

A Meditation On Industrial Collapse

Rhubarb

1993

Well, I started a while ago to write an article on the ethics of industrial collapse, that is, wanting it and helping it to happen. Trouble is, I kinda think that the whole idea is a millenarian fantasy which has more to do with the Judeo-Christian baggage of Western civilization we carry around than a reasoned projection of the future course of events. Frankly, I think we underestimate the ability of the global corporate-governmental power structure to deal with, adapt to, and even consciously direct in a coordinated fashion the transformation of the non-human biosphere into a resource base and waste receptacle for industrial social processes.

I think what we forget is that while the ongoing rapine may well (like it's a question) wreck the biological integrity of all the world's ecosystems to the point of the kinds of ecosystem collapses such as the extinctions in the Permian or the end of the Mesozoic, that process is likely rather long in terms of a human timescale. In other words, an anthropogenic ecological collapse may take place in the blink of a geological eye, but may take longer than, say, all of recorded human history to date. Of course, it may not, and there'd be no one happier than I if I were proven wrong. I'd be willing to bet, though, that most of us will grow old and die with the industrial system more or less intact and in similar form. I do think complete collapse will come, but I think it may also be coterminous with an extinction of 90% of all animal species including *H. sapiens*.

Fine, so in a million years whole new orders, maybe even classes of life will evolve and radiate into a rich and complex world ecosystem. But what do we do now? One avenue of potential mischief-making may be in focusing on the local and limited rollbacks of state power and its protection and promotion of industrial/agricultural resource extraction. Such rollbacks are absolutely inevitable and, as a little historical search will indicate, have happened frequently to now-extinct Earth-raping civilizations. Examples: Ur, Babylon, Maya, Anasazi, the cultures of the Sahara/Sahel, Phoenicia, any number of Hellenic city-states, I have no idea about Asian examples, and let's not forget the classic story, worthy of operatic tragedy, the Decline and Fall of Rapa Nui (Easter Island).

A little recap of this tale is instructive for those who would view a total ecological/cultural collapse as merely theoretical. Because Easter Island is extremely isolated, its Polynesian settlers were able to develop their culture undisturbed by outside human influences. There was only one limit they had to contend with, and that was the size of their island, the type of ecosystem on it (cool, somewhat dry forest), and its carrying capacity. Over the centuries, they developed a complex hierarchical ceremonial culture in which the great chiefs commanded the famous stone heads to be built. The population grew and the class distinctions became extreme, with a large number of impoverished commoners supporting a small elite which commanded the allocation of wealth. In addition to the stone heads, palaces and temples were built, great rituals took place regularly in the service of the state religion, and of course all the ordinary business of daily life in the villages, fields, quarries and manufacturing centers went on unabated. All this, naturally, required resources. Slowly, so that nobody took any

notice, the forests fell to the needs of the great building projects, for the cooking fires, and simply to make way for the ever-increasing need to expand agriculture; and they did not grow back, nor have they since. With the trees gone, wood became scarce and expensive. Guess who got it. With the trees gone, the water in the soil dried up, agriculture declined and there was a lot less food to go around. Guess who got it.

Eventually, a new and subversive politico-religious movement began to gain influence amongst the populace: the Bird Man Cult. I'll spare you the details, mainly because I don't remember them, but the upshot is this: there was a revolution and great wars raged across the island. The workers dropped their tools in the quarries, leaving half-finished heads where they lay. Others were pulled down and defaced. The old order perished and with it the ceremonial culture. The establishment of the Bird-Man cult as the reigning authority presumably redressed some of the inequalities, but it was too late. After a while, archaeological evidence of its ceremonies ceases, and indications of desperate battles for food and water sources appear. There are caverns near the sea in which hundreds of refugees huddled and died, their bones scattered within. When the first European explorers landed they found only a handful of wretched inhabitants, eking out a meager existence from a harsh, dry, cold, treeless and windswept island. To these unhappy descendants the great heads, temple platforms and the strange and terrible carvings of bird-like men meant nothing at all.

I think the part about the social revolution ought to make our friends take notice who think that if we just changed everyone's mind about how mean the capitalist system is, everything would be just fine. Soon now, the great aquifers will peter out. Soon now, the oil will dry up. Soon now, the soil's fertility will be all mined out. At the moment, though, there's a whole delicate infrastructure (really a superstructure) in place, sucking and burrowing, piping and toting, felling and processing and harvesting and excreting. And all of it is dependent on every piece operating smoothly. They have armies to guard all this, but sometimes revolutions come. But the revolution won't try to take the infrastructure apart, just redirect it. And what can a revolution do anyway against lack of water, trees, oil, topsoil etc? Nothing, that's what.

So two things must happen to end the current rape of our chunk of the planet. First, the fall of the current political-industrial order. That much is inevitable. Second and more long term, the land and its resources, both biotic and inanimate, must not be allowed to be incorporated into another political-industrial order. A place which is on the margins, which is inaccessible, beyond the pale, or just not worth the time and trouble, is about as safe as any habitat can get. A possible example (how things turn out remains to be seen) may be found in Siberia. Here we have a place more or less protected by the indifference of the Soviet state which, following the latter's demise, is now available to the hungry maw of international timber and mining corporations. Yet as we have seen in the West, companies depend on governments to provide both infrastructure and subsidy, as well as police, military and quasimilitary protection against an unhappy populace that sees its land going down the toilet. But the successor state to the U.S.S.R., the Russian Republic, is much weaker. The advantage to the timber

companies is obvious: Russia's in no position to resist their demands. The advantage to Earth defenders is more subtle: Russia can't guarantee them protection from suitably enraged people. After all, Eastern Siberia is a long way from Moscow, transportation is sketchy, and if the Nez Perce N.F. spent (so far) over a quarter of a million dollars to babysit and occasionally arrest a few non-violent Wild Rockies wussies, think of what such an outlay means to a government helpless to stop small wars in its territory now, and unable to produce enough beets to keep its citizenry in borscht.

And so, the point: we know the current order is doomed. We also realize that the fall of the United States is not going to usher in the Millenium. In addition, we know that the present political-industrial system rests primarily on a resource base of groundwater and fossil fuels. Precarious as that situation is, it can continue on its own inertia until the base is really gone. If undisturbed, it may well be able to effect a transformation into an equally predatory system dependent on a different energy source. It is thereby incumbent upon folks interested in preserving wildlands to disturb this system as much as possible. If we attack it in its basic supply and transportation networks, and not just attempt rearguard actions on the front on their terms, I think there's a chance. I guess I just kept having visions of what the Cove/Mallard campaign might look like if the Freddies and the timber beasts couldn't drive all their shiny trucks and Earth-chewing equipment up and down all those roads and highways. Cut the supply lines! Cut the supply lines! Cut the supply lines! The Forces o' Destruction depend on their machine and weapons technology. Without it they won't know what to do. If we're smart, we will.

The Ted K Archive

Rhubarb
A Meditation On Industrial Collapse
1993

Wild Rockies Review, Vol. 6, no. 1. <www.environmentandsociety.org/sites/default/files/key_docs/wild_rockies-ef_vol6-no1.pdf>

www.thetedkarchive.com