

The Extractors and climatocide

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
05 July 2007

Culture Change Letter # 164 - July 25, 2007

Sections:

- Extraction culture dating from Sumer until present
- Extraction aided by modern technology and social forces
- Psych-op for nonstop hyper extraction
- The Nazi system: brazen extractors
- Conclusion: "alternative" economies are the only way

Introduction

The end of the extractive economy is in sight, when sea level rise alone will undermine and depopulate coastal cities worldwide, causing enough inundation and destruction to terminate most global trade. This apparent certainty is more than enough reason -- even though petrocollapse could happen faster -- to question the way we produce and live. To understand the rise of The Extractors through Western Civilization's reign can help us see how we have clung to a faulty and lethal system.

Extraction is euphemised as "production," in part because the latter term is commonly considered a basic fact of life in our industrial minds. History reveals our succumbing to the extraction culture through force as well as feel-good advertising. The Extractors concept describes what we allow done to us when we submit to others for complete domestication in order to cater to their devouring the Earth, while we willingly participate.

Extracting is also an apt vision, as depicted in the film *The Matrix*, for using humans as energy sources. This is only fanciful in the particular method in the movie, where people are bred from embryos on through maturity like cattle by heartless machine-beings. With a similar wake-up message, The Yes Men guerilla political-theater group has fooled oil-business addicts with an elaborate pseudo-corporate proposal for Vivoleum ("Solves Global Warming and Peak Oil"): left-over human biomass soon to be available when petrocollapse and climate disaster hit. These artistic depictions of the extractive mentality and our plight refer to the dominant culture's intent to plug everyone on the planet into slavish consumption and work.

Extractive industries' colonialism and imperialism are sold as job-producing and "opening up markets" for "free trade." How can that really be "greened?" It can't, but some would use environmentalism to soften the extreme excesses of corporations and government and try to keep us on board the good ship Titanic with faith-based navigation. Questioning the ongoing waste economy and its global injustice, the green ethic of re-use and recycling is -- without necessarily realizing it -- antithetical to economic growth as measured by gross domestic product and mega-corporate profits.

The Extractor Economy cannot do the right thing for the ecosystem, and neither can the environmental movement if it keeps undermining itself by accepting unending extraction and consumption. The consumer lifestyle depends on nonstop extraction for increased electricity use, although limits are starting to be seen along with fresh water shortages due to climate developments in this time of continued population growth. Environmentalists generally avoid focusing on stopping many activities threatening our future existence. Instead, they promote the status quo, e.g., higher C.A.F.E. standards for ever more motor vehicles, and constructing ever more buildings with greener materials such as mushroom-based insulation. There's an "unlimited market" for the technofix, such that the obdurate fundamentals of overpopulation-via-petroleum dependence are swept under the rug.

In the previous Culture Change article on ecological economics, John Feeney wrote that mainstream economists were in effect promoting homicide when they try to grow the economy. Indeed, growth on a finite planet is not only crazy and homicidal, but is rushing at breakneck speed. Pouring gasoline on a fire, "The exploding growth in China's and India's economies (current GDP growth of 11% and 9% respectively) is placing demands on the world's natural resources in a way that is unprecedented." [Colorado's State Geologist Vincent Matthews, Peak Oil Review, ASPO-USA] Is this not "climatocide?"

Extraction culture dating from Sumer until present

Several thousand years ago, after about 200,000 years of anatomically modern human existence, a group of people in what is now the Middle East gradually gave up the hunter-gatherer way of life. They chose to rely on farming and town settlement. Thus, "civilization" was born. It ultimately gave rise to today's Western Civilization and all its trappings such as the global economy, and it inexorably led to the climate crisis becoming our worst fear in only the last few years.

That original culture that developed agriculture and living in cities may have taken this path out of the need for simple survival and in incremental steps, assuming it was not a predatory impulse to begin with. Regardless, a clear case can be made that the preference for civilization was an ecological mistake that now, centuries later, on a grand scale threatens the world as we know it. Extraction of fossil fuels, of forests, of crops with the attendant tilling and erosion, industrial animal farming, as well as the regimentation of the population as workers and other forms of servants of empire, all derived from the original culture of extraction that evolved in the Middle East.

