

# Burning furniture: future urban energy

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## Culture Change e-Letter #98

### Collapse of the system and infertility ahead

When people start burning wood from unoccupied houses after the post-peak oil die-off, some of the "wood" will be particle board and plywood which are laced with formaldehyde. Plastics will also be burned, as they already are today in incinerator/waste-energy plants. So, there will be some energy to use, but it will be limited (as all energy sources are for huge populations) -- and toxic. Are we simply faced with a choice: will we die of cancer or of deprivation such as starvation and exposure to cold?

People do not want to face what is happening, as they don't want to change their lives -- even if for the better, if they only knew. Yet, the window of opportunity to segue into a less regimented and more freedom-filled lifestyle, through localized sustainable economies, is shrinking fast.

Another shocker has come, as the heat wave in Seattle, after a dry winter, has people from all walks of life worried about the future's climate. One of these days the shocker will stick, and an earthquake of social action will ensue. Until then, it makes one want to get radical and wake people up somehow.

What can bring on the sudden cascade (pardon the expression, Seattleites) of collapse of the global corporate economy and consumer society? One possibility is the stock market, as if it is a traitor to its own cause:

As exploration yields no more gigantic oil fields as in the days of yore, and oil companies rapidly deplete crude-reserve assets in the ground, numbers can no longer be inflated and the corporate stock is devalued. Shell was recently caught with inflated reserves, and the multimillion-dollar fines and devaluing were a crusher to its corporate worth. If and when this happens with more companies and countries, it could cause the whole stock market to crash, bringing down the global financial economy. Keep in mind that almost all the top corporations in the world, by size and profits, are oil companies or car companies (that run their death machines on oil).

For now, people are fairly well behaved and patient. Then comes the unprecedented upheaval and strife. History will see the biggest bloodbath ever, as the swollen petroleum-fed population is caught without energy, food and water -- not to mention consumers' endless array of fun gadgets that offer a bit of happiness. These substitutes for having a nature-based life are killing us with plastic-chemical migrations into our skin and lungs, but freedom today means the right to shop -- and the U.S. will keep killing for that right (mainly, the "right" that corporations have to profit) as long as oil will power the policy.

The "developed" world awaits socioeconomic transformation not in any textbooks, although our anthropocentric density should give us a clue. What an historic time this is to witness the extreme swing of the pendulum from high entropy to rebalancing of natural systems (distorted though they have been by industry and overpopulation).

One doesn't want to see extraordinary incidence of death, but one may as well face the reality of the consequences of inflating humanity's numbers, through the virtual disappearance of ample petroleum. Further, one may as well start preparing for the post-petroleum world by restructuring our social relations and our relationship with nature and our urban surroundings. (As we consider later in this essay, homeless street-people are better prepared than most of us.) Finally, we may as well revel in the upcoming rebirth of sustainable culture.

Or, you can assume the soon-to-be Late Great State of California will just absorb another Ohio-sized population increase to reach 48 million by 2025. Even "green" "activists" speak of "Smart Growth." Hello; it was decades ago that growth outstripped the ecosystem's capacity to sustain us. [demographics statistics source: Associate Press coverage of Public Policy Institute study, June 2, 2005] But who can blame the proponents of Smart Growth; they need to pay their bills and buy costly organic food.

One thing that can curtail growth of the population is the effects of petrochemicals, i.e., plastics and pesticides. Sperm counts are way down, and sexual development of males is more and more deformed in terms of smaller penises and shrinking distance between penis and anus ("genital-ano"). Perhaps Arnold Schwarzenegger, past user of steroids which shrivels genitals, can relate to the problem the coming generation of boys will have with their smaller members. But, will they all be able to flex their psychological penile muscles by having Hummer vehicles, like the Governor does? Nein. From Californians Against the Plastic Plague, summarized in its June 1, 2005 online Update:

"Scientists link plastic food containers with breast cancer:

"A chemical widely used in food packaging may be a contributing factor to women developing breast cancer, scientists have suggested. The study links the compound to the development of hormone sensitive tissue in mice and has prompted environmental campaigners to call for far tighter regulation of such chemicals...

"Study Links Plastics to Small Genitals and breast development:

"New

York - A manmade ingredient of many plastics, cosmetics and other consumer products may be interfering with prenatal male sexual development, new research suggests. A study of 85 infant boys found a correlation between increased exposure to some forms of the chemical phthalate and smaller penis size and incomplete testicular descent... Researchers have reported for the first time that they have found a highly significant link between human exposure to chemicals used in consumer products and adverse changes in the genitals of baby boys..."

