The Oil Drum: Campfire
Discussions about Energy and Our Future

Reducing complexity

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Joseph Tainter tells us that increasing complexity confers advantages to a society, but eventually, the energy required to maintain the increasingly complex society becomes a problem. Tainter's view suggests that one way to make our society more sustainable is to make it less complex. Tainter defines complexity as follows:

> Complexity is generally understood to refer to such things as the size of a society, the number and distinctiveness of its parts, the variety of specialized social roles that it incorporates, the number of distinct social personalities present, and the variety of mechanisms for organizing these into a coherent, functioning whole. Augmenting any of these dimensions increases the complexity of a society. Hunter-gatherer societies (by way of illustrating one contrast in complexity) contain no more than a few dozen distinct social personalities, while modern European censuses recognize 10,000 to 20,000 unique occupational roles, and industrial societies may contain overall more than 1,000,000 different kinds of social personalities.

The question for tonight is to think about things that might be useful to do in the coming year, that would act to make our society less complex, without losing too much functionality.

Ideally, if we have to move down in complexity, we would like to move down only a small notch in complexity (for example, change the system so that there are fewer choices in appliances, so that replacement parts are easier to come by), rather than a large step down in complexity (each of us growing all of our own food). What are some steps we can take to reduce complexity? Are there any steps that we can take to get local officials to make changes that would permit a reduction in complexity?

As one example, our family generally buys food in as close to its original form as possible, so as to cut out the packaging and processing.

Others will choose to buy locally grown foods. Supporting local farmers would seem to be a step toward reducing complexity.

Buying clothes that can be washed at home, rather than dry cleaned, would seem to represent a reduction in complexity.

Is the goal of reducing complexity a reasonable one, or does it conflict too much with the need for specialization?