The extractors, or "takers," do more than use the environment and other people. They systematically squeeze out all the benefit they can for selfish, short-term reasons. What is left behind is devastation and impoverishment. Desertification was one major result of this culture in the "Fertile Crescent" which supported the oldest of empires, Sumer.

This was in all likelihood the beginning of rigid social hierarchies on a massive scale, and inequality that resulted in slavery, poverty as well as kings and opulence. The well-organized takers also allocated much of the extraction or wealth for social and political purposes, as in crumbs off the table to aid in the control of the population. This is called good government or altruism, but however generous or justified this can be made to appear, the main beneficiaries are the ruling extractors. In the beginning of this culture in the Middle East the process meant the first regular "surplus" created for armies, the priest-scholars, "public works," and other institutions.

Combining with the first agricultural societies were herders or pastoralists, at first at odds with farmers that horsemen preyed upon. Eventually, animal husbandry and cavalry became a major feature of the nascent Western Civilization, and the pastoralists and nomads have been driven almost entirely to extinction. Animals in close quarters with domesticated, "penned" people caused diseases (and substantial immunity to them), as well as new strains still with us that are mutating. Today, animal farming is a major and growing extractive industry that is so unsustainable that cow flatulence ranks among the highest sources of global warming gases. Agriculture uses and wastes mind-boggling amounts of fresh water, energy, and topsoil, but factory farms for animal products' extraction are the worst culprit.

The greatest example of modern humanity's extraction-oriented way of living is the constant use of electricity. As we are hardly ever harvesting truly free electricity such as from a lightning bolt, the extraction of electric power comes with a cost, mostly in entropy (i.e., waste in the form of degraded states of matter). Despite the obvious consequences of electricity addiction, such as dams that hurt fish runs, radioactive waste lasting thousands of years, greenhouse gas emissions, acid rain -- to name a few -- we still insist on using power wastefully instead of sharing appliances and using manual tools, for example. Older buildings had few electric plugs; now every wall has perhaps two sockets.

The public is brainwashed to believe electricity is on a par with shelter and drinking-water as essentials. More is better: electric cars, electric tooth brushes, computer information instead of print media, etc. Instead of doing without, such as living without household refrigerators, the only option is supposedly more efficient units. This cycles more pollution-boxes into the landfills, as efficient models also wear out.

From the July 16th disaster at the largest nuclear power plant in the world, the Kashiwazaki Kariwa in Japan, we are reminded that our addiction for extractive power remains unquestioned. The radiation leaks and the official deception have been criticized by news media, but weren't they inevitable, as are more so-called accidents in future around the world?

Extraction aided by modern technology and social forces

Today the dominant culture and the global corporate economy practice extraction on every level. Growing food was where it began, ending up so: farm soil is used as a mere medium, stripped of beneficial bacteria and other ingredients, for growing a few species of plant via petroleum fuels, machines, and petrochemicals. Tilling releases nitrous oxide to help warm the globe.

Water and everything in it is considered a "resource" to be exploited and used up, rather than treated as a sacred, vital part of life to share and keep pure. [see Culture Change's global water crisis report; link at bottom.]

A worker, in almost any job, has his or her time and energy legally extracted for the benefit or profit of the few. A job that is pleasant and good for our Earth is considered rare and it generally pays much less.

The principal extraction industries are usually identified as timber and minerals (including fossil fuels). But when we stop and think about modern human activity, it is organized around extraction. The pattern and objectives are short-term and not about sustainable use or restoration of the ravaged ecosystem.