From a new study on pesticides' effects:

"What was surprising was that these traits (lowered sperm counts and reduced ability of sperm to swim) were also seen in 90 per cent of the male offspring born to three more subsequent generations yet the scientists found no obvious mutations in the DNA of the animals...'We are mostly describing a new phenomenon... The hazards of environmental toxins are much more pronounced than we realised,' said Dr. Michael Skinner, head of the research team at Washington State University" [source: Truthout.org/The Independent - UK]

Ecosystems to restore, truth as a business

After the slaughter of the American bison population, as part of the genocide of native American peoples, there remains hardly any of the original prairie ecosystem. A small remnant exists in downtown Chicago as a living museum. (I used to go up the adjacent building to sell Amoco Oil my market research reports.) Will the buffalo come back where the monocrop/GMO farms now sponge off the Earth, and will cities remove some pavement so that people can live off the landscape as they always used to?

That is only one expression of today's dilemma on survival, as

the doo-doo hits the fan of modern society's culture of waste. Paradoxically, none of this kind of concern has anything to do with one's paramount need to obtain food today, whether as a slave of employment or as an affluent consumer.

A new "industry" must grow out of the embryonic activity I sometimes call the "truth business." This is a line of work that includes, I believe, this series of Culture Change Letters and countless other sources of real information such as Street Spirit (tabloid of Oakland, California). Almost by definition, being paid for pursuing truth is a hopeless and automatic contradiction, a paradox, and an oxymoron. Whether one is attempting to spread information and wisdom about sustainable living that flies in the face of dominant economics -- via publishing or simply acting out one's daily nonpolluting and nonparticipation in social injustice -- being compensated with cash presents unresolvable problems. For example, what is to be done with money: use fossil-fueled transportation and utilize manufactured goods that should not even be made? Easily enough, truth seekers aren't ever presented with such problems of riches.

Such a question is for the intelligentsia for the most part. Another question for the intelligentsia and hopefully across class lines, is "There will HAVE to be a way for people to start taking action -- does someone have to come up with something original and attractive?" Our world is being destroyed, and we wink and nod at the deadly game and tell ourselves there is always hope tomorrow, although with less and less certainty.

#### Urban society post-collapse

To reconcile this conundrum, a truthful minority of today's population could acknowledge the challenge and decide to actively support totally new thinking. Is it the educated people in decent health? Although that may be generally true, it is street people, however, who already have a leg up: knowing how to get by in the harsh environment of the city we should call "the privatized fortress." Instead of being feared and vilified, street people should be looked upon as skilled in things that are about to matter a lot. For street people will have the calm and know-how to obtain food and dodge threatening people -- as they do now.

A national discussion needs to take place on the issue of petroleum dependence and how vastly and rapidly changes will come about. I told Congressman Bartlett (see Culture Change Letter #96) about "citizen petroleum councils" and how they would work to identify problems and solutions.

As time is lost every day that goes by without many people's taking some moments to discuss depaving and non-car transportation, to name two vital characteristics of sustainability, we are trading in our wealth and peace today, such as they are, for a cataclysmic wiping clear of the slate.

The truth of this is scant nourishment, whether we be well-fed intelligentsia or street people. For those in the truth business and those anticipating complete petroleum-induced collapse, the same rule applies: knowledge alone will not feed the belly or the soul or a person or a population. Speaking of nourishment, when urban survivors are cooking over furniture fires, one shouldn't use varnished or painted or treated (pesticide injected) woods -- the taste is second rate, and sperm count and swim-ability may be of greater concern in future than in the much populated present.

In that epoch ahead, after our fiddling is finished and our Rome burned, and we may be roasting rodents over furniture fires,

Iraqis and other peoples might not be so inclined toward revenge when they think of how the mighty U.S. fell, and, besides, getting to this continent with sailboats -- once the oil is mostly unavailable -- will not be so easy as today.

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Links:

Pesticides' impact on sperm count from Truthout.org

[www.truthout.org/issues\\_05/printer\\_060305HB.shtml](http://www.truthout.org/issues_05/printer_060305HB.shtml)

Street Spirit [www.thestreetspirit.org/index.htm](http://www.thestreetspirit.org/index.htm)

Toronto Star reports on plastic war and Jan Lundberg

[www.thestar.com](http://www.thestar.com)

Californians Against the Plastic Plague

<http://earthresource.org/campaigns/capp/capp-overview.html>

Climate Helter-Skelter in the Lower 48 [www.truthout.org/docs\\_2005/060605N.shtml](http://www.truthout.org/docs_2005/060605N.shtml)

Fox News <http://www.foxnews.com>

The Guardian <http://www.guardian.co.uk>

SF Chronicle online [sfgate.com](http://sfgate.com)

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