Ending Industrialism

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Will peak oil save the climate, or shall we first embrace a new culture?

We will have to be much more imaginative as a people if we are to take meaningful action to deal with global warming. It is a simple truth that economic activity that transforms the Earth into consumer products is the main problem.

Yet, hardly anyone is proposing that such activity and products have to be mostly stopped. There is actually some thought along these lines, and there always has been, but it is frowned upon by those with industrial axes to grind or who have bought into "progress" and "growth." So it is hard to publicize the idea of ending industrialism. The few authors on this topic are not household names, unless we infer that some famous old writers would have come out against industrialism if they had seen a little more progress and growth. Thomas Jefferson and Henry David Thoreau are examples of men who appreciated small farming and would have decried the concentration of employment in urban factories and the complete triumph of the corporation.

Today, it is claimed that the U.S. is "post-industrial" or is "a service economy." But in the global economy there has mainly been a geographic change in the exploitation of workers and resources, compared to the heyday of smokestack-industry heavy employment on U.S. soil. U.S. cities are still more like work-camps than communities of enlightened citizens involved in politics.

Rather than say "Get rid of all industry" or "Get rid of technology," one can visualize local crafts-people soon making due with scrap materials and some renewable resources. The individual's possessions will not be so voluminous and overbearing when the change comes. There will no longer be a great number of things used daily, because new stuff won't be available and cheaply shipped to everyone the way it once was. So, re-using finally becomes the rule of the day.

Politics has increasingly meant proposing only (1) what will be acceptable to those with vested interests or (2) what people can be swayed to tolerate regardless of justice or scientific logic. Therefore, as the climate crisis enters a catastrophic level never before seen by humanity, politics as we know it must be rejected or bypassed. This might be expressed simply as "Think for yourself and save yourself," although selfishness is not the message as it would not solve the collective dilemma.

People cannot stop the global-warming culprit of industrialism, rather, it will stop itself. Another way to state this is to say that the economy will collapse and end most greenhouse gas emissions. This is not to say everything will be just fine as soon as manufacturing and oil-powered transport stop. There will be severe repercussions to "lifelines" of energy, food and materials being cut or terminated.

Being unable to plan for meaningful cuts in emissions during the time recognized today as most effective (perhaps as late as 1980 onward), modern society faces not just climate catastrophe but the imminent breakdown of systems that rely on fast-dwindling petroleum. The peak in world oil extraction may not be certain for a few more years, according to several peak-oil analyses.

But if enough people know what to expect, and are motivated to try to save the atmosphere and climate today, an attempt at simplifying lifestyle and cutting consumption will do two helpful things: soften the blow of petrocollapse and help usher in the "new" economics of local self-sufficiency and community cooperation.

Opposing this reasonable approach are those who wish to only get rich or richer, and those who believe religiously in the notion of linear progress and growth that have culminated in impressive technology. The accomplishments of industrialism and Western Civilization have blinded people to the overall negative trend we are all beginning to glimpse and feel. While people can sing the praises of the internet, they unconsciously use similar technology for convenience that harms themselves and the rest of the world. A prime example is throw-away plastic waste such as separate baggies for veggies that grow their own protective skins.

The technofix-environmentalist shares the same mind set and ethics of the incurable politician who always takes the easy way out and panders to common standards of status-quo behavior. A whole raft of information and insight on the non-feasibility of whole substitutes for petroleum is available, but is ignored by corporate interests and others allied with them perhaps unconsciously. To want to save the climate and yet maintain an economy similar to the destructive, wasteful economy that is killing us (and feeding us), is to want to have one's cake and eat it too.

It is hard for most modern humans, educated or not, to get their minds around the idea of the industrial world as they know it coming to an end. Even more far fetched for them is the idea of hastening its end -- even though this would give the climate as we have known it a fighting chance. Resistance to change may be our greatest obstacle, while resistance to annihilation is fertile, not futile.

And when faced with an unworkable situation and glimpsing a better future free of greed and war, people try to embrace it. Sometimes all they can do is believe in a song such as "I Am The Walrus"... No, I mean "Imagine" by John Lennon, from 1971.