Oil and energy get the most attention, as the corporate press frets about profits and growth of consumption. But minerals aren't in the news -- yet. They "are also experiencing unprecedented demand -- with prices in the 21st Century increasing markedly for virtually all base metals, precious metals, minor metals, and even cement. The average price increase for 25 important metals in the past four years was 538%. .. In the last 3.5 years, the price of uranium has increased from \$10 per pound to more than \$130 per pound... There are 20 strategic and critical materials, with uses in alternative energy applications, for which the U.S. is dependent on imports for 50% or more of consumption. A large number of the extractive operations in the United States are owned by foreign corporations... For the first time, China needed to import coal in 2006." [Vincent Matthews]

Despite the rising interest since the late 1960s in saving the environment from disastrous abuse, world population growth and relentless extraction have so far negated any well-meaning new tendencies to conserve or preserve. The failure to turn the corner and reverse trends that imperil the whole world and our survival as a species is clear to even the most optimistic promoters of the Utopian technofix; nevertheless they persist in avoiding the crux of the issue.

But reformers who would substitute more efficient and less toxic products and systems are misguided in their hopes for perpetuating the present economy and social order. These are hopes rather than calculations that they don't fully do; one never sees an attempt to prove that renewable energy can really substitute for petroleum on a comparable scale. Besides the unproven and elusive economics and technology for substitution, an extractive economy that makes motor vehicles drive further on less energy is doomed to fail, in part because energy efficiency leads to growth of the use of technologies that stretch the resource in question. Additionally, and fundamentally, population growth cancels out per capita improvements in energy use. This is why entire systems such as the car and truck need to be retired immediately. Their efficiency for actually moving a person or a widget or load of food is actually a tiny fraction for the energy used up by the vehicle and spewed into the environment as waste.

When we:

- use a car, we are extracting in the worst way, and not giving back to the ecosystem.
- tear off another plastic bag for our vegetables, we are being extractors.
- pave over some land for cars, we are feeding only our extraction.
- buy paper not of high post-consumer-waste content, we support extractive industry.
- see an job-ad that depicts a happy applicant, the extractors are shaping our minds.

A local-based economy cannot remain extractive for long. Therefore, extraction means a far-flung ecological footprint as well as aggressive tactics to obtain the "resources." Petroleum is the best example: its extraction is called production, even though depletion is the only possible outcome for the land whence it came. Oil peaked in global extraction in about 1964, and despite propaganda to the contrary, subsequent wars were essentially over resources, especially petroleum.

Why is the U.S. in Iraq and Afghanistan? We now import fully two thirds of our oil. The State Geologist of Colorado recently wrote that U.S. history does not support the view "that technology will save us."

"Since the U.S. peak (in oil extraction) in 1970, we have had huge advances in frac technology, seismic processing, 3D seismic, CO2 oil recovery, computing power and software innovation, horizontal drilling, and on and on. Yet, our oil production has been in nearly constant decline." [Vincent Matthews]

Extractors use up a vital component of the environment -- the web of life -- and then move on, in "boom and bust" fashion. From forests to coal to oil, modern civilization has come to offer us plastic chairs, plastic eating utensils, patented petrochemical medicines and massively accelerated entropy, in place of high quality goods and local-based plant medicines, to cite a few examples.

The extractors only know removal, growth of this removal, and brutal repression of those who directly question and fight extraction. Extraction is violence. Whether reformers of today's extraction, or the blind fanatics of growth who support military-means for continuing extraction, they are determined to keep their system running regardless of the impacts. They know no other way of living or of organizing society to be a real community. So, despite their disasters, they tell us what must be, as they cling to holy Civilization and admonish us to support their schemes. Their message dominates because people, including some environmentalists, are well paid to spout it, or delude themselves to believe it.

People accept this unfair, teetering system of never-ending extraction in part because they are so trusting. The limited information and slanted news consumed by any citizens open to change passes, unfortunately, for answers to problems of resource depletion. But these problems are very rarely publicly acknowledged as relating to today's hyper-extraction. Recycling can never overcome relentless extraction and throw-away consumption. Re-use, however, gets closer to doing so.

Creating a non-extractive economy based on local ecological limits is clearly what is needed, and the test for acceptance by the extractors would be how much it would upset them. The extractors will never give up, so unless we put our hope in the collapse of their ability to keep extracting, they should be consciously stopped. How to do this with hope for success toward evolving a modern nonviolent culture, when we're running out of time?

