The Collapse: Looking Back - July 12, 2099

Contributed by Peter Goodchild
02 October 2010

Almost everything in the economy was either made from oil or required oil to manufacture it or operate it. As the price of oil went up, so did the price of everything else. This rise was referred to as “stagflation” -- stagnant incomes combined with price inflation. The hardest hit were those who had lost their jobs, followed by those with limited disposable income, which meant those most likely to have debts: car payments, house mortgages, credit cards, student loans. But everyone found that a dollar just didn’t stretch.

That was Phase One: economic hardship. Besides stagflation, the major issues were unemployment and a falling stock market. While money was still real, it was everyone’s obsession: as in Weimar Germany, it took the proverbial wheelbarrow of money to buy a loaf of bread. A depiction of the world of Phase One might be to say that it was shoddy, dirty, and disorganized.

Phase Two, much longer, was complete chaos. It was characterized by the disappearance of law and order and capable government. As these faded away, money had no use as a medium of exchange. When there was no more faith in the dollar, money was replaced by barter. From economic hardship of a financial kind we passed to economic hardship of a physical kind: manual labor and a scarcity of basic goods. The world of Phase Two was a different picture: shocking, horrifying, and deadly.

The first clearly visible sign of the Collapse was the increasing frequency of blackouts. Throughout the world, electricity came mainly from coal, natural gas, nuclear power plants, or hydroelectric dams, and all of them were bad choices. Most US and Canadian electricity was produced by fossil fuels, and in the US that generally meant coal. The first problems with electricity served as an advance warning, but the greatest danger occurred years later as the production of fossil fuels and metals was itself reduced by the lack of electrical power: a vicious circle was created.

The US and Canadian grid was a hopelessly elaborate machine -- the largest machine in history -- and it was perpetually operating at maximum load, chronically in need of better maintenance and expensive upgrading. Every part of those two countries was in some danger of outage over the years, due to inadequate supplies of energy. Texas was in the greatest danger, whereas Quebec (with the advantage of hydroelectric dams) was the safest area. But most Americans and Canadians still couldn’t think of a failure of electricity as anything more than a momentary aspect of a summer storm. In other parts of the world, the future was already there: the lights went out daily after four or five hours, if they came on at all.

The Collapse rarely appeared in the conventional news media, or it appeared only in distorted forms. Ironically, the world was plagued by a lack of serious information. One day’s news item was usually forgotten by the next. The television viewer had the vague impression that something had happened somewhere, but one could change channels all day without finding anything below the surface. The communications media were owned by an ever-shrinking number of interrelated giant corporations, and the product sold to the public was a uniform blandness, designed to keep the masses in their place. But the unreality of television was only the start of the enigma. The larger problem was that there was no leadership, no sense of organization, for dealing with the important issues.

Everyone lived on a separate island, lost, alone, and afraid. It was a “shame” to be poor, so one could not even discuss it with the neighbors. The press and the politicians largely denied that the Collapse existed, so there was little help from them. In general, it was just each nuclear family on its own -- for those who were lucky enough to have a family.

Part of the reason for those problems was that many societies, including that of the US, were “individualist” rather than “collectivist.” Yet we should not have forgotten the truism that there is strength and safety in numbers. Individualism was

probably more beneficial in good times than in bad; Americans seemed to adjust poorly to crises.

As the Collapse worsened there were various forms of aberrant behavior: denial, anger, mental paralysis. There was an increase in crime, there were extremist political movements. Strange religious cults arose, and “fundamentalists” were on the rise everywhere. The reason for such behavior was that the peak-oil problem was really neither about economics nor about politics. Nor was it about alternative energy; there was no such thing. It was about geology. It was about humanity’s attempt to defy geology. But it was also about psychology: most people couldn’t grasp the concept of “overshoot.”

We couldn’t come to terms with the fact that as a species we had gone beyond the ability of the planet to accommodate us. We had bred ourselves beyond the limits. We had consumed, polluted, and expanded beyond our means, and after centuries of superficial technological solutions we had run short of answers. Biologists explained such expansion in terms of “carrying capacity”: lemmings and snowshoe hares -- and a great many other species -- have the same problem; overpopulation and over-consumption lead to die-off. But humans couldn’t come to terms with the concept. It went against the grain of all our religious and philosophical beliefs.

When we were children, nobody had told us that any of this would be happening. Nobody told us that the human spirit would have to face limitations. We were taught that there were no necessary boundaries to human achievement. We were taught that optimism, realism, and exuberance were just three names for the same thing. In a philosophical sense, therefore, most humans never became adults: they couldn’t understand limits.

As mundane as it seemed in such an “advanced” civilization, “peak oil” basically meant “peak food.” Farmers were invisible people, and middle-class city dwellers chose to pretend that the long lines of trucks bringing food into the city at dawn every day had nothing to do with the white-collar world. Perhaps it was a mark of the civilized person to believe that the essentials of food, clothing, and shelter had no relevance to daily life. Yet when the farmers stopped sending food into the great vacuum of the metropolis, the great maw of urbanity, the city rapidly crumbled. Nobody had thought to ask: Where was all that food coming from?

We finally pushed the planet Earth to the point where it could no longer maintain our population. We could convert great quantities of petrochemicals into fertilizers and pesticides, we could draw water out of the deepest aquifers and even desalinate the oceans, but at last we had to face the fact that the Earth was only a small rock, small enough that it could be encircled by a jet plane in a matter of hours. We had squeezed both our residential areas and our farmlands beyond endurance. When the spiral broke, it did so in a far more destructive way than if the problem had been solved earlier. When the human race suddenly found itself unable to manage the reciprocity of overpopulation and food production, there were no more choices left to make.

Humanity had always struggled to survive in terms of balancing population size with food supply. The same was true again, but population numbers had been soaring for so long. Without ample, free-flowing oil, it was impossible to support a population of several billion. Famine caused by oil-supply failure resulted in about 2.5 billion above-normal deaths before the year 2050; lost and averted births amounted to roughly an equal number. Eventually the population fell to less than one percent of what it had been at its peak.

Nevertheless, it was often hard to separate “famine deaths” from a rather broad category of “other excess deaths.” War, disease, and other factors had unforeseeable effects of their own. Because of the unusual duration of the famine, cannibalism was significant; to what extent should this be included in the calculation of “famine deaths”?

The problem of oil depletion turned out to be something other than a bit of macabre speculation for people of the distant future to deal with, but rather a sudden catastrophe that would only be studied dispassionately long after the event itself had occurred. Doomsday was upon us before we had time to look at it carefully.

* * * * *

Peter Goodchild is the author of Survival Skills of the North American Indians, published by Chicago Review Press. His email address is odonatus [at] live.com. The above article also appeared in the Kerala, India-based website Countercurrents.org

Peter Goodchild's previous articles on Culture Change are

The Countless Centuries

An Experiment in Country Living

The Century of Famine

Post-Peak Economics

Food and Population

Depletion of Key Resources: Facts at Your Fingertips

When the Lights Go Out

Crime in the Post-Peak World

How Much Land Do We Need?

Putting Meat on the Table

Laborers Before Sunrise

The End of Electricity

Growing Your Own Grains
After the Age of Exuberance.