Petroleum Use Is Wrong For You And Me. What Can Be Done?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
10 February 2015

Conflict, Contest, and Hope

In this time of serial, overlapping wars, accelerating climate destruction, and -- the epitome of inequity -- just 85 of the world's richest people's owning as much as what 3.5 billion people own, the dominant culture has overreached. It may find itself on the run as "the system" is opposed by a swelling majority of people. For we are suffering more and more, and we sense there are fundamental problems coming to a head. The common denominator is often oil.

It is well known that oil is involved in most of the Middle Eastern, Central Asian and African armed conflicts which involve oil-dependent societies (primarily the U.S.). War itself has been for the last century a massive oil operation, and the Pentagon is decade after decade the largest oil buyer in the world.

Climate change from human activity is from fossil-fuel combustion, cattle, and deforestation (plus, increasingly, feedback loops). Yet, surprisingly few people see the developed landscape of industry and trade, plus today's large complex systems -- the military, food production, transportation and agriculture -- as actually the petroleum infrastructure running our lives and enabling what we consider the modern world. When we do come to see this in consensus, we might see the need and the means to change the rules of the game for dealing with interrelated, escalating crises. But not every "new approach" -- e.g., the technofix of somewhat cleaner energy complexes -- is really new, nor does it fully take into account the petroleum infrastructure.

Meanwhile, the contest concerning faith in, or rejection of, the dominant culture/system is growing, but does not yet seem to approach civil war. The contest is seen to be between those wanting justice in a corporate police state and those protecting their own privilege and greed from on high. However, the contest is an internal one of the mind or the mass mind: awareness that requires the strenuous task of minimizing society-wide distractions and issues that are more manufactured than organic. This involves everyone, potentially, including "the 1%."

Individual knee-jerk survival instincts include violence, whether predatory, inadvertent or defensive. More concerted grassroots and/or mob action, revolution, or upheaval flow from people's mental decisions and gut reactions. Either way, the prized outcome in the minds and hearts of those paying attention to their changing world, and striving for collective benefit, is for basic popular demands to be met: for protecting the climate, ending war, and eradicating egregious inequity. Most people are aware of such basic needs and struggles, although the corporate news media does its best to suppress such awareness by serving up inane news and consistently disjointing all news developments.

Expectations Changing - Why?

Modern life is mostly very hard for the disadvantaged at birth. "Hard" does not suffice to describe the lives of those victimized by state and more random violence, by the prison industrial complex, by falling into the trap of addictions, as well succumbing to the epidemic of environmentally caused cancer. Those managing to consistently work, play, and pay bills find little room or time for understanding and improving their lives by looking at the big picture. Yet, the American Dream has been clearly fading for decades, as middle class aspirations dimmed. Promises of a turn-around always ignore realities involving the ecosystem and the true energy picture.

Upward mobility from getting a college degree is no longer a given. The demise of unionism and a swelling population of desperate workers has weakened wages, benefits, and pension security. A corrupt Congress and the Wall Street-controlled executive branch is always ready to compromise on the needs and rights of the people, by throwing billions of dollars at war and maintain tax breaks for the rich, while failing to inexpensively alleviate U.S. infant mortality and the hunger of millions within the borders of "the richest country in the world" purporting to be a democracy.

Role of Oil

None of these conditions was so true or common when oil was cheap, plentiful, and -- this is most key -- yielded an extremely high energy return per-barrel-extracted that is no longer possible due to depletion of the easy reserves under the ground. Ignorance of that basic fact, and of the fact that yesterday's growth and prosperity was for an energy-richer, smaller population (paying less in "externalities" and subsidies for oil), makes social change iffy and most reform-efforts pointless. The biggest, over-arching aspect of this void in the mainstream mind, so as to diminish rationality, is that nature is a "resource" to exploit, dominate and at best use more efficiently -- rather than see that the basis of our existence is nature as wild and healthy and that the Earth has geophysical limits.

Propaganda and distortion from the corporate media and politicians keep critical thought down. For example, the machine of lies that has been the Pentagon's and its supporters' handling of the history of the genocidal Vietnam War -- deemed immoral by 58% of the U.S. population1 in 1971 -- has inhibited realism about the nation's continuing foreign policy trickery. 2

Distracted from Nature

To deal with ecological threats that call into question any possible future for humanity, people must first gain awareness about the threat's origins and larger context. This is essential for making basic change in the deadly U.S.-led consumer lifestyle. Second, the distractions of fear, lies, and distortions, as well as legitimate crises, have to be kept in perspective or minimized. This is essential if people are to come together such as for town hall meetings, to decide how as communities to deal with ecological threats to their own lives and their descendants' future. But if the people are led to believe that there is a terrorist (formerly, a Communist) lurking around the corner, or if people are pacified or hampered by environmental toxins and Big Pharma's pills, they are unlikely to go to a town hall meeting to decide what kind of community and nation they might want and create.

