

Social Justice Activists Must Take Into Account Ecological, Cultural, and Economic Transformation

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
02 May 2011

Popular protest against rulers in many parts of Africa and Asia has spread faster than most anyone would have dared hope. Ferment in other countries may well materialize and mount, including the U.S. However, while the recent uprisings have potential and are well stoked by rampant oppression and greed, we are no longer in a 19th or 20th century set of social or ecological conditions. The attainment of peace and prosperity can no longer be fully addressed with revolutions or social movements. The decades of economic growth from cheap oil -- producing wealth for some, not bringing peace -- cannot be replicated.

The common people have always just wanted peace and prosperity, but are pushed beyond a certain point by relentless opportunists seizing greater power. This results in eventual revolt, but new immutable factors in social change include the deteriorating health of the biosphere, cultural breakdown, and economic collapse.

We must view the aims of today's uprisings for social justice as naive, and the expectations outmoded, if much of the population is not in accord with the direction in which humanity and the Earth are actually going. There can be no consensus if unbridled capitalism or other systems for massive industrial development can hold sway, for they leave behind the majority of people, at best, while mostly preying upon them. Even when people are willing to take action in concert to redistribute the pie, whether by Gandhian mobilization or use of force, this may resonate falsely, for the pie is disintegrating. Its recipe and ingredients are obsolete. And freedom attained in harsh austerity, characterized by intense competition for food, will be doubtful or of little comfort.

In the absence of finding common ground, and having failed to address resource limits, humanity veers ever more sharply towards collapse. The form of collapse can appear to be primarily financial, oil-supply related, or climate disruption, but it will be all three. Continuing to "develop" nature is seldom seen as contributing to collapse, including by countries that were not 20th century powerhouses. Industrial pursuits thus seem perfectly okay, exempting them (in their minds) from greenhouse gas limits and protections of wildlife. There's hypocrisy too, as in Bolivia's pursuit of petroleum production -- justified for Mother Earth because capitalism is claimed to be the "only" cause of climate change.

The common thread in movements for social change today is that they are still anthropocentric. The main delusion is that mass material prosperity can continue or spread despite global oil extraction's having peaked and energy famine just beginning. Another delusion is that the global conflict can be fixed by trying to communicate with corrupt, myopic politicians or by a modern equivalent of storming the Bastille.

A simple way to look at uprisings, strife and activism is in the context of unprecedented population size afflicting the planet with consumption. Wars, terror, privatization, and hostile politics dividing people, are prevalent. Strife can be traced to overcrowding; with significantly fewer people there is plenty of room for people to enjoy peace and nature's bounty. Shortages then don't exist, and people live in balance with nature and her carrying capacity.

The rebellious Egyptians, for example, were getting hungrier early this year as oil prices pushed up the cost of food. Unfortunately, the people could not and cannot be lifted out of their misery with more oil because the cheap stuff is well depleted. Mubarek and Tahrir Square were just logical focal points, albeit outrageously corrupt and infuriating. Most demonstrators -- poor and desperate for the most part -- would not believe that neither the dictator's wealth redistributed nor U.S. influence terminated can fix much. Perhaps Egyptians feel they cannot cope with the huge, underlying issues of overpopulation and ecological degradation. Cairo's population is put as high as 18 million. The population of Egypt doubled since the Second Oil Shock of 1979. Those who understand petroleum and energy know that renewable and alternative energy cannot float today's petro-fed population.

It doesn't appear that even intellectual giants such as Noam Chomsky are looking beyond the present culture and its

inability to produce an alternative to familiar power structures. When his position is, "Only a Massive Uprising Will Change Our Politics" [Interview with Democracy Now, February 2011], he's putting the cart before the horse: collapse and deprivation will change (end) our politics and economy, and the uprising will be a reaction against (and adding to) society's failure and disorder. But neither upheaval nor uprising can create more oil and material prosperity; rather, the reaction will redistribute the depleted natural wealth, and poorly. Eventually, when the system is completely undermined and shopping is finally passé, an equitable and sustainable culture must form. It would be helpful if progressive activists and writers could focus more on the real prize.

