

Farther to Fall

by Henry Robertson

The free-lance web-based journalist came down from the mountain, unpacked his laptop and typed his dispatch to the manic Western World. "I have been to the land of Pachamama, where the people still respect Mother Earth and her eternal cycle of regeneration. They know they must not destroy the land they live from. They are poor, they have heard all the promises and hype and lies about development and growth and the easy connected life, and yet they still say, 'No!'"

He has seen dirt-floored shacks with no plumbing or electricity, where women grind grain and weave cloth by hand, and the men steer their ploughs behind a horse. And as his jet rises above Quito or Lima or La Paz, behind it trails his subconscious thought: No way in hell would I ever live like that!

Below him, the city accretes another layer of shantytown every year, while some of those backwoods farmers cut down forest to grow quinoa for American foodies who think they're environmentally enlightened.

Cassandra haunts the screens of America, trying to insinuate her latest unwanted prophecy. "I foresee the end of civilization within the twenty-first century! This is no addled vision. It is the path of a bullet aimed straight by science. The greenhouse effect is real. These temperatures are real. The ice melting, acid oceans, droughts, floods and fires are real."

The response is 1 part denial, 9 parts apathy. Reality be damned, Cassandra, the American way of life is not negotiable. Even the earnest climate campaigners admit it when they cry, "How unjust it is that those who will suffer most from climate change will be those who did the least to cause it!" But really, who is better equipped to survive the unraveling of civilization, the Peruvian peasant or the suburban American stockbroker?

It's easy for peasants to say they can live in the embrace of Pachamama. They never broke away from it. They've never known anything else. We Americans have farther to fall.

Solar equality

Maybe we can have it all, all the goods and services of the modern capitalist economy without fossil fuels. Impeccably academic studies assure us we can—by the skin of our teeth. Others say we can't.

Believe we can and a captivating vision of solar democracy opens up. Renewable energy, almost all of it, is solar. The sun moves the wind and the waters and grows the crops that can be fermented into vehicle fuel or burned for electricity. The sun shines evenly on the just and the unjust. It can't be con-

trolled as readily as the mine mouth or the oil well—which is why capitalism can't let this happen.

The first fossil-fuel capitalist told the peasants of his day, "I regret to inform you that I must become rich while you remain poor. Only concentrated wealth and private ownership can fully deploy natural resources. You must understand that this is for your own good. First, I will fit you with these chains to bind you to the clock and the machine. Then, we will ride the iron horse together into a future of unimagined prosperity."

It worked. The furnaces of the industrial revolution spat out trains, cars, planes, household appliances, transistor radios and electric toothbrushes. In time, the chains were struck off, to be shipped overseas and fastened on cheaper workers. The American middle class's new chains were velvet-covered links to consumption, debt and the siren song of corporate advertising. Yesterday's blue-collar factory workers were not so lucky. Now the foreign factories spit out PCs, laptops, tablets, game boxes, flip phones and smart phones jockeying for market share with the minutest differences in features. We live longer—too long, some of us—thanks to medical technology.

To be fair to our grandparents, the consequences were largely unforeseen. Coal, cars and ammonia-based fertilizers looked like miraculous benefactors of mankind. The defects did not become apparent for many decades.

We are the 70%

Consumer spending accounts for 70% of GDP; the rest is government spending, investment, and exports minus imports. The figure is bogus; it includes

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government spending on health care, for example. Still, we citizens foot the bill either as consumers or taxpayers. The media have trotted out the 70% figure a lot since the recession began, telling us it is our duty to spend our way back to prosperity if it costs us every dime and a pile of debt.

This is exactly the wrong prescription. Self-gratification may seem like an easy civic duty but it's ruinous financially, ecologically and morally. Our true self-interest is to spend less. Why is this such a hard sell?

Except for those who believe renewable electricity can power industrial civilization, we who are looking for ways to solve the climate crisis tend to come to the realization that it can't be done without a change of values. We can end excessive production and consumption by individual and collective action—produce less, consume less, spend less.

No one knows how to do this. I hear only two approaches to the problem.

One is wishful thinking, which is pointless. The other is exhortation: Please do the right thing, people! Exhortation is fleshed out with appeals to the virtues and joys of a simpler life—take pleasure in family, friends, leisure and creativity. This isn't visibly working. Sit on your porch and you'll miss that flight to Cancun.

