Cool '90s Radical Efforts Still Alive: The Big Ten Actions

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The 1990s were not a great success in terms of activists and progressives winning the hearts and mind of the masses of people to bring about fundamental social change. But key principles and mini-movements were planted and intensively developed. They were outgrowths of previous decades' movements, notably the hippies, back-to-the-landers, Appropriate Tech, and peaceniks shooting for disarmament -- many of whom also took time for making their own music in the tradition of 1960s protest folk-rock.

And they never really went away.

These folks were dedicated and (usually) happy radicals, as distinct from reactionaries or nihilists: for "radical" from the Latin means "to the root." Roots in soil need nourishment, such as nature's compost or some added manure -- activism for the soil. Just as compost makes for a strong plant or tree that can live many years, social-change activism can have long-term effects.

However exhilarating and promising, the 1990s activists' efforts and successes were almost completely kept to the fringes by the corporate establishment and National Security state. Then as now, but not forever fringed out. Two phenomena that offered much promise were squelched but not forgotten. The Occupy Movement emerged in a big way, rivaling the '90s for heady activism, but with some police-state coordination and government violence it was submerged. The other major instance of repression was the anti-globalization movement culminating in the November 30, 1999 "Battle of Seattle" that nonviolently shut down the World Trade Organization's meeting. (The property-destruction aspect there was overblown in the corporate news, and was subsequent to police violence against peaceful protesters). The momentum of the anti-globalization movement stopped and lost much ground upon the Bush regime's successful manipulation of the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks. The event also interrupted support for top-priority environmental activism, but a few strong efforts find popularity today, such as to label GMO food and ban Monsanto poisons.

One reason for lack of environmental progress since the first Earth Day has been the narrow and timid focus of the major environmental organizations. Only one, Friends of the Earth, supported a moratorium on new roads -- revealing the poor leadership of the big enviros. But sometimes what the grassroots radicals know filters up to the environmental establishment: on Saturday the New York Times all but endorsed the recent intensification of the big Washington groups in climate protection [see Further Reading]. But the alleged fighting spirit among the big D.C. NGOs to replace climate-unfriendly officials is all about mere incremental change, to ease off on greenhouse-gas emissions. Too little and too late. But the Times retained its "objectivity" by quoting a global-warming denying scientist; no wonder they had to dredge him up in Alabama to find this rare breed.

But it's not only about the rampant selling out or trying to overcome it. A major lesson of the 1990s' failure to engage the greater population in positive social change is that long-standing opposing trends have to play themselves out. Consumerism, growth, "progress," manufactured fear, and related myths were and are still treated as if they are real, acceptable, and here to stay. That their days are numbered is little understood. And for those who understand, preparing constructively for what peak oil grandfather Colin Campbell calls an historic "discontinuity" is difficult to carry out.

Consider these upstart trends that were largely unknown to consumers in the 1990s and today, that were not enough a thorn in the side of somnolent consumers and their powerful superiors to get attention. These mini-trends hold promise more than ever today:

• Depaving, including of biological pavement known as lawns

• Bike carts and trailers

• Sailing for transport

• Utilizing horses

• Keeping chickens (goats and sheep too)

• Bee-keeping

• Maximum tree planting*

• Organic gardening and farming including hemp

• Unplugging literally and in general

• Non-corporate purchasing (local, DIY, bartering)

Call them The Big Ten Actions for a sustainable world.

Where are they now? Everywhere, if one looks -- provided one can set aside time otherwise devoted to trying to pay bills and propping up the status quo. Most consumers may not see trying to get by as propping up the status quo, but it happens thanks to self-defeating purchasing patterns and hesitancy to take up bold or radical change. Nevertheless, post-financial meltdown unemployment from 2008 onward triggered food-gardening, encouraged by Michele Obama's White House organic gardening. So some were learning local self-sufficiency that their ancestors couldn't live without, realizing that the future may not really be in Keynsian or trickle-down growth.

The Big Ten Actions are fun, positive, and imply no car ownership, no McMansions, no frivolous vacationing via jet planes, while tending toward getting plastic out of one's life to the extent possible. Some wish to do more, while die-hard consumers and property-rights fanatics are alarmed by such "doom and gloom." The Big Ten fly in the face of advertising and growth-is-good institutional brainwashing. The Big Ten Actions are embodied in Permaculture, eco-villages, and back-to-the-land communes -- all of which are just under the surface of mainstream culture, treated as non-existent by Fox News et al. If the Actions smack of deprivation and doom gloom, such a reaction is attributable to both the lack of experiencing alternatives and a stunted spirit of adventure. The adventure is based on pursuing independent-mindedness and taking action; common themes are lifestyle change, self-healing, and taking control of one's future. It takes honesty and guts. For contrast, think rigid civil-servant bureaucrats who gave up their dreams.

