

# Y2K: Will it all fall apart?

Peter Werbe

Previous to this era, opponents of capitalism, particularly marxists, but also anarchists, saw the internal contradictions inherent in the political economy as the basis of the system's overthrow; the working class was to be the agency of revolution. Other marxist theorists postulated that resistance to imperialist domination and colonial oppression, or a revolutionary peasantry, could carry out this task.

Traditional Marxist opposition, disgraced by its apologies for police state socialism and leftist rackets, has thankfully departed the stage of history as a serious threat to the rule of capital. However, rather than this being the era of the market system's triumph, it may face defeat from another direction.

## Conscious Revolutionary Project

Marx and his epigones saw in the development of the capitalist means of production the material basis for revolutionary transformation. Today, instead of the conscious revolutionary project of the proletariat unraveling things, what looks increasingly possible, is that the malfunctioning of the industrial/nuclear/petrochemical planetary work/consumption machine itself may wreck the whole show for workers and bosses alike.

Usually, this publication reports on what the industrial age and modern consumerist society has done to the air, land, and water, but as we approach the end of history's bloodiest century (thanks to the mechanization of warfare), a tiny glitch in the administrative machinery may accomplish what generations of rebels have failed to do—bring capitalist society to a halt.

There is extensive concern that an internal date malfunction brought about by the inability of computers to correctly perceive that we are about to enter the year 2000 and not a hundred years earlier could create great disruption. However, none of this is certain and the effects of what is known as the Y2K problem continue to be debated as government, military and industry race to fix the millions of computers that govern their operation.

The worse case scenario coming from those dubbed Chicken Littles could actually result in the sky falling if there is a massive failure of the computer networks affecting energy, communications, finance, transportation, health, food, and the systems controlling nuclear power and weaponry.

Predictions for what will happen as the clock strikes the millennium (or more accurately as the numbers roll over to the year 2000) depend greatly on what one hopes will happen.

## So, No Worry

Spokespeople for mainstream institutions blithely assure us that the experts have worked diligently to insure there will not be even the slightest inconvenience. Several airline CEOs announced they intend to be airborne at the stroke of twelve on New Year's Eve as a gesture of confidence.

My bank included a little note in a recent statement describing their state of Y2K compliance and the security of my paltry funds. A spokesperson for the local gas company told me they too were ready for the roll-over and they have auxiliary generators in place to continue an uninterrupted supply of gas for heat and cooking. Even my workplace says, we are 100 percent ready. So, no worry. They, of course, want everything to continue as before.

On the other hand, christian millenarians, right-wing militia-types, and (sorry to put these folks in the same sequence) those desiring a collapse of industrial, hierarchical, complex, state society anticipate anything from wide spread disaster to total collapse of the world as we know it. Many are even gleefully welcoming the prospect of the Last Days before the return of christ, or of revolution, depending on their point of reference.

From the considerable amount I've read about this, it seems impossible to make an accurate prediction as to the extent of disruption that will occur. Almost everyone's analysis from the Polyannas to the Chicken Littles seem sensible and logical when read within the context of the arguments presented. The frightening reality is that no one can say with assuredness what will occur.

In North America and Europe, major catastrophe will probably be averted if the electrical grid holds and there is not an outbreak of public panic. But certainly, this should not give one a sense of security. The interconnected regional electrical systems are the weak link in the chain of industrial society upon which everything else depends. Its collapse, either regionally or nationally, could bring about the dire predictions one hears from the Chicken Littles. There have been several dramatic blackouts and brownouts in recent years under so-called normal circumstances.

## Numerous Unpleasant Forms

The other wild card is the potential for public panic. It's not entirely clear what form this would take other than runs on banks, grocery stores and gas stations, but a true panic could take numerous unpleasant forms. There's even a psychological syndrome detected by therapists in people "overly" concerned about Y2K that has been dubbed MAD—Millennium Anxiety Disorder. Whether this is covered by your HMO isn't known at this writing.

Panic is spoken of in a contemptuous manner as if anxiety about life in modern society is unfounded; that somehow we should be confident a Three Mile Island-type nuclear power plant won't explode in our neighborhood or some group of fascists won't decide to ethnically cleanse our region.

Panic disorders, which are at epidemic levels among citizens of the modern age, are discussed clinically as if disconnected from the dis-ease people feel constantly living in a technological machine world with disasters—from car wrecks to industrial accidents—just a dice roll away from any of us. These function at a mostly submerged level, controlled by Xanax and Prilosec, since psychological survival demands constant denial about living in a world that essentially is poisoned from the air we breathe, to the water we drink and the food we eat. Fear of the consequences of Y2K could trip the panic lever in many of us.

