Things to Know as Collapse Becomes Hip

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A consensus seems to be building toward anticipating collapse. So what's your flavor? Financial meltdown with chaos? Petrocollapse? Climate extinction? The contributing crises are seemingly diverse, including Fukushima's mounting radioactive releases into the Pacific, the growing plastic plague and creeping GMO contamination. If none of those are your thing, you can acknowledge accelerating bee colony collapse.

You may feel the days of "innocence" have receded in the rear-view mirror as we drive off the ecological cliff like motorized lemmings. Even so, maybe you see such resilience in the corporate state and its war machine that you anticipate dictatorship à la Children of Men, the ominous film set in 2027.

It appears that things must get worse before they get better. The United States has become especially absurd with its intensifying mess of debt and flailing leadership. If a major event in the Persian Gulf or China can trigger the toppling of the US House of Cards, increased consumer vulnerability must be the order of the day. It is surprising to some that total collapse has not yet happened, but news such as record new car sales in July suggests the entire system can keep on going indefinitely. Such news supplies happy-talk for the embattled corporate agenda.

A more disturbing and shocking statistic than car sales going in the wrong direction for Mother Earth:

"Four out of five US adults struggle with joblessness, near-poverty or reliance on welfare for at least parts of their lives, a sign of deteriorating economic security and an elusive American dream." (Associated Press, July 28, 2013)

Is this a wake-up call or just part of the relentless barrage of disillusion? What about things the four-fifths can do now that they are not doing? Are they - we - helpless victims? We'll need to do more than wait for the next election, write to Congress or demonstrate in the streets against economic hardship and mismanagement. Yet many of the four-fifths still assume that they can rise above any temporary period of struggling and that money will solve their problems. Meanwhile, the holy grail of national Recovery beckons without arriving.

How many of the four-fifths are talking about bartering and seeing what else they can do for more self-sufficiency? Are they growing their own food? Creating compost for soil-building instead of land-filling the food-waste? Boycotting corporate products by eschewing car dependence, for example? Depaving and installing gardens? Sharing appliances and skills in their apartment buildings and neighborhoods?

Only a tiny minority of consumers lifts a finger in its own long-term interest. One factor is that progressive commentators concentrate on "the 1%" or the one-out-of-five not currently struggling as the source of economic security via redistribution of wealth. Redistribution is not going to happen while the financial system is intact. Even the triumph of a revolution over wealth redistribution and provision of social services could still fail to secure the survival of the species or prevent a thorough economic collapse.

The alternative press all too often limits its coverage of the sociological problem by not addressing the system itself, instead excelling in pointing out the dastardly attempts of the guardians of the status quo to exert control and feather their own nests. The result is reading material that simply riles us up without providing a solution. The message of the alternative press and social-justice activists almost never prioritizes radical lifestyle change and emancipating ourselves from the broken, dangerous system. A controversial or taboo topic is the concept of too many people for the ecosystem's carrying capacity - or certainly far too many fossil fuels-dependant people. This detail of our times was accomplished with

dwindling petroleum that's harder and more toxic to extract, and lacks the high net-energy yield of yore.

When the unraveling intensifies, whether primarily from oil supply crisis, climate failure, or financial meltdown, then even the 1% will experience upheaval and perhaps deprivation. They won't be able to live as isolated jet-setting shoppers. Some will try it, but there's no future for living off the cream of global consumerism when growth finishes imploding. A big reason is that a shrunk-down version of the vertically integrated oil industry for the elite is very unlikely.

What About "Jobs?"

Since the abundant, cheap, flexible energy that we have known is already a thing of the past, there is no jobs program that will ever allow for a continued, growing consumer economy. Besides, we should question working for The Man when it's not actually a job one needs, but rather the essentials that jobs and money help obtain. Simple changes in social relations cut out the middle man and get us closer to nature and our local communities. This guts corporate domination more than signing petitions, writing letters, and even marching on Washington or Wall Street. So why can't we get the job done without wrenching collapse?

It is perverse to wish for the effects of collapse, but we ought to understand any basis for a silver lining. And as long as collapse looks more inevitable, as it does in the minds of many, we would do well to take a break from distractions. Celebrity-obsession in the mass media draws attention away from the melting Arctic, for example. But serious commentators' finger-pointing at politicians and passion to reform unfair policies may be pointless in regard to the unaddressed bigger picture. This is not to say that being critical and resisting oppression today are a mistake.

We have come to expect yet another major blow to hit us in tomorrow's news, so it would be wise today to develop better understanding about the end of the consumer economy. Jobs and other programs of modern society can become obsolete if populations are hitting resource limits and can't seem to get their act together. How could the end of the world of wondrous technological goods and upward mobility be coming about in our lifetime?

The "growth" of the last century has been primarily a function of cheaply extracted petroleum in "endless" supply, whose peak occurred in approximately 2005. If we are to get on with the historic task of recognizing and preparing for general collapse, we will have to wean ourselves not just from high-energy materialism, but also from merely lamenting the long list of failures and disappointments of civilization.

