

The compatibility of collapse and resistance

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
02 February 2007

Culture Change Letter #152 - Feb. 1, 2007

In this time of more discussion about climate, war, peak oil and other major issues, debate almost rages about the relevance of resistance and activism versus accepting or encouraging total collapse. This debate is not allowed to be very public, thanks to control of the media by the corporate state, but people do discuss it if they prefer such topics to the Superbowl, for example.

Some disputants in the debate are rather compassionate and energetically optimistic, and as a result they may be more popular as dinner guests than, say, some morose, self-centered analyst of our world's dilemmas. However, who is right, and who will be left? Both, perhaps.

Culture Change has combined a dire outlook for the short term with the need for action to uphold positive models for sustainability. In this report we contrast two well-known writers' views of collapse and resistance. To bring out the best in this debate and see the commonality, let us consider the psychological factors involved in (1) surviving in large cities, and (2) why we behave as we do.

First, let us sweep aside long-held simplistic images in our minds about the goodness of civilization in terms of crowded cities as vibrant Meccas of sophistication and hope. For although there is beaucoup sophistication and hope as well as beauty and wonder in today's large modern cities, the reality of petroleum dependence and the vicious assault on the climate by today's huge metropolitan areas call our long-held images into question. Suddenly the artificial environment appears insane. The notion of progress, as it has been amply discredited by our record on ecological stewardship and social-justice, ought to be enough to stimulate new thinking or a return to older wisdom. It has occurred, though for only a tiny minority of citizens.

For most urban dwellers, stress and busyness rob the soul of enjoyment and peace, so stimulants are often employed. With climate change as a huge, frightening development (except for the 13% of this nation's people reported as not knowing about it), the general insanity will increase. People were already overloaded, perhaps like a powder keg that has multiple lit fuses.

In our recent, crowded conditions of urban life -- not at all like the prior 99% or more of our time so far as a species -- we make many compromises of necessity. Of course an urban dweller must eat via long-distance oil transport, and Ahh, the consumer choices are so fine and tasty. Voila, a lifestyle dressed up as superior to the peasant or the primitive. Our education and daily propagandizing tell us that we are the greatest example of humanity to ever come down the pike, because of our amazing technology and ever-mounting accomplishments (at someone's expense).

But in U.S. cities especially, we see frightful homelessness that is just one of the visible results of competition and divide-and-conquer management of the poor. Not everyone can be rich and powerful; it's the nature of today's game.

It's a war against the poor

We're in our separate shacks

Some of us just broke off and died inside

Rich bitch

Greed man

[from a song I started writing last night]

The average member of modern society is so infected with materialism and the temptation of satisfying momentary desires, he or she has bought into the equivalent of choosing a last meal accorded a condemned prisoner over taking a stand and making change which involves risk. The major pushers of the false, deadly feast, offering a devil's bargain, are the corporate retailers and advertisers, along with their allies in the entertainment industry, academia, and government. They are all telling us individually, "Here's what you want. Never mind that your future is being foreclosed. Play along and you can have any size feast you want. Even a sexual fantasy or two. What more do you want? There's nothing more to have." This message is real to the extent that we have indeed had everything else taken away from us, from the

dire wolf to the clean running stream.

The inhabitants of large modern cities can be imagined, for illustrative purposes, as caged rats kept moderately happy and often on speed. Many are comfortably fat and can avoid the more desperate members of society. There are plenty of cop rats plus the military to protect the property and safety of the fat rats. Under our present circumstances of an overpopulated world, it is true that laws and their enforcement are necessary for public order. But is that a consolation for the ravages of Western Civilization such as the end of a decent climate? Unfortunately, under today's crowding and the uneasy calm before the rat doo-doo hits the fan, denial and apathy dominate such that nothing can be seriously questioned except by a few fringe rats who try to live a little differently.

I hasten to clarify that it is not out of contempt for my species that I use the comparison of rats, or of sheep. I do so simply because most of us need to be reminded that we really are a variety of animal, and are subject to biological realities including limits on our numbers. Meanwhile, we always return to myopic obsessing over our difficulties that are strongly linked to crowding. An example, with a good lesson:

We are fooled by the latest news spin that propagandizes U.S. democracy: that an election means a different policy direction. To use the example of waning support for the latest war as a hopeful test of real change is not so valid when we know the War on Iraq has already run its course longer than most wars. And the so-called peace we've come to expect may not even come. There can be policy changes in this and other arenas that hint at a new direction, but we are dangerously deluded that the change is one of kind and not of slight degree. If you aren't sure of this, consider asking the Democratic Party leadership this: "If climate change is so serious, and we really are going to do something serious about it, will you support car-free living?" Since they won't, it should be obvious that change is only possible on the grassroots level and should aim to weaken corrupt national rule that serves big business over everything we hold dear that honors life.