Emancipating oneself from petroleum appears to most consumers as impossible or fanciful. Yet, people tend to do it nevertheless, at times of extra high fuel-costs or when surcharges are placed on products such as plastic bags. It is the task of this essay, and of many essays by others before and in future, to begin to identify petroleum or fossil fuels as either a villain or a terribly poor, unintelligent option. Fossil fuels have turned out to be yesterday's historic, immeasurable mistake on a mass scale. There are ways to move ahead now more wisely. Unfortunately, the easy, tempting answer of "clean cars," to name the most common "solution," goes in the opposite direction needed. (See "Questionable Renewable Energy Dreams" on culturechange.org)

The toxic nature of petroleum (i.e., oil and natural gas) and fossil fuels (coal, petroleum and related substances) is well documented, and needs no explanation; people only have to recall the BP Oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. Unfortunately for awareness-raising, beyond visible oil spill there is little clarity. A big reason is that environment protection agencies such as the U.S. EPA do not fight to end pollution, but simply regulate it in order to put the economy ahead of the environment. So, pesticides and other petrochemicals are considered "safe" in residual form to a degree obfuscated and manipulated by industry lobbyists and spineless public officials.

The assumption that we need oil and petrochemicals is related to the firmly fixed idea that we need ample energy to power our lifestyles for transportation, high-tech gadgetry, and modern homes. This energy is also required for hospitals, the police and fire departments, agribusiness, "Defense," and more. The public is most often presented with a choice: a new natural-gas fired power station, or retaining a coal fired one. Other choices are oil-fired, nuclear, and hydroelectric. A solar- or wind-powered electric grid is hoped for by many. However, for today's convenience and perpetuating the consumer economy, the 530 quadrillion BTUs that the world consumes annually are "necessary." One "quad" of energy is equivalent to over 8 billion gallons (U.S.) of gasoline.

Instead of forging ahead with a high-energy diet -- even the maximizing of renewable energy as fast as possible will not change the picture much -- dramatic energy curtailment is required now. This is anathema to the corporate establishment and their friends running governments, so we can say that to keep frying the planet is their plan. Consumers can go along with it, or not. When we buy into the alleged need for ample energy for urban living,

"unexpected" events happen such as Chernobyl and Fukushima. Chernobyl is in the news again because fires are releasing radioactive material from the forest floor 3

Why Boycott Petroleum

To boycott petroleum personally today is at best to greatly reduce its use, as it is so ubiquitous: one can scarcely function in modern society without coming into contact with the petroleum infrastructure as well as myriad petroleum products. Petroleum's (and to a much less extent, coal's) presence in products and processes are often unknown or unsuspected to the mainstream. Many do not know that asphalt is basically petroleum -- augmented by ground rock, but also by illegal chemical wastes, old "rubber" tires, and ground glass that people imagine is recycled into more glass containers.

Massive ignorance about where food comes from, and how it is grown and distributed, is perhaps the greatest impediment to awareness of petroleum. It is unkind to point a finger at the victim, commonly the poor and uneducated urban dweller, when he or she may be lucky to enjoy having a half-full belly every day. Many young, poor urban dwellers particularly in the U.S. believe food just comes from "the refrigerator" or "the store." Such people are understandably concerned with their own survival; beyond survival the next priority is typically a shred of wealth, such as fashionable clothes, a flashy car, and obtaining cash as fast as possible.

Arguments against universal personal car-use and maintaining the millions of miles of paved roads are many. Road kill, urban sprawl, wasting money and resources, unhealthful lifestyle -- these are not mysteries, nor excusable. But the arguments and damning statistics are known to few, and are of any concern to much fewer. Yet, to a great extent this state of affairs is a matter of awareness (or absence of it) and lack of options. To explain lack of action by the ethical and civic-minded, shall we ask if many of the aware citizenry is waiting for collapse or the end of oil supplies, before cars and their infrastructure are sent to go by the wayside?

Programs, Reform, and Other Half Measures

Daniel Quinn, in his books in the 1990s critiquing Western Civilization, pointed out that "programs" -- policies, institutions, laws, reform movements, etc. -- change nothing as they serve to perpetuate and preserve the status-quo culture, instead of having people walk away from a failed model. So it is a sad thought to think of the struggle to create community gardens, distribute meaningful books for prisoners, enact rent control, and accomplish other admirable and rewarding initiatives, as mere programs for a hopelessly misdirected, unsustainable culture.

