

Silent Armageddon?

Contributed by Alexis Zeigler
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Editor's note: Written especially for Culture Change readers, this solid analysis asks

"At what point do we recognize that expensive technologies meant to maintain a 'sustainable' consumer society among the world's wealthiest people are utterly divorced from any reasonable moral coherence? Are we ever going to provide plug in hybrids to the citizens of Darfur?"

The greatest danger of the ecological collapse of civilization is that we might not notice. There are a few taboos in political and academic discussion that serve to make our leaders look important and moral. We are not supposed to admit that our minds are directly influenced by the Earth on which we walk, or the degree to which we benefit from the exploitation of the global underclass. Our failure to recognize these things hides the impacts of ecological collapse.

As much as those in the progressive environmental community are striving to have a realistic discussion of the combined impacts of peak oil, global warming, the breaching of other environmental limits, we seem to be largely ignoring the most obvious scenarios. The most likely future, at least in the medium to near term, is a simple extrapolation of current trends. We seem to talk as if ecological limits are going to disrupt all of modern society, and transform our lives. The reality is that both in the U.S. and the world, incomes have been polarizing rapidly, especially since the early 1980s. (For a number of decades before that, the income gap in the U.S. was actually growing smaller owing to progressive taxation and other factors.)

A simple extrapolation of current trends would indicate that those in power are going to try to stay in power, try to maintain their privilege, and will be willing to use many different schemes, overt and covert, to do so. They are going to try to shuffle the distress downward. This will likely require a greater centralization of state power. A brutal reality of the modern environmental crisis is that for much of humanity it is already here. The number of malnourished people in the world has increased by about 20% in the last decade, from 800 million to near a billion people. That's the number of starving people, not the number of poor people. The increase in poverty is much higher, owing to the efforts of neoliberal economic adjustment in the 1990s and oil price spikes in the 2000s.

These increases in poverty and hunger are not merely coincidental with the "war on terror." Now that the global energy pie is stalled in growth or shrinking, the only way the U.S. can continue to eat gluttonously (literally and figuratively) is to eat an ever larger share of the remaining pie. The only way the U.S. and the other wealthy nations can continue to expand their claim on a shrinking resource pie is to maintain an aggressive foreign policy, and that in turn demands a greater concentration of state power. If one simply extrapolates these current trends into the future, the picture seems both dire and very different from most of what is painted regarding environmental limits.

It is highly likely that environmental limits will be manifest as a series of economic shocks that will be noticed by everyone, but the greater brunt of these shocks are going to be borne by the very poor. The problem is that the entire process is likely to be so hidden and politicized that we are likely to be fighting the "barbarians at the gates" for a long time to come without any open recognition of the ecological linkages between their well being and political change in our own society. Specifically, although oil prices have fallen dramatically with the current economic downturn, grain as traded on world markets has not fallen nearly as much. Why is that? There are three reasons. First, global warming is already making itself felt in the drying out of grain producing areas in Australia, China, Africa, and arguably the American west. Second, because of the global polarization of wealth, the upper classes are eating more meat, thus putting greater strain on global grain supplies. Meat production has in the last few decades increased about twice as fast as population itself. And thirdly, the competition for agricultural outputs for biofuel is supporting global food prices at higher levels, again with a direct linkage to the consumption of the wealthier classes.

In short, a simple extrapolation of current trends indicates increasing prices in general, as the world becomes more crowded as resources of all kinds become more scarce. As prices go up, those with less money are going to grow hungrier, and more restless. We can expect to see both an increase in state power and conflict over resources, except these trends are likely to be shrouded in religion and ideology. The bottom line is that the global upper class is likely to remain largely shielded and purposefully unaware for quite some time to come of the ecological roots of political conflict.

The reality is that the industrial powers, the U.S. in particular, have the power the debt their way out of extraordinary problems. Other countries do not have the privilege to act like that. We get away with it because we print the global trade currency, and we have a great deal of military and economic power to back up our profligacy.

We may be able to debt our way out of the current crisis, or it may be that so much purchasing power has now been cornered by the upper class that the economy itself, apart from ecological concerns, has been undermined by removing the capacity of the middle and lower classes to generate consumer demand. That, in a nutshell, is one way to describe the Great Depression. Class conflict is often played out as a battle over the supply of money. Rich people want to keep that supply limited, and controlled. That is why the Great Depression lasted so long, because of the tendency of wealthy conservatives to maintain a tight fiscal policy. The problem now is not so much tight fiscal policy per se, but the fact that so much of the money supply is simply being soaked up by the wealthy that our consumer, demand-driven economy is being undermined.