Measures involving yanking dollars from the insatiable maw of the growth economy suck the life blood of extractive industry. So, they offer more hope and are more reasonable and effective than fighting cops or smashing SUVs, for example. Julian Darley and I, in our 2005 joint essay, had some ideas in cutting car use drastically which would tend to bring down the extractive U.S. economy (and likely other parts of the global economy). The car is the ultimate in extraction, such that the mining and manufacturing processes spew more air pollution than what exits the tailpipe. Each car in its lifetime is responsible for three dead trees and 30 'sick' trees. [Environment and Forecasting Institute, Heidelberg, Germany].

How to stop extraction and extractors is approached by both reformers and cultural revolutionaries. How to stop the extractive society and culture, and therefore Western Civilization's death march, is a bigger question. As explored in prior Culture Change Letters, the socioeconomic system is destroying itself, such as by trying to exceed retrievable supplies of petroleum. Petrocollapse may bring on, in the aftermath of chaos and die-off, a sustainable culture. If not, the human species and countless other species by definition cannot be sustained.

The notion of re-wilding or going back to the land is dismissed today by all who have bought into global economics and the power of the industrial state. A hunter-gatherer society is indeed impossible if there is very little to hunt and gather, when agriculture is the only viable way to produce food on a huge scale. However, as wild species keep disappearing, crops will ultimately fail if their diversity continues to be compromised and there is too much climate distortion as well as loss of pollinators, as the current bee die-off may portend.

Hunting and gathering is the only proven method of very long-term human existence, so it should be encouraged on a phased-in basis, with repopulation of wild species achieved via habitat restoration. The "civilizers," whether missionaries or capitalist imperialists, have mostly succeeding in scaring people away from free living in nature. Calling it primitive and barbaric, the civilizers' attack on the lifestyle is really fear of the non-materialistic way of relying on renewable resources.

Instead of extracting and degrading the ecosystem, the hunter-gatherer or nomad appreciates the beauty of essential living and being able to roam. How scary is it to only work a few hours a day and a few days a week, as "primitives" do, compared to workers enslaved by extractors? But if people are now hardwired to be able to hop in their own car and drive to a hospital, instead of trusting the village's folk medicine and shaman, we have an impediment to voluntary change. Kicking and screaming, modern humanity will have to give up extraction and excess, and see how much "improvement" upon living in raw nature is realistic over the long haul.

Instead of economic extraction, the modern human experiment must be about ecological restoration, starting now. Delay for the sake of "jobs" (in extraction) is often in the name of social justice, but short sightedness and continued domination by the chief extractors are heading us toward equal-opportunity extinction.

An economic system of predation that grows and grows can't be sustained indefinitely, so join in its replacement -- if you believe a crash sooner will hurt less than postponing it to the point of maximum pent up pressure for total collapse and climaticide.

Psychologically, modern humanity has bought into having material things on an unprecedented scale. This cultural mutation cannot be erased by mere education or elections. We are awash in material things [see link to photos of discarded stuff, below] due to extraction and consumption. The act of consumption is actually part of the process of extraction. To understand consumerism and how to stop it, extraction has to be understood and stopped. If extraction can be hindered enough or subverted by alternative economics, if enough people refrain from consuming the fruits of extraction and don't buy new products, consumption easily withers and people rapidly wean themselves from "all this stuff" -- or, we will be part of mass starvation and perhaps our species' extinction.

Psych-op for nonstop hyper extraction

Unlimited and therefore terminal extraction cannot occur without controlling the minds of the population. Drugs and industrial pollutants such as carbon monoxide are one level of manipulation. Other levels include the emotional, via fear mongering and the indulgence in sex and violence in media, and faith in religion or quasi-religion such as, respectively, sky-god omniscience and the unquestioned acceptance of technology and science. Almost every sports-hero and film-star promotes consumption and therefore extraction, impressing upon the adulating mind that success means having and using rather than being and doing.

