

Green Anarchism and Oil Depletion

How Close Is The Collapse?

Richard Heinberg

The march of human social organization is essentially the story of how people have found ways of harvesting ever more energy from their environments in order to sustain ever more humans. The story began with the harnessing of fire and the domestication of plants and animals, but it took a fateful turn at the commencement of the industrial revolution when we discovered fossil fuels.

With coal, oil, and natural gas we won the energy lottery: hydrocarbons that had been stored, chemically altered, and concentrated over the course of hundreds of millions of years were extracted and burned in a period of two brief centuries to fuel the creation of by far the most elaborate and extensive society ever imagined by humans.

Of all the hydrocarbons, oil has been the most important. We have used it for transportation and industrial agriculture, which together, enabled us to enlarge the human food supply and to deliver food far greater distances. Consequently, our population has grown from fewer than one billion (when the industrial period began) to well over six billion—almost a seven-fold increase in two centuries.

Nowhere was the impact of fossil fuels greater than in America. The oil industry started in the US, which quickly became the world's foremost petroleum producing and exporting nation. America also, coincidentally, became the world's wealthiest and most powerful nation. However, discoveries of oil in the US peaked in the 1930s, and extraction peaked in 1970; production has been sliding downhill ever since.

The US is by far the world's most mature extraction province; it is the prototype of oil-producing nations. Thus, we should expect to see a similar pattern of production peak following discovery peak elsewhere. And indeed we have: global oil discoveries peaked in the 1960s, and since 1970, over 20 countries have followed the US in undergoing an all-time peak in production followed by a gradual slide. Most of the oil now being exported globally comes from a few super-giant oil fields discovered decades ago, all of which are approaching senescence. Meanwhile, the quantities of new oil being found today are comparatively inconsequential.

The US has maintained its economic clout (after a fashion) since its oil peak through the strategy of importing ever-larger quantities of petroleum from other countries—though the exercise has resulted in unsustainable balance-of-trade deficits and worsening foreign policy dilemmas. When the world as a whole peaks, Earth will not be able to import oil from other planets. The party will truly be over.

The best estimates for current global reserves and discovery rates suggest a global production peak within years, possibly as soon as 2006. Given the centrality of fossil fuels to industrialism, it would appear that our current civilization is on its way toward collapse—which appears to be the standard fate of all complex societies anyway, according to archaeologist Joseph Tainter in his *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

I first became aware of all of this in the late 1990s. I had just written a book (*A New Covenant with Nature: Notes on the End of Civilization and the Renewal of Culture, Quest*, 1996) critiquing civilization and especially industrialism, but in it I had not even mentioned energy or fossil fuels. However, after reading Colin Campbell's and Jean LaHerrere's groundbreaking *Scientific American* article "The End of Cheap Oil?" (March 1998), I began to reflect on just how important energy is to understanding human social processes. Once I had grasped the bone jarring significance of

this new information, I decided to write a book about it—*The Party's Over: Oil, War, and the Fate of Industrial Societies* (New Society, 2003). While I had no expertise as a petroleum geologist, I was a teacher of human ecology and, by this time, had acquired enough of an under-standing of the broad sweep of human history to give context to the oil-peak discussion.

In my book, I discussed energy history, the evidence for a near-term global oil peak, the likely consequences, and the counter-arguments of the cornucopian economists who insist that “the market” will somehow produce more oil (rising demand stimulates supply, right?) and thus solve everything. I also surveyed the alternatives to oil—from coal to wind and solar—and came to the conclusion that no available replacements are capable of supplying the range of “benefits” currently offered by oil and gas.

I've heard the “all we have to do is just ... arguments. I get phone calls and e-mails every day from well-meaning folks who are convinced that a few more solar panels will do the trick. People who haven't done the calculations can be forgiven for missing the cruel truth: Replacing our current energy infrastructure will require immense investment and time; that investment simply isn't occurring, and we don't have much time.

The Party's Over was published over a year ago; since then, the evidence of a looming energy catastrophe has continued to mount. China's oil imports are growing at a rate of over 30 percent per year, which suggests eventual geopolitical competition with US for remaining supplies. Meanwhile, America is becoming mired in a resource conflict in the Middle East that threatens to spiral into World War IV. North America's natural gas production has peaked and is dwindling rapidly. And evidence has surfaced suggesting that oil reserves in the Middle East may be wildly overstated, so that when the global production peak does arrive, the subsequent decline in available exports may be rapid.

