Six Decades of Leisurely Deterioration for the U.S. Masses in a Mess

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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Greetings from Oklahoma City, where I came to speak at the University of Oklahoma on "Natural Gas: a Bridge to Nowhere?" More on that in a later post.

My reflection this evening is on the transformation of USAmericans into a leisure society of individuals. It began in the 1950s and flowered in the '60s and early '70s. It developed into guitar playing rebels, surfers -- "Baw dip da dip dip" -- and, above all, television watchers, as prominent types among the new affluent generation. Institutions such as school and church weren't offering much cohesion.

So the new generation of young people were distinguished sharply from their parents who had experienced the Great Depression, worked rather hard, endured World War II, and had witnessed their own parents' having more skills and tradition than they did.

The importance of this change between generations was ultimately not so much the luminescence of the Counterculture, but instead a weakening of the population. The direction of the population was not toward liberation and enlightenment or a return to more natural living (except for some hippies). Instead, as has become clear over the decades since, the population was becoming less healthy, more alienated, possessing fewer skills, controlled by the top of the pyramid, and losing knowledge of elders' traditions and sense of community.

I believe the above explains how a modern middle aged person in the U.S. today is little more than a graying replica of previous generations' resilient, wiry-strong citizens. While a factory job of yesteryear may not make more sense or be more healthful than a service-job today at a corporate chain store, the factory worker nevertheless used his hands and made something, and knew intimately of his parents' or grandparents' rural roots and simple values. One can deride the ignorance or lack of imagination of the generation of the 1920s, '30s and '40s, but minimizing the strength of that generation -- because it may not have been as technologically sophisticated or able to stop the corporatization of the nation -- as we applaud women's liberation and the slackening of church going, misses the overall change for the worse in the population during the last several decades. (Growth in population did not help anyone but the few profiting off growth, nor did reliance on ever-more-expensive, dwindling petroleum give us more than a short-term jolt of energy.)

For it is the mass denial today of our ecological plight and the increasingly obvious domination by unworthy, greedy masters that raises the question, "What accounts for the current generation's putting up with the imbalanced economy and total lack of connection to the life-giving land?" As I have a look at Oklahoma this week, I see the cloned, exacerbated sprawl development, automobile dependence, and acquiescence to ever more costly, senseless militarism. Simultaneously there is little acknowledgment of climate change when the state is experiencing the hottest summer in history. The people, as with almost USAmericans, are more dependent than ever on technology and being dictated to by government in more and more areas of daily living. Perhaps, though, the kindness and directness of the people of Oklahoma will be the biggest local resource -- beyond the vaunted petroleum industries and cattle ranching. And the famous Oklahoma Food Coop is the envy of the nation.

Where is this societal trend -- six decades of leisurely deterioration for the U.S. masses -- going? Times are tougher and tougher for more people, as the system shows itself to be failing. Eventually the number of people that the system is rewarding will be so small that they will be dealt with harshly by a hungry, landless mass of frustrated, mostly confused people who also had led soft, often empty lives. One can hope for a good outcome when things settle down, but we are running out of Mother Nature's patience.

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