Transportation-Jobs and the Agenda for Overt Over-Consuming

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
13 October 2010

Whether we listen to President Obama, Paul Krugman, Robert Samuelson, the Republicans, Tea Party-ers, or liberal progressives, they all want more “jobs,” a “recovery,” and “prosperity.” As long as lust for “growth” prevails, and the approved social critics also ignore the nature of the system and its collapse, then the runaway train of unprecedented chaos and ecosystem destruction is only accelerating.

We can't afford to cling to the illusions of consumerism's plenty and corporate globalism, for they are fading into history. By now you are either cheering on this radical critique and you stand for fundamental change, or you are perplexed and are asking, “Don't we need more jobs so we can all live decently?”

When one is at the end of one's rope, the answer is not to try to stretch the rope, or, in the real world, attempt to continue the cancer-like endless growth of industrialism that runs on fast dwindling, nonrenewable resources. Still, one asks, “what is the alternative to doing the forever commute, the endless shopping, and trusting the never-ending flow of water, electricity and other services for a huge population disconnected from local ecosystems?” The “alternative” is not really an alternative, but is rather nature's way, the only way, with humans as a cooperative part of it. In truth, the brief fossil-fuel phase and craze of human history is the “alternative,” and it on the way out along with countless species. Still, according to Obama and the rest of the Establishment, the fossil fuel industries and the even more subsidized nuke power crowd are essential and a part of our future. Drill Baby Drill is bipartisan. But whose future is it? What if socioeconomic collapse (petrocollapse) and climate disaster bump aside business-as-usual mega-pollution and maximum consumption?

“Enough!” someone cries, “what can replace the present system? I need to drive a car even if you don't. I need to put my kids through college.” This is all reasonable, but it's obsolete thinking. Imagination has brought about deep questioning and has successfully demonstrated more rational ways of living ever since the hippies went “back to the land.” Their success was not large-scale, but what has sprouted from that passionate movment flowered into appropriate-tech, permaculture, natural building, bicycle culture, DYI (do it yourself, or anarchism), ecovillages, and campaigns for peace and justice. These components of a sustainable society -- and there are many others such as local currency and depaving -- don't appear yet as a cohesive or growing movement in the eyes of the mainstream. The “green” wing of the mainstream has started to learn about farmers markets, different light bulbs, expensive “clean(er)” cars, organic food, and greater recycling. But the “green” consumer is typically as alienated and isolated as his or her parents were in their middle-class oblivious splendor. U.S. culture centers on materialism and work, with families and friends given mostly lip service.

Yesterday (Oct. 12, 2010) the leaders of U.S. society and their lapdog news media served up three revealing articles in daily newspapers such Portland's Oregonian: “Roads, rails and runways” legislation from the White House, Paul Krugman's column defending Obama and Democrats from the charge of expanding the government, and Robert Samuelson's analysis of the stubborn recession. Despite any truth in this coverage, all three pieces serve to confuse, mislead, and, most insidious, discourage grassroots action to change the system.

Oil reality nowhere to be seen by mainstream

Trying to strengthen the petroleum-oriented infrastructure is folly when we find ourselves at the end of petroleum's capability for economic vitality. And, although rebuilding or repairing roads sounds innocuous enough, much new capacity would be involved such as road widenings -- simply adding to traffic congestion. But a real solution, that of getting people out of their cars, remains the poorest stepchild in politics because “Money talks” (e.g., the U.S. has plenty of corruption and the skids are greased). Obama's not above it, although many would like to think he's above it in his heart. In the transport-jobs article he said enviously, in some longer versions of the story, that China is building "hundreds of thousands of miles of new roads." China endured a nine day traffic gridlock in the summer. This congestion would not happen if the people were still oriented to bicycles. But then there would be no need for the roads, and Obama would not have a shining example of climate-killing development to rave about.

Krugman is a smart economist only in his narrow field of vision. He's typical in holding out for growth and more employment, and he makes it sound believable when he promotes fairness. But what is fair about workers giving their lifetimes for meaningless, hard work, when the future of prosperous retirement will never happen? Does Krugman himself want to work for someone else and have no say over the work? No; he's above it all, as if we need him to speak down to the masses from his ivory tower with his message of "Work for the capitalists!" Samuelson is less emotional than Krugman, but his journalistic contribution of revealing that the age of growth has given way to cutting back is hardly enlightening. To him we're just in a maybe this, maybe that phase of the economy: less spending by government is important but harmful as well, so we'll just have to see! How a Samuelson's waste of ink and electrons is justified is by pretending that "growth" can return and be endless.

What all three talking heads -- Barack, Paul and Robert -- really stand for, though they may admit things aren't looking bright for total “recovery,” is society's success through greater consuming and generating more wealth and jobs. Population growth? Good, no problem. The greater the consumption and rise in the GDP, the better. Hence, the overt over-consumer is still the coveted hero. He's buying, and we need to pay attention to what he's buying! But he too is an endangered species if we care to face reality.

The answer is not to green consumption, for it won't be a factor as people retrench into their own local communities for subsistence.

The corporate media and the politicians play a cute game that all too many people fall for: posturing that there is a real difference between the “pro-job roadbuilders” (to give them a half-accurate name they would like) and the “pro-profit non-regulators” – the Demopublicans and their Republicrat opponents, respectively. In the real world the progressive-leaning liberals in both politics and business are no more useful than kinder destroyers of Mother Earth, or torturers who do not shock the testicles but only twist arms. Granted, it is easier for the average citizen still eating today to just put up with this system, complain about the truly repugnant, and wait for a better Obama. Or, start forging radical, fundamental change through new relationships, tactics and vision that put people and nature first.

Obama and the corporate columnists have in common that they can only see the perpetuation of capitalism, the corporate model and “innovation!”. Working for others is right for the masses, these bosses say. Gotta maintain the status quo and blame the Republicans or the Chinese. Set up a straw man to knock down, instead of dismantling the lethal system destroying nature and exploiting people. The entire political system's visible face or facade is a straw man. Serving up lies is the job of the dominant mass media, with tidbits of truth thrown in for verisimilitude. As questionable as a manufacturing or pencil-pushing job is when its days are numbered, at least a physical or cubicle job is more honest work than the top job of propping up a facade while refusing to acknowledge collapse and ecocide falling down around our heads.

* * * * *

References:

McClatchy-Tribune news:

(in the Oregonian, the bottom 5 paragraphs were cut)
Obama presses pitch for $50 billion plan for roads, runways

Washington Post:

Welcome to the Age of Austerity, Oregonian and OregonLive.com

New York Times:

Hey, Small Spender (in the Oregonian as "That big-government expansion? Never happened")

Is "More Jobs" Sustainable or Necessary in the Post-Peak Oil World? by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change, March 9, 2010

The illustration "Trick" was kindly provided by David Dees of DeesIllustration.com