not something with which to make billions of.

One might picture the rhythm method and post-sex washing maximized when one can't go to the (empty) drugstore or supermarket. This could result in a spike in pregnancies, unless enough people have read Petya Corby's book How to Avoid Unplanned Pregnancy Every Time You Have Sex - WITHOUT Using Contraceptive Drugs. People can also limit pregnancy by behavior
such as coitus interruptus and plain old abstinence. Since abortions will probably be harder to come by when socioeconomic collapse hits, we can anticipate a higher birth rate – only, of course, for survivors of peak oil and its unfolding effects.

Because the oil market is extremely sensitive to geopolitical events, especially in volatile petroleum-infested regions, a crippling global oil shortage will come with little warning. When this causes oil prices to skyrocket, resulting in panic buying and hoarding, it won't matter what the quantity of crude oil reserves really is, or how great "clean energy" and alternative supplies could someday be through massive investment and replacement of infrastructure. Lack of preparation for peak oil means such replacement will not be possible, as noted in the Hirsch Report to the U.S. Dept. of Energy in 2005. Technological prowess or faith in Western Civilization cannot go as far as some would like in avoiding inconvenient, sweeping change, when cheap oil has no real substitute on a massive scale.

From this reality we can nevertheless imagine the upsides of tumultuous change, even a better world in some respects. Whether a transition or violent transformation, the world of BP terror and consuming one's life away will give way to active, convivial engagement and strong community. Human relations will get closer where societies fostered alienation and isolation.

But before that comes to pass, we seem unable to avoid hitting the wall. Therefore, one day when commuters suddenly cannot get to jobs, and trucks don't deliver food and other goods (such as condoms) to retail outlets, social upheaval and chaos will commence across the board and play out until the balance between supply and demand is reached. The psychology of the oil market will mean prices cannot go anywhere but up, as all parts of the world scramble to secure their own supplies of oil.

We can imagine during urban riots and looting there will be wholesale rape as well as sexual abandon. But goods will finally have all been walked off with, and people made calmer, so this period will be not last long. This also goes for the "pip" of the present historical age, as M. King Hubbert (peak oil conceiver) called the era of fossil fuels. Getting pregnant in the backseat of a car on a date will become far less frequent. There will be cars after petrocollapse, but stationary cars won't have the appeal of those that could be driven to Lovers Lane.

People cannot go longer than 50 days, at best, without food; without good water, four days. (As for sex during a fast, it's not as frequent as when people are eating. However, after health and energy are restored from fasting, there is more sex.) Hence, die-off will come quickly and be thorough. For few of us are prepared for the post-petroleum future, assuming we get through the worst of petrocollapse. Will nuclear power plants be well babysat, forever? The need for working the soil to grow food will be paramount, but it will be a much smaller population doing it.

Now in our relative calm-before-the-storm, if we look forward to survival, it is the post die-off future that should concern us. Sex may now seem like a trivial concern for our future stress when it is primarily food, water, shelter, clothing and defense that will be required. However, ultimately it is sex and sufficient fertility that will determine any future population and the continuation of our life form. It may be we will find ourselves needing all the sex and fertility we can get, along with plenty of luck, in the coming ever-more challenging decades.

Revering fertility and coming to regard sex as sacred are values that may help a society to be sustainable. Fewer birth control options are not going to help the human race, but change is going to hit us and result in adjustments and long-lasting, new (or very old) patterns. Building up a larger population from a devastated low number may become a universal desire, depending on how dire and strained are the new conditions.

Not only will humans in the vulnerable post-industrialized world feel the need to try to replace the many casualties of collapse and petroleum dependence, we will be hard pressed to surmount intensifying climate distortion. Crop failures, water shortages and sea-level rise will interfere with building up a population again, even if there is no end of petroleum under the ground, and even if there were an intact infrastructure to extract, transport and refine crude oil to provide agricultural fuels, chemicals, distribute birth control products, etc. Fortunately, natural herbal medicines can return to common use if the knowledge and wild nature are available.