Why do we have to change values? First, it's asking an awful lot of renewable energy not only to generate electricity, but to replace oil in transportation and natural gas for heating and industrial processes. Fossil fuels are concentrated stores of solar energy laid underground over millions of years. Incoming solar energy is plentiful but diffuse and must be harvested over huge areas. Second, climate is not the only limit of nature's stability that fossil-fueled industry and agriculture have transgressed. The loss of fresh water from aquifers and glaciers, degradation of topsoil, deforestation, loss of biodiversity and chemical pollution are others. Population has exploded, reducing the share of resources available to each person. The habitable expanse of Earth will shrink dangerously during this century at the rate we're going.

Corporate control, technological complexity and the minute division of labor have narrowed our options to the point where spending money is the only way to get the goods and services we need or crave. Each of us earns money from a narrow occupation to pay others for the products of their narrow occupations. The web of transactions is like the skin of a rising balloon that has cut its ties to Earth. The subsistence farmer is still down there, but his way seems out of reach even if we wanted it. The skills, the equipment, the traditions are long gone from America. [1] History doesn't repeat itself, and we don't have to go all the way back to pre-industrial times; we'll have enough renewable energy to avoid that. But the high-energy, hyper-productive, ultra-consumerist society is doomed.

Most of today's minutely specialized boutique occupations will disappear in a low-energy world. If we're going to feed ourselves without fossil fuels, a lot of people are going to have to go back to the land. It's not so bad, is it? It beats being part of the urban reserve army of the unemployed. It beats being employed to churn out plastic trinkets, race the clock to

pack orders in a warehouse, or sling unhealthy crud in a fast food outlet for a minimum wage no one can live on.

Simplicity isn't simple

History isn't encouraging. There have been a few countries that have walled themselves off from modernizing influences—pre-Meiji Japan, present-day Bhutan—but there is probably no example in history of an entire society that voluntarily reduced its material standard of living.

Simple living has been a constant, minor theme in American history, often voiced by religious sects or comfortably well-off intellectuals who had no intention of actually living that way. Whenever the Factory fires up a new product line, the idea of the simple life adjusts to incorporate the latest appliance. [2] No one wants to go back to the condition of subsistence farmers in 1800.

Americans tend to admire the rich who are busy cornering the world's financial assets. Servility, it seems, is a constant human trait, even in a country that's supposed to be immune to it. Consumerism depends on inequality. Since there's no absolute standard of wealth or happiness, we compare ourselves to our neighbors. Status drives non-essential spending.

Truth for a change

Since the 1970s, the US Supreme Court has given advertising constitutional status as a form of free speech. Great, the First Amendment protects advertising. Government has limited authority to

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regulate "commercial speech" that is not false or misleading.

What does truth in advertising even mean when many commercials make no factual claims at all, and some have nothing whatever to do with the products they're selling? What is truth in advertising when even accurate claims about what a product will do leave out the consequences of its production, like global warming, labor exploitation, corporate control of politics, pollution and resource depletion?

Advertising plays with our sense of inadequacy and our sense of self-worth, exploits our presumed sexual identities, bathes us in sentimental imagery, amuses, alarms and generally tries to make everyone the subject of behavioral control. Combating this manipulation is one of the most important things we can do.

Advocates of the noblest causes also practice manipulation. Nowadays the preferred theory is "framing." The guru of framing, George Lakoff, explains that frames are non-factual ideas or metaphors that encapsulate one's worldview. Find the right words and stories to fit your frames and they will

prevail over your opponents' frames. Lakoff sees this as moral, at least if done by progressives, but it's inherently Machiavellian. [3] Humans are compulsive liars. With our linguistically based reasoning faculty grafted onto our animal nature, we can't help it.

The Declaration of Independence spoke of self-evident truths. When well-intentioned people seriously think solutions to the climate crisis include buying hybrid cars and pressuring your alma mater into selling energy company stocks, it's time to cut through the clutter. We need to hammer home ideas that are truths on the strength of their inevitable logic. You can't have infinite growth on a finite planet. The world can only support so many people at a given standard of living. When capitalists own everything from resource to retail outlet, freedom is a fantasy. The greenhouse effect is a scientific *theory* confirmed by *facts*.

Human-caused global warming, whose worst effects are still a matter of prediction, isn't there yet. We can handle sea-level rise and the loss of polar bears, but not the loss of fresh water or a sustained decline in food production. Maybe it's time to be more alarmist, not rational, and shout from the rooftops: the consumer balloon is going to fall. It's just a matter of how far and how hard.

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Notes

1. Kollibri terre Sonnenblume, Who will feed the people? *Synthesis/Regeneration: A Magazine of Green Social Thought*, 58:5, Spring 2012.
2. David E. Shi, *The Simple Life: Plain living and high thinking in American culture*, University of Georgia Press 2007.
3. George Lakoff, *Don't think of an elephant! Know your values and frame the debate*, Chelsea Green 2004.