

Termination of the fossil-fuels society

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Based on today's intensifying trends, warning signs and an understanding of history, one must be ready to see the fossil-fueled phase come to an end most abruptly. When common practices cannot be maintained and too many people suddenly scurry for scant supplies, the desired resource dries up. This causes ramifications that quickly compound whatever triggered the crisis.

At this writing, crude oil futures have passed the \$65/barrel mark. In this column we have been anticipating heavier, rapid changes to economics and social order: petrocollapse (see previous reports).

Fossil-fueled civilization has spanned all of modern times, even though its reign will have been short. But its length has been the most damaging event in the planet's history during humans' existence. To really fix today's vast, complex, fossil-fuel-based problem, the culture that created it must be eliminated. Forces beyond anyone's control will bring this about.

What will we be left with? Forget Walmart, celebrities' plastic smiles, and another \$286 billion to pave over more good land. Finally! "The Revolution will not be televised," as the Last Poets advised three and a half decades ago.

One does not look forward to no lights, refrigeration and what have you. Those who anticipate a future without "universal" material luxuries should not be considered bent on depriving others of what are called necessities in the U.S., although most of the rest of the world does without them. However, if the petroleum-dependent societies are going to revert to what is really the long-term norm -- that of subsistence farming and very low energy use, as predicted recently by writers such as James Howard Kunstler and Richard Heinberg -- it can only be healthy to anticipate the coming absence of appliances and whatever else passes for wealth in the consumer economy.

Not only have global warming and a massive wave of extinction been irrevocably launched; a road-based transportation mode has overrun much of the planet, and petrochemicals are an unmitigated disaster despite their convenience and versatility. An overall replacement for the dysfunctional fossil-fueled system is the honoring of the Earth's natural processes that provided wise tribes with the wherewithal to live for millennia. This statement is a heresy to those who love today's cities and who therefore would only reform our terminal civilization. It is as if their fossil-fuel tradition is deeply rooted.

Much of what passes for nice and proper in today's fossil-fueled culture is unworthy of preservation. Most of the world's people are assaulted daily by commercialism and toxicity as an extension of capitalistic exploitation. When the effects of runaway technology are seen as an assault on nature and they isolate humans into being consumers, "the baby needs to be thrown out with the bath water." This does not at all mean cutting our own throats if we are committed to positive change. In fact, there are helpful if daring steps to take now (read on).

To sketch in the details of what could be tomorrow's Utopia is useful but not the task of this essay. Visions from Culture Change and others such as Ecocity Builders, and the eco-village and permaculture movements are making the attempt. It is as if we are in a dark night trying to describe a new place the dawn will bring, and we are unable to see what the landscape will look like or how populated it will be. We must leave assumptions behind, particularly if they are the product of a failed system of a dying culture.

Even if we cherish certain aspects of civilization, e.g., an impressive city such as Paris, perhaps very little can survive petrocollapse. So it serves us well to reject the basic concept of fossil-fueled (and, by extension, nuclear-powered) civilization. If we trace its creation, fossil-fueled society had to do with generating maximum profits via boom and bust development and subjugation of peoples and their environments. If we think about the purposes and benefits of fossil fueled civilization, the price is too high. The main march of history must end and give way to an entirely new sense of respect for all humanity and all living things.

To get on with terminating the planet-threatening fossil-fueled lifestyle and the built infrastructure strangling the world, we should first list some absurdities that negate the "progress" of fossil-fueled civilization:

- shipping food thousands of miles
- loss of self-sufficiency in food, water, medicines, etc. in one's home region
- killing abroad for oil
- the holocaust of global car crashes
- loss of hand-craft skills
- commodifying life's essentials that had always been free
- effects of crowding such as diminished freedoms

Wind energy and other "renewables" have been available since before petrocollapse appeared certain, but renewables have failed to gain a significant foothold. Now it is too late to revamp the whole economy. More meaningful action than the technofix is required immediately, and more technology would primarily extend the status quo. Those who imagine that universal hot running water and ubiquitous computers are necessary for life believe we must preserve our technical accomplishments at all costs.

In truth, the imperative to terminate fossil-fueled civilization is the greatest adventure today and perhaps ever in history. As the fall of this civilization is already starting -- no matter if China, for example, serves to maximize global consumption -
- the encouragement of inevitable change is an opportunity for positive creativity.

In our lives, changes often impact us badly when we are unprepared. But when a conscious change is undertaken to advance one's desired goals, there is more control and enjoyment. Julia Butterfly told the Auto-Free Times, in her first cover-story interview by a national magazine, that some people wait to have "change hit them upside the head like a two-by-four." Taking risks for changing one's life can be hazardous, but how can eliminating fossil-fueled dependence be a risk? Clinging to massive energy use in an overpopulated world, by enacting only a Kyoto-Protocol level of change, for example, is a scientifically understood formula for failure of our precious, delicate, common global climate.