In as much as the concentration of state power is a predictable response to ecological constraints, don't expect anyone to announce that on the evening news. The various convulsions through which we travel will always be cast in immediate, political terms, and our understanding of history tends to get whitewashed beyond recognition.

The root of the problem is that our ecological overshoot is changing much faster than our thinking about it. By various measures, we are in overshoot, meaning we are already consuming more resources than the Earth can sustain by any reasonable measure. The further we progress into overshoot, the more divorced our "solutions" to the ecological crisis become. Ever since the 1970s, we have been advocating for "alternative energy" and more efficiency. Let us extrapolate this trend into the future. Suppose current trends continue (which is likely), and the consumer society goes through various economic convulsions, but remains essentially intact. Meanwhile, starvation across the world continues to grow. Are we going to continue to advocate plug-in hybrid cars and other expensive technologies as the "solution" to the environmental crises when two billion people are severely malnourished? When there are three billion? Four? At what point do we recognize that expensive technologies meant to maintain a "sustainable" consumer society among the world's wealthiest people are utterly divorced from any reasonable moral coherence?

The history of Nazi propaganda is interesting in this context. The Nazis had very active charity programs, collecting money on the street to feed the poor. This program was accompanied by heart-rending posters exhorting good Germans to give to the less fortunate, and workers who collected funds on the street for that purpose did so in the name of the Nazi party. The Nazis also had some rather progressive environmental policies, not the least of which was an aggressive anti-smoking campaign. The Supreme Aryan Race was supposed to be freed of such polluting influences. The Nazis are easy to pick on because they have become such an archetype of evil that one does not have to explain that there was something fundamentally astray in their social order. One does not have to expand upon the extremely cynical nature of collecting funds to feed the poor while simultaneously building an efficient industrial genocide machine.

If we transpose this historical lesson onto the modern world, the lessons are a bit more sobering. The number of hungry people in the modern world is growing, and that growth is accelerating upward on a parabolic (geometric) curve. The rate of increase in the number of hungry people is increasing. Because of the aforementioned factors (global warming, increased meat consumption, and biofuel) this trend is likely to continue. Given this rapid acceleration of poverty and starvation, is trying to solve the modern environmental crisis with plug-in hybrids and other expensive technologies that are ultimately intended to simply pad the lifestyles of the world's wealthy the moral equivalent of Nazi "charity"? If not now, will the comparison become more appropriate when there are two billion malnourished? Three billion? Are we ever going to provide plug in hybrids and a "hydrogen economy" to the citizens of Darfur?

Based on an extrapolation of current trends we can predict that the supplying of expensive alternative energy technologies to the poorest of the world's peoples can be described on a timetable that might be surmised as "never." The problem is changing much faster than our thinking is changing. One could perhaps plausibly argue in 1972 that improving the efficiency of the consumer society would ramp down consumption among the rich even as we developed efficient technologies that might "trickle down" to everyone else. Without debating the finer points of what was true in 1972, that approach becomes less and less morally viable as we move further into overshoot. When we are down to naked mass genocide, which is the mature state of a market economy operating on a contracting energy supply, are we still going to be advocating expensive techno-toys for the rich as a solution to the environmental crisis? How many billions equals "naked mass genocide"?

It is my contention that we are already over that line. What may have made sense in 1972 does not now make sense. Improving efficiency of the consumer society with no recognition of the blood flowing through our fuel lines puts us in unsavory company. The problem is that we have gotten to the point where the easy answers are wrong and the right answers are difficult, at least from a political perspective.

The reality is that the modern economy is going to undergo some enormous changes in the next few decades whether we like it or not. A simple extrapolation of current trends, including the success of most of the conservation and alternative energy aspirations of the mainstream environmental movement, leads us to a world where a few live in the sustainable techno-bubble while billions die.

The political distress generated by the demise of so many people from "natural causes" will be manifest as a decline of democracy and civil liberty and the rise of authoritarian government. As much as we have a highly flattering and mental notion of modern democracy as being a triumph of social progress, the reality for ancient states and ourselves is that democracy is the process by which economically empowered persons express that power in the political forum. Inasmuch as a general decline in resources, or an increase in prices, results in a decline in the number of economically empowered persons, democracy will decline. But the process will be, as it always has been, highly politicized. The speeches from the late Roman Empire are most instructive on this regard. They hearken back to a golden age when men were virtuous, the barbarian terrorists were not to be found, and prosperity reigned. I suppose we will be dusting those off soon.