For many years I identified myself as an anarchist—that is, as one who believes that humans are inherently sociable and cooperative, and that authoritarian systems of government (which, historically, began to appear at about the same time as agricultural civilizations) only serve to constrain human freedom and reciprocal altruism. My initial interest in anarchism was stoked by readings in anthropology, which affirmed that pre-agricultural peoples enjoyed physical and mental health, as well as personal freedom, to a degree equaled only by members of the wealthiest classes of more formidable urban societies that got their food from farming. In my first book, *Memories and Visions of Paradise* (Tarcher, 1989; Quest, 1995), I even hypothesized that the universal myth of a lost Golden Age might represent humanity's collective memory of the time before plows, kings, and armies.

Of course, I argued, “progress” has brought many benefits in speed, convenience, and hygiene. But at what cost! These benefits are inevitably unevenly spread (a billion live at the verge of starvation while a million drive luxury SUVs), and the side effects of the enterprise entail the destruction of the planetary biosphere. Modern industrial democracies, for all of their niceties, rely on extraction and exploitation in order to deliver their vaunted goods and liberties (ah, what freedom we enjoy!—to choose from a boggling array of consumer products and pre-selected slates of business-friendly political candidates). Meanwhile, species disappear, topsoil vanishes, and the global climate loses its moorings.

Peter Kropotkin, writing at the beginning of the 20th century, had laid the groundwork for green anarchism with his classic text, *Mutual Aid*. Citing countless examples from human history and natural science, he showed that cooperation is not something that has to be enforced; it is innate—in both human and non-human communities. It is with the growth of the coercive state, with its monopoly on violence, that cooperation and freedom have suffered an eclipse. As the century wore on, with its World Wars and mounting ecological crises, and with further developments in the science of anthropology, it became possible to mount a general critique of civilization per se.

Daniel Quinn popularized this critique in his novel *Ishmael* (Bantam, 1992), in which he suggested that agriculture disrupted our primordial Edenic condition; with its advent, humanity bifurcated into “leavers” (the remaining hunter-gatherers) and “takers”—herders and farmers who saw nature as consisting simply of a pile of resources. All of history hinged on this fateful moral choice.

In the early 1990s, I joined an academic organization called the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations (ISCSC), and at one of its annual conferences I presented a paper bashing civilization (the reception was not a warm one). Later published as *MuseLetter #43*, (July 1995), my paper, “A Primitivist Critique of Civilization” was later republished by John Zerzan in *Against Civilization* (Uncivilized Books, 1999); it is still posted at various anarchist sites on the web at <http://www.insurgentdesire.org.uk/civilization.htm>

However, as I learned more from primary sources (visiting aboriginal communities in Australia, talking with Native Americans, and reading early ethnographic accounts), and as I studied archaeology and the principles of ecology, the picture became more complex. I became less inclined to think of civilization as a “mistake”—or a moral choice—but more as an inevitable response, given who we were and what conditions we faced after the close of the Pleistocene.

Our ancestors took up farming and herding not out of greed, but through necessity. Population pressure and resource depletion led to domestication and planting, which in turn led to periodic surpluses. The storage of food meant that some groups suffering temporary privation could survive by raiding other groups’ granaries—hence the origins of armies (for both raiding and defense from raids) and of organized war.

The burgeoning numbers of people living in towns and cities led to the need for supervision and redistribution—and eventually for record keeping and bureaucracy. Every step along the way seemed unavoidable and good. Each step changed the way we thought and looked at the world. We justified each transition after the fact with our myths, religions, nationalistic propaganda, and political ideologies. And each adaptation brought consequences that required even more adaptation. The process is continuing still.

People can indeed be cooperative, but they can also be fiercely competitive; it is not only the presence or lack of coercive government that makes the difference, but also ecological conditions: where population is low relative to carrying capacity and people have integrated themselves into their ecosystem over the course of at least dozens of generations, competition is kept to a minimum; when population-resource ratios are less favorable and people are acting, in effect, as an invasive species—that is, when they have arrived in a new territory and have not had time to learn its limits and to co-evolve with other species already present—people can be both overwhelmingly destructive of their environment and also ceaselessly bellicose. Peace and cooperation have ecological preconditions.

Nevertheless, if the foraging life of the Pleistocene was not necessarily a peaceful utopia, it was, nevertheless, the pattern of existence from which we evolved.

Even for those like myself who think of industrialism as a particularly nasty development in human history, the realization that industrial civilization is almost certain to collapse, and that the process has already begun and will dramatically escalate in the next few years as a result of oil depletion, comes as a shock to the system.