Activism in many forms has been good for keeping a rebellious spirit alive and for pointing the masses toward independent thinking and action. But the limited critique of most of today's activists and commentators fails us at this time of both apocalyptic breakdown and opportunity for a positive vision. It's difficult to admit that no matter what anyone does to help the situation now, these are dire times, and things will get worse before they get better.

Historical perspective for the USA movement

The U.S. probably has the most out-to-lunch population on the planet. Provincialism and ignorance have encouraged embracing the consumer lifestyle on a small planet. The skills and family cohesion of our great grandparents are fading from our knowledge base, as we trust digital media for individual consumption and superficial knowledge. We have obtained techno-toy glamor, but group and personal mediocrity spreads deeply as something laudable and modern. Few seem aware of the consequences: conformity, passivity and ultimate failure on many levels. Meanwhile, the population's underlying violent streak -- with the highest per capita gun ownership world wide at almost 90 guns per 100 residents -- buttresses little more than a false sense of individualistic security. This only contributes to the average community's steady loss of cohesion and compassion. The average person is not so blameworthy when overworked and overcharged for life's necessities. This reinforces the tendency to become more downtrodden, brainwashed and in poor health.

Foreclosures and rent hikes by the very rich turn people out onto the streets, as food and oil costs rise. But news sources and common discourse dwell mostly on infotainment or superficial observations on key events. People also need to start talking among themselves seriously about rampant pharmaceuticals addiction and environmental contaminants -- all-too-familiar threats going unchecked. Despite today's unprecedented disparity in wealth, the super rich don't seem to fear a French Revolution-style backlash. Most of us want no such bloodshed, but when a system in denial finally self-destructs it will take down many from all walks of life -- especially the most petroleum-dependent among us who may not own their own oil refinery (with uninterrupted crude supply and product-distribution -- fat chance).

Assuming there will be a gradual dwindling of oil is as commonplace as the fear that there will always be extreme social stratification even in a post-petrocollapse, climate altered world. Both assumptions are wrong, and seem to go together. A common, erroneous prediction is that "The Corporate State Will Continue its Inexorable Advance Until We're Locked into a Permanent Underclass" [article by Chris Hedges in Truthdig and AlterNet.org]. He claims, "They will continue to exploit the nation, the global economy and the ecosystem. And they will use their money to hide in gated compounds when it all implodes." But how long will the food and water last in the compounds without free interaction with the land where others also dwell?

The idea of "losing our democracy" and wondering "where did we go wrong" are time-wasting notions, considering that Western Civilization was founded on amassing for the few the unlimited spoils of wealth obtained by disregarding other peoples and species. Hedges, a scholarly moralist whom I have had the pleasure to meet, supports his "lost democracy" idea by quoting Sheldon Wolin who wrote that today's form of imperialism just grew, instead of being planned as the Nazis' was. The naivete of this view is clear when the culture of materialism and greed is known to have already been at play when even the nicest of the British colonialists invaded North America. Today, the idea of righting the wrong of the corporatization of America as a single problem, or the idea of any similar movement or revolt, is bound to fail or fall moot at this stage of the game. Attacking the top of the foundation of a rotten pyramid does little good.

The 1960s' idealistic youth had a yearning to remake the world. As Graham Nash sang in his song "Chicago" in 1971:

"We can change the world / Rearrange the world / It's dying." The song was in support of the protests at the Chicago Democratic Party Convention of 1968. There was revolution in the air, and liberation movements were forming out of the civil rights campaigns that had begun in the 1950s. But the Sixties Movement failed, giving way in the 1970s to the Me Generation. The Movement (as it was called) was derailed in part through assassinations, and hobbled by other subversion campaigns by corporations and government. This period was a critical juncture for U.S. culture and civilization: resource limits were suddenly clear, but the Population Bomb was never defused.