Imitation people have been put ubiquitously before humanity by corporate advertising and government psych-op/propaganda programs. Models and useful celebrities don't seem like a terrible thing; after all, they can be ignored, right? Unfortunately, day-in, day-out, an unlimited number of smiling, good-looking, apparently intelligent and sensitive people are telling us to consume, smile, shut up, and be grateful.

"Cooperate with the designs of the capitalists and enforcers of the empire" -- we never hear it put anywhere near so honestly. False diversity, as in people of color pictured in advertisements, reinforces the idea that we are one people under a flag sharing common values. Anyone fighting the war machine or fomenting class consciousness against the elite is unrepresented in the visible landscape that has been clearcut by corporate homogeneity.

Extracting resources for ever more products makes the models -- imitation people -- grin and appear confident. The message: resistance is futile; go compete, get a job, and -- if you don't stumble with ill health -- afford stuff that gives the illusion of personal power while isolating and dividing everyone. As obedient citizens we were never supposed to factor in the nonstop trashing of the planet. Granted, a kinder, gentler version than the U.S. rat race exists elsewhere, such as in Canada and Europe, where the social safety net relies on less extravagant wealth accumulation. But extraction at half the rate of the U.S. per capita use of energy, as is the case in western Europe, is still unsustainable. It is a cultural flaw that cannot be erased without upheaval, collapse and a return to conscious living enjoyed by our distant ancestors.

The Nazi system: brazen extractors

Nazi Germany could pursue its policy of domination and terror by offering some hope and security to a majority of people in a nation that had suffered war and economic depression. Control of the mind of the citizen was essential, and the Nazis were really "with it" when it came to pushing industrial and technological progress. This passed for civilization which was automatically a good thing, right? Unfortunately, the purpose of civilization and industry was questioned by very few, such as Herman Hesse who saw a war between machine-people and rebels. Those agitating for a bigger piece of the pie for the downtrodden workers could be attacked by the resurgent Germany's fascist leaders as unpatriotic. Communists and others were labeled a threat to a stable rise on up the economic ladder by the patient worker who kept his mouth shut (except to "Heil Hitler").

Nazi Germany, regardless of its blatant horrors, was merely more extreme in extraction aspects than the other corporate states which stood supposedly in stark contrast. Much of the Nazi technology and methods of extraction for chemical industries such as poisons and drugs -- that came out of the same factories -- were taken over by the victorious U.S. whose major corporations and blue-blood financiers collaborated and supported the Nazis until forced to stop. Examples were Standard Oil of New Jersey (Exxon), IBM, Ford, and the current president's paternal grandfathers. Given our dire situation today in a putative democracy extracting far more from the Earth than the Nazis did, it's a perilous pity that the similarity of economies between these extractive nations was not appreciated then or today.

The social and political systems were also brought closer together by the conflict of war and subsequent pacifying of Nazi Germany. Few war criminals were prosecuted, especially SS experts in "intelligence," espionage, torture, propaganda, who herded people at will and used terror to subvert unions and others who didn't like unbridled capitalism or fascism. Many of the Nazi perpetrators or enablers of genocide were brought into the U.S.'s growing national-security apparatus, just as Nazi aerospace and weapon experts were brought into the U.S. industry and government programs for missiles, space rockets and secret projects.

When the name of the game is extraction, controlling the population through media and political messages must be pursued relentlessly and ruthlessly. The U.S. government's secret Operation Paperclip started as a harvest of Nazi know-how and personnel, but continued as an "intelligence" program for many years after World War II involving publishing companies, editors and reporters who parroted the party line to drum up public support for the Cold War and avoid being labeled a Red. The profits from armaments and building bases in countries forking over their resources had to be increased, ostensibly for the grandeur of Old Glory (the U.S. flag). Growth and extraction were absolutely unquestioned.

The Nazis demonstrated best, up until their reign ended, the potential for technology to dehumanize and automate the process of extraction and exploitation. Killing innocent people was not the only purpose of the Holocaust, but rather to

use them as disposable laborers. It was a model of efficiency, in the view of the fascists, as it had the extra benefit of culling the population of designated malcontents and undesirables. The U.S. and the growing transnational corporate state has surpassed in subtle ways what the Nazi system could accomplish in human and material extraction, while fooling many into believing fascism -- "Corporatism" in Mussolini's ideal -- was vanquished.

