Humanity's chances dimmed when many progressives love slave-jobs and cheap gasoline

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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With toxic consumerist habits and our propensity to overwork and condone society's violence, we qualify as the most inferior of species. At 7 billion, our huge numbers appear as some great success. But as we suffer from overpopulation and its many symptoms, we are not superior or very intelligent after all. Our kind of smarts is ultimately counterproductive and lethal -- to ourselves and fellow species. True, no species can even approach humans' ingenuity. But we can't do what most other species do (and they do it peacefully).

The essential problem with the dominant culture is probably that modern humans don't see themselves as equal with other species. So we "develop" (destroy) their habitat, we change the climate, and we cannot seem to halt the process to save ourselves and our fellow species. Most people might agree with this, although not to the point of really changing their behavior.

When a recent Truthout.org headline is "Leaving Wall Street," it is one of many indications that we are figuring things out: we want peace and community rather than riches in isolation. This is humanity's top "we," striving for survival and more equality. Consciousness is awakening, as it has been among modern consumers since the 1960s. It has lost much steam since around the early 1970s and yet has kept on. But this is despite progressives' areas of confusion all along. When the "we" is a tiny portion of the intelligentsia, does it include or not include those compromised by the perceived need for no end of cellphones, unshared appliances, cars, etc. -- and the "good jobs" required to buy them?

The bad news and the good news

We sit on our hands while two dozen Fukushima-like reactors in the U.S. keep risking the health and safety of millions of people. This is only one of our challenges whose "resolution" probably awaits general collapse rather than a consensus of humanity to take action. Or perhaps enough of humanity -- those who actually think freely and speak up -- will take note of the Japanese masses celebrating in the streets in early May what could very well be the end of nuclear power in their ravaged county. They had not quite learned from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but the Fukushima disaster and the corporate state's complicity was the straw that broke the camel's back.

One or two events don't decide a trend. So is it possible to gauge the progress of the top "we"? On some levels, we're a marvel. The rising number of people seeing through the propaganda and brainwashing of the System is heartening. But politically, the progressives -- a catch-all term for liberals and radicals today -- are often confused. I don't refer to their perennial question of whether to vote for the Democrat just because he or she is not a Republican. Instead let's talk economics -- and I don't mean the usual railing about the 1%'s having astronomical wealth while the bottom 50% suffer.

The heart of confusion

When progressives don't truly understand peak oil or energy, they sometimes figure that any talk of geological supply constraints or any upward pressure on petroleum prices just points to a rotten scam by Big Oil. True that the oil industry wants high prices, and does what it can to get them along with keeping lucrative subsidies. But that doesn't mean that we can consume a finite resource forever. An instance of exceptionalism for many progressive Americans is that cheap gasoline is a right. A recent example of misguided rage is the recent article "How Wall Street Drives Up Gas Prices -- Ripping Us Off and Killing Jobs" by Les Leopold on AlterNet.

While Wall Street indeed takes an unearned cut of oil profits, we actually need the price of gasoline to somehow be at least $10 a gallon to reflect some subsidies and to greatly discourage driving that pollutes, slaughters people and

animals, and promotes urban sprawl. The "more jobs" message being connected to gasoline consumption in the Leopold article is like BP saying "we helped employ people in the Gulf by poisoning it." The GDP indeed does measure economic activity, not quality of life.

The progressives' tendency to want the middle-class materialist dream for as many people as possible is not what the planet needs. Nor does it help people fix their broken lives in need of community. To be empowered is not to work for someone else's profit -- that's what a job is usually about. Slaving for dollars -- when direct barter and mutual aid can take care of basic needs -- is a scam. And why should people have to pay for what nature freely provides? Salon.com buys into the "jobs" culture with its article "The real job creators: Consumers, not the wealthy, are the key to an economic rebound, and GOP austerity is shackling them" [May 4, 2012].

Quoting pro-growth economists such as Paul Krugman may be dandy for criticizing the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy, but this kind of weak critique solves nothing. A refreshing approach to the jobs question is in Alternet's April 29 edition: "Is It Possible To Build An Economy Without Jobs?" Culture Change has addressed this in several essays, but we questioned work as well, which Frank Joyce's Alternet article does not. The origin of the word "work" is unsettling, and was unknown in primitive societies that had much more time for family, arts and appreciating nature. Moreover, as a typical progressive, Joyce makes unwarranted claims for civilization in his list of "areas of extraordinary development."

Ecotopia and putting Earth First

An inspired vision of a truly better way of living was the book Ecotopia. If progressives would read this 1975 novel by the late Ernest Callenbach, they might glimpse a car-free, oil-free, non-job and liberated culture that is possible. Callenbach died last month at age 83, and among his final works were Nuclear Roulette (as reviewed in Culture Change) and a posthumously discovered essay, "America in Decline."

The end of growth-through-petroleum -- energy decline or descent -- is upon us. So confusion about endless employment and affordable gasoline could be allayed. Peak extraction of global oil has arrived, which in itself ought to be reason enough to question the expansionist model of modern civilization. But with climate damage out of control we must put nature first now. There is a "we" doing so, but a good many social-justice activists need to do more than merely tip their hats to Mother Earth by wanting their Daddy Obama to do a little better.

Who's your Daddy?

As long as corporate mass media reigns, Daddy figures will distort our reality and influence our lives to our detriment. One such celebrity, tycoon investor Warren Buffett, is famed for his wisdom and even compassion. But he is diagnosed now with cancer. So much for having billions of dollars when environmental toxins and "better living through chemistry" will getcha. (Environmental factors including diet are responsible for about 80% of cancers.) But modern humanity tells itself that progress and technology come first, because we are Number One as a culture, nation and species. So we should not put Buffett into the "top we." On his death bed he might wonder about his life, his values, and separation from nature that he and other industrialists have put on the run.

The industrialists, financiers and their politicians are thumbing their nose at the common people and life itself, when they sit on their elite thrones of "democracy" and refuse to respect other species' rights to exist. To thrive together is somehow unacceptable to the control-tripping greedy. To overcome today's unprecedented crisis, everyone including progressives must truly put Earth first and bravely embrace lifestyle change. If not, we all continue to fall prey to the elitists' growth philosophy that offers only ecocide and tempting crumbs for the slave-workers.

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Further reading and references:

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by Jan Lundberg, March 9, 2010

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by Jan Lundberg, March 19, 2009
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Why it's best that people lose their jobs in this unsustainable economy,
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by Jan Lundberg, June 27, 2007

Population Is Popping: Why We Cover Our Ears and Eyes - another failing of many progressives. By Jan Lundberg, April 23, 2012

Epistle to the Ecotopians - Ernest Callenbach, Last Words to an America in Decline

Photo courtesy Young Innovation Europe

Leaving Wall Street, by Alexis Goldstein, Truthout.org, May 5, 2012

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