

The Oil Drum: Campfire

Discussions about Energy and Our Future

Transitioning to A Society of Sloth?

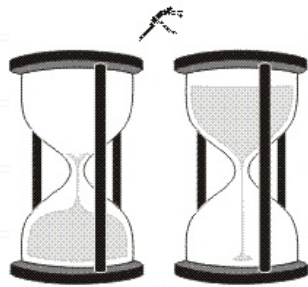
Posted by [Nate Hagens](#) on May 9, 2009 - 1:32pm in [The Oil Drum: Campfire](#)

Topic: [Economics/Finance](#)

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Yesterday I posted an [academic introduction](#) to the issues surrounding an energy/sustainability transition. Since Saturday pm is The Oil Drum "Campfire" 'tough questions' slot, I thought I'd follow if with something less politically correct. (Campfire guidelines [here](#))

10 years ago**, Jay Hanson, of [www.dieoff.org](#) notoriety, wrote an essay titled "[The Society of Sloth](#)". In it he likens our satisficing of wants (as opposed to needs), to a giant Rube Goldberg resource consumption machine. His prescription is that in order to avert future suffering, we replace our present social sin of avarice with one of 'sloth'. The essay is below the fold, as well as part of a related recent email thread, (and the usual Campfire questions).



(**I should point that in 1999 I was an oblivious playboy financial manager who had never heard of Limits to Growth or Peak Oil and had quite different notions about what [sexual selection](#) meant. IOW, Jay has been ahead of curve thinking on these issues)

(Editors note: (Nate): This is one of hundreds of essays/excerpts by Jay Hanson; most are descriptive of problems- this was one of a few that posed some sort of suggestion to mitigate the upcoming supply/demand intersection. The way I read it, a society of sloth is not what Jay finds optimal or prefers, but one path that would be physically possible and might avert what he sees as WW3 coming down the road)

INTRODUCTION (Background information)

What becomes of the surplus of human life? It is either, 1st. destroyed by infanticide, as among the Chinese and Lacedemonians; or 2d. it is stifled or starved, as among other nations whose population is commensurate to its food; or 3d. it is consumed by wars and endemic diseases; or 4th. it overflows, by emigration, to places where a surplus of food is attainable.

– James Madison, 4th President of United States,

Capitalism can be seen as an organized process to ingest natural, living systems (including people) in one end, and excrete unnatural, dead garbage and waste (including wasted people) out the other. Major changes in our natural environment make it unsuitable for us – we no longer "fit". Thus, avarice carried to its logical conclusion lives up to its reputation as the deadliest of the Deadly Sins and billions of people will die horrible deaths this coming century:

Finally investment cannot keep up with depreciation (this is physical investment and depreciation, not monetary). The economy cannot stop putting its capital into the agriculture and resource sectors; if it did the scarcity of food, materials, and fuels would restrict production still more. So the industrial capital plant begins to decline, taking with it the service and agricultural sectors, which have become dependent upon industrial inputs. For a short time the situation is especially serious, because the

population keeps rising, due to the lags inherent in the age structure and in the process of social adjustment. Finally population too begins to decrease, as the death rate is driven upward by lack of food and health services.

Meadows - Limits to Growth

You see things; and you say "Why?" But I dream things that never were; and I say "Why not?"

– George Bernard Shaw

"Collapse" is defined as the rapid transformation to a lower degree of complexity, typically involving significantly less energy consumption. Societies "collapse" when they become too complex for their energy base. Thus, the collapse of capitalism is inevitable because capitalism must grow to survive – must become more-and-more complex and consume more-and-more energy.

But a "planned collapse" – a planned simplification – would not only mitigate much of the human suffering, it could also usher in a new golden age of leisure, music, arts and crafts – a simpler, more humane, more spiritual society. It's more-than-obvious that Mr. Potatohead has no answers, so we must see "planned collapse" as a "systems engineering" problem – not as an "economic" problem ("getting the prices right").

Think of it this way, if the only tool one has is a hammer, then everything looks like a nail. What other possible solution can an economist recommend to the problem of too much economic growth, except more economic growth? So send the economists into retirement and call out the scientists, engineers, and systems people!

Since true democracy is inherently unstable, the most obvious means to "engineer" our new simple society is repression and coercion. But what about the seemingly insurmountable *quis custodiet ipsos custodes* problem?

In the seventeenth century, men could not imagine a *deus ex machina* (god from machine) authority. Four hundred years later, we have the digital computer. Computers would watch people and other computers would watch those computers. A fail-safe *deus ex machina* system of checks and balances could be designed to insure integrity – in fact, orders-of-magnitude more integrity than can be attained with humans.