Extracting gold and other jewelry, as well as gold fillings, and precious art, was a gigantic theft that the Nazis perpetrated against what they reviled as lesser humans: Jews, mainly, for their wealth. The executed and worked-to-death prisoners had their clothes as well retrieved for distribution to the Reich's programs. Indeed, the Reich Economic Administration was a top SS agency responsible for prisoner-processing and liquidation.

Lest we start thinking of The Extractors as "Them," who are We? If we are complicit even as moderate consumers in today's global economy, we need to extract the Extractors out of our brains and admit that the U.S global-warming economic engine is tantamount to a holocaust of unprecedented proportions.

The end game is that the growth paradigm for greed reaches its limit, causing massive die-off.

Conclusion: "alternative" economies are the only way

Our evolutionary past is not just a reference point for contrasting natural, tribal living with today's extreme extraction and growth-economics. As the only model for our sustainable future is the indigenous, traditional cultures, most of which have been snuffed out, new respect must be given to simple living and "primitive" ways. To make life last -- a new worry for our species -- breaking with civilization's errors is called for urgently.

An Ecotopian or neo-primitive way features maximum recycling that includes composting, grey water and treated human waste for local food gardens, and gathering wild plants. Decentralized energy systems that do not extract will come to the forefront. The ecosystem has been too degraded, and petroleum supplies too depleted, to support more than one billion of us perhaps. Just as we have not faced our culture's and our economy's extractive nature, we have refused to deal with population growth. Nor have we addressed institutionalized greed, nor explored on a substantial scale cooperative living that puts the community first. So, the still unpopular "alternative" to the culture of extraction is our only option. It will become universal at some rather late date for the human family, even if it comes tomorrow.

* * * * *

Thanks go to Dan Bednarz and Lonnie Maxfield for editorial contributions. - JL

Further reading and references:

"Can ecological economists stop the mainstreamers before it's too late?", by John Feeney, Culture Change, July 2007:

culturechange.org/cms

Blue Salon conference report: Oceans dying; Fresh water supply to plummet; Vulnerability to peak oil not yet appreciated - Culture Change Letter #163 - July 1, 2007

culturechange.org/cms

"Ways to end car culture along with the globalized trade godzilla" - articles by Jan Lundberg and Julian Darley, March 11, 2005:

culturechange.org/cms

A Green History of the World and A New Green History of the World, by Clive Ponting

rbooks.co.uk
(Random House UK)

Ishmael and My Ishmael, Daniel Quinn:

ishmael.org

"Increased Global Demand for Energy and Mineral Resources" Vincent Matthews, Peak Oil Review, Association for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas - USA:

aspo-usa.com

"The Environmental Cost of the Car", "dirty from cradle to grave," by John Whitelegg, covering the study by Umwelt-und Prognose-Institut Heidelberg "Öko-bilanz eines autolebens" (Environment and Forecasting Institute, Heidelberg, Germany:

lead.org.au

Sea level rise: "Puget Sound: Deeper troubles," Seattle newspaper editorial:

seattlepi.nwsourc.com

Discarded stuff: incredible images and stats on consumer culture (e.g., two million plastic beverage bottles, the number used in the US every five minutes):

chrisjordan.com

Honor The Earth (exective director is Winona LaDuke) creates awareness and support for Native environmental issues by using music, the arts, the media, and Indigenous wisdom:

honorearth.org

* * * * *

Historical note from the American Heritage Dictionary

Su-mer (soo-mer):

An ancient country of southern Mesopotamia in present-day southern Iraq. Archaeological evidence dates the beginnings of Sumer to the fifth millennium B.C. By 3000 a flourishing civilization existed, which gradually exerted power over the surrounding area and culminated in the Akkadian dynasty, founded c. 2340 by Sargon I. Sumer declined after 2000 and was later absorbed by Babylonia and Assyria. The Sumerians are believed to have invented the cuneiform system of writing.