

Until avoidance fails: system collapse brings culture change

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As conditions worsen, eventually the rich too will be brought down by ecological collapse and social upheaval. Meanwhile, we all seem to be sleepwalking in a regimented line toward the cliff, despite various wake-up calls and reasonable suggestions for changing our ways as a culture.

When the system refuses to reform itself and is bent on crashing, there is justification for taking action to dismantle and replace the system. However, inaction is the rule of the day, just as the system's destructiveness against life is the rule of the day. So, the system awaits its certain self-destruction. This is all the more reason, if possible, to hasten its end in favor of a compassionate alternative based on our long, historic success: tribal organization, local economics, smaller population, and conscious, nature-based living.

But because hastening collapse of today's system is probably impossible (and counterproductive if somehow forced), the alternative is perhaps best approached through individual spiritual practice and joining with like-minded visionaries. Part of the strategy must include anticipating collapse of Western Civilization (whether we love it or not) and its true alternative as noted above. The culture change we refer to is not the distinction between mainstream consumers who use as much petroleum as convenient compared to more conscious consumers who use significantly less, but rather: consuming versus living very lightly. This means using entirely renewable, local (or scrap/reclaimed) materials that do not require today's immense transport, packaging, power-consumption, and disposal.

The motoring globe-warmers just keep driving us to extinction, and we are too nice and practical to look at them (ourselves) as present dangers and actually make them stop. But why should we, when they have a right to pollute? Or do they? They feel they must move a huge, heavy, personal vehicle up and down the hills of San Francisco, for example, as part of a daily routine that's convenient and elegant. And the laws protect this behavior -- and almost all such behavior -- that slashes the climate to smithereens (only to see it come back as a mutated monster).

"Civilized living and modern appliances are not to be questioned! You can and must shop and get good stuff for your hard-earned money!" If you believe that, you may or may not be a supporter of the Bush regime's backwardness on coping with climate change. But the distinction matters little when we are all participating in an economic system that demands high volume of production and consumption, and takes over all most all aspects of social life. This is most unwise and deadly. Still, people try to pretend it isn't true, as they revel in their comfortable consumerism and dutifully support the war economy through paying taxes. And of course they don't manage to vote out the scoundrels and hacks. But so what, another nice day presents itself, and they feel so sophisticated and pleased to wear the grooviest clothes and have la-di-da conversations in expensive watering holes. These folk are often ultra hip people who would stand out strangely in Middle America, but they're using plenty of plastic nevertheless.

Let us stipulate that the system is unfair, destructive, and annoying. We see it only getting worse as one of its main features. Picture a near consensus that the system must go by the wayside in favor of alternative values and other structures. Yet, it will not be done as long as a minority is allowed to wallow in consumption and use a great deal of energy. For some of us, it is hard to believe that today's energy consumption is continuing before our eyes. Alarming science news reaches us and we embrace common sense. But as the energy pig-out goes on, what happens when people just wish the entire system -- elite consumption included -- would stop already? Not much, until the system crashes and disintegrates.

System crash sounds frightening enough that we need not repeat warnings of die-off from overpopulation and the sudden loss of key energy sources for basic services, food and water. But the purpose of discussions on the global peak in oil extraction and speculations about climate change is to honestly look at what's going on. We're just trying to see how we fit into a changing world that is not being planned for rationally or democratically. And yes, some of us are activists and imagine we are pushing critical levers.

But we are not bringing down or replacing the system as much as it is collapsing of its own weight.

Do The Avalanche Scramble!

It's interesting to think of people coming to the point of generally wanting to get out immediately from under a coming avalanche. But if they haven't caught on yet, as they busily work like slaves to pay their bills and debts, they probably won't catch on and make thoughtful moves, until the roar of change distracts them from their electronics. Then people can't be expected to be very rational in their confusion and desperation, although it will depend on one's training.

So, it comes down to an event that tips the scales and pulls the banquet right off the table. It could be a huge oil exporter suddenly crippled, or general tightness in supply and high energy prices finally breaking the bank. That is when we start to see rapid, widespread failures in businesses and a free fall in economic activity when the seriousness of shortfall develops into hoarding and social disintegration. Or it could be a massive climate disaster in one region of the world that pulls down the whole global economy.

Then we see the chaotic scrambling for survival by the suddenly very hungry, ill-prepared industrial race of homo civitatis. The cities -- being the mere work camps and marketplaces that they are -- offer little community foundation for taking care of people and sharing resources. The skill-lacking, frightened modern beasts will be on the move for food, water and fuel. You don't want to be between them and what they want. They will probably be armed. The policemen and national guard members will have gone home to protect their families and their refrigerators (getting warm and spoiling food). Let's not go into further details, such as cannibalism!

Workaday living is hard enough as it is! We are divided, separated and alienated. This keeps us atomized and prevents us from acting as a single social force. Even when elders need help from family members, the job and the nuclear-family/single-parent obligations prevent people from caring for an ill or disabled loved one. To think that strangers in institutions instead should take care of our loved ones is a shame and a perversion of human values.

"The industrial revolution was a de-evolution, in terms of human values going by the wayside," said a friend to me. Admittedly, her viewpoint goes against the grain of modern progress and associated developments such as scientific advances. But if the end result of all this proud history is extinction and massive sea-level rise, why should we cling to the status quo and appease those invested in business-as-usual? Why keep having faith in a continuation of their piddly offerings of minor reform?

We cannot at this point visualize people coming together in town hall meetings everywhere. If anything called for such a response, it would be today's global-warming threats, and the realization that strong climate-protection ideas must be shared and adopted now. Just as crucial is the open anticipation of petrocollapse and how to shed our petroleum dependence. An organized, militant rebellion to seize policy-making is even more far-fetched, and not at all likely until it would be far too late and pointless. Therefore, the realistic appreciation for inevitable system collapse -- while increasing resistance to the current, doomed paradigm, through life-styles that reinforce models of sustainability -- is what prepares us for the historic transition from industrialism to its successor and opposite.

Until avoidance fails and the avalanche is falling, we wait for adequate stimulus as a crowd currently receiving our last generous doses of petroleum food & drugs. Then mass hysteria will ensue as people face the fact that there is no more job over at the corporate office tower, and no more oil-burning trucks delivering corporate food to the supermarkets chains. Keeping our heads and transitioning toward sustainable living will probably be a real fringe activity, then as now, until it's suddenly the only way for everyone. See you there.

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- Jan Lundberg

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