A lack of efficiency is not the driving force behind our ecological predicament. It is a red herring that allows us to ignore the realities of the division of class power. The reality is that the western industrial economy is driven by throughput. If we leave the coal in the ground and the trees standing in the forest, nothing much happens economically. If we dig up the coal, cut down the trees, and then sell, buy, and burn these "resources," we generate economic activity. Particularly given that the U.S. prints the global trade currency (the U.S. dollar), and given that we can issue debt seemingly at will (perhaps we will find a limit to that soon), we are a consumption driven society. The more we consume, the more we stimulate the economy, the more powerful we become. The consumption of cars and houses has historically driven our economy, notably the great booms of the "roaring twenties," the post World War II boom, and all the growth period since then, not the least of which was the most recent housing bubble. In a consumption-driven economy, the more we consume, the more powerful we become. That is the reason why Americans drive SUVs while people starve in Darfur. That's why, when we hit hard times, our political leaders tell us to go shopping.

Efficiency cannot touch throughput. The reality is that, if current trends continue and the market economy remains intact, then the throughput economy will remain functional, eating up unfathomable volumes of "resources" to feed the lifestyles of the rich and famous, even as we slide down the scale of global decline. We may paint a green veneer of efficiency or "alternative" energy over these consumption habits, but that does not change the basic equation. The upper class maintains its power, in part, by consuming so much. The power to consume means that great resources, financial and otherwise, can also be diverted to such police and military endeavors will serve to maintain the social order under conditions of energy decline.

The bitter irony is that we are almost certain to hesitate just long enough in embracing real solutions as to ensure the

destruction of countless millions of people and our civil society, to arrive only slightly later at the same material circumstance, but under very different political conditions, than if we had embraced these real solutions much sooner. One hundred years from now, our descendants will not be living in a consumption-driven economy. They will not be propping up the economy by buying cars they cannot afford and building spacious private houses they cannot pay for even in the course of decades. They will be doing what they have to do -- sharing meager technologies that actually work. Our children's children will be living cooperatively, growing food locally and without chemical inputs, not because of some higher ideological calling, but rather because they are compelled to do so. The difference will be political. If we can create a movement now that downscales faster than we are compelled to do so, a movement that creates a conscious culture that undermines the power of the ruling elite by building a localized economy from the bottom up, then we can arrive at the future cooperative society with some measure of democracy and civil liberty left in place. If we wait until we are forced to scale down by actual scarcity, then our children's children will arrive at their cooperative future under an ecofascist boot.

Nationalism is so deeply and profoundly embedded in American culture that we easily fall under its persuasion without even noticing. Nationalism has overtaken the environmental movement. We have become focused on "alternative" energy production, in spite of the fact that these technologies are not a real solution. The real solutions are actually fairly easy. They simply involve doing what we will be doing in the future -- using resources cooperatively -- a little sooner than we are compelled to do so. Unwinding the throughput economy cannot and will not be achieved by enlightened social policy. The throughput economy can only be changed by a bottom-up movement that seeks fundamental structural change in our society.

Phrases like "culture change" or "conscious culture" seem to evoke the image that we should all play nice -- liberal utopianism. A real understanding of culture leads us to the conclusion that the ecological and economic foundations of a society have a dominating influence over the social structure and belief system over time. A sustainable future does not mean we teach everyone to be tolerant. Though there is no harm in such lessons here and now, to achieve real "culture change" means rebuilding society from the bottom up, building a truly localized and sustainable society. You might imagine that is unlikely, but that is precisely what is going to happen, either by plan or by default. The latter would be much messier, and lead to a society that is neither equitable nor conscious. By getting ahead of the curve, we could arrive at the same point, but in a society that is conscious of its own process of social evolution. That society will not be a liberal utopia. It will be a sustainable society where power is devolved to the community level so people are empowered to defend themselves, and to create the future they want. It will not happen by policy, nor will it ever be announced on the evening news. It will happen as the minority movement of people who want to see it happen grows through the coming waves of change. See you in the street.

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Alexis Zeigler is a self-educated activist, green builder, and orchardist living in central Virginia. He has organized numerous campaigns around environmental and social justice issues, built super-insulated buildings and alternative energy systems, and has lived in intentional community all of his adult life. More information, including articles, interviews, and downloadable books, can be found at his website, covev.org or by contacting him by email: [tradelocal "at" yahoo "dot" com](mailto:tradelocal@yaho.com).

He has recently completed his Culture Change Constructive Panic Amtrak Tour. His recent book Culture Change, Civil Liberty, Peak Oil, and the End of Empire is available through his website:

Covev.org

Ecodem Press

Alexis Zeigler

P.O. Box 703

Charlottesville VA 22902 USA

Telephone: 1-434-409-6006

alexis "at" coneveg "dot" org