Many who are informed and passionate foes of the plutocracy and of the U.S. empire want revolution, and some do speak of it. Yet, what the revolution would really be about, and how it would perhaps not change the dominant culture of material pursuit (even equitably), leaves us with classifying revolution as commonly defined as just a program.

However, if a change in culture -- what Quinn told Culture Change is its basis, "mind change" -- drives initiatives with successfully changed lifestyle and values, then the many admirable initiatives and programs designed to surmount the consumer economy will fundamentally alter today's sick, petroleum-addicted society. This probably wrenching culture-change can be a peaceful revolution of conscious priorities. Such as, when John Q. Public's refuses to buy corporate products, especially any shipped from afar. This would not be what we would diminish with the "program" label.

Long-distance transport always involves oil; sail transport is thus far a drop in the bucket (although enjoying a rebirth). The average piece of food in the U.S. travels 1,500 miles from farm to plate. Transportation is not even included in the shocking process of producing food via fossil fuels: for every one calorie of food produced, ten calories from fossil fuels went into growing the food, on average. Thus, the need is clear for local, organic agriculture -- better yet, home gardens and a commons for picking wild greens, nuts, thatch, and even hunting and fishing. Bicycle carts and animal power fit easily for local self-reliance.

Population Growth from Petroleum

The sticking point in all of the above is the planet's mushrooming human population. The widespread use of oil enabled population growth by improving crop yields and enhancing the distribution of food. Petroleum has also played a role in preserving food, cooking food, in making medicines, pumping water from aquifers, irrigation, and more. Fossil fuels provide almost all the energy used for refrigeration -- often of petroleum-packaged, processed foods.

Economic growth is itself a function of cheap, abundant energy. "Okay, so what" -- dominant-paradigm thinking allows for never-ending growth, never-ending technological advance, and the perceived need for energy and petroleum products that our recent ancestors somehow got along without. The public is misled to hope for "recovery" and more trickle-down of wealth.

Conclusion

Consuming energy like gluttons -- billions of us -- is unsustainable and destructive almost beyond imagination if it is not sharply curtailed. The key form of energy for "growth" and myriad wonder-products has been oil. Petroleum is the basis of industrial civilization today, despite more solar panels, windmills, and the use of coal and nuclear energy.

Our civilization of endless expansion, generating surplus, regimented specialization, and violent conquest sprang originally from the same Fertile Crescent dominant-culture mindset that now says petroleum is a global good that should be maximized no matter what. But, never-ending expansion and the unraveling of the ecosystem and climate are so advanced, as appreciated only in the past two decades, that the sixth major extinction-event of the planet's whole history is underway. This does not make the Powers That Be bat an eye. Species extinction is now almost entirely caused by modern society, rather than by "primitive" or traditional indigenous cultures. Somewhat fittingly, extinction of our own species is now increasingly anticipated -- as the price of progress and "man's superiority" over all life.

Closing all petroleum refineries and coal mines, thereby inconveniencing ourselves and potentially losing millions of people, may be one of the basic but unacceptable solutions involved, willy-nilly, for securing any future for humanity. Other such steps are much less drastic, although are perhaps also in the category of unlikelihood: everyone planting one tree per day, so as to remove the excess CO2 from the atmosphere in a matter of months. But, dreams have been known to come alive.

Such programs and initiatives, from local and unique to planetary -- may see the light of day as part of a new and dominant trend. But it cannot happen without rejecting petroleum use almost entirely: first by cutting back the immense waste of oil, e.g., discretionary driving. Without such "extreme" measures and similar mass thinking-outside-the-box, there is little hope for any planned, orderly retreat from the precipice of terminal ecocide for life as we know it.

* * * * *

Notes

1. America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975, with Poster (4th Edition) Paperback – November 15, 2001
by George C. Herring

2. Burying Vietnam, Launching Perpetual War
How thanking the veteran meant ignoring what happened. By Christian Appy / TomDispatch, also in AlterNet.org, February 8, 2015

3. Rise in wildfires may resurrect Chernobyl's radiation, New Scientist, Feb. 9, 2015

Further reading:

Albert Bates is a climate author, permaculture teacher and lecturer who runs the Ecovillage Training Center at The Farm in Tennessee.

Greeting to Culture Change readers from Daniel Quinn

5 Facts That Show Half of America Is Seriously Struggling, by Paul Buchheit, AlterNet: "The media celebrates [sic] "economic growth," while new data shows [sic] most Americans are barely surviving."

The Shockingly Low Wages We Pay People Who Look After the Elderly [just another example of skewed values that degrade and destroy family and the social fabric. - JL]