What can be done to mitigate the coming nightmare? I propose that we retire "avarice" as our central organizing principle and replace it with a less deadly Deadly Sin: "sloth". I believe the "Society of Sloth" would be a splendid 21st century replacement for the Society of Avarice.

SOCIETY OF SLOTH: A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

By Jay Hanson, Spring, [1999](#)

(What follows is not meant to be a comprehensive description of a new society, but only presents some conceptual ideas for consideration.)

In order then that the social compact may not be an empty formula, it tacitly includes the undertaking, which alone can give force to the rest, that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free; for this is the condition which, by giving each citizen to his country, secures him against all personal dependence. In this lies the key to the working of the political machine; this alone legitimises civil undertakings, which, without it, would be absurd, tyrannical, and liable to the most frightful abuses.

– Jean Jacques Rousseau

Definitions

Global Problematic: (after The Club of Rome, 1972): Global tragedy of the commons because people are genetically programmed to more-than-reproduce themselves and make the best use of their environments.

Commons: A commons is any resource treated as though it belongs to all. When anyone can claim a resource simply on the grounds that he wants or needs to use it, one has a commons.

Needs: Human “needs” have a scientific basis which is defined by human biology. 35,000 years ago, three million hunter-gatherers “needed” community, shelter, health care, clean water, clean air, and about 3,000 calories a day of nutritious food. Today, people still “need” the same things that hunter-gatherers “needed” then (except fewer calories).

eMergy: eMergy (with an “M”) is the solar energy used directly and indirectly to make a service or product. In other words, eMergy is the “cost” of a service or a product in units of solar energy.

Why eMergy? In reality, the economy is nothing but a monstrous, energy-gulping Rube Goldberg machine to deliver “needs” to people. But each of those three million hunter-gatherers was the energy-using counterpart of a common dolphin, whereas each of today's 280 million Americans matches the energy use of a sperm whale. Obviously, the “economy” is incredibly inefficient at delivering “needs” to people.

No doubt my statement will stick in the economist's craw, because after all, isn't “efficiency” what economics is all about? The problem with “economic efficiency” is that “money” is not a measure of anything in the real world (like, say, BTUs). Money is power because money “empowers” people to buy and do the things they want – including buying and doing other people (politics). Thus, “economic efficiency” is properly seen as a “political” concept that was designed to preserve political power for those who have it – to make the rich richer and the poor poorer.

For over a century, theorists have sought ways of integrating economics and environmental accounting, often using energy as a common measure. But these efforts met with limited success because different kinds of available energy are not equivalent. The measure of “eMergy” allows us to compare commodities, services and environmental work of different types. “Transformity” – the eMergy per unit energy – allows us to compare different kinds of available energy.

So we need to totally junk the present economic system and replace it with a new one that minimizes eMergy costs (not money costs) and delivers basic needs (not Cadillacs) to everyone in a sustainable way.

Sustainable Development: Sustainable development both improves quality of life and retains continuity with physical conditions; it requires that social systems be equitable and physical systems circular (industrial outputs become industrial inputs).

Authority: Goals (or ideals) are not produced by a consensus of the governed, rather a qualified authority determines goals. For example, physical goals for sustainable development must come from “scientific” authority – because no one else knows what they must be. All contemporary political systems are “authoritarian” with the moneyed class ruling the pseudo democracies.

Coercion (politics): To “coerce” is to compel one to act in a certain way – either by promise of reward or threat of punishment. Two obvious examples of coercion are our system of laws and paychecks.

THE ONE-AND-ONLY HUMANE SOLUTION: Mutual coercion, mutually agreed upon; a global system of coercion – laws, police, punishments and rewards. In principle, the global commons can only be managed at the global level by people who understand the physical systems involved: scientists. Global coercion can be seen in the worldwide reactions to ozone depletion and global warming. Besides laws and paychecks, coercion can take many forms:

“It is not necessary to construct a theory of intentional cultural control. In truth, the strength of the control process rests in its apparent absence. The desired systemic result is achieved ordinarily by a loose though effective institutional process. It utilizes the education of journalists and other media professionals, built-in penalties and rewards for doing what is expected, norms presented as objective rules, and the occasional but telling direct intrusion from above. The main lever is the internalization of values.” [1]

Step one would be to establish a global government of some sort with the authority to protect the global commons – our life-support system – as well as protecting universal human rights. This government would also oversee the “clean” manufacturing of “repairable” and “reusable” energy-efficient appliances and transportation systems. It would also insure the sustainable production of staples like wheat, rice, oats, and fish.

