
Technology and Money Have Dragged Modern Culture to Cliff of Extinction

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
22 November 2010

Food, Water and War

Many who see the main title of this essay may readily turn off to the concept conveyed. The idea appears negative, never mind the need for the public to consider more deeply certain issues. Other readers of the title may see it as good tidings, for the making of an omelette requires breaking some eggs -- providing the extinction referred to is of modern culture and not of such a reader.

Editors identifying with the sustainability movement, along with many environmentalists eyeing socioeconomic change, strive to portray positive trends & news. Coincidentally the corporate media eschew "gloomy" analysis, so a freelancer learns to offer only upbeat articles. Still another kind of prospective reader or editor is only interested in "throwing the rascals out" and clamoring for more social justice, pointing the finger at bad guys or policies that spoil an otherwise workable and admirable system.

For the consensus we need on social change, as we address unprecedented threats to life, there must be a discussion of underlying issues rather than of only events. We need to distinguish between where things are headed and where we are trying to go. We need to examine openly what stands in the way of the latter.

Feel-good articles, such as the hypothetical "Bicyclists Finding More Vacation Options," cannot be anyone's steady diet for long. Some try admirably, in an effort to avoid system collapse by avoiding discussion of it. In the bargain they hope to preclude all-out fascism. Emphasizing positive messages often accompanies imagining that the post-peak oil reality will conform to a convenient down-slope. In the long run this is a self-nonfulfilling prophesy. Reality does bite, but not as badly if it is faced along with adopting a most humble approach to living on a small planet.

It is harder and harder to doubt that technology and money have taken over modern lives in a detrimental way. This has happened separately and in tandem, to wit (1) technological change and dependence and (2) financial and abstract valuation of major aspects of daily life.

Many reject such a position, content to play the game of competition, acquire more possessions, and reap rewards of short-term gratification. They see their course as their right, associated with patriotism, religious living, and the only way people (the lucky or virtuous ones) can live. Western Civilization supports this worldview, as do institutions known as Hollywood and Madison Avenue.

But don't all these concerns disappear when the New York Times says "There Will Be Fuel" (Nov. 16, 2010)? The article attempts to soothe consumers and investors with "the nation has gas reserves for 100-plus years." This statement and the mention of some oil discoveries are meant to let the proponents of endless growth confidently bid adieu peak oil.

There are several problems with the rosy scenario, whereby Arctic petroleum extraction and trade are supposed to make up for the polar bears driven to extinction:

The fracking of shale gas is a poisonous enterprise that does not yield oil, the prize among fossil fuels needed for the oil-based national infrastructure. Peak oil is a liquid fuels crisis, as will be petrocollapse.

Oil discoveries increasingly lag behind the accelerating rate of depletion. Biofuels remain a dream for massive

application, but only that.

Economic collapse also relates to past and present financial malfeasance. Even if this were not about gross theft and inequality, the astronomical debt and deficits cannot be fixed without the crippling austerity measures barely begun. Economic collapse flows also from the nonstop unraveling of the social fabric.

There's no economy without ecology (ecos translates to household or home).

Changes in energy policy could bring about wonderful savings of both resources and jobs. Author David Cundiff says, "The DOE estimates that for each \$1 billion negative in balance of trade we lose 27,000 jobs. So for our \$390 billion in imported oil, we are losing about 10.5 million jobs." Unfortunately, for oil imports to be voluntarily cut significantly and quickly in the U.S. this is straight out of fantasy. Healthy policy options for a voracious system of private wealth are as sensible as trying to turn a tiger into a vegetarian. Therefore, perhaps a critique of the entire socioeconomic system holds more promise for attaining a sustainable future.

Mounting crises that affect the great majority of people have called into question the prevailing patterns and assumptions we have lived under. These patterns and assumptions were established by an almost unbroken rule of the force of nations and corporations. Despite censorship of ideas and of movements that resist dominant society and even resist civilization, more and more people see worsening problems of pollution, health, climate change, economic hardship, and loss of freedom as inherent in society if not the culture. Yet, only a few of these critics blame the existing system and culture in such a way to participate in alternatives for the common good.

The foundation of techno-dominance and big-money hegemony that pose threats to the human species and the web of life must be examined exhaustively. Then the foundation may be rejected and marked for extinction, as long as more just and sustainable living is envisioned.

Every step away from nature and natural living, and away from skills and traditions that our grandparents and great-grandparents relied upon, is suicidal. But the big-money interests and the cult of technological supremacy or (pseudo)science-worship discourage and deny the attribute of not being helpless when it comes to living without machines, manufactured and processed items, and wealth controlled by the elite money masters.