To focus on the present we mustn't endlessly debate the '60s or '70s. But we must distinguish between a time when reform and remaking society may have been possible, in contrast to 2011 when we have lost the chance to challenge the power structure and build anew within an intact infrastructure. This is because humanity has gone down the path of economic growth and ecological destruction so far that social movements now have a backseat role compared to decades ago.

Peak oil, massive population increase, climate change, and out-of-control nuclear radiation releases have taken over. These dilemmas can be possibly addressed with policy, but not "solved." Hindering us unnecessarily is that the "powers that be" demand the status quo in order to pad their portfolios, although some say the real agenda is to control the population toward "demand destruction." The top owners of the material world seem thus far unafraid of a mass backlash, in part because most everyone continues to drink the same Kool Aid of technological progress and the unstoppable march of civilization. But a few critiques of the system's faulty, common assumptions appear here and there; we are nibbling at the edges so as to call attention to a radically different vision for post-industrial humanity.

Opinion pieces and other expressions of political feeling about our current challenges have proliferated since long before the current post-Bush state of affairs. Going back to the Clinton administration, we saw the corporate state's intent to exploit the Earth to the maximum for "free trade" and "democracy." We realized that much activism was mere "stamping out brush fires" -- endlessly reacting, often ineffectively. Nothing has changed, except the excesses of the Bush II Neocons -- supposedly gone when Obama was installed -- served to push people off balance and make them settle for "Hope" via continued piecemeal critiques of policy.

Massive demonstrations have not materialized to end wars and disgorge from Wall Street the spoils of casino capitalism. In the absence of such popular mobilization, we activists and vocal members of the intelligentsia have naturally joined campaigns to try to push society in a more reasonable direction. Some have attained mild success, without changing society's overall direction of self-destruction and ecological catastrophe.

These benign strategies are not gaining much ground, regardless of other methods of expression and tactics that some say should be tried. There is no organized militant opposition, despite the dreams of a few advocates of violence (against people in power or their armed servants). Anger over species extinction, poisoning of our water, medical costs and other aspects of the overall global crisis seems to come down to blaming certain people rather than modern humanity's mistake of Western Civilization. For example, an essay in AlterNet.org asks, "The Public Overwhelmingly Wants It: Why Is Taxing the Rich So Hard?" This sentiment is off the mark, as happens when social-justice urges lack realism or even mention of larger forces. Additionally, the need for deep cultural change is almost never voiced.

In another article that AlterNet.org ran in the last week of April, "More GOPers Feeling Town Hall Heat: Attendees Tell Rep. Ending Medicare Is 'Unconscionable,' Demand 'Tax The Rich!'" I sadly have to ask: Are we asking the rich to tax themselves? The government and the rich are one and the same, for the rich control the government. Tax the rich? That's like suggesting to an executioner that he shoot himself, and asking people to join in a chant for it.

One might ask me what the answer is, since I differ with the approaches rooted in the prior century's leftism. In general, I advocate the love tribe. You can make of it what you want, but it is timeless: embracing egalitarianism and harmony rather than competition or keeping up with the Joneses. This elusive sounding Utopia is none other than our evolution. The question on everyone's lips should now be "Where must we go?" We cannot easily go back, and few desire to do so. But discussing our plight and opportunity can let us work things out -- as long as we don't think we can have our

cake and eat it too, for planetary changes have been unleashed that compromise our very survival.

Let us venture an idea of what the answer is not. Let's say there's an uprising such as a general strike in the U.S., and the stressed out population manages to avoid major bloodshed. And the power structure gives way to sincere, kinder people such as a provisional government led by Dennis Kucinich, Cindy Sheehan and Julia Butterfly.

Their lifestyles are known to be conscious and uplifting. But even among the progressive population, deep cultural change is almost never advocated or put into practice. How we live and what we value does not stop at what kind of greener machines we buy or if we bicycle to a Saturday farmers market with reusable bags. The sustainability movement (e.g., Transition Towns) is more than scratching the surface, but urgently needs intensive public involvement.