It is one thing to look back nostalgically at ancient hunter-gatherers inhabiting a sparsely populated planet and to opine that we should somehow try to recover their personal autonomy and closeness to nature; it is quite another to imagine the chaos that will ensue as 6.4 billion humans attempt to survive when the industrial system that supports them sputters and stalls.

Already grain production per capita is slipping; what happens when we can no longer cheaply grow and transport food? If even a fraction of our current population were to attempt to take up hunting and gathering, what is left of wild nature would disappear rapidly.

I can’t help but think of all of this in personal terms, at least occasionally. Much as I detest cars, cities, cell phones, and industrial agriculture, I am not prepared for what is coming. Despite my solar panels, fruit and nut trees, and double-dug vegetable garden beds, I am thoroughly dependent on the industrial support infrastructure that we have all grown up with. Moreover, I have developed a taste for books, music, and art. I spend hours each day writing, and communicating with other people, via computer.

I have no intention of buying a gun and trying to survive the coming crash by picking off garden poachers. I am resigned to the fact that I am a product of my historical era. My colleagues and I at New College in Santa Rosa teach our young students about primitive technology, renewable energy, and ecological agriculture, but I have no realistic expectation that I personally will live to see the complete demise of our current world system, much less a full transition to a new era of sustainability.

These days, when I see a young green anarchist calling for the overthrow of civilization and a return to the wild, I feel a mix of emotions. I can hardly disagree with the sentiment: it is even plainer to me now than it was before I began studying energy history that the rise and demise of industrialism may constitute the most destructive events in planetary history. If one can mentally view the human condition from some sufficiently distant perspective, it is easy to say, “Good riddance!” But woe to us who have to live through the actual events.

It appears to me now that industrialism is not something one has to oppose, no matter how horrendous its impacts; I could say the same for globalization and perhaps even civilization itself: these are all verging on collapse—and perhaps within a matter of only years; decades at the most.

It still makes sense to me to actively and vigorously oppose war, corporate hijacking of the commons, forest clear-cutting, the genetic engineering of food, sweat shops, and a thousand other abuses of nature and humanity. We need to save what we can of nature—non-human and human. But even if we do nothing to decry the overarching system that entails these abuses, that system will disintegrate on its own, and soon. Opposing it is like commanding the Sun to set.

Moreover, advertising oneself as an “enemy of civilization” in such circumstances may only provide the suffering multitudes with an easy target against which to vent their rage.

I suggest that we oppose instead the new feudalism that may take the place of the current world system. If the industrial period has been bad, its demise could entail something even worse.

Imagine the scenario: as resource depletion undermines the industrial infrastructure of production, distribution, and communication, people are cut adrift. Bands of looters roam the countryside. In order to maintain control, central governments dispense with niceties and become utterly ruthless in their methods. But, exhausted by resource wars overseas and unable to maintain long-distance command and control, those same governments eventually grow ineffectual and disintegrate. Feudal warlords arise, offering protection to those who submit and death to those who resist.

If this scenario at all resembles what is actually in store, those of us who love freedom and cooperation will have our hands full keeping the flame alive.

On the other hand, the period ahead could hold opportunities: during times of intense change, people often become open to new ideas that were previously marginalized. In this case, the potential alternatives range from ecovillages to Permaculture to small-scale direct democracy and consensus decision-making.

For the maximization of both strategies—the defensive and the creative—small cooperative communities will be essential. Some communities could focus primarily on preserving what is worth salvaging of our industrial interval (useful scientific knowledge, history, literature and the arts); others could specialize in the redevelopment of primitive technologies and skills (fire making, flint knapping, tanning, etc.). Still others could dedicate themselves more to activist work, targeting specific environmental and human rights issues.

I believe that anarchists have a choice to make at this critical juncture: on one hand, they can choose to squabble over a political philosophy that arose with the industrial era and may die with it; or they can hew to the essence of that philosophy (autonomy, creativity, cooperation) while adapting and applying it to rapidly changing circumstances.

Those who attempt to do this are in for a lot of hard work, and survival is not assured. However, if anyone is to survive the coming century, and if humankind is to avoid a descent first into fascism and then authoritarian feudalism, new models of social organization will be required—not theoretical ideals, but living examples of service communities that are protected and nourished by surrounding populations because they provide tangible cultural benefits. Such communities will need to be in position to teach survival skills, while acting as repositories of historical and ecological knowledge, while also being havens for the arts. There is not much time to gather the resources for the creation of such communities, so it is important that efforts along these lines begin immediately.

For more by and about Richard Heinberg, visit his site at <http://richardheinberg.com/>

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