Another obstacle to reviving population growth possibly in a few years is the health or strength of our species: factors in the falling sperm count for modern males include exposure to petrochemical poisons, plastics, and sources of radiation. Motility – the sperm's ability to swim – is not what it used to be (a la Olympian Mark Spitz). For those wanting to have a child and cannot, the topic will be Sex and Futility in the Post-Petroleum Age rather than Sex and Fertility in the Post-Petroleum Age.

There will be pressure for new tribes and communities to add to their numbers for purposes of labor requirements and defense, even though resources will be less available. Local ecosystems in their currently trashed and depleted state cannot provide for many people, as ecosystems did when hunter-gatherers ate off the fat of the healthy land and enjoyed the more benign climate.

In some parts of the world that are not very petroleum dependent today, there will be little change in culture and even population size when industrialized and consumer societies lose the abundant energy and materials from petroleum. They will carry on with sex but may not be able to obtain birth control products. Fortunately, natural herbal medicines can return to common use if the knowledge and wild nature are available.

In the U.S. and other modern nations, petrocollapse means a severe breakdown in social order, allowing state dissolution and Balkanization. As the diminished post-petroleum population – probably less than 10% of present, if we consider today's ecological "Overshoot" – tries to survive and reconstruct, they will revert to revering fertility as pre-civilization peoples did (see fertility goddess archeological findings). Fertility ceremonies and greater appreciation of women, including Mother Earth or Pachamama, will return. If collapse comes soon enough and in such a way to shut down most greenhouse gas emissions, and ecological restoration becomes the order of the day (even without jackhammers for depaving), perhaps there will be a future for humanity and uncounted other species essential to our common survival.

Extinction is our big threat today, if we project into the not too distant future. We like to think that today's extinctions -- at a rate last seen with the die off of 65 million years ago -- as only applying to other species, not us. But we are not above other species except in recent myth. The global economy as the number one concern is, in truth, a relic of yesterday. The illusion of endless growth lingers on today in our leaderless predicament. Such distractions prevent most people from quetioning alleged reality.

As to quality of people today and tomorrow, the paradox is that the people who are most aware and educated about the state of the world often choose to be childless or have only one child. As crises intensify, the people we'll need the most are unfortunately reproducing the least. This tendency should disappear when more people are actually needed, unless ecological conditions are so unhealthful and gloomy that people won't bring children into a questionable world. For the overpopulated present, the segment of the population that is gay ideally grows as an extra help to keep our disastrous numbers lower than they might be.

For those trying to reproduce in the post-petroleum world, having sexual relations can feel like a sacred duty. Coming to consider the male-female sex act as connected to giving life, rather than providing short-term gratification and ego-boosting, may characterize the future culture -- especially if reproducing the species for a much lowered population size becomes the top concern. Let us hope there will be nothing like the oppressive control of fertility in Margaret Atwood's 1985 book The Handmaid's Tale (partly an extrapolation of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring).

Maybe it isn't too soon to heed Marvin Gay's musical message: Let's get it on for sexual healing. But hold off on the reproducing until its safe or justified.

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Human race 'will be extinct within 100 years', claims leading scientist, by Niall Firth, the Daily Mail, 19th June 2010

Tuna Cole, author of Ragnarok: A Plausible Future, can be contacted for a copy of his self-published book via email at: tcole "at" cnnw.net, or order it from a bookstore.

CORRECTED LINKS: How to Avoid Unplanned Pregnancy Every Time You Have Sex - WITHOUT Using Contraceptive Drugs by Petya Corby is available for download at store.payloadz.com (English) and store.payloadz.com (Spanish)

More: Population, Nature, and What Women Want, by Robert Engelman, Island Press, 2008

The Greenest Steps to More Sex "surviving both collapse and climate catastrophe can put you in an advantageous position -- missionary and otherwise -- for attracting mates", by Jan Lundberg

Catton, William R., Jr. 1980. Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.