That lament is useful and has a steady following, but is seldom phrased that way or seen for its limitations. It remains the unconscious, ineffective strategy of most social-justice activists and commentators who seem to not see the forest for the trees. They vacillate about what is really wrong with the direction society is going in, and they almost all have simplistic ideas about energy industries. Across the ideological spectrum, an unsubstantiated faith in a recurring techno-fix is thwarting action to change our clever, polluting way of life.

This mindset has to do with embracing "jobs" and "growth" as sacrosanct and eternal fixtures of humanity. The mindset's promoters are across the traditional left-right spectrum, and most want more massive deficit spending over years and years, regardless of who pays for it. The New York Times Quotation of the Day, Aug. 3, 2013:

"At a time of mass unemployment, it's clear, the economics textbooks tell us, that this is not the right time for fiscal retrenchment. To watch it be ignored like this is exasperating, horrifying, disheartening." - Justin Wolfers, an economics professor at University of Michigan Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy.

Economists never seem to connect the eco in economy to the eco in ecosystem - as if unlimited consuming on a finite, increasingly crowded planet is possible and desirable. In opposition, the "deep greens" or even your Aunt Mabel might exclaim, "As if healthy nature is not our prime safety net! As if Nature does not bat last!"

In rare public discussion of collapse, when overcoming the corporate media blackout, the only way to keep the worried, depressed citizen's attention is to include a positive message. Then wonderful ideas for alternative living and liberation can surface. But we need to face what kind of world we are willing to live with that's realistic. Although the blackout has been practiced also by most progressive media, this has started to change in the last year or so, as collapse indications proliferate. Simultaneously one can find heartening news on lifestyle improvement, and of innovative, low-tech alternatives to the business-as-usual Rat Race.

The best known student of collapse and living simply is Dmitry Orlov, who witnessed the rapid collapse of the USSR. His recent books on comparing applicable patterns for the United States, Reinventing Collapse and The Five Stages of Collapse, are grounded in observing oil supply's relationship to wasteful empires. The entire topic of collapse encompasses a large body of analytical works that have been multiplying in the last two decades in an exponential curve. The recent, sudden upward swing of the graph is like the observed intensification of atmospheric and oceanic CO2 levels.

Success on the material plane has been for a small minority on the planet. But surveys have shown that material gain has for most people not produced as much happiness as taking the time to enjoy friends and family. With collapse, we'll all be looking at less material pursuit and more reliance on friends and family: i.e., community. Becoming closer to one's family will be the order of the day in the United States. When people have mutual aid, cooperation and community, they need nothing else except an accommodating natural environment. The latter is the biggest worry for the future, because we're losing it.

The clamor for "more jobs" and "take back what the banksters grabbed" is about compassion and justice. But this focus almost always ignores three things: putting nature first so as to uphold environmental and ecological health; understanding the energy basis of economic collapse; and clear and better ways of organizing society for fairness and general welfare.

Collapse needs to be understood as a sweeping away of unworkable schemes of excess, greed, inefficiency and corporate wage-slavery, although we cannot predict exactly how collapse will play out. With the inevitable changes upon us, some have a vision - if somewhat diffused and marginalized - for positive developments involving green livelihoods and fostering community. Rather than a "techno-fix" under central authorities, the vision is for a return to decentralized "appropriate tech." For example, to the rescue will be the rising sail transport movement and reorienting urban areas toward local, but globally linked, sustainable trade and travel. Last but not least, total financial collapse offers opportunity for deeper partnership, as we saw in the 1981 film Rollover.

Knowing What Our Troubles Really Are

Confusing the symptoms of deeper problems with their causes is a common tendency. Status quo institutions are adept at not addressing root causes of any basic societal or cultural crisis. So any progressive movement would have to overcome that. When nonprofit groups and large membership associations are funded to just slightly reform the system, they serve mostly to obstruct fundamental change.

In contrast, the "positive-collapse activist" tries to get more people thinking about self-sufficiency and the natural environment than, say, about a better Democratic Party.

Could the Occupy movement come back more land-based? It needs to happen before widespread food riots, touched off perhaps by a crippling failure of crops due to climate chaos. It is only a matter of time before such a scenario comes to your petroleum-dependent neighborhood. That is the challenge for the US population - the most energy-wasteful on the planet. The hour is late for rethinking what has passed for "progress": the isolated-consumer high-tech lifestyle.

There are steps to take now that put power in people's hands, by not waiting for politicians to act or corporations to sell. Real wealth is not on Wall Street, but rather in utilizing and sharing healthy land. To help cope with bioregional and geographical limitations of food supply and other goods, sail transport will come back in a big way. Bicycles and bike trailers have huge potential - and improve health. A better future should be ahead, but how much time and what resources will we waste before making it happen? It is essential that the progressive media shed stark light on our changing, precarious world and aid us in sailing onward and away from the dysfunctional and phony world we will leave behind.

Further reading:

"Climate change occurring 10 times faster than at any time in past 65 million years"

"No honey, more problems: A 'catastrophic' year for bee colonies"

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