In the absence of any activist group with courage that enjoys a mass support base, individual and affinity-group actions are required to strike at the fossil-fueled beast by demonstrating low-energy-consumption living. Additionally, high-profile monkey-wrenching that does not smack of terrorism can serve to educate.

A tiny list:

- Potatoes stuck into exhaust pipes are a harmless but clear statement if a note explaining the action is placed on the windshield. Motorists would get the message and tell others.
- By the same token, bicycle riders should be given hugs, gifts and reverence.
- Preparedness drills should be carried out whereby a community's food or water supply is cut temporarily, of course with the consent of all concerned, to dramatize today's extreme dependencies.
- disruption of school classes and other institutional meetings should be undertaken to speak extemporaneously about the peak of global oil extraction and the implications for business-as-usual. There are artful ways of doing this, if we take the example of the Yippies who burned dollar bills in public and kissed each other during university lectures devoted to maintaining the loveless status quo.

Why must this urgent approach take precedence over the possibility of reforming the system from within? The global economy is the enemy if it runs on polluting fuels and sets people up for devastating deprivation once petroleum shortage hits "without warning." Therefore, a John Kerry presidency upholding "free" trade agreements and pledging to keep subsidizing the price of gasoline is a non-starter.

Daniel Quinn wrote in his 1999 book *Beyond Civilization* that programs serve the (flawed) system and do not offer a replacement vision. So nothing substantial is fixed. What I got for the first time, from this book and two of his other great books of our time, *The Story of B* and *My Ishmael*, is a clear sense that reforms and programs do not solve the inherent flaws of civilization and our unjust society. A new vision or a better model, in place of the existing social system, is the only sensible course.

Quinn points out that a culture's visions are more powerful than programs, and that both visions and programs can turn out ugly. Programs attempt to protect the environment, for example, but only to keep it from becoming even more degraded than it is. Programs can be essential but ultimately inadequate because they are essentially reactive: "...they only make bad things less bad. They don't bring into being something good, they only drag their feet against something bad... If there's no new vision for us at the end of the road then we are going to die, because programs (useful as they are) just don't have the capacity to keep us alive indefinitely."

Can the word "reforms" be substituted for "programs"? To write this essay, I asked him what he might have on the subject of reform in his books. He refreshed my mind that he had instead written about programs and vision. He referred me to his theme-index for his books at the end of *Beyond Civilization*, which I recommend to anyone. I reread today with pleasure some of his observations:

"The tribe, in fact, is just a wonderfully efficient social organization that renders making a living easy for all -- unlike civilization, which renders it easy for a privileged few and hard for the rest... The tribal way isn't [necessarily] the right way, it's just a way that worked for millions of years, in contrast to the hierarchal way, which has brought us face to face with extinction after a mere ten thousand years."

The original title of this essay was "Ending the idiotic fossil-fuels existence". I altered it to "Termination of the fossil-fuels society" for the sake of credibility. I originally flashed on this whole concept while sitting in a restaurant on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley. I had a very odd feeling about our civilization, a feeling which very few people probably ever had a number of years ago. Things are more absurd every day. When one takes a serious look around at society's set up, the overwhelming madness is clear. For example, one of the mind-blowing mini-analyses of our materialist culture is what Daniel Quinn pointed out: the food is locked up. What's hard for many to grasp is how, if society and Western Civilization

do work, more reforms and programs are inadequate and even may be the wrong approach at this hour in our deepening dilemma.

What is idiotic is the pursuit of the "unending" existence of fossil-fueled society, in all manifestations: electronic music, plastic tables, natural-gas heated food, SUVs powering noisily by, and, craziest and saddest of all, thinking that maybe this is heading in a good direction someday somehow.

I want culture change not just because I want to see the ecosystem saved for biodiversity. I want community which will help save the ecosystem and see social justice, and I want people to enjoy their time on Earth. Fossil-fueled culture gave up community and can barely help itself address real problems. If you want culture change too, tell others.

Links and further reading:

Petrocollapse: Culture Change Letter #101:

http://www.culturechange.org/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14&Itemid=2

"End-time for USA come oil collapse"(CCL #100):

http://www.culturechange.org/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=6&Itemid=2

Plan B package: "Preparations and policies for petrocollapse and climate distortion" (CCL #104):

http://www.culturechange.org/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=2

"Surfing the tsunami of change: following up with Plan B preparations" (CCL #105):

http://www.culturechange.org/cms/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=18&Itemid=2

Plan B Project: <http://www.planbproject.org>

Citizen Petroleum Councils (Culture Change Letter #11):

<http://www.culturechange.org/e-letter-11cont.html>

Daniel Quinn's website:

<http://ishmael.org>

The Long Emergency by James Howard Kunstler, Atlantic Monthly Press, 2005, New York, NY. www.groveatlantic.com

Peak Oil and Community Solutions - second annual conference, Sept. 23, 2005, Jan Lundberg and Richard Heinberg among speakers. Yellow Springs, Ohio

<http://www.communitysolution.org/05conf1.html>

Julia Butterfly Hill's Circle of Life foundation: <http://circleoflife.org>

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