The Transition movement expresses such positive living with its emphasis on greater resilience and community. "Transition" reckons with rapidly dwindling cheap petroleum and resultant global conflict, plus accelerating climate destabilization. Transition Towns, a network of activists, drew almost entirely upon 1990s initiatives and mini-movements. Among the '90s originators were Richard Register (founder of Ecocity Builders), road fighters in the loosely affiliated Earth First! network, pro-indigenous revival exemplified by poet John Trudell, home-power (solar, etc.) enthusiasts and designers, Permaculture teachers such as Albert Bates, car-free activists and publishers, and the growing ranks of organic farmers who made the spread of farmers markets possible and trendy today. They are all still with us, alive and kicking, but deemed unmentionable by politicians and the corporate media. With corporate media consolidation, radical ideas get much less exposure today than in the 1990s. Yet, what was outlandish then is a lot less shocking in recent years. "Anything goes," thanks to the Internet that filled a void of diversity and suppressed information.

Making an inordinate amount of money is still the most attractive benchmark of "success." But since the 2008 meltdown, golden dreams are out of reach for the former middle class. Still the wannabe-rich unwittingly strive to feed into more global warming through material acquisition, as they live for the fantasy of a financial bonanza somewhere around the corner. It appears to be beyond their comprehension to "Ask not what you can do for the corporate economy; ask what undermining it and its disappearance can do for you and a more peaceful world."

There are two major challenges with bucking the false American Dream and doing one's part for peace: first, the war machine and The Great Game (foreign competition for dominance of the large region surrounding Afghanistan) rage along toward cataclysm. U.S. politics and foreign policy are rigged. Second, one's making a present choice for a simpler

lifestyle, without losing the companionship of Wifey or Hubby, seems only remotely available; this explains why the ranks of the tribalistic Earth First! are basically limited to a median age of perhaps 24 years old, decade after decade.

Here in 2014, I know of no answer to unplugging the war machine anytime soon, nor a way for many to immediately step securely out of corporate employment to find a cool job "saving the world." In past years Culture Change and other groups encouraged recognizing, if not embracing, collapse -- petrocollapse or a related sudden failure of the economy in the new climate-challenged age -- as a way to live the future now and liberate oneself from false security. The idea involved drastic curtailment of energy-consumption rather than waiting for a "clean-energy economy." For most participants, the latter translates to conveniently stopping far short of radical change by limiting oneself to baby steps (more recycling, replacing incandescent light bulbs, buying organic food, etc.) -- the mark of many Yuppies.

The impeccable logic of slashing energy-use voluntarily and anticipating collapse flies in the face of fearful considerations -- be it the risk of breaking away from the familiar herd, or the reluctance to hurt one's earning power by stepping back "prematurely" from wage slavery. There are also a few mental straightjackets that provide additional reasons for paralysis of action. One is the "certainty" of climate extinction (including humans), or total economic collapse with no mitigating effects -- so "why bother at all?" Another intellectual handicap is the flat-out rejection of the recognition of likely collapse of the present system. This denial sometimes stems from fear of social chaos and massive die-off, or the specter of an all-out fascist police state. This accounts for a tendency to support a continuity through the Democrats, even though society's present course has been demonstrably lethal. Wishfully thinking that a gentle cure such as a better Obama may fall from the sky is comforting, and for some it conveniently does not scare away friends or NGO funders. The trouble with collapse-rejection is that it negates the scientific fact that collectively we've already started driving off the ecological cliff like motorized lemmings. Our time as civilized consumers was actually up quite a few years ago; the global greenhouse-gas decades' delay or lag, coming due over the coming years, bears this out.

U.S. as Satan or God

Audre Lorde said in 1984, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives."

Some in their analysis of "the problem" seize upon one issue, such as the U.S. as the No. 1 enemy of people and the planet. (In my view it is rather a matter of the nation's intractable flaws woven into its core and origins.) Or, in the same vein, "the problem" according to the conspiracy-minded is the "Illuminati" or "the Rothschild bankers." For others, capitalism is the only issue, even though modern society can destroy the planet non-capitalistically. A single-issue or single-enemy focus is akin to the victorious faction of Iranian revolutionaries -- reactionary rather than radical -- who vehemently accused the U.S. of being The Great Satan, while they must have believed they were God (what kind of God, anyway?). This was a shocking absurdity to the citizens of the U.S. who thought they were not only the force of good, but were themselves like God if anyone could be. The U.S. "white hats" watching television saw the Iranians (all of them, typically) as backward and evil. The two opposing narrow-minded populations could not see then, nor can they see today, their own faults and weaknesses, as they were blind to their common interests on a small, overpopulated planet.

Meanwhile, the clearest emblematic threat to vulnerable consumers may be easy to identify right outside their front door, or lying within themselves: the big inefficient, polluting vehicle that has no role in nature other than to destroy the environment for the individual's convenience. This mass-produced killing machine -- a mistaken, tragic progression of civilization -- is propped up by a social structure and culture that maintain and enforce what can be seen as a Savage Republic -- the name of a late 1970s punk group that aptly sang:

The crisis of our country

is not caused by external forces.

The danger lies within.