Food, water, overpopulation, technology and money

Food and water are the most basic examples of modern linkage with (A) increasingly complex technology, (B) bureaucratic systems for large populations, and (C) private or corporate ownership. Few states are looking out for their people's basic needs or long-term interests. Instead, putting faith in the market economy and individualistic effort supposedly suffices, even though this denies and negates the human tendency of mutual, voluntary cooperation and aid.

It is as if there is no crisis associated with food or water as long as technical and managerial expertise is always growing and carried out, even though it is without the fully informed consent of those affected. If a crisis is acknowledged in limited circles, the current system is commonly expected to solve future crises or turn around any dangerous trends via minor reforms. We are told by governments, the United Nations and academia, that growth of consumption and population are inevitable. Technocrats and politicians, in the pay of big-money interests, assumed day-to-day leadership over society centuries ago, as private property and profit increasingly defined food production. Long before this historic aberration, the creation of surpluses, market-related shortages and famine came about as the evolution of a culture embracing or condoning greed and violence that secured the emerging system.

The privatization of water is more recent, as population has grown and the petroleum infrastructure has accommodated the manufacture and distribution of plastic bottles moved mainly by truck. In the little town of Cascade Locks on the Columbia River in Oregon, Nestlé has courted the business interests of the town with promises if not bribes. Nestlé is infamous for killing countless babies in poor countries by inducing mothers to use contaminated water for infant formula instead of breast feeding. Water sources were once only of the commons, and it wasn't long ago. They will be so again when the support structure -- such as subsidized petroleum -- for corporations such as Nestlé collapses.

What's this got to do with war and peace?

War is still generally agreed to be a terrible thing, but people have grown so accustomed to it, such that they allow themselves to pay for it as long as bombs are not dropping on them. War can be best considered mass hysteria. World Wars I and II, and countless other conflicts connected to private gain through public cost, may have had evil and good roles played by numerous participants. But war as we now know it can only happen with a semblance of overcrowding, along with lack of sharing in the private-property system. War in particular relies on society's constant, sometimes subtle regimentation and brainwashing (propaganda and "education"). Just as true in these recent times of fast-paced change, technology and money drive war and war-profits.

No matter how weighty and critical may be issues such as all of the above -- each day they are more urgent -- the great majority of people would rather not look at them or discuss them. This is what distractions are for -- television, spectator sports, "terror," the joys of green consuming; the list goes on. The idea is to deprive us of peace and tell us it can only be this way, as in the U.S. announcement of intending to occupy Afghanistan until 2014. Undeniably, the true need we each have -- if we can't assure peace for our fellow humans being killed abroad -- is for supporting the everyday pillars of our existence. These include love, feeding ourselves and defending real interests. "Paying our bills" is a recent addition, and is alien to most of our species' history. But the struggle to pay bills and maintain consumption cannot be neglected, except during approved vacations. Ah, but this is where the problem noted in our headline resides: everyday existence is terminal and unsustainable thanks to our lifestyle, our addictions and (identified above) the Earth-unfriendly and ruthless power structure.

I have no wonderful ending or answer for the dilemma of multiple, interrelated crises that escalate faster each day. Nevertheless, with open discussion and reaching greater understanding, we might soften the coming inevitable collapse of the system that most of us depend on -- whether we despise it or not. Finally, such understanding can help build the future we need for survival of all species who can make it, for they all deserve it -- regardless of human technological achievement and the idea that money makes the world go 'round.

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Further reading:

Nestlé tapping Gorge water:
Environmentalists mobilize to block water-bottling plant

By Jennifer Anderson, Portland Tribune, Nov. 11, 2010

Nestlé hogs water in rural Pennsylvania, reports Culture Change writer Prof. Peter Crabb on Nov. 23, 2010:
"Hi Jan—

Great essay. Right on!

I live 1 mile downstream from a Nestlé withdrawal facility. They take 3 million gallons a week from the spring sources of 2 tiny tributaries that converge on my property, so I have a front row seat on the devastation their practices cause. I am quoted in Elizabeth Royte's fine book, *Bottlemania*, as bluntly accusing Nestlé of bribing local officials so they will look the other way and of decimating the aquatic life of these streams. They are completely above the law -- cannot be sued or otherwise regulated, and during summer droughts, while the rest of us are under water use restrictions, they merrily withdraw their 3 million gallons per week without interruption."

The Health Economy by David Cundiff, MD