Does this new global government sound repressive or restrictive? Not at all! A great deal of freedom is possible – in fact, far more than we have now.

eMergy Certificates

Step two would be to replace the organizing principle of “avarice” with the principle of “sloth”; break out of the money-market-advertising-consumption death trap. The Society of Sloth would not be based on money because that would be inherently unsustainable. Instead, it would be based on “eMergy Certificates”. [2]

Global government would determine the “needs” of the public, set industrial production accordingly, and calculate the amount of eMergy used to meet these needs. Government would then distribute purchasing power in the form of eMergy certificates, the amount issued to each person being equivalent to his pro rata share of the eMergy cost of the consumer goods and services.

eMergy certificates bear the identification of the person to whom issued and are non-negotiable. They resemble a bank check in that they bear no face denomination, this being entered at the time of spending. They are surrendered upon the purchase of goods or services at any center of distribution and are permanently canceled, becoming entries in a uniform accounting system. Being non-negotiable they cannot be lost, stolen, gambled, or given away because they are invalid in the hands of any person other than the one to whom issued.

Lost eMergy certificates would be easily replaced. Certificates can not be saved because they become void at the termination of the two-year period for which they are issued. They can only be spent.

Insecurity of old age is abolished and both saving and insurance become unnecessary and impossible. eMergy Certificates would put absolute limits on consumption and provide people with a guaranteed stream of “needs” for life.

With modern technology, probably less than 5% of the population could produce all the goods we really “need”. A certain number of “producers” could be drafted and trained by society to produce for two years. The rest can stay home and sleep, sing, dance, paint, read, write, pray, play, do minor repairs, work in the garden, and practice birth control.
Self-Determination

Any number of cultural, ethnic or religious communities could be established by popular vote. Religious communities could have public prayer in their schools, prohibit booze, allow no television to corrupt their kids, wear uniforms, whatever. Communities of writers or painters could be established in which bad taste would be against the law. Ethnic communities could be established to preserve language and customs. If someone didn't like the rules in a particular community, they could move to another religious, cultural, or ethnic community of their choosing.

In short, the one big freedom that individuals would have to give up would be the freedom to destroy the commons (in its broadest sense) – the freedom to kill. And in return, they would be given a guaranteed income for life and the freedom to live almost any way they choose.

[1] p. 8, Herbert I. Schiller, CULTURE INC; Oxford, 1989;
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0195067835>

[2] Energy Certificates: <http://dieoff.com/page149.htm>

Addendum: here is the tail-end of a recent email thread between Jay Hanson, myself, and others discussing the costs in resource and fiat terms of our obesity epidemic. I had commented on how sugar induces physical dependency (Colantuoni and Hoebel 2002), sugar is a ‘gateway’ substance that increases the likelihood of addiction to other substances, e.g. amphetamines (Hoebel 2003), sugar and fat together create significantly increased consumption behavior (Kelley 2003), low serotonin is linked to carbohydrate craving, obesity and depression (Wurtman 1986, 1995), and diets high in sugar will cause release of dopamine in the pleasure center of the brain (Hoebel 2005). When asked what to do about our current state of obesity and consumption, Jay replied :

The way we live today is utterly insane. Stop all advertising of everything -- especially booze and food -- immediately. It is totally insane to encourage people to destroy their health and the planet.

Close all non-essential businesses such as tourism. No one NEEDS to be a tourist. Close Disneyland, etc.

Insure that health-food-type grocery stores exist within easy access of every neighborhood. If a city is too sprawled like Detroit, bulldoze the suburbs and concentrate the residents.

Start paying people to take and pass classes in cooking. Pay married couples enough so

one can afford to stay home, watch the kids, and cook etc.

Start gradually closing restaurants and booze stores (start with the fast food) until no more restaurants exist -- and only enough booze to satisfy the addicts. Cover parking lots with dirt so people can plant gardens.

In short, gradually dump the entire market economy and allow people to stay home, take care of their kids, exercise, take university classes, etc.

If we followed my recommendations (and they worked), we could avoid WW3. The handwriting is on the wall. The time for capitalism has passed.

QUESTIONS FOR THE CAMPFIRE:

1. Has the time for (global) capitalism passed?
2. If humans can't overcome our impulses, should advertising for 'consumptive goods' that are bad for us be allowed (e.g. fast food)?
- 3a. In a society where basic needs were provided for, what would we compete for (being hardwired to compete for status)?
- 3b. What would happen to our current societal wealth disparity (masked by debt and cheap energy) if society 'slowed down'?
4. Would it be possible for us as a species to leave easily available energy and resources untouched?
5. If we acknowledge the idea that systems go through growth, transition, descent and recovery on a regular basis and that human systems are likely no different, would slowing down consumption in the manner suggested lead to quicker descent, and therefore quicker recovery?

(Please keep in mind the above essay was written over a decade ago, without any recent additional datapoints.)



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