Stop, Hey, What's that Sound? Environmental and Political Background Hum of Civilization Tinnitus

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Urban dwellers experience a familiar hum caused mainly by motor vehicles, along with other sounds of modern civilization: buildings' heating and air conditioning, power tools, aircraft, and, arguably least objectionable, the voices of people and animals. Other urban background cannot be heard but is seen, smelled and, to some, felt: air pollution and electronic waves. The often murky air along with light-pollution assures that seeing many stars is unlikely, and is of little concern anyway to the typical technological urbanite.

This background is almost unnoticeable to those inured to it, such that it is only upon leaving and coming back that one perceives the discolor of the sky and the lack of silence in the city and suburbs.

There's an additional "energy buzz" in some city centers such as Manhattan, that -- while stimulating to many -- is considered by just as many to be mass craziness. Other cities such as some in northern Europe seem, on the other hand, to exude joy. San Francisco once had it.

Real countryside and open sea offer to an increasingly high percentage of modern people a rare, "strange" experience of sweet, natural smells, and the sounds of only the breeze, birds, and bees -- this is the natural background of nature that humans evolved with. It is of little interest to those devoted to material aggrandizement, and of little use for short-term gratifications of city distractions and diversions. Anyone can love the peace of nature momentarily, or as a virtual possession; this is not being one with it. As people are more plugged into technology day and night, sensory reality that is nature's beautiful music becomes like a commodity or a kind of historical footnote in one's awareness.

The threat to survival of life as we know it is the creeping artificial background. Like with tinnitus that intensifies, the rest of reality and our options can be drowned out. Civilization's unrelenting background noise is not the natural music that calms the spirit. But the modern background is worse than what we started to notice decades ago: it now includes global warming. When in our modern environment, we don't recognize its growing, pervasive oppression day to day. It can be tuned out or even denied, for a little while.

Background Political

There is another key aspect of the artificial background on a different level: the cultural and political system that, for as long as people can remember, has taken control of the land, smashed alternative cultures, and proceeded to "develop," expand, and exploit nature and people with a blind vengeance. Fortunately, indigenous traditional cultures are not all extinct. For what it's worth, their struggles are an antidote to the dominant culture's tinnitus that echoes with genocide and ecocide. Yet this is almost entirely unrecognized at a time of most humans' now living in cities.

The toxic political background is not, ironically, much about politics as we know it. It is not about right or left, as both sides of the political spectrum are two sides of the same coin: bent on "economic growth" and consuming -- with the goal of manipulating people and nature to a lesser or greater degree.

Fascism, defined as the unity of the state and industrial interests, enforced by violence, is surprisingly a major part of today's background. The supremacy of the military-industrial complex coupled with the corporate consumer economy is scarcely one generation old. In the 1960s it was observed that the U.S. has "friendly fascism." Now with militarized police and summary official execution of "undesirables" on the streets, a fascist-state designation seems not far fetched. The war economy's iconic opponents are known mainly as victims of assassination. Martin Luther King, Jr. and JFK are the best examples of alternative thinkers and doers who threatened the entrenched establishment. The unelected power behind the state brooked no serious threats to the status quo, so that it could keep enjoying its world-stage playground by preparing for war, not peace, and actively waging profitable wars of choice.

Contrary to the message of today's majority of critical liberal or left commentators, our "political background" -- i.e., the power of the ruling elite and the history of suppression of freedom and justice -- is not a recently created phenomenon. Democracy and freedom were not in abundance enough to have been subverted primarily by George Bush II, the Koch brothers, et al, post 9-11. We actually need to look further back than the corporate takeover of the U.S. over a hundred years ago. We must look still further back than the tragic European invasion of the Americas and the related mass slavery and genocide. For we need to see the beginning of recorded human history as basically the demarcation of successful, organized thuggery -- dressed up as royal, divine rule, embellished with art -- to see how the society's political structure and influence was created. It became the background, and it continues to envelop and stifle us to this day.

Western Civilization is another term for today's dominant culture. Its roots are traceable to Sumer as the first civilization that maintained individualistic and class gain as a springboard to empire. Slavery, division of labor, suppression of women's rights, patriarchal institutions of church and state, totalitarian agriculture to create surpluses, territorial growth, and writing for records of property and business all combined for an aberration in humanity's experience that became the kernel of the world's cultural norm. Any nearby cultures that retained hunting and gathering (along with spiritual consciousness of Mother Earth and similar concepts about nature) were attacked, destroyed, or absorbed.

Although Western Civilization was a mutation of history that made little sense from the standpoint of what almost all people wanted (e.g., freedom to gather all food locally without work as we know it, maximizing time with family, tribal peace, etc.), civilization's strengths and the lack of any sustained, coordinated opposition meant that the New Order proceeded to take over the entire world. Empires eventually would collapse, but the cultural values of materialism, private property, manipulating nature, hierarchy and competition continued. After Sumer there ensued an unbroken series of empires, regimes, and nations that always featured emulation of, and usual linkage to, the previous dominant power. Stepping back with maximum perspective, we can consider almost all of today's working population -- all former tribespeople -- to be successors of the slave class that built the successive dominant powers' monuments, operated the mines, rowed the ships, grew the crops, etc.