Or ask a major city's mayor if some of the toxic impurities in the drinking-water supply can be banned, based on prudent science and the precautionary principle. Don't hold your breath; it's another example of a time-wasting effort. Fortunately, there are other ways of making a point and taking direct action toward needed change. To empower people in their own communities is the ideal, but it's hard when most people are content to get through one more day to get their paychecks, drugs, etc.

These tough realities do not mean that nothing can be done, or that nothing is being done, to challenge today's common threats and injustices. But the point of activism and resistance should be to question the entire system and abandon the system to the maximum possible as we improve our relationships and environment. A softer way of saying it: we strive to be more self-sufficient and take back our time for ourselves, family and neighbors, so that we stand a better chance of surviving a sick society and its collapse.

A real insight into the modern human character is Dmitry Orlov's -- that is, if you can handle a bucket of cold water thrown in your face to wake you up. He recently shared a draft with me, not of beer, but of his latest essay Collapse and its Discontents. Now that it has come out on carolynbaker.org, I'm more than ready to immediately help share it with the world. The article leads the reader convincingly through the normal thought processes and reactions that peak-oil activists have experienced, to the ultimate outcome:

"We can be sure that the living will not always outnumber the dead, as they do now, and that the flow of humanity will reach a peak and start to ebb. Based on everything I have seen and experienced, I can imagine that once the downward slide begins, it will not be a smooth transition, but an abrupt, wrenching change. The downward slide will acquire a logic and a momentum of its own. Taking the specific example of oil, which a lot of people focus on, I can't imagine that, a few years down the road, we will still be looking at annual production shortfalls of just a few percent. I imagine the number to be closer to 100% - not a slowdown, not a recession, but a collapse. I am also sure that we, collectively, will have little idea that this is happening. Once the lights go out for good in your neighborhood, nobody but your few nearest neighbors will know what is happening to you, and you will know of the larger world no more than you presently know of the goings on in the various places that are already largely in the grip of a permanent blackout...

"...Because, you see, there really is not much to be done, on a global scale, and most serious people sense that intuitively. The biggest "if" in the world is the one in sentences that start "If we all..." If we all reduce our ecological footprint to a sustainable level, then there wouldn't be anyone left out to increase theirs at our expense. An additional complication is that we cannot make such a huge reduction because the current human population of the Earth far exceeds its carrying capacity: a lot of people would have to die. If this sort of thing has to be part of our little project plan, then doing absolutely nothing becomes the more ethically acceptable option, albeit a distressingly impotent one." (For the whole article, use the link below)

Dmitry's message and my essays differ, but we are similar: I am more activist-oriented and professionally so -- doing it year after year and often wishing I weren't -- but he is a giant thinker on a practical level in his spare time for the Sail

Transport Network, an arguably activist project. So, as I've recently recorded a song about protesting the University of California-Berkeley's targeting of a rare oak grove, it hits me that the apparent dichotomy of propounding the reality of collapse (as Dmitry and I do) and resistance/protest might make for good contrast and comparison, weaving it in with my latest radical musings that might complement both Dmitry's essay and my song. Hence, this essay.

I can see how some activism is pointless in the larger scheme of things, when we compare a little oak grove to huge swaths of rainforest disappearing daily. But being fully alive may mean standing up and saying "No!" In my case, I used to live near the UCB grove, and I resent the state's top-down attitude that bulldozes others' needs. And, activism is fun when you have a guitar that Country Joe McDonald greatly admired at the grove we found we have in common. Bring on the resistance if we can make it a party. No one should go through life missing Country Joe do the Fish Cheer and sing the Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die Rag: "And it's one, two, three, what are we fightin' fo(u)r..."

I hope you enjoy at least one of these offerings below, and let us know via email. Thank you for reading and listening to our messages. - JL

"Protesting UCB" (a short guitar, vocal and tambourine tune:

culturechange.org/Songs/Protesting_UCB.mp3

(The last line, "Protect the Free Box," refers to the People's Park box for clothing distribution that is dismantled instead of protected by University Police.)

"Collapse And Its Discontents," by Dmitry Orlov

carolynbaker.org

* * * * *

"UC Berkeley attacks tree sitters despite court rulings," by Jan Lundberg, Culture Change Letter #149:

culturechange.org/cms

Please improve our capacity to reach more people with our publications and projects. Our PayPal button for secure online donating is on our funding page at

culturechange.org/funding.htm, or snail-mail your donation to:

CULTURE CHANGE

P.O. Box 4347

Arcata, CA 95518 USA

Telephone and fax: 1-215-243-3144

Email: info "at" culturechange.org

Thank you. We appreciate your feedback. Our website has a Forum.

Please send the subscription link below to others who might like to sign up to receive Culture Change Letters via email.

<http://lists.mutualaid.org/mailman/listinfo/culturechange>