Imagine no possessions

I wonder if you can

No need for greed or hunger

A brotherhood of man

The song was and remains extremely popular. (Lest any feminists be offended by the quaintness of the last line, it is worth recalling that Lennon was soon to put out "Woman is the Nigger of the World.")

How can people live without the benefits of industry? But, equally vexing and dispiriting: How can people exercise their freedom when they gave it away for the regular paycheck -- to remain within four oppressive walls away from home and nature for forty or more hours a week? Trying to answer these questions, and to grapple with the challenges of giving up privilege or the aspirations of wealth and power, can result in little more than frustration, denial or mental depression. So, it must be with open-minded inquiry and seeking answers from sources often suppressed, that stamped-out molded citizens might discover "new" ways of living that will rock this present world.

It would be pointless to talk about ending industrialism if we were not also discussing a liveable future. The climate must not end. Or we end too. So our future has to be sustainable and worthy of honoring all life.

At the same time, trying to honor the maximum number of human lives when such a number is unsustainable is not compassionate. Just as unpopular as ending industrialsim, with those running society, is the idea that the growing human population must shrink significantly. We are all subject to laws of biology, so if we don't manage our population size, nature will do it for us.

Under the current regime of industrialism, getting sick is -- but should not be -- a normal part of life. Primitive and many Third World people lack industrial medicine and much of the stress of modern life, and are normally free of runny noses and dental problems. Apart from the industrialized person's processed diet and near constant stress, there is widespread petrochemical-induced poisoning from a vast multitude of profitable products, even medicines, that represent another major negative feature of western civilization. The worst may be radiation of various deadly kinds, under the categories of war and "peaceful."

These are clear mistakes in managing our environment, and are indicative of our huge population's weakness and susceptibility to die-off from disease and genetic failure. -- even if Mother Nature's climate were to be kind, and petrocollapse not on the horizon.

Nevertheless, there are countless people who are positive and optimistic, regardless of the weirdness this society represents and generates. Do-it-yourself mutual aid, as happened with post-Katrina New Orleans, or Miami's Liberty City neighborhood for the former homeless, is perhaps becoming more common, and will come back bigtime.

Another even bigger return-phenomenon will be primitive living and living as a tribe; the two seem to go together. These concepts have been demonized, even though they are 99.9% of our history -- before global problems emerged with civilized agriculture and its offspring industrialism. As part of the swing of the pendulum, spirituality identified with the Earth will return strongly, as people revere life in part by deploring the past era's trashing of the living world.

Industrialism is accelerated entropy. Instead of the moderate amount of waste generated in the Iron Age, the Industrial Age that began with coal enabled mass production of ultimately disposable items. The forests of Western Europe were first disposed of as population rose and industrialization began, but it was not until coal was surpassed by petroleum that industrialism could grow like a metastasizing cancer.

Thus we see that as the dominant culture adapted to extreme industrialization and the ostentatious wealth it permitted, the same culture -- that allowed for the warped values to dominate in the first place -- reluctantly spawns within it the seeds of revolution such as a counterculture. It will arise out of the dying mainstream culture of materialism and separation from both nature and one another.

Prior to certain effects of peak oil that may manifest officially as the final energy crisis, it may be that another mechanism or Earth-shaking event brings the industrial culture to its end. Regardless, out of the rubble and ashes will come a new culture that some have already been embracing for decades in their respect for the land, air, water and our fellow species.

I've recently revisited the Ten Steps of The Pledge for Climate Protection our office distributed since 2000. These steps could usher in serious economic changes in short order. But they would need to be adopted almost universally until the present system buckles and falls. However, the present system will not, I predict, be made to fall by people-power's surge for a better world, although one can hear this now and again. Rather, larger forces than social movements are in charge: a collapsing economy and "Nature bats last."

Yet it is definitely worthy to start embracing now a new culture. There are many of us who wish to do more today. The Pledge may be difficult-sounding for some of us. One way of making the Pledge seem reasonable could be to add to it, perhaps thus getting people to think more deeply about the first easier steps.