Since working for others' gain is too often the norm for employment, and is rarely a matter of choice, little has changed deeply in basic culture from the early Mesopotamian societies that thrived on exploiting people and the environment. Irrigation is touted as an achievement, and indeed it did raise crop yields, but in the long run it created salinization and lowered crop yields. Deforestation and the draining of wetlands were similarly touted as progress, whereas today these practices are widely understood as contributing to the Sixth Extinction, as well as exacerbating hurricanes' wrath. Despite the mounting evidence telling us we went down a "Highway to Hell," today's less and less convincing claims of progress are touted incessantly, especially by the corporate media. Admittedly, no one can deny the gee-whiz factor of technological accomplishments, whether for one's convenience or to kill en masse. The lucky users following the orders of bosses or commanders are actually "free range slaves," workers made to feel superior to the poor unemployed. All of us, including the extremely rich, must participate or be marginalized, to reach out and grab ersatz freedom: to shop and consume, ballyhooed as worth all of today's inequities, the environmental devastation, and mounting social alienation. Boosting false security is the unacknowledged profession of those in many sectors of the economy and the state.

Resistance and the promotion of sustainable alternatives to industrialism and centralized, oppressive power are visible, but of little interest to the majority. As long as the herd feels fed and is made to fear (manufactured political) threats, and public health is compromised from the despoiled environment and mass drugging, little change in politics and lifestyle is at hand. The public is manipulated to fear terrorism above all, despite the fact that the dreaded acts kill a tiny fraction of the deaths in car wrecks (de facto policy flowing from the power of the oil and car industries). Similarly, stereotypical "terrorism" kills a similarly tiny fraction of the number paying the price of corrupt environmental policies. To fight terror and control oil, U.S.-led wars in the Middle East in recent decades killed almost 1.5 million Iraqis, costing well over one trillion dollars.

Meanwhile the public has swallowed the petrochemical pharmaceutical industry's scam of pills for newly named diseases, as part of the costly-treatment approach to health. Having and exercising medical insurance -- misnamed health insurance-- is thought tantamount to health and healing. Thanks to the many forms of petroleum dependence that

society tries harder and harder to cling to (as peak conventional oil fades), and thanks to the availability of cash, false values that do not recognize the deadly environmental and political background, are propped up. This directs consumers to keep competing for survival and the dream of comfortable positions and status. The population does this in individual isolation, losing real community steadily. However, the writing is on the wall: the entire system and culture are teetering just like the besieged biosphere.

Conclusion

When a human being or other creature is aware of the background on the horizon, approaching threats in the distance are noticed. But if there is enough haze, darkness, noise, or propaganda, the approaching threats are unobserved or somehow minimized. In our artificial, toxic, radioactive, and unsustainable world, it is now the background itself that is the lethal threat. Unfortunately it is hard-wired to be unresponsive to allowing, let alone forging, a new consensus for the common good.

Understanding the background now surrounding and oppressing us is the first challenge to face. Creating the alternative background -- transforming our increasingly negative existence to a healthy context for the pursuit of happiness and preserving all life -- is the second part of the environmental and political challenge. Let us tune in a better background hum, emanating from communities struggling for their integrity and sustainability, and from inspiration such as John Lennon's song Imagine.

Viable models and the tools for sustainability as well as action plans appear in many Culture Change essays and reports, and elsewhere such as on Resilience.org and TheGreatChange.com, so a list need not be reproduced here. Most critical is that before the great change for resilience can come about, thinking for oneself and taking action -- beyond short-term, daily activity -- must no longer be the province of the few, the misfits, radicals, and adventurers. Thinking and acting, as truly grown-up and responsible citizens, is nothing less than the prerequisite to Natural Survival 101 -- the class where we all shall meet and from which we must graduate. Don't drop out and miss the drama, tears, and joy!

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Further Reading:

Culture Change report by Jan Lundberg (containing encouraging news): Global Warming Culture versus the Natural Future for Humanity, and the Real Denialism

Nick Breeze's article from February 27, 2015 Survivable IPCC Projections Are Based On Science Fiction

Robert Engelman's book, More: Population, Nature, and What Women Want (Island Press, 2008)

John Pilger's article on JohnPilger.com and elsewhere: Why the Rise of Fascism is Again the Issue, February 27, 2015

James W. Douglass' book, JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why It Matters (paperback, 2010). Scroll down for Chapter One, "A Cold Warrior Turns"

Daniel Quinn's books such as Ishmael and Beyond Civilization (1990s)

Clive Ponting's book A Green History of the World: The Environment and the Collapse of Great Civilizations (1993)

Welcome to the 21st Century - Time to "turn21." By turn21: article on
CultureChange.org
and turn21.org

The World Turned Upside Down (a.k.a. The Diggers' Song), by Leon Rosselson at energybulletin.net

Songs of Petroleum: The Autobiography of Jan Lundberg, Independent Oil Industry Analyst and Eco-Activist (October 2011 edition; out of print)

Stop, Hey, What's that Sound, Everybody Look What's Goin' Down -- chorus from "For What It's Worth" by Buffalo Springfield's Steven Stills