The reality is that even the best, most accountable leadership cannot usher us out of collapse and the coming deprivation that our material waste has caused. One way to understand it is to grasp that the abundant cheap oil -- energy and materials -- is gone forever. The accelerating and wrenching change in society will be much more than

- shifting from cars to bikes
- government services cut for the poor and other fiscal reprioritization
- enacting humane policies such as ending (unaffordable) wars

and

- encouraging community involvement in economic decisions.

The entire culture will have to change rapidly for us to sort out what doesn't work, as we ultimately find the mix of traditions and innovations for survival in a time of violent ecological instability.

Social justice activists and even full-time environmentalists often harbor simplistic expectations, as, like most of us, they are clouded and confused by cultural myths. The accomplishments of industry and science that have eased some physical work or dazzled the senses still give rise to a knee-jerk approval of huge, centralized and questionable energy systems, for example. Author Keith Farnish recently pointed out that a few prominent environmentalists are "going nuclear because they can't -- very sensibly -- see a way of powering industrial civilization through renewables, and fossil fuels are running out soon. The line [that these environmentalists] won't cross is towards an alternative to industrial civilization. That's the argument people like us have to be pushing forcibly and without giving way. There is no way to fuel civilization without mass species extinction and climate breakdown..." [Global Warming Crisis Council listserve, May 1, 2011]

In conclusion

We all need to recognize the imbalance between social movements (or their intentions) and the overwhelming realities of petrocollapse and nature's batting last. When many of us are unable to consider these realities, a better future for us all is unimagined or even precluded.

There's little point in progressives' persisting in the dominant critique by clamoring for reforms or implying there is an easy way out of the perceived crisis and collapse. More sensible is a rejection of the system -- Western Civilization -- whereby we create the alternative with local community and a rebirth of solidarity. So far, this isn't getting through to many progressives or those who could formerly be considered radicals. Perhaps out of timidity or sense of privilege they bypass discussing the magnitude of change humanity is undergoing. Until the total collapse, we will still see commentators ignoring the larger forces of change, calling for reforms and the fixing of an unfixable system or at best a changing of the guard. The dominant critique is a distraction, as it keeps pointing to the bad guy du jour and yet another

shameful policy to try to reverse.

The alternative to the faltering "\$ociety," the love tribe, has been practiced long before the hippies began the Back to the Land movement at People's Park, Berkeley, in 1969. Today, some of us still live so as to constructively undermine the dominant system, living outside it as much as possible. We thereby hasten -- at least by example -- the end of the corporate economy and the U.S. as we know it. We are messengers and preservers of viable natural systems. We stand for nonviolence, and thus support a truly sustainable culture. Perhaps at best we are showing the way modestly and minimally, through a tough transformation beyond the settling of the dust.

[See Part 2, of this article, a follow up on labor: Social Justice: Too little and Too Late to Demand More Pay and Better Jobs? (Part 2). The above article (Part 1) appeared on AlterNet.org on May 5, 2011, with the title "Social Movements Will Achieve Little Unless We Embrace the Realities of Petrocollapse"]

* * * * *

Jan Lundberg is a former oil industry analyst who founded Fossil Fuels Policy Action (now Culture Change) in 1988. He is the author of the new book Songs of Petroleum.

List of countries by gun ownership, Wikipedia

"Only a Massive Uprising Will Change Our Politics" Democracy Now interview, Feb. 2011, transcription on AlterNet.org

The Public Overwhelmingly Wants It: Why Is Taxing the Rich So Hard?, by Alyssa Battistoni, AlterNet.org, April 23, 2011

The Corporate State Will Continue its Inexorable Advance Until We're Locked into a Permanent Underclass, by Chris Hedges, on Truthdig and AlterNet.org, April 29, 2011

Sheldon Wolin, Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism, 2008 and 2010, Princeton University Press

Keith Farnish wrote Time's Up! An Uncivilized Solution To A Global Crisis, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2009, and his related writings are at culturechange.org