Here is first the Pledge for Climate Protection, which Eban Goodstein says "Looks very good." Goodstein is Professor of Economics at Lewis & Clark College, and Project Director of Focus the Nation. (This section will be followed by an additional ten steps, to be offered for consideration by the Global Warming Crisis Council.)

“I pledge to begin taking as many of the following steps as I can to stave off the worst effects of global warming, and spread the word. In so doing I will cut fossil fuel use. I will do some or all of the following:

1. Cut down on driving my vehicle, or carpool. I will walk or bike, and not buy a car if I do not have one (best of all). I will support and use mass transit. I may work closer to my home.

2. Cut down on working just for money: I can thereby barter more, and cut down on commuting.

3. Depave my driveway, or help others’ depave their driveways, or depave parking lots, and grow food in depaved land.

4. Unplug or retire my television, and perhaps go off the electricity grid. I will reduce energy for heating, and share appliances such as my oven with neighbors, and not buy or use power tools or jet skis, etc.

5. Publicly oppose new road construction and road widening in my community, to start undoing sprawl, prevent growth in traffic, and halt the spread of forest roads allowing clearcuts.

6. Take vacations without jet air travel, and avoid career activity dependent on jet travel.

7. Plant trees, collect rainwater, and avoid overusing municipal water as it is energy-consumptive (and thus may emit CO2, the main heat-trapping gas that fossil fuels release).

8. Buy local products, buy as little plastic as possible, carry a travel mug. Minimize consumption. Support alternative plant materials to cut down on petrochemicals and trees for paper. Avoid eating animal products especially shipped-in beef.

9. Not bring more children into the world, or limit my offspring to one, and possibly adopt. I recognize the threat of overpopulation.

10. Inform my community and the greater national and global community on the need to take action such as the above for climate stability.”

Pledge for Climate Protection (and Even a Little Human Liberation) II:

- Take brief, cold showers. If you "can't," because it's too miserable, and that's the only option, then you prefer being dirty. Cold running water is a luxury, and because of the fossil-fuel-powered pumps, it's a source of greenhouse gas emissions.

- Go to bed when darkness falls, or shortly afterwards, and get up when it's light, to save on energy for lighting and heating.

- Live without refrigeration. Okay, some people are unusually dependent on refrigeration at this time.

- Dumpster dive some time, or be observant enough on the streets or anywhere to pick up for yourself some useful abandoned item.

- Go for a wilderness or parkland camp-out for an extended period. Augment your outdoor skills. Note useful materials

from nature and use them when needed, such as in making pipe out of bamboo.

- Tell a motorist in his or her gas-guzzling car that you hope he or she will be able to save the climate and cut oil dependence soon, by car-pooling, biking, etc. Actually, rather than be confrontational and risk road-rage and run-of-the-mill insanity, it's safer to either hum "Have a global warming day..." or just cough conspicuously while giving the car a dirty look.

- When buying a product in a jar or a bottle, if the cap has a clear plastic sealant in it, ask the cashier or manager if they know about bysphenol-A (endocrine disrupter).

- Rethink eating: (A) Eat wild herbs you pick in the neighborhoods or vacant lots, such as dandelion, yarrow, plantain, red clover, and fennel. (B) Go on a fast from time to time, in order to detoxify and regain appreciation for the food that comes your way.

- Give a homeless person some food, including those asking for money, with some helpful words such as locations of shelters, camp-sites, or Food Not Bombs, and encourage the person to eat wholesome foods.

- Raise your voice to uphold what is right in the common interest and what you oppose, in the name of the common good -- including for all species.

If coordinated, as in a Gandhian movement against a colonial oppressor, efforts to stop the climate-killing plague of industrialism could be focused with powerful effect: if enough car buyers only bought used cars instead of new cars, the economy would dissolve into many local economies; the money would be kept in the community instead of going to distant corporations. This kind of effort, or some other people-power attempt to derail a runaway train heading off a cliff, may never happen or become necessary if petroleum supplies tighten enough to choke economic growth and spark a new, post-petroleum and truly post-industrial era.

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