Being overly concerned about Y2K isn't fashionable in the mainstream of society. Magazines regularly give lists of kooks and doomsayers who are preparing for the New Year's Eve crash with everything from rural bunkers to packing in a year of food and ammo. A right-wing, conspiracy-mongering newsletter, The McElvenney Report, predicts President Clinton will use Y2K to declare a national emergency, cancel the 2000 elections, and rule by fiat through the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA). At the end of every issue, the publication offers its readers gold coins and a year's supply of freeze dried food for sale.

People often scoff when we quote 18<sup>th</sup> century English philosopher John Locke who asserted there is no such thing as a labor saving device. What could be better evidence than the millennium bug? Even during so-called normal operations, I doubt whether computers save any time whatsoever. As it is, it probably will take a generation for them to make up the costs and time involved in making just North American computers Y2K compliant. Some estimates go as high as \$1 trillion for total costs spent on the effort, but what some firms lose, others will gain in capital's Mobius strip.

Another element which hopefully will be an unplayable wild card, but could be the mother of all catastrophes, is the state of the nuclear power and weapons systems. Chris Clark, in our interview, talks about the threat of atomic generating plants, and describes what happened almost twenty years ago when a computer chip malfunction could have obliterated the Northern Hemisphere.

## The Gravest of Dangers

As I write, enormous political destabilization is occurring in the Balkans in a human tragedy of substantial proportions. What the consequences of the Serbia NATO conflict will be by year's end are unknown. Russia, the traditional protector of the Serbs, seems currently stilled by its need for another International Monetary Fund handout, but the condition of its economy coupled with war on its borders could give rise to the gravest of dangers.

Neither the attacks on Iraq or Serbia could have occurred during the Cold War—the Soviet empire never would have allowed the West at war that close to its territory. Now, patriotic forces within the country are demanding a defense of Serbia and outright fascists in the Duma are calling for re-targeting U.S. cities by Russian missiles. Also, Russia has terminated its Y2K compliance program with the U.S. and Ukraine is reportedly contemplating reversal of its non-nuclear status. Ominously, the Russian military was centralized under a unified command in January, something usually done only when preparing for combat.

What if a worsening economic situation in Russia created the context for a militarist or fascist government coming to power such as occurred in 1932 Germany in similar circumstances? Suppose this coincided with an escalation of the war in Kosovo such as introducing massive numbers of NATO ground troops on the eve of 2000 at the point the Y2K bug created major malfunctions in the military communications and command systems of either the U.S. or Russia, or both? Now, that is the worse case scenario, although the condition of Russian nuclear power plants even during their so-called normal operation should also be enough to give us pause. We are assured that the war option cannot occur, but these guarantees come from the increasingly unpopular Yeltsin government and the Clinton administration.

I could go on, but this is supposed to be an introduction to the articles on pages six and seven. I guess my gut feeling aligns me more closely with Clark than with Holbrock, but my deepest fears, perhaps like many of us, are that the worst will occur. I suspect the latter view comes from the feeling that the catastrophist predictions will be correct at some point, if not necessarily on January 1, 2000.

Let me end with a quick discussion about how to prepare for Y2K on a personal, group and community level. There are certain basics that would be necessary for comfort and if necessary, survival. Most important are food, water, and heat. Other considerations are the availability of cooking and toilet facilities, money, ammo, illumination, and gasoline. You can figure out how to provide yourself with these items with the only question being quantity.

Should nothing happen, you're going to look like a real dufus if you wind up stuck with a year's supply of freeze dried food or with all of your assets converted into gold coins. I plan to store a few days extra food and water, firewood, perhaps a kerosene heater, a bit more cash than I normally have around, and I'll make sure all my camping gear is in good working order. If I'm wrong, and things get worse along the lines the catastrophists predict, then I like the rest of us, have to turn to our community.

So, read these two accounts, enjoy the year, keep fighting for a sane world, party on New Year's Eve, and don't get MAD.

## About the Train Wreck (sidebar)

The Paris-Granville Express was carrying 131 passengers as it approached the Paris Montparnasse Station in October 1895. The brakes failed to stop the train as it approached its destination at too high a rate of speed. The train careened across the station concourse, crashed through a 2-foot thick wall, and sailed out of the station, plummeting onto the street 30-feet below.

The front three train cars were extensively damaged, but all the passenger carriages remained on the track. Two passengers, and three train personnel were injured; a woman on the street was killed. The train engineer was found guilty for driving the train at excessive speeds and spent two months in jail.

More on this at [www.danger-ahead